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Coming Home: Elizabeth Bowen in Hythe

One night in January 1969, a man stood at Sandling station, enjoying the memory of a very happy day in Hythe. Later, he described his contented state as "burgundy-filled" in his diary, after sharing a pleasant 1949 Nuits-Saint-Georges, as he waited for the train that would take him back to the reality of his busy London life and office in Trafalgar Square.

The man was none other than the Canadian High Commissioner.

Charles Ritchie had been visiting his friend and lover of three decades, the famous writer Elizabeth Bowen, to spend time with her and to celebrate her recent literary success. Her new novel, *Eva Trout, or Changing Scenes*, published in the United States the previous year, was now out in Britain. (Though unaware it was to be her final novel, it would prove something of a comeback for Bowen, winning her the James Tait Black Memorial Prize in 1969 as well as being shortlisted for the prestigious Booker Prize in 1970).

Formerly the owner of Bowen's Court, an Anglo-Irish 'big house' in County Cork, Bowen had moved to Hythe in 1965, though she had first lived in the town in her early years. Her father had suffered a breakdown, and her mother had felt it better to remove her to England. Despite her short time in Kent, as decades passed, the town had never been far from her thoughts, as was clear from her writing. Hythe appears in her novels, including the successful *The House in Paris* (1935) and *The Death of the Heart* (1938), as well as in her journalism. Twenty years before she moved back, she published 'By the Unapproachable Sea'[1] in *Christian Science Monitor Magazine*, in which she detailed magnificently a visit to Hythe the previous summer. Her American readers were informed of the courage and fortitude of the town's residents in the face of adversity and frequent bombings by the enemy flying across the Channel from German-occupied France. Walking around, observing the shops closed 'for the duration' and the evidence of recent attacks, she spoke with residents and even interviewed the Mayor. She noted that "Hythe, with its eye for order and cheerfulness, has been extra quick to clear away bomb damage: today, grass and wild flowers clothed several gaps. It was often in high daytime, sometimes without warning, that bombs fell. (Almost before you can name him, the sneak raider comes flashing over the town, from the sea haze.) He is barely gone again, the Mayor told me, when all hands fly to work: an hour or two later, not a splinter of glass is left to litter the street, and the town has meanwhile, undaunted, continued its working day".

[1] 'By the Unapproachable Sea' is included in *People, Places, Things - Essays by Elizabeth Bowen*, edited by Professor Allan Hepburn

Later, after the war, she would also write for the BBC Home Service on Hythe and Romney Marsh, and even spent Christmas in the town with her husband Alan[2] in 1950.

Bowen purchased a house on Church Hill, which she soon renamed 'Carbery', with the proceeds of the sale of her archive to the University of Texas's Harry Ransom Center. Her return was a happy affair as the move closed the door on a difficult chapter in her life, seven years of personal turmoil. From 1957 to 1959, she struggled with major financial challenges: rising living costs, an inconsistent writing income, and her own extravagance. The result led to the sale of Bowen's Court to a developer, who then proceeded to demolish the property, thereby ending two centuries of Anglo-Irish history. Without a permanent home, staying in hotels, rooms at the American campuses where she taught, and using a flat in Headington, Oxfordshire, as her base, she had spent 1960 to 1964 grappling with the loss of her previously enjoyed status as the owner of a country estate as well as, given her reduced literary output[3] and being increasingly unfashionable, the reality that she was no longer Britain's premier female novelist, a position she had enjoyed from the death of her friend Virginia Woolf in 1941 to arguably the 1958 publication of Iris Murdoch's highly successful fourth novel, *The Bell*[4].

In September 1964, Bowen, set on moving to Kent, wrote to Ritchie: "Hythe was lovely; the weather was golden and the sun blazed. I kept thinking of you at every turn, and thinking, 'Now how soon will Charles and I <u>both</u> be here?'" She wrote of her stay at the White Hart on the high street[5], which proved "a tremendous home from home. Nice sunny bar, open from 10 a.m., and filled from then on (or at least on a Saturday morning) with happy natives of both sexes boozing away. Oh I do like a town where people enjoy themselves, instead of rushing about with tense faces furrowed by self-importance".

Moving to Hythe proved a success. The house was filled with the furniture from Bowen's Court that hadn't been auctioned after the sale, and she soon settled into her new home. Though she no longer owned a famous estate, she nonetheless remained a generous hostess. According to Victoria Glendinning's 1977 biography[6], guests visiting Bowen were put up at the White Hart, now her local haunt, arriving to find their rooms prepaid and coins left for the meters. Ritchie, who had recently served as Canada's

[2] Alan Cameron died in 1952. Ritchie had married in 1948.
[3] Having dedicated her time to journalism and lecturing abroad to earn money, Bowen published only three novels after *The Heat of the Day* (1949), her greatest commercial success.
[4] Murdoch had been a visitor at Bowen's Court, and Bowen, a prolific book reviewer, had praised the novel in *Saturday Review*.
[5] Still in operation today.
[6] *Elizabeth Bowen: Portrait of a Writer*

ambassador to the Kennedy and Johnson White House, would often visit her during his time at the Commission, which would be his last diplomatic post before retirement. A dedicated diarist, he detailed his trips to Hythe, which can be read along with her letters in *Love's Civil War: Elizabeth Bowen and Charles Ritchie: Letters and Diaries 1941-1973*.[7]

In May 1968, as riots raged just across the Channel, Ritchie wrote of enjoying a lunch of sole and a good bottle of wine at Dover's White Cliffs Hotel before going back to Hythe for drinks, with discussion topics including "youth movements, snobbery, gossip, religion", among others.

Bowen would meet him at Folkestone Station with her car, and some visits were certainly more successful than others. In September 1968, he arrived with a suitcase "heavy with whisky and shoes" to find her somewhat subdued, which he attributed to her cough (she was a heavy smoker for much of her life). In June 1969, he found her hard at work on an autobiography or "'free association' anti-memoirs" (posthumously published as *Pictures and Conversatio*ns in 1975). Over a lunch of tongue and Cumberland sauce, he informed her about a recent lunch he had hosted for the prime minister, Harold Wilson, a man Bowen cared little for, at his London home in Upper Brook Street. He felt she was unimpressed at his being awarded a Companion of the Order of Canada (CC), as it did not carry a title, adding he was "too much of a snob to want a knighthood".

Ritchie liked to take a constitutional on his visits, often following the same route: "Cold, sunny weather, quite warm when you had been walking briskly up and down the sea front past the early Victorian seaside lodgings, past the 1920 bungalows... Then walking back past the now leafless trees of Ladies Walk... and so on up the hill to Carbery." Bowen had not accompanied him on this occasion, complaining the cold air would make her cough (decades of heavy smoking were catching up with her). She was apparently considering a return to live in Ireland when his posting to London ended. He would say of the town: "E is everywhere. Never come back to Hythe when she is gone from there."

Bowen did not move back to Ireland, and in March 1971, Ritchie wrote: "Nothing ever goes wrong between us when I'm on her ground in Hythe. All is natural." They could never be entirely themselves when they met in the capital. His last recorded visit in his diary to the Kentish coast was that May, finding his lover of three decades "happier in a different way now, than ever. The happiness of old age. The day-to-day kind of sensuous pleasure in the visible world. She wants to go on living; and so do I…"

[7] Also edited by Victoria Glendinning

A few months later, Ritchie retired and moved back to Ottawa. Bowen's health would soon decline rapidly with lung cancer, with her eventual death in a London hospital on 22 February 1973.

Though her time in Hythe was relatively short, the town gave her exactly what she wanted: a home for her and Ritchie. The affair had been very much long-distance. They were seldom together for long, though they wrote to each other often. For the first time since the forties, they were living in the same country at the same time. While Bowen's Court was not to be their home, as Bowen had hoped it would be before its sale, Carbery and Hythe itself, in the last chapter of their love affair, certainly proved to be so, and that was a good thing.