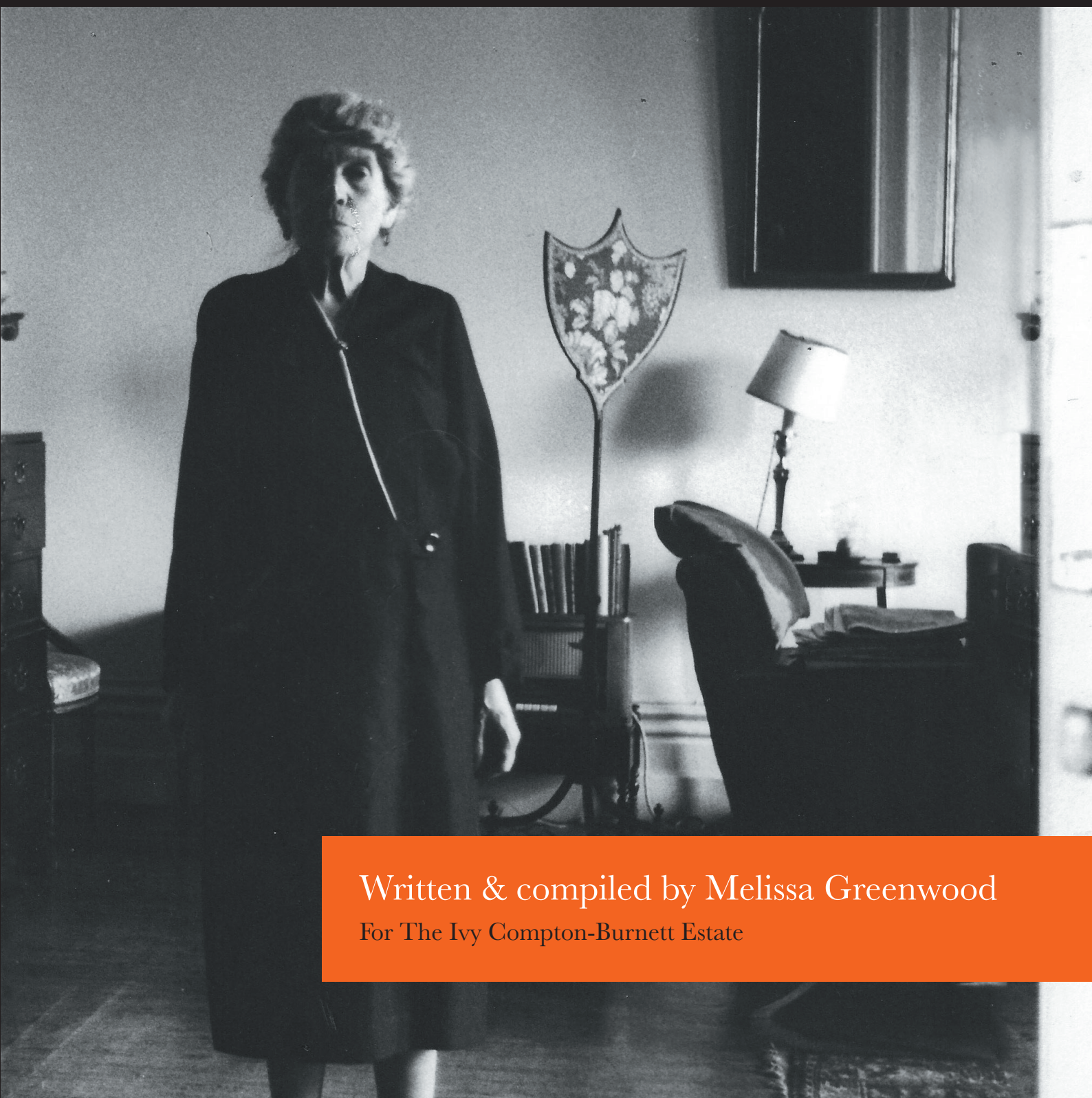
# A Dame and Her History

*Reading Between the Lines of Dame Ivy Compton-Burnett*



Written & compiled by Melissa Greenwood

For The Ivy Compton-Burnett Estate

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# Preface

*'My writing is much inferior to the bitter truth and intense originality of Miss Compton-Burnett.'*

Virginia Woolf

This document sets out to explore the enduring enigma of Dame Ivy Compton-Burnett: novelist, searing observer of human frailty and one of the most original voices in twentieth-century literature. Using the thematic structure of the accompanying website as a foundation and expanding upon it with additional strands, it aims to build a fuller picture of Dame Ivy and the possible influences on her life and writing — particularly the impact of her childhood and family background, the devastating loss of her beloved father and brothers, the shocking double suicide of her sisters, and the profound, lifelong grief that followed.

Drawing on a range of sources, it takes a closer look at the more nuanced experiences of her early and private life - experiences that undoubtedly shaped the distinctive tone and structure of her work. To provide further context, it includes a more detailed account of her father, the distinguished homeopathic physician James Compton-Burnett, with references drawn from his biographer John Henry Clarke and Hilary Spurling's authoritative account. It also examines the character of her mother, Katharine, and the lasting psychological impact of her extreme and often damaging behaviour, an influence that casts a long shadow over Dame Ivy's emotional world and literary vision.

Turning points in Dame Ivy's world — most notably the tragic deaths of her closest family — are noted, with consideration of how such grief may have shaped her interior life. Her decades-long relationship with Margaret Jourdain is also explored, drawing on references from Dame Ivy herself, and from her friends and acquaintances.

This is not intended as a comprehensive biography, but rather an introduction that brings together some of the more nuanced, illuminating and lesser-known characteristics of her life that may allow us to approach Dame Ivy not only as a formidable writer, but as a woman shaped by her time, and by the constraints and sacrifices of her early life.

Much of the source material has been drawn from published literature, including Hilary Spurling's definitive biography *Ivy: The Life of I. Compton-Burnett* and Elizabeth Sprigge's *The Life of Ivy Compton-Burnett* (a more personal account of a close friend), alongside articles

written about Dame Ivy during her lifetime and after her death. Contemporary commentary, reviews, critical essays and archival interviews, such as the 1962 recording of her conversation with Studs Terkel and her published dialogue with Margaret Jourdain in the first edition of *Orion*, have all contributed to a fuller picture of a writer who repeatedly explores the juxtaposition of the domestic quotidian with quiet cruelty, moral hypocrisy and emotional violence simmering just beneath the surface.

Marked by deep personal loss and an acute sensitivity to the failings of the world around her, Dame Ivy saw human behaviour with a clarity that was both unsparing and quietly profound. This appears in both her writing and her manner with others, whether close friends or passing acquaintances. The enigma deepens as particular traits and behaviours are uncovered: she relished intellectual sparring, could strike terror with her piercing gaze, and was known for her unflinching, sometimes disarming questions — yet she was also fond of gossip and the goings-on of those around her.

In what follows, Dame Ivy's intriguing persona emerges through her own words, the recollections of those who knew her, and material drawn from interviews and written accounts. What takes shape is the character of a woman of formidable intellect and unsparing perception, one with little patience for pretence and none at all for sentimentality. She was a paradox, often contradicting herself in the rare personal details she chose to share; devilishly curious, with eyes that twinkled as she watched her prey squirm or falter under the weight of an unflinching question. Uncompromising and unchanging, she remained resolutely herself: of her time and of none - much like her novels.

N.B. The variations in how Dame Ivy Compton-Burnett is referred to throughout this text are deliberate and reflect the different aspects of her life and legacy:

*I. Compton-Burnett* is used in reference to her public identity — the name known to readers, reviewers and within the literary world. *Ivy* is used in a more intimate register, to suggest the daughter, sister, or friend behind the writer. *Dame Ivy* is used following the conferral of her D. B. E. marking a shift in how she was formally addressed and perceived. Each name is used with intention, according to context, tone, and the facet of her character or career being considered.

# The Incomparable Ivy

*'She has a needling ability to activate the reader's innate suspicion about human unworthiness; that ability goes to the root of her peculiar genius.'*

Hilary Mantel

Admired and feared in equal measure, Dame Ivy Compton-Burnett (pronounced "Cumpton Burnètt, if you please") remains one of the most distinctive voices in twentieth-century literature. A woman of formidable intellect and unmistakable literary presence, she nevertheless stood slightly apart from the mainstream. Her publisher, Victor Gollancz, rarely championed her work beyond its initial release, relying instead on the positive reviews she consistently attracted. Those who met her rarely forgot the encounter. Cicely Greig, her typist for twenty-four years, never addressed her by her first name, even when encouraged by her employer to do so.

As to her character, an interesting insight came from her brother Noel in 1915, who wrote to his friend Elliott Felkin urging him to introduce Ivy to his sister Winifred — Noel thought the two women would find common ground in each other observing: "…I think they are rather kindred — at one in their contempt of the [human] race". He was right, and they did become close friends.

When asked about her reputation for elusiveness, Dame Ivy once remarked: "I have had such an uneventful life that there is little to say." This characteristically self-effacing statement, whilst far from true considering her early years, more likely referred to her later life of modest routine shaped by a relatively wide but tight circle of trusted friends, and a deliberate distance from the world of literary admiration and critical acclaim which she generally eschewed. That said, many were the young authors or admirers who were put through their paces after receiving a much-coveted invitation from Miss Compton-Burnett to join her for tea, lunch or dinner.

Yet, in conversation with her friend and fellow author Kay Dick — later published in the book *Ivy and Stevie* — she was typically elliptical when asked whether she would consider writing an autobiography, saying: "Well, if I wrote an autobiography, a really good one, and put myself into it, I think it would be very interesting, and I think I should do it very well. But I'm not thinking of doing it."

Dame Ivy's sisters spoke of how she was always an observer rather than a participant in life - more often found at the fringes of a gathering or conversation, scrutinising what was

unfolding before her. In later life, she was often seen removed from the action, absorbed in her own thoughts or activity, or simply watchful, those piercing blue eyes quietly noting people's behaviour, her ears attuned to their deliberate choices of language. Perhaps this natural disposition, along with her innate 'contempt of the [human] race,' was what enabled her to absorb and intellectually dissect the impulse and meaning behind human behaviour.

These dissections were expressed through her characters. Their extraordinary reactions to some of the more hideous characteristics of human behaviour could seem shocking to the reader. To her they were obvious. She was simply holding "the mirror up to nature."

In her biography, Elizabeth Sprigge includes a remark by Charles Burkhart, an American scholar and biographer, who said that although Dame Ivy was always very kind to him, he was 'frightened of her'. He wrote: "Under the kindliness was the terrifying mind that produced those novels. Anyone should have been [frightened]. She knew too much about us."

Cicely Greig has a different insight into the author. In her biography *Ivy Compton-Burnett: A Memoir,* she gives a very personal account of her relationship with Ivy, which spanned over twenty years: 'Ivy was not cagey. One crossed whole areas of silence when one talked with her, but that quiet of hers was not so much a barricade as an interest in one. There was a wariness in her silent attention, but I am sure it had a creative quality, she was a keen observer of human behaviour.'

# A Well-Kept Secret

In the 1950s the 'aesthete' Brian Howard referred to Dame Ivy as 'the English Secret', as very little was known about her and her readership always remained small.

In his 2008 *Guardian* article 'London Has Lost All Its Ivy', Stuart Jeffries recounted his unsuccessful search across London's bookshops for works by I. Compton-Burnett, highlighting the decline in her visibility within the city's literary landscape. Jeffries noted that despite her once prominent status, her novels had become increasingly scarce on bookstore shelves. This observation underscores the limited promotion her works received during her lifetime; a situation compounded by her publisher's minimal marketing efforts. Nevertheless, Dame Ivy remained steadfastly loyal to her publisher, Victor Gollancz, valuing the stability and continuity of their professional relationship over broader commercial success.

Jeffries' experience serves as a testament to the challenges Dame Ivy faced in gaining widespread recognition, despite her significant contributions to literature. He wrote: 'It seemed important to me that Compton-Burnett's novels be written into the fabric of her city. But, in a fit of absentmindedness, Ivy has very nearly disappeared from London'.

Cicely Greig, who was the typist for all of Dame Ivy's novels from 1946 (the first being *Manservant and Maidservant*), wrote her own personal account of Dame Ivy in *Ivy Compton-Burnett, A Memoir.* She was perhaps best placed to fill in the physical details of Dame Ivy's writing — that she always wrote in pencil, filling several Penny exercise books and always with many 'rubbings out'. Even given her unique view of the great author at work, she acknowledged that Dame Ivy 'escaped the perils of popularity'. However, during her lifetime she did achieve critical acclaim and those who knew of her work and read her novels remained loyal.

Dame Ivy was a prolific writer, authoring some twenty novels throughout her life. The first, published at the age of twenty-seven in 1911, was *Dolores*. She dismisses the relevance of this novel, barely taking ownership of it at all. There was then a fourteen-year break until her next novel, *Pastors and Masters*, appeared in 1925 — the first to be written in the recognisable I. Compton-Burnett style — when she was the more mature age of forty-one. A complete list of her works, including publication dates and Dame Ivy's age at the time of each, is included in the appendix below.

She was first introduced to an American audience in 1929 with the publication of *Brothers and Sisters*. Vita Sackville-West intuitively grasped the distinctive quality of the writing during a radio interview, when she suggested that the novel should be approached as a chessboard. She went on to explain: "All the characters [are] chessmen in an artificial world created by the author. You will see that the characters in this book have an existence and a significance entirely their own, living and moving in a world entirely their own — false, invented, make-believe, but true to their own rules and their own conventions."

The book was well received and reviewed in literary circles, but its author was not brought to the attention of a wider readership until the publication in 1947 of *Manservant and Maidservant* published in America under the title of *Bullivant and The Lambs*. The reviews were glowing — especially in *Time* magazine — which was instrumental in projecting Dame Ivy further into the public eye, with reviewers generally agreeing that it had won the New York novel stakes that year.

# Her Early Life:
# A Tragic Start & New Beginnings

Born in 1884 to a large and complicated middle-class family in Pinner, Middlesex, England, Ivy's early years were marked by both privilege and trauma.

She studied Classics at Royal Holloway College, among the first generation of women with access to higher education. But between 1901 and 1918, she endured the deaths of her father, her mother, two beloved brothers, and two sisters (who died in a joint suicide). As Hilary Spurling notes in her biography, these years shaped Ivy's life and fiction, steeping her novels in themes of repression, loss and the cruelty of family life.

Those who knew or interviewed Dame Ivy believed she never recovered from the deaths of her beloved brothers Guy and Noel, who died some eleven years apart — in 1905 and 1916 respectively. Ivy and her brothers had been close from childhood. She was the eldest, with a difference of only one year and two days between her and Guy, and no more than three years from Noel. They ruled the nursery as infants, pressing the younger children into their own games, and were the first of the siblings to transfer to the school room where they read, studied and shared an education together. Like Ivy, Guy was astonishingly bright, and the three of them studied Maths and the Classics together under the tutelage of a governess, before being dispatched to school: Addiscombe College for the Daughters of Gentlemen in Hove for Ivy, and a local prep school for the boys.

If Guy and Ivy were the intellectual stars of all the siblings, according to Hilary Spurling's biography *The Life of I. Compton-Burnett*, Noel was a 'slow mover'. Not until he went to Cambridge did he flourish — due in part, he confessed, to the fact that his brother had died and left a void in his mother's world that he saw as his responsibility to fill. Noel and Ivy's response to the position they find themselves in after the deaths or their brother and mother, are explored in more detail further on in this document.

Dame Ivy's father, James Compton-Burnett, died unexpectedly in 1901, with devastating consequences for the family. Her mother, Katherine, was plunged into the depths of grief and despair that cast a long shadow over the remainder of Ivy's young life and that of her siblings. Katherine's mourning seemed without limit, draining the household of joy and air, creating a vacuum where warmth and love should have been and leaving each child teetering on the edge of emotional stability, hostages to their mother's shifting temperament.

However, being so bright and always having received an education, in 1902 Dame Ivy commenced studying 'the Classics' at Holloway College, in Egham, Surrey, a relatively new institution for young women founded by self-made philanthropist Thomas Holloway. Spurling offers a vivid portrait of the college — its inhabitants, routines, and rituals — capturing what a young Ivy would have experienced. What stands out from this account is her now notorious reserve and propensity to observe rather than participate, with Ivy only having one or two close friends.

In 1905 tragedy struck again, and her education at Holloway was abruptly disrupted following the untimely death of her beloved brother Guy. She eventually returned to complete her degree, collecting it from London in May 1907. An avid reader who delighted in study, her sisters observed that she lost interest in the Classics after Guy's death — a subject they had both loved — and turned instead to her own writing: a novel entitled *Dolores*. In later life she wished to distance herself from this work, which she referred to as "juvenilia", at one point even attributing her brother Noel as co-author. This seems unlikely since in a letter to his tutor at Cambridge he mentions not being granted access to his sisters' manuscript, instead having to wait for it to be completed before being permitted to read it.

On returning home from her studies at Holloway, Ivy was responsible for the further education of her younger sisters, with her other brother Noel now at Cambridge. Her mother remained steadfast in her mourning and rarely showed love or affection to any of the children, while Ivy herself was not of a nurturing disposition. In 1911 her mother died after a long illness, and with Noel still away at University, Ivy assumed the role of head of the household. At that time her life must have seemed pre-ordained and inescapable, but she completed her Novel *Dolores* which was published the same year.

The fourth painful and tragic loss came in 1916, when her brother Noel, upon whom she was dependant for intellectual stimulation, social interaction and support in dealing with the rest of the family, died at the Somme.

Shortly after Noel's death, her four sisters moved away from the family home in Hove to London, leaving Ivy alone to sell the property and finally break up what was left of the family. She too moved to London and lived alone, sometimes visiting friends and staying for long periods of time when she could — although her sisters would not permit her to stay with them.

In 1917, not many months after their move to London, the fifth and perhaps the most disturbing tragedy befell Ivy. Two of her sisters - the youngest, Topsy and Baby - took their own lives in an apparent double suicide. This act was inexplicable and left Ivy and the rest of the family subject to speculation on the nature of the sisters' relationship - something Ivy did little to dispel.

Like the rest of the family, she had always suffered from a weak chest — an ailment known in the family as 'the Quinzies'. This, together with the several shocks she had endured and the self-containment of her grief, meant that during the 1918 Influenza epidemic that swept London, Ivy contracted the disease and was taken seriously ill. Before the advent of modern medicine her chances of survival were slim. Speaking of that time she said: "One just fought for breath for about a month." However, she eventually pulled through, although it took her many months to recover and left her with life-long respiratory problems.

Hilary Spurling's full biography of Dame Ivy was originally written as two separate volumes: Volume I, *Ivy When Young: The Early Life of I. Compton-Burnett 1884-1919*, published in 1974, followed in 1984 by Volume II, *Secrets of A Woman's Heart: The Later Life of I. Compton-Burnett, 1920-1969*. It is telling that Dame Ivy's life can be extrapolated in this way, as she obviously and purposefully separated herself from her early life. Rarely referencing her childhood or family, she would obfuscate and sidestep any questions regarding either. The second part of her life would seem to be marked as starting with her recovery from influenza and her friendship with Margaret Jourdain.

**A fuller discussion around the events of these years can be found in the following pages.*

# Dame Ivy's Father: James Compton-Burnett - The Physician-Father

*'He was a big dark brooding man, rather like me in the face, insofar as a big dark brooding man can be like me.'*

Dame Ivy

It is worth taking the time to consider the influence of Dame Ivy's father, James Compton-Burnett, on her life and education. A progressive figure in medicine, having converted from orthodox practice to homeopathy, he would have been a towering presence in young Ivy's world. His interests in the human condition and the causes and treatment of disease included pioneering techniques still referred to and used today.

We do not know how much of his knowledge or experience he shared with his family, but he was a driven and highly intelligent man, closely associated with some of the most influential homeopathic clinicians and educators of his time. His patients and family ties also linked him to some of the era's most prominent cultural and scientific figures.

We can only surmise how much of this Dame Ivy might have absorbed, but his prolific works and wide-ranging research - on everything from cancer treatments to the effects of menopause - undoubtedly created an atmosphere of intellectual rigour and enquiry. He showed an unusual attentiveness to the inner lives of women particularly in matters relating to health, resilience and adaptation. His literary reflections on what he described as women's ability to cope with the 'dramatic changes brought on by menopause' demonstrate a genuine curiosity and, at times, a quiet admiration. For a man of his time, this was striking.

James Compton Burnett (the hyphen in the name was added by Katherine Rees when they married), was Victorian in his manner and sensibilities. Born in 1840, he went on to become a distinguished figure in the field of homeopathy during the late 19th century. Born in Redlynch, near Salisbury, Wiltshire, to a farming family of Scottish descent, he was the son of Charles Burnett (1811–1883) and Sarah Wilson (1805–1882).

Dr Compton-Burnett's first family consisted of five children, left motherless after the death of his first wife, Agnes, who died shortly after giving birth to their fifth child. The children were still very young when he remarried to Katherine Rees, with Ivy and her younger siblings forming his second family. For a time, the two families lived together as one. Eventually, the older stepsiblings were either sent to boarding school or left the family home when they could,

retreating from their controlling and emotionally unavailable stepmother.

Dame Ivy's father was certainly present in his influence, if not always in person, during her infancy and childhood, leaving the nanny detailed instructions for the care of his children. Though still a conventional patriarch in many respects, he appears to have engaged with his children's lives with care and thoughtful attention. Unlike many Edwardian fathers, he took a hands-on interest in his children's physical and mental development. In her biography Ivy: *The Life of I. Compton-Burnett*, Hilary Spurling writes of Ivy and her siblings' recollections of how he was known to supervise their breakfast, accompany them on outings to the seafront and create playful moments at home — from storytelling by the fire to Sunday evening games. He placed value on what they ate, how they exercised, and the kind of people they were becoming, especially the children from his second marriage, of whom Dame Ivy was the eldest.

After his sudden death in 1901, a barely seventeen-year-old Ivy became an emotional anchor in a household that would soon be shaken by further loss. In later years, while she rarely spoke of her early life, she would occasionally refer to moments from her childhood — a memory of her father or a fleeting recollection of her mother. And yet those early experiences echo throughout her fiction: families divided by grief, patriarchs who dominate and diminish and women who, though wounded, hold things together with a silent, unyielding strength.

Her father's perspective may have planted something lasting in her — not softness perhaps, but an early exposure to attentiveness and quiet regard. If Ivy seemed enigmatic to those who knew her, her novels hint at emotional truths too deep and hidden for casual discourse or exposure. Instead, she draws on her experience of the fragilities and fractures of family life and expertly transposes them into the dialogue and sensibilities of her characters.

James Compton-Burnett's background, reputation and legacy in homeopathy — he was the author of more than twenty-two works, many still preserved in physical and digital form (* see Appendix) — form an important part of the context that shaped Dame Ivy's literary landscape. His life and works are well documented and the influence of his practice and writing is still apparent and alive today. As such, it is worth giving some background as context to the character of the man, his notoriety and dominance over his family. The following serves as illumination on the possible influence his paternal legacy may have exerted over Dame Ivy's writing.

From the age of sixteen to nineteen, he was educated in France and travelled widely across the continent. In 1865 he enrolled in medical school in Vienna, where he studied anatomy for two years and was awarded a gold medal for his accomplishments. He later entered the University of Glasgow's medical department, from which he graduated in 1872 after only one year. A

contemporary recalled: 'Passing through a brilliant examination in anatomy, lasting one hour and a half, the professor shook hands with him, saying that he had never examined a student with so brilliant and thorough a knowledge of anatomy.'

In 1876, he completed his internship for his MB degree at Barnhill Parochial Hospital and Asylum in Glasgow. It was during this time that a colleague, Alfred Edward Hawkes, introduced him to homeopathy. He subsequently studied under John James Drysdale and Edward William Berridge in Liverpool - initially in secret, due to fear of reprisals from allopathic colleagues.

After practising in Birkenhead and Chester, he relocated to London, where he committed fully to homeopathy. He became a prominent figure in the field, known for his innovation, prolific output, and high-profile patients including Lewis Carroll.

He worked at the London Homeopathic Hospital, held a private practice, and succeeded Edward Barton Shuldham as editor of *The Homeopathic World*. In 1881, he served as one of the local secretaries for the 2nd Quinquennial International Homeopathic Congress, held in London.

Throughout the 1880s and 1890s he was part of the 'Cooper Club', a group of four influential homeopaths: Robert Thomas Cooper, Thomas Skinner, John Henry Clarke and Compton Burnett himself. They met weekly to dine, exchange notes, and debate. This small circle exerted considerable influence on the development of British homeopathy.

Later, he maintained two busy medical practices in London, at Finsbury Circus and Wimpole Street, while living in Hove, East Sussex. However, his chosen path of medicine was an unorthodox one. Despite an impressive client list and the influence he carried in certain circles, practicing homeopaths were often dismissed as charlatans (until the Royal Family appointed their own in 1918), something his second wife Katherine lamented regarding the impact on their social standing and income.

His written works include numerous books and pamphlets on a wide array of medical and philosophical topics. Titles such as *Fifty Reasons for Being a Homeopath* (1888), *Vaccinosis and Its Cure by Thuja* (1884), and *The Change of Life in Women and the Ills and Ailing's Incident Thereto* (1878), reflect his broad commitment to the advancement of homeopathy. He also contributed significantly to the homeopathic materia medica. Notably he introduced several nosodes*, including Bacillinum Burnett, Coqueluchinum, Carcinosinum, Epihysterinum, Ergotinum, Morbillinum, and possibly Schirrinum and Influenzinum.

He was inspired not only by Hahnemann, the founder of homeopathy, but also by Johann

Gottfried Rademacher, a Paracelsian** practitioner of organopathy. He noted: 'It seems to me that organopathy and elementary homeopathy are identical.'

His personal life was equally complex. His first wife, Agnes Ann Thomas - the daughter of homeopathic pharmacist Edward Thomas - died in September 1882, shortly after the birth of their fifth child. Her death deeply affected him, but by late 1884, he was re-married and father to a new baby daughter: Ivy.

His second marriage was to a former patient, Katharine Rees, and together they had seven more children. Katharine managed a large and demanding household: five stepchildren and seven of her own, while James commuted to London for his medical work.

The family moved several times, eventually settling in a large house at 20 The Drive, Hove, Sussex, where they would remain for the rest of their lives. However, Dr Compton-Burnett's long absences and intense professional life may well have contributed to the emotionally charged and hierarchical dynamics Dame Ivy later depicted so sharply in her novels. (See sections on Katherine and Ivy.)

James Compton-Burnett died suddenly of heart failure aged sixty-one. He was lodging at his hotel in London on the night of Monday 1st April, 1901, just two months before Ivy's seventeenth birthday. His obituary was published in the *British Journal of Homeopathy* that same year. John Henry Clarke wrote: 'It is not too much to say that during the last twenty years Burnett has been the most powerful, the most fruitful, and the most original force in homeopathy.'

In a strange twist of fate, his older brother, John — a Congregational Minister in Bedford — had died just two weeks earlier, on 21st March.

It would likely have pleased Dr Compton-Burnett greatly to know that Dr John Weir, who became the first Homeopathic Physician to the Crown, held the title of Compton-Burnett Professor of Materia Medica at the London Homeopathic Hospital, an honour established in his memory and still in place today.

Coincidentally, Dr Margery 'Grace' Blackie (1898–1981), who succeeded Dr Weir in the royal appointment (the first woman to hold the position) and became personal homeopathic physician to Queen Elizabeth II, was Dr Compton-Burnett's niece through his second marriage. Like her uncle, she began her medical career in orthodox practice before turning to homeopathy. This family connection made her Dame Ivy's first cousin. Although she and Ivy were on good terms, it was her sister Katie with whom Ivy corresponded most closely

throughout her life.

Dr Compton-Burnett fought tirelessly for the official recognition of homeopathy. That ambition was, in many ways, realised through the work of Dr Blackie, whose campaigning helped secure its place within the newly established National Health Service in 1948.

**Further reading, citations, and sources can be found in the appendix.*

# Dame Ivy's Mother: Katherine Compton-Burnett - The Oppressive Mother

*'There is no one on this earth, whom I wouldn't not rather set myself against than your mother. I wondered how your father could undertake her.'*

From: A Father and His Fate, I. Compton-Burnett

Born Katherine Rees in 1855 and the daughter the Alderman of Dover, who was a prominent member of society, she was 27 years old when she met her future husband and Dame Ivy's father, James Compton Burnett. She was taken to him as a patient in 1883 after being diagnosed with Bright's disease and very unfavourable chances of recovery. Her family, who were already homeopath devotees, had heard of Dr Compton Burnett by reputation and took Katherine to Liverpool to consult with him.

In his book *Fifty Reasons for Being a Homeopath* James' account of his wife — at the time merely his patient — was prescient in its observations. He described her as: '…an unusually beautiful, sweet girl' and went on to characterise her as: 'A human high-bred who will not cave in but, if duty calls, will go on till they drop: existing on their 'go' rather than on their physique… [She] has no occipital power worthwhile. Well, the patient in question had been through a domestic trial and has bent; some thought she had broken'.

Katherine was beautiful, with a 'halo' of bright blonde hair that was her crowning glory right up until her death. She was imperious, particular, possessed a jealous nature and was known for a fearful temper which she rarely controlled and for which she never apologised.

Rowland Rees - Katherine's father and Ivy's grandfather - was a brusque, imperious man, accustomed to issuing orders and, by his own admission, possessed of a 'notorious temper'. A bullying bombast, he relished public life as Alderman of Dover and fully inhabited the well-defined Victorian patriarchal role both professionally and within his family. Katherine took great pride in the social standing her father's position afforded her and always considered herself, and by extension, her own family, to be of a higher social rank than most within their circle. Mr Rees's wife, Katherine's stepmother Nancy, was deaf and, according to Julian Mitchell — a playwright who adapted several of Dame Ivy's novels for the stage — Katherine and all her children could 'talk on their hands'.

Katherine became mother to seven children, Ivy being the eldest. She was also stepmother to

her husband's five surviving children from his first marriage. The stepchildren lived alongside the growing 'new' Compton-Burnett family — the fact that Katherine added the hyphen to the family name tells us something about her character — until they departed for school, work, or in the case of the eldest daughter Olive, in a spirit of outright rebellion.

One stepdaughter, Daisy, remained close to Katherine, though her life resembled one of servitude: tending to the younger children, managing domestic duties and accompanying her stepmother on social calls. The daily toil Daisy endured along with Katherine's authoritarian regime, unfettered temper tantrums and unpredictable moods, would later surface in more than one of Dame Ivy's fictional households. Daisy became a fervent Christian and eventually entered a religious order, a path that evidently offered more peace than the rigours of her former life.

Being the first born, Ivy was beloved by Katherine, as were her brothers Guy and Noel, and the trio remained a 'group' of their own. Not even after their father's death, when a barely sixteen-year-old Guy assumed responsibility as head of the household, did Ivy pay much attention to her four other younger siblings. Katherine was not maternal by nature, and after the birth of her first three children she seemed to have no feeling left for the other four, all of whom were girls: Vera Sabine, Juliet (Judy), Katherine (Topsy), and Stephanie Primrose (Baby). They appear to have been seen by her as less significant.

Instead, Katherine abdicated her parental duties to the children's nurse, Miss Smith, known to them all as 'Minnie'. As a young woman of twenty-three, Miss Smith had come to Dr Compton Burnett after the death of his first wife to look after his five children, the youngest of whom was an infant. She moved with the family when Dr Compton Burnett remarried and remained with them, looking after the first five children and then the second seven. She was adored by them all, with Ivy in later life acknowledging that they loved Minnie as a mother. She remained with the youngest children into adulthood, moving to London with them when they eventually left the family home. She is an important influence and individual, not only because she was practically the only source of feminine comfort and kindness for Ivy the child, but because she clearly provided Ivy the author with some of her most enduring and empathetic characters.

However, Katherine was devoted to her husband and jealously guarded his affections, which were returned in equal measure. In one instance she sharply removed Olive, his eight-year-old daughter from his first marriage, who had climbed upon his knee. She was vain, used as she was to admiration and never one to temper her frequent emotional outbursts – once in a fit of anger she threw her own dog out of a carriage window when the animal refused to behave. Her household and family were subject to strict laws, timekeeping and routine, all of which her husband condoned, particularly as it was necessary for him to lodge in London during the week,

and therefore he was often absent.

Religion in the Compton-Burnett household was regarded as both a duty and a social obligation. Katherine had been raised in the Wesleyan tradition, to which she remained loyal throughout her life, and Sunday evening prayers at home, led by Dr Compton-Burnett and with the entire household in attendance, were a regular fixture throughout young Ivy's childhood. Though non-conformist by nature, in many respects both parents adhered to certain social conventions. They attended services and occupied a family pew at their local church in Hove, which also afforded Mrs Compton-Burnett the opportunity to exhibit her children and trumpet her social standing to the wider community.

The figure of the domineering matriarch looms large in I. Compton-Burnett's fiction, just as it loomed over her life from earliest childhood. Her mother was a force of tremendous will, rigidity and moral severity. While Ivy's father was a respected homeopathic physician - rational, reserved and generally supportive of his children's education - it was Katharine who came to dominate the household emotionally, especially following her husband's death in 1901.

James' passing marked a decisive turn in the atmosphere of the Compton-Burnett home. Though grief was natural, Katharine's response was extreme: she imposed a near-permanent state of mourning on her children, particularly Ivy and her sisters – even the baby was dressed in black with 'a dark grey pelisse tied over her bonnet with black ribbons'. Dame Ivy was sixteen when her father died. From that point on, the family was expected to remain emotionally suspended in bereavement, with mourning clothes worn for years and a household ethos of restraint, control, and subdued expression. The weight of Katharine's grief became institutional and 'extravagant', transforming what had been a large, bustling upper-middle-class household into a cloistered space of silence, propriety and emotional repression.

Dr Compton-Burnett's not inconsiderable estate of over £67,000 and property, together with Katherine's own inheritance, amounted to an income of several thousand pounds a year and placed the family firmly within the ranks of the well off. However, as an additional extravagant savagery of her grief, Katharine imposed a frugal regime upon the household. She allowed little or no expenditure on the children - particularly the younger ones - and a deliberate parsimony in the provision of even basic comforts and domestic necessities. She dismissed many of the long-serving staff, in particular the 'menservants' who had once contributed to the vitality and atmosphere of the Compton-Burnett home. She also permitted no expense on entertainments, small luxuries, or the keeping-up of fashionable appearances.

A small but regular sum had been allotted to the children of James's first marriage as a gesture of continued paternal obligation, if not of generosity. Despite her markedly austere household

management, Katherine nevertheless ensured that these payments were maintained. It was an act of duty rather than sentiment, an obligation of her widowhood. As Hilary Spurling notes, for the daughters especially this modest allowance became a vital if slender support over the years. After Katherine's death and as executor of her mother's will, Ivy continued to honour the arrangement with the same exacting diligence, ensuring the payments continued without pause.

The family became known as aloof and withdrawn from society, with the young girls and their mother regularly seen trudging to the family church to sit in their own pew, to pay their respects and further mourn their father. In 1905, four years after James Compton-Burnett's death, their grief was to be deepened even further when Katherine's eldest and most beloved son Guy died suddenly of pneumonia.

While Ivy was in her final year at Holloway College, several of her siblings had been taken ill with influenza and whilst it was the girls whose survival was feared the most, it was Guy who developed pneumonia, succumbing within days. His death was so quick that he passed before his sister could be summoned home in time.

Ivy arrived to find her closest ally and only intellectual superior gone and her mother sunk ever deeper into a bleak and impenetrable mourning. Guy's death and the long months she spent at the family home in Hove assuming his duties within the suffocating vacuum of her mother's grief had a profound psychological impact. She had been poised on the threshold of completing her degree - a moment when freedom, intellectual joy and independence might have taken root. Instead, she found herself tethered to a household governed by ritualised sorrow and oppression. Her college education was abruptly halted, and she was sucked into a life of monotonous domestic obligation: supervising the lessons of her younger sisters in the schoolroom, tending to the unceasing demands of her mother's neediness and ever increasing rages, absorbing in silence the oppressive weight of responsibility.

Ivy returned to Holloway College in 1906, but the promise of freedom was quickly overshadowed by the persistent pull of a home steeped in grief and rigid moral authority, and she soon returned to a future overshadowed by familial obligation. Despite her intellect and natural curiosity, Ivy found herself confined — both emotionally and physically — within a regime that allowed little room for ambition or joy; only duty.

Ivy's natural reserve meant she was ill-suited to play the role of consoling companion to her mother. Unlike Guy she could not easily access or express emotional nuance, nor could she set aside her need for intellectual engagement, something she perhaps felt her mother could not share. As a result, she struggled to empathise or to give voice to either her own loss or

her mother's. Instead, she withdrew into silence, broken only by rare moments when she was said to "sparkle", otherwise immersing herself in the solitary occupation of writing her first novel: *Dolores*.

For her part, Katharine had to content herself with the limitations of stilted exchanges and her daughter's quiet reserve. According to Hilary Spurling, Ivy's sisters maintained that their mother, though she may not have outwardly shown it, 'was always a little bit in awe of Ivy'.

Katherine died on 5th October 1911, aged fifty-six, having kept her family in a state of near isolation during the years since her husband's death. She had been diagnosed with breast cancer and suffered greatly, eventually succumbing to the illness after undergoing several rounds of the painful and primitive radium treatments then available. By the end she had grown almost entirely deaf. She had remained resolute in her determined and prolonged grief, never bending to the fast-changing modern world beyond her curtilage. She was untouched by perceived social expectations, or her children's emotional needs. Elizabeth Sprigge writes in her biography *The Life of Ivy Compton-Burnett*, that Ivy had been: 'Considerate and patient with her mother during the last difficult years.'

While Dame Ivy rarely, if ever, spoke directly of her mother in public or private correspondence, the shadow of Katharine can be felt unmistakably in her novels. The tyrannical matriarch, the house ruled by a widow who bends all inhabitants to her will, the constant tension between surface civility and the undercurrent of emotional violence, are not mere literary conceits. They reflect, albeit obliquely, the reality of her formative years. It is no coincidence that her fiction is so attuned to the unspoken, the repressed, the polite cruelties of family life. In her mother Ivy encountered the embodiment of the domestic autocrat whose influence would shape not just the household, but her daughter's literary vision.

# Ivy: The Older Sister

*'Ivy very rarely put into words what was her real feeling, she put herself into her books and she was a secret otherwise, known only to herself.'*

Juliet (Judy) Compton-Burnett

After the death of her mother, Ivy, aged 27 at the time, assumed the role of head of the household with as much exacting precision as she became accustomed to exerting as a writer. She was responsible for daily household routines, all expenses and the girls' education. Throughout her life she had demonstrated her moral obligation to duty, and she stuck rigidly to her role of executor and eldest sibling.

Her brother Noel, with whom she had become especially close, had blossomed into a bright and talented young man and was an historical Fellow of King's College, Cambridge. Ivy visited him there and was introduced to many of his friends — including Rupert Brooke, to whom Noel was especially close. These encounters took place either during her visits to Cambridge or at 20 The Drive, which could once again be used for entertaining now that Katherine's illness no longer prevented it. One acquaintance in particular, Jack Beresford, became a lifelong friend to Ivy. He and his family would come to have a lasting and influential presence in her life.

Within the Compton-Burnett family Ivy undertook a role that extended beyond that of a sister, stepping into a position of guardianship and authority. She took on the responsibility of managing the household and overseeing the education of her younger sisters, as Hilary Spurling notes: '…with a sense of duty rather than affection, offering structure without intimacy.'

This approach to familial responsibilities, marked by a lack of overt warmth, reflected her emotionally reserved nature — a trait that would become something of an insignia in later life. This dynamic is echoed in Dame Ivy's own literary work where she explores complex family relationships and the burdens of duty.

In truth, she and some of her siblings were far apart in age and interest. Her sisters Vera and Judy were accomplished musicians and after years of shutting out the sound of their incessant practice, after her mother's death Ivy forbade music to be played in the house. Instead, she arranged for the piano to be removed to an alternative location where the sisters could practice at specific times.

Nevertheless, she dutifully took care of her four sisters until late 1915. At this point they were into their late teens (and Vera was twenty-three), and so desperate to remove themselves

from the house in Hove and their eldest sister's intractable regime that they planned to move to London and away from the oppression. Their extraordinary upbringing and circumstances were made apparent to them after a visit from a friend, the pianist Myra Hess, who was appalled by the paucity of their daily life and lack of warmth or attention from their oldest sister. Emboldened and encouraged by Myra, they determined to remove themselves and prepared to leave for good. Ivy resisted their representations to make the move to London, with the girls eventually winning the argument by simply departing against Ivy's will, taking lodgings at a house in St John's Wood in September 1915.

This departure meant the final unravelling of the Compton-Burnett household. With the war in progress and his imminent departure to France, their brother Noel, who had recently moved to London himself after hurriedly marrying ahead of his deployment to the Front, viewed the girls' decision to abandon Ivy and Hove as ill-timed and poorly judged. Later, a distance in relations settled between Ivy and her younger sisters and while they loosely kept in touch, Ivy did not include them in her future life.

Themes of quiet domestic mutiny and the inability to 'obey' characterised as the blatant abandonment of duty are visited several times throughout the novels of I. Compton-Burnett. In her novels the oppressor is usually victorious but in the instance of her sisters' move from Hove, Ivy was to lose control. On occasion there is a hint of empathy for the captive characters in her writing, although often they pay the price for their disobedience and acts of perceived self-centred rebellion.

Life was to deal a further blow to the now rudderless Ivy, who having dealt with the sale of the house in Hove had also unwillingly moved to London. Noel was by now in the final stages of his training and preparations to leave for France. However, the predicament of his eldest sister was on his mind when he wrote to his friend Elliot Felkin: 'I wonder if you would ask your sister…whether she would put my sister Ivy up for her club. I should like my sister to know yours as I think they are rather kindred - at one in their contempt of the human race. Ivy is often wondering about town; the foxes have holes, the birds have nests, cabmen repose inside their hackney, but my sister has not etc. I wonder if your sister would write to Ivy if willing.'*

Ivy did become friends with Elliot's sister, Winifred, and close to the whole family over the years, but not before tragedy struck again. Little over a year after being sent to the Front, Noel was killed in action. The pain of this loss must have been enormous to Ivy, but Noel's young wife, Tertia, - whom he had married only months before, and whose sensitive nature he was at great pains to protect - fell into 'paroxysms' of grief. Ivy had moved into a flat with Tertia when Noel left for France, partly for the practicality of needing somewhere to live, but also to support her brother by being a companion to his new wife while he was at war.

Whatever the depths of her grief, once again Ivy suppressed it to help Tertia and find her more permanent care. Within her own loss, Ivy found herself in the uncomfortable but familiar position of being without a foothold and executor to Noel's will - Tertia either having relinquished her duty as co-executor, or deemed incapable due to her state of mind. Much later in her life Ivy was to remark on several occasions that losing Noel and Guy: "Quite smashed my life up, it quite smashed my life up."

Either way, it was Ivy who saw to it that Tertia was properly accommodated and cared for, and who visited her daily.

Tertia was Jack Beresford's younger sister; his eldest, Dorothy — strikingly pretty, with an imposing and domineering personality — was as direct and astute as Ivy. Intellectually they were well matched, if not completely compatible, and found great companionship with each other. So much so that Ivy went to live with Dorothy for a few months at The Rectory in Easton Grey, Wiltshire — the Beresford family home. Later the two women shared a flat in London, until Dorothy was married.

All this time, Ivy discharged her duties regarding her sister's affairs, never neglecting her financial responsibilities. Whilst she was able to attend to business, she was never able to reconcile herself to their recklessness and abandonment of her, and she otherwise washed her hands of them.

In December of 1917 Primrose (Baby) and Katherine (Topsy) informed their two older sisters and Minnie – who, in an act of loyalty to the four younger, less experienced siblings and at their behest, had moved to London as their housekeeper — that they wanted a break away. They said they were going to stay at a farmhouse in Wickham, a destination well-known to all the girls. Some days later Iris, their half-sister, was visiting Judy and Vera in London. Concerned after hearing the younger girls had not returned, she went up to their bedroom. No one had thought to look there as they had not been seen or heard from since their departure. Unable to open the door and realising the key was on the inside, the door was broken down. Primrose and Baby were found dead together, having lain undiscovered for at least a two to three days. They had never left their room, let alone London.

The coroner concluded they had both died by Veronal overdose some time on or around Christmas Day. It was left unclear as to whether the overdose was accidental and there is no official recorded verdict of suicide. However, whatever the reasons for this unthinkable act of brutal self-harm, what was known was that they had never settled in their new home and were 'restless'. They were devotees of Ralph Waldo Trine, a controversial figure who was part of the growing Anthroposophical movement which had taken root at the time. Topsy had

been prescribed Veronal for toothache and it would appear both the sisters had become accustomed to taking the drug. They died possibly only hours apart, side by side in bed, dressed in their dressing-gowns over their night-gowns. Primrose was holding on to her sisters' dressing-gown.

The tragedy of their deaths had a profound impact on Ivy. Biographer Hilary Spurling notes that the series of familial losses culminating in the deaths of Topsy and Primrose, led to Ivy's physical and mental collapse. At her lowest ebb during the 1918 influenza epidemic, she contracted pneumonia and fell dangerously ill — at time before antibiotics. Dame Ivy was later to say of her experience: "One just fought for breath for about a week."

She recovered slowly and according to Spurling was described as: 'In a state of extreme debility, unable to read or write for several months.'

This period of intense personal loss and suffering profoundly shaped Dame Ivy's subsequent literary work, where themes of familial tension, psychological complexity and authority dominate. Alongside these themes run darker motifs - suicide, incest, and both homosexual and lesbian relationships - not introduced to provoke or sensationalise, but rather conveyed as elements of a world she assumed to be universal. These were not merely conscious thematic choices, but reflections of a worldview shaped by experience, one in which such complexities were simply part of the human condition.

Her fiction rarely offers redemption or solace to characters caught in toxic dynamics — of their own making or otherwise — or burdened by secrecy, hurt, or psychological strain. Instead, there is at best the sense of stoicism; at worst, abandonment and an acceptance that life is unfair and usually offers little relief. That survival - not salvation - was the most one could expect. And yet she had compassion for her characters. Elizabeth Sprigge tells of how when Robert Liddell began his book: *The Novels of I. Compton-Burnett* Dame Ivy urged him to: "Stress the goodness of my characters".

The combination of Dame Ivy's innate character and the events of her early life appear to have formed a worldview whereby one should have little patience for the performance of suffering. Her novels suggest that pain is a constant, neither a cause for indulgence nor to be expressed with the expectation of sympathy. In her view everyone suffers, everyone bears wounds, and to presume one's grief is greater than another's akin to vanity. Her own considerable losses were not exaggerated — they are obliquely referenced in her literature and borne by her characters less with courage and more with emotional restraint. To her, this is not just a personal choice but a principle.

Several of her books feature children. In all they are given a voice; indeed, a criticism often levelled at her is that it is hard to differentiate their speech from the adults'. In her conversation with Margaret Jourdain, Dame Ivy says: "I do not think children have less interest than older people. I think their experience tends to be deeper and sharper, and even if more transitory - and I am not sure of this after very early years - to leave a deeper impression and memory".

She handles her young characters with care, affording them the space to offer their innocent wisdom and perception, delivered in simple and plain terms without the artifice or corruption of adulthood.

In later life she took a keen interest in the children of her friends, always asking after them and listening intently to stories of their progress. She shared in their triumphs and felt real sorrow when misfortune struck. Perhaps it was easier for her to show compassion for them than for her own younger siblings. Her early experiences caring for and observing her younger brothers and sisters, while enduring her own muted childhood under the weight of her mother's control, instilled in her an outrage at the inequality of expression, a wrong she sought to redress through her writing.

*This excerpt comes from Hilary Spurling's biography *Ivy: The Life of I. Compton-Burnett, 'Ivy When Young - 1915-1919'*, p. 213. In this chapter Spurling gives a detailed historical account of Noel's time at the Front, the movements of his battalion and his death.

# Ivy-isms

*'Anyone who picks up a Compton-Burnett [book] finds it very hard not to put it down.'*

Dame Ivy Compton-Burnett

Dame Ivy herself was under no illusions about the accessibility of her work, once remarking: "I have a small public, but it is quite as large as I wish. I would rather have a few readers who really read me than thousands who neither know nor care what I write."

Her speech was fast paced and deliberate, her humour dry, and her presence quietly commanding. Elizabeth Bowen recalled: "She could deliver the most scathing observation with the faintest hint of amusement."

Like her books, conversations with Ivy were exercises in control with no tolerance for vagueness. She dressed plainly, kept a rigid routine and lived with fierce precision. Even her famous teas were more intellectual duels than casual gatherings.

Wherever she turned her sharp gaze, Dame Ivy's unsentimental view of human nature - its self-interest and quiet opportunism - held firm. Even the supposedly civilised setting of a cocktail party did little to soften her scepticism. In *Ivy and Stevie*, Kay Dick recalls a conversation in which Ivy describes attending such a gathering with her usual dry wit: "I can't bear them. I went to this one because it was given by the landlord. We're frightfully friendly. That is to say, he's frightfully friendly to me. I believe it's because of the enormous rent I pay him. He rather likes my fame, but he thinks of the rent much more."

Both Ivy and her long-term friend and partner Margaret Jourdain were enthusiastic theatre goers sometimes visiting the theatre three or four times a week, and would discuss their opinions and views at length with friends. An avid reader (although she often contradicted herself about this), she was not fond of 'modern' literature where she felt authors left little to the imagination. She shunned authors who used lengthy descriptive passages. Even though she was very fond of Jane Austen - and read her throughout her life "with such enjoyment and admiration" - she admitted to skipping past passages of exposition, saying: "In the case of Jane Austen, I hurry through her words about Lyme and its surroundings, in order to return to her people".

Gossip was her passion. She was known to light up at the prospect of any new titillation or scandalous detail about friends, acquaintances or folks from the literary world and would repeat

these snippets of gossip to any fellow gossiper. According to Kay Dick and others, Ivy was notoriously always interested in people's financial affairs and income — a life-long fascination that was perhaps derived from the parsimony imposed on her by her mother.

Dame Ivy was intensely private and should a guest comment about her own literary works, she would look taken aback and confused, barely able to discuss it further. She carefully circumnavigated all conversation about her own writing and private life were carefully circumnavigated, though general conversation could encompass just about any subject.

Christopher Sykes had introduced her to the poet T. S. Eliot, who coincidentally lived nearby. Like her, he avoided literary talk, preferring instead to discuss the banalities of everyday life. There is a famous story — reported by Ivy herself — of the two sharing a cab ride home and discussing nothing but the upcoming Rent Act and its likely impact on their finances. As Sykes remarked, when Eliot and Ivy were in conversation, you would never imagine you were listening to two titans of English literature.

Ivy once remarked on Eliot's marriage to his second wife, Valerie, sharply observing: "I am sure she is very clever, but one does not like to be married to a clever woman."

For others who met her, it was often with a degree of trepidation. Her sharp eye and unforgiving candour - coupled with a rapier wit - could disarm even the most robust of personalities. She frequently challenged her guests, usually with a twinkle in her eye and a glint of humour. Being in her company was not for the faint-hearted.

Yet those who knew her well spoke consistently of her humour - something that is often overlooked, especially in discussions of her writing. Her novels are as full of humour and candid observation as was her conversation. In her biography, Cicely Greig is at great pains to emphasise the comedy in Ivy's work and her remarkable ability to switch direction with a single, sharply observed remark - both in fiction and in life.

# Iconic Appearance

*'She has not unpleasing, sharp features, and her profile is almost beautiful. But she is not the kind of woman who cares tuppence for appearances, and wears a simple, unremarkable black dress which she smooths down with long fingers.'*

James Lee-Milne

Perhaps it was the years spent in mourning as a young woman that left Dame Ivy Compton-Burnett with the lifelong habit of wearing black. Or perhaps it was simply a practical decision — an unfussy "uniform" that required no thought. Whatever the reason, she was rarely seen in any other colour. In *Ivy: The Life of I. Compton-Burnett*, Hilary Spurling draws on a vivid description by Robin Fedden, a fellow author and friend, recalling his impression of Dame Ivy during his first tea invitation in 1946: 'Her jewellery managed to never look like jewellery but, on her, seemed hieratic insignia. I do not recall seeing her out of black. She wore it like a uniform, with care but with the disregard for mode proper to uniform. A sense positively of the Services attached to a black tricorne, vaguely reminiscent of an eighteenth-century quarter-deck. There was also the long black umbrella. This she would carry to dinner a mere two hundred yards from [her] home on a halcyon evening…'

Another striking and unchanging feature was her hairstyle, which remained essentially the same from her late teens until her death. A Photograph of Dame Ivy at Royal Holloway College shows her in black, with her distinctive upswept hair, a style that over the years became less voluminous and ever more severe. Fedden continued: 'For me, the physical impression was recurrently of a Roman head, a soldier-emperor, perhaps Galba. The rolled hair and the ribbon sometimes seemed like a laurel wreath.'

Her image became nearly as iconic as her writing. In his novel *The Uncommon Reader*, Alan Bennett imagines Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II brushing up on her reading via a mobile library. Confronted with the shelves, she lights upon a name she recognises: I. Compton-Burnett. She looks at the photograph of the author and remarks: 'I made her a Dame. Yes, I remember that hair, a roll like a pie-crust that went right round her head.'

The line suggests two things: first, that Alan Bennett was familiar enough with Ivy's work to include her in his novel; and second, that her image — as much as her distinctive prose — had become a form of literary shorthand.

The uniform of black, then, appears to have been a compromise, a rejection of sartorial fuss in favour of order and efficiency. As a young student at Holloway Ivy was often noted for

being late to dinner, which was a formal affair. She would leave dressing until the last possible moment, sometimes arriving still buttoning up her clothes. In a letter to her cousin Katie Blackie on 1 May 1903, she writes: "I must say goodbye now, & go & endeavour in the short space of 6 minutes and ¾ to arrange my wig [hair], an operation which Mother declares should occupy every lady at least half an hour."

Another of Dame Ivy's sartorial eccentricities was a black tricorne hat, which she regularly wore, unironically and with apparent conviction. Though no photographs of her wearing it survive, accounts describe her arriving at the London Boat Race, garden parties and grand houses in this distinctive piece of headgear.

In 1955, after the publication of *Mother and Son*, Arthur Colder-Marshall broadcast a review of the novel. He referred to the Cecil Beaton portrait of I. Compton-Burnett, saying: '…Her eyes are the most haunting feature; the eyes of one who has looked through a keyhole and seen terror.'

Many others, Cicely Greig included, described her eyes as green-grey, often showing a softness that belied her outward appearance. Whilst she was rarely seen to laugh out loud, her eyes twinkled with mirth and humour. Make no mistake, they could also be 'watchful and wary, sometimes hostile' and freeze you to the spot with one icy look.

Her small delicate hands are often noted in people's descriptions of her. They were either kept folded in her lap whilst listening to or observing others, or engaged in embroidery, which had become a hobby she took a keen interest in and became very good at. She and her dear friend Ernest Thesinger (a renowned actor, artist and close friend of the artist William Rankin) spent many hours together at their embroidery. Ernest was considered a world-class expert for 'petit point' — his expertise in demand all over the world. As a child she collected small things and throughout her life she loved to pick up seashells, or empty snail shells. She was deft of hand and put her hands to good use.

Although she always had a very healthy appetite and was a voracious consumer of sweets, chocolates and fruit, she had a small frame, becoming rather thin in later life. She had big, beautiful eyes that twinkled with mischief and an aquiline nose. Cicely Greig observed: 'She had beautiful manners and although she was not without kindness, her wall of reserve was formidable, her dignity impregnable.'

# "Best Friends"

## *Dame Ivy & Margaret Jourdain: A Domestic and Intellectual Partnership*

For over thirty years, Ivy lived with Margaret Jourdain, a respected furniture historian and author of several books on the decorative arts. She was clever and a published poet, essayist, journalist, and well-known authoritative voice in her field. They met sometime around 1918 and certainly by the end of 1919 they were "best friends" and sharing Ivy's flat in Leinster Square, London. Their relationship was intellectually intense, emotionally intertwined and profoundly important. Whether romantic or platonic, it gave Ivy the stability she needed to write. After Margaret's sudden death in 1951 Ivy was devastated, her writing becoming even darker and more introspective.

In 2024, to mark what would have been Dame Ivy Compton-Burnett's 140th birthday, Stuart Jeffries reflected on her relationship with Margaret Jourdain, writing: 'Whether or not their relationship was sexual is unclear. Compton-Burnett later had a long and fond relationship with Madge Garland, founder of the School of Fashion at the Royal College of Art and one-time editor of *British Vogue*.'

Jeffries also noted how remarkably open Dame Ivy's novels were about homosexuality, especially given the era in which they were written. In '*More Women than Men*' written in 1933, Josephine Napier is discovered in a lesbian embrace with a teacher from the girls' boarding school she runs. In *Two Worlds and Their Ways* written in 1949, Oliver Firebrace is romantically involved with Oliver Spode who is not only a fellow schoolmaster, but also his half-uncle.

When Margaret and Ivy met, Ivy was still in the throes of ill-health and grief and looked frail and ill. The two must have found an intellectual parity with one another and Margaret felt tender towards the younger Ivy, whose malaise would have ordinarily turned Margaret away with disdain.

However, though they shared a life that fell eventually into the pattern of an 'old married couple', never was there any hint of the women sharing a room, let alone a bed. Friends of many years who had been privy to just about every type of social interaction between them, were never able to picture the women in a sexual relationship. Margaret herself described both she and Ivy as 'neuters'.

Both women enjoyed the company of bright, good looking young men; for Ivy, this was a legacy of the years she spent in the company of her brother Noel's brilliant young Cambridge

friends. There were rumours that before the First World War the young, beautiful and bright Ivy had been engaged to a young man, but this has never been substantiated or corroborated by Dame Ivy. It was commonplace at the time for women to share a home. In her conversation with Kay Dick, she reflects on the effects of the First World War: "A generation just went…the women didn't marry so much because there was no one for them to marry…".

In 1934 they settled in a large flat, in Braemar Mansions in Cornwall Gardens, Kensington, where Ivy remained until her death in 1969. In her biography Hilary Spurling describes the flat: '…A gaunt granite barracks with a porter, lifts, a carpeted foyer and large high-ceilinged rooms, a great deal more spacious as well as an address in itself infinitely superior to their previous quarters.' It was adorned with exquisite furniture Margaret had acquired over time — pieces of interest and delicate beauty.

Cicely Greig visited the flat on numerous occasions when both its occupants were in residence and then often after Margaret Jourdain's death to see Dame Ivy, usually to drop off a newly typed manuscript. She describes the sitting room as: 'A collectors' room, a room one could talk about. It was large with two floor to ceiling French windows that went on to the balcony, filled with potted plants and flowers — which was Ivy's joy. There were two or three Hepplewhite chairs and the two small, elegant fires screens on their tall stands which stood against the wall facing the window, an armed Hepplewhite chair between them.' This was the setting that was later to be used by Cecil Beaton when he photographed Dame Ivy.

There was usually a fire lit in the sitting room and Ivy always sat in the same position by the fire, with her back to the large windows with the blinds half drawn. The sparse furnishings and apparent lack of comfort suggested a home composed of rooms without warmth or welcome. But the constant flow of visitors and the generosity of its hosts tells another story.

The dining room was the setting for hundreds of luncheons and dinners - not always formal, but invariably governed by Dame Ivy's exacting domestic authority. For newer visitors, the atmosphere could be intimidating. Ivy was known to sharply rebuke Margaret mid-meal for minor infractions (a wrongly poured drink, an ill-timed interruption) while conversation, sharpened by intellect and expectation, rarely allowed for passivity. Both Margaret and Ivy were incisive observers of human behaviour, and neither hesitated to share their appraisals.

An apocryphal story tells of a young admirer of Dame Ivy's work, who was invited to dine with his literary idol. So overwhelmed was he by their initial exchange that he drank his wine too quickly and fell asleep at the table. He awoke sometime later to a cold, darkened room - the guests gone, his hostess long since retired - and left, stricken with embarrassment, into the night, never to return.

Hester Marsden-Smedley, daughter of a close friend of Margaret's and herself a childhood acquaintance, recalls the first time she heard Margaret speak of Ivy, describing her as her "best friend." Hester was close to both Margaret and Ivy throughout their lives and spent a great deal of time with them over the years. In her view, the "best friends" were just that, and whilst the nature of their relationship was never discussed with them personally, she believed them to have a "true love" for one another. Hester is another friend who was at pains to let it be known that despite the reputation built up around her, Ivy was always gentle and kind to her and her husband Basil.

For a long time, Ivy was known by Margaret's wide circle of friends as a quiet presence who was very much in the background, with Margaret in command of any given situation and certainly the instigator of social engagements. Margaret Jourdain was already very well known in her field, and it was not until many years later that Ivy became the 'celebrity' of the household. Although she didn't much relish the position, Margaret maintained Ivy: "Enjoyed fame far more than me."

Rooted in a deep mutual respect and recognition of each other's fierce intellect, their relationship revolved around the comfort of quotidian routine, a daily rhythm that allowed them to live in harmony and domestic companionship.

In Lee Miller's 1942 image of them taking tea together (which was an arranged setting conceived by the photographer), the viewer is invited to share Miller's observation of their dynamic and the depth of their bond. In the photograph they are both seated at a small round table, with a tray set for tea. Dame Ivy, who appears more reserved, is pouring tea from a formal silver teapot, quietly focussed on her activity. However, Margaret Jourdain's movement in the scene seems to indicate a control of proceedings, suggesting a dynamic where Jourdain often took the lead in social settings. This visual representation aligns with accounts that Jourdain was more outgoing, often managing their social engagements and taking the lead in conversation.

## Time for Tea:

"Come for tea on Saturday". Dame Ivy's legendary teas were an extension of her literary world: precise, unsentimental, and slightly daunting. Tea was a daily ritual and came with the distinction of a much-coveted invitation. When Margaret was alive it was always served in the sitting room and invariably in front of the fire.

Cicely Grieg recalls her first tea with Ivy and Margaret in her biography *Ivy Compton-Burnett, A Memoir*. She remembers how Ivy would always pour the tea once the pot had been brought

in on a tray by the housekeeper, while Margaret conversed with ease. She describes how tea in the early days was a 'long drawn-out meal' and was dismayed to discover that in fact it was 'high tea' and she was expected to eat all that Ivy put in front of her, a huge meal of chunks of bread and butter laden with cream cheese, lettuce, cucumber, potted shrimp and cake.

In later years tea was served in the dining room and always with a mix of guests old and new. Eventually, it became streamlined to cake and a pot of tea. In his 1962 radio interview with Dame Ivy which was conducted during tea, Studs Terkel was advised by Julian Mitchell that the cake was "always fruit cake."

Often, both women would quiz their guests on the latest news or gossip concerning mutual acquaintances. In contrast with the sharp observational wit especially attributed to Dame Ivy, she was always ready to engage in conversation about the cost of goods, coal, domestic help — subjects of such a quotidian nature — that for the uninitiated this in itself could be disorienting.

Left, after Margaret's death, to entertain without her companion's emollient interventions, Ivy's conversation sometimes became more stilted. Evelyn Waugh described leaving her house after tea wondering if he'd said anything worth saying at all. According to Hilary Spurling: 'Her teas were like her novels - remarkably controlled affairs where no conversation was allowed to flow too freely.'

Other guests also found Ivy's teas formidable and unsettling, while some came to admire the sharp intellect that permeated the gatherings. Again, Evelyn Waugh reflected: 'Ivy's teas were the gatherings of a mind, not of a hostess. There was always a quiet challenge in the air, as if each guest's words were being subtly tested against Ivy's own fiercely held beliefs.'
Another guest recalled: 'Ivy's teas were certainly not for the faint-hearted. There was always a sense that, though no one spoke it aloud, we were all playing some kind of mental chess game with each move under her critical eye.'

However, bound as she was in her own strict code of conduct, there are many accounts of Dame Ivy's wit and kindness. James Lees-Milne, a close friend of Margaret's — and first Historic Buildings Secretary for the National Trust — who often visited for tea, gives a warm insight into Dame Ivy's more mischievous side in his article 'Major/Minor: A Symposium', writing: 'On the contrary, she was always very kind to me, and I greatly enjoyed her company. One laughed with her ceaselessly. She adored trivial gossip and rejoiced in the follies of human beings.'

## Literary Circles and Social Interactions:

Hilary Spurling gives many accounts about the friendship group of the two women, with Ivy characterised as the 'appendage' to Margaret, who had a wide and long-standing circle of friends. Many of them resented and disliked Ivy, whom they saw as something of a social misfit and intellectually inferior to Margaret. These people never accepted Ivy's brilliance, even in the face of her growing critical acclaim, and made no attempt to continue their acquaintance after Margaret's death.

However, a few of Margaret's friends, such as Basil and Hester Marsden-Smedley, Earnest and Janette Thesinger and Herman Schrijver, became close members of Ivy's tight and dependable circle. But to begin with Ivy was very much thought of almost as an additional domestic help. Some of Margaret's circle found it impossible to believe that Ivy was writing novels at all, much less gaining attention as a literary great.

In time Ivy's literary presence was formidable, commanding attention from her contemporaries. Virginia Woolf, then a leading figure in modernist literature, acknowledged her profound impact. Despite their mutual recognition, there is no evidence of a personal relationship between the two authors, although in a letter to her husband Harold Nicolson, Vita Sackville-West describes how after meeting Ivy for lunch for the first time she took her straight away to meet 'Virginia'.

Both Ivy and Margaret maintained a certain distance from the Bloomsbury Group, though they were acquainted with several of its members, including Vita and Harold, with whom they became great friends. They would regularly visit the Nicolson's at their famed Sussex home, Sissinghurst Castle, something Ivy continued to do long after Margaret's death.

Margaret contributed articles to various art and furniture publications including *Vogue*, where she shared insights into design and aesthetics. Her professional pursuits complemented Ivy's literary endeavours, creating a household steeped in artistic and intellectual pursuits. They moved in rarefied circles and as time went on were always received warmly, though friends increasingly had to accommodate both their eccentricities, particularly Ivy's intractable behaviour and her apparent inability to temper her opinions.

After Margaret's death Ivy is said to have eventually transformed herself from the 'appendage' to the celebrated author whose company was sought by the great and the good. Away from the social shadow cast by Margaret, she widened her circle and entertained many people, some of whom were friends of friends, often admirers of her work curious to meet the enigmatic I. Compton-Burnett.

From the literary world she made and remained good friends with authors such as Elizabeth Bowen, Kay Dick, V. S. Pritchet, Elizabeth Taylor, Stevie Smith, P. H. Newby, L. P. Hartley, Anthony Powell and T. S. Eliot, all of whom admired her work.

## Shared Retreats and Travels

Beyond their London residence, Ivy and Margaret frequently retreated to seaside towns, seeking solace and inspiration. Lyme Regis in Dorset was a regular retreat — they often stayed in the same lodgings as Jane Austen's, removing themselves there for a time to escape London during the Blitz of the Second World War.

Margaret travelled frequently for work, often without her companion but in the company of other friends — she had a retinue of brilliant, handsome young men who were part of her world of work and one or the other of them often accompanied her. Ivy would comment to friends that she had been "abandoned" and left to fend for herself, although there was always a live-in housekeeper in residence who doubled as cook. Throughout her life Ivy was uncomfortable with change and each time a housekeeper left it would cause her great distress. Only once the position was filled and the new recruit fully trained to Ivy's satisfaction in the established household routines, would she regain her sense of order.

Due in part to Margaret's work and both of their family connections, they were lucky enough to spend time in some of England's best-known estates and country houses: Sissinghurst Castle, Bottisham Hall, Broome Park and Sutton Veney being among the most frequently visited. Dame Ivy always had a passion for flowers and would spend many hours in the gardens and grounds of their hosts.

As Ivy began to write more frequently — she usually completed a novel every two years — would cross the Channel to France, Italy, Austria or Switzerland on completion of each work. But wherever their travels took them, they were always keen to return to Braemar Mansions and resume their round of lunches, dinners and Saturday teas. There were long periods of time when Ivy wasn't writing and during these intervals she would sometimes accompany Margaret on work assignments, or the two women would make extended visits to family and friends. Both had a deep affection for family and took genuine pleasure in the company of other people's. While usually keeping a respectful distance, they nonetheless took an interest in the lives of the children and other family members.

## Margaret Jourdain's Death

Margaret Jourdain died on 5th April 1951 after a long respiratory illness, leaving her companion

of over 30 years completely devastated. Dame Ivy's usual response to grief was anger – she couldn't forgive the abandonment.

Only a few short weeks later, Ivy was made a C. B. E. as part of Queen Elizabeth II's Birthday Honours. Elizabeth Sprigge cites a letter from Ivy to Dr. Passmore — the long-serving physician to both the women — who had written to congratulate her. In it, Ivy's grief is laid bare: "…I am trying to get over the shock and strain of Margaret Jourdain's death. It is the loss itself that I cannot get over, and I find it hard to look forward."

Biographer Hilary Spurling describes Ivy as being 'utterly lost' after Margaret's death, and Ivy was forced to relearn how to manage daily life on her own, as she had been deeply reliant on Margaret for practical matters – she couldn't even wrap a parcel with paper and string to post it. Some accounts suggest that Ivy never fully recovered from this loss, though she continued writing.

At the time of Margaret's death Dame Ivy had been working on her novel *Darkness and Day*, which was published only days after Margaret died. From then on, her novels became darker and more introspective, possibly reflecting her growing sense of isolation and grief.

In the depths of her sorrow, she briefly considered having a lodger or companion, but quickly withdrew from this notion. Ivy remarked to her friend Ivo Pakenham that it was no good settling for less: "…Once you have lived with someone with a first-class brain."

Dame Ivy never again shared her life with anyone, though she did form a very close relationship with Madge Garland, a family friend of Margaret's, who relied on Ivy after a brief and disastrous marriage to Sir Leigh Ashton — then head of the V&A. After the very public and humiliating collapse of the marriage, Ivy stepped in with her usual understated support. The two women remained friends to the end of Ivy's life, bound by common interests in gardens, travel, literature, and mutual friends. Hilary Spurling records Madge writing: 'I think that my friendship with Ivy was one the happiest things in a long and troubled life. It was because nothing was said. *Nothing*. We didn't have to say anything. There was complete trust on both sides.'

There is no suggestion that the women were ever anything more than friends and they never lived together — with Dame Ivy remaining the sole occupant of Braemar Mansions. She widened her circle of friends beyond Madge with her nearest and dearest gathering around her, remaining attentive and loyal until the end of her life. Many years after Margaret's death, Dame Ivy confessed that she: "…miss[ed] her more with every day that passes".

# Recognition

*'The single most powerful force at work in the English novel in the generation following James Joyce and Virginal Woolf.'*

Raymond Mortimer

In 1935 critic and literary editor Raymond Mortimer identified Ivy Compton-Burnett with the above quote, helping to cement her reputation among her contemporaries and in literary circles. His early recognition of her talent, after the publication of *Pastors and Masters* in 1925, was instrumental in highlighting the depth and originality of her writing. In his view she was a distinctive figure in the literary landscape that followed the modernist era, which had been led by writers such as James Joyce and Virginia Woolf. He saw her as a unique voice, creating a place of her own alongside such authors - a view he continued to hold throughout her writing career.

Though never a household name, Dame Ivy was revered by many of the literary greats. Graham Greene admired her deeply. Rebecca West called her: '…A novelist of the most astonishing originality.' With Angela Carter likening reading her work to: 'Deciphering an intricate code.'

In reviewing Hilary Spurling's biography of I. Compton-Burnett, Gabriele Annan opened with the line: 'Inscrutable as an owl, Ivy Compton-Burnett sits out on a limb of literature, singular, eccentric, and keeping herself to herself.' Annan was not alone in her summation of Dame Ivy's skill and reputation. In her essay titled 'The Unspoken Word', published in *The New York Review of Books* on March 8, 2001, critic Diane Johnson described Dame Ivy as: 'An inscrutable literary figure, prim, formidable, and blandly sociable, giving tea parties and writing her devastating novels.'

In 1951 - the same year Margaret Jourdain died – Ivy was made a C. B. E. Hilary Spurling recounts how the news had been by Ivy received in a letter to her cousin Katie Blackie, writing that: "…It came at a time when things have little meaning for me."

In 1955, after the publication of *Mother and Son* Ivy won the James Tait Black Memorial Prize for that year's best work of fiction. This prize gave Ivy great satisfaction, as it was chosen by the Regius Professor of Literature at Edinburgh University and had previously been awarded to several of her friends.

In 1960 she was granted an Honorary Doctorate of Letters by the University of Leeds, an honour which pleased her immensely, holding as she did such a high regard for academic and

intellectual distinction.

In 1967 Ivy Compton-Burnett was made a Dame Commander of the British Empire, a formal recognition of her unique contribution to English letters. This was a title she enjoyed very much. In her 2024 self-published book *The Formidable Ivy Compton-Burnett, An Appreciative Enquiry into the Life and Work of Dame Ivy Compton-Burnett*, Jackie Scutt notes: 'She enjoyed the accolade of D. B. E.  and the way she would be referred to as "the Dame" in her last couple of years when she was housebound'.

Unfortunately, by the time the honour was conferred upon her she was too frail to attend the ceremony at Buckingham Palace, instead receiving an emissary in her flat.

In 1968 she received the last accolade of her lifetime, the dignity of Companion of Literature, which was conferred on her by the Royal Society of Literature. In her biography Elizabeth Sprigge gives an account of how Dame Ivy received and responded to the news, writing that this particular recognition gave her even more pleasure than the D. B. E., as only ten Companions are allowed at any one time. That year her fellow recipients were Dame Rebecca West, Sir Compton Mackenzie and Sir John Betjeman.

Dame Ivy was completely housebound by this point and once again unable to attend the ceremony, sending her friend Dr George Furlong on her behalf. The presentation was made to 'Dame Ivy Compton-Burnett in honour of her great gifts as a writer and in gratitude for her most excellent contribution to English Letters'.

# Stage, Screen and Airwaves

*'Ivy Compton-Burnett is Jane Austen on bad drugs.'*
Francine Prose

Though not easily done, her work has been adapted for stage, radio, television and a film. The subtlety of her style and the sheer density of her dialogue make faithful renditions difficult, but the radio plays were very well received.

In May 1964 writer and friend Julian Mitchell, at the time a young man and very much liked by Dame Ivy, asked if he could adapt her book *A Heritage and Its History* for stage. Dame Ivy had her misgivings, concerned that the book might not translate well to the stage, given the 'compression' of the dialogue which would be a necessity. She wrote to him expressing her concerns: '…I fear it is almost impossible to make a popular or reasonably popular play out of any book of mine without in a sense destroying it…'. She suggested he consult with Christopher Sykes, who had already successfully adapted several of her books for radio.

During her interview with Studs Terkel in 1962, Dame Ivy remarked that she thought Christopher Sykes had done a good job of adapting her books for radio. In reality, Christopher Sykes had been responsible for producing several of her novels, despite having eschewed them at first, until a young writer called Peter Mellors submitted a draft script he had adapted from *A Family and A Fortune*. Apparently, the author of the novel had not only given her blessing for the adaptation but had collaborated on the re-working of the text. Sykes was immediately entranced and commissioned Mellors to complete the script, persuading the controller of the Third Programme on BBC Radio to find a slot in the schedule for the play.

The play aired on 16th November 1952 and was a success. So much so that Mellors adapted, and Sykes produced: *Men and Wives* (1954), *Pastors and Masters* (1955) and *A Father and His Fate* (1957). After Peter Mellors moved to Canada, Christopher Sykes continued alone, both adapting and producing: *Manservant and Maidservant* (1954), *A Heritage and Its History* (1959), and *The Mighty and Their Fall* (1962). Part of their success was that the novels were made more accessible to a wider audience, and whilst the audience may not have all converted into ardent followers of Dame Ivy's literary work, the broadcasts brought her to the attention of a whole new generation of listeners.

Christopher Sykes had become such an admirer of Dame Ivy's writing that he would have been willing to adapt more. In his papers and correspondence, he writes of this period and his desire to: '…adapt as many of Ivy's books as were amenable to radio treatment, [but] not all of them

are. I remember once saying to her: "I can make good radio out of any of your books provided that not more than two major characters are under the age of five". She enjoyed this facetious criticism.' Dame Ivy remained friends with Sykes, and he and his wife introduced her to poet T. S. Eliot, as mentioned above.

However, Julian Mitchell did not defer to Christopher Sykes for his stage adaptation, instead forging ahead with his own dramatisation. With only minor suggestions from the author, she declared she was happy to: "…Leave all else in your hands." The play opened at the Oxford Playhouse in April 1965, directed by Frank Hauser. It transferred to the Phoenix Theatre, London, in May for a limited run, with Dame Ivy attending a matinee, being by that time too infirm to attend the original run.

According to her biographers, she had mixed feelings about seeing her work dramatised for stage but went nonetheless, meeting the cast for tea after the show. Apparently, she was kind and polite to them, avoided discussing the play itself and having paid great attention to the costumes, chose the details of those as her topic of conversation. She wrote to Cicely Greig saying the reviews were generally good: "…with the Evening Standard giving it a fortnight!"

Julian Mitchell then adapted the play for television, screening it in August 1968 as part of the *ITV Playhouse* series. It was arranged that he would watch the programme with Dame Ivy at the Braemar Mansions flat. On the evening of transmission, Mitchell, Dame Ivy and her housekeeper Mary gathered around the newly acquired television set – an absolute first for Dame Ivy who had never watched the television before, let alone seen one of her books adapted for screen.

In her biography Cicely Grieg reports the following exchange with Dame Ivy, who had been very much amused by her housekeeper's response to having stayed up late to watch the play: "I asked her next morning if she felt tired after sitting up to watch the play and Mary said 'Yes, it was very fatiguing.'" Julian Mitchell went on to adapt *A Family and A Fortune* for television, which was screened a year later.

In 1973 French filmmakers Francis Lacombrade and Armand Ridel released their television film adaptation of *Elders and Betters* entitled *La Substitution*. Armand Ride directed and Francis Lacombrade takes a writer's credit. There doesn't appear to be a record of Dame Ivy having known about this - or indeed to have collaborated in its adaptation - however, she is also credited as 'writer' along with Lacombrade.

Her novels continue to lend themselves to careful adaptation, their universal themes of human behaviour and cruelty translating well from the Edwardian drawing room to modern day settings.

# Dame Ivy in the Media

*'My novels won't live. Yours may, Ivy.'*

Rose Macaulay

Dame Ivy was never particularly fond of the spotlight, yet her persona has fascinated critics and readers alike. In her later years, she became known as a confounding enigma - sharp, disciplined, self-contained and all the more fascinating for what she chose to withhold. As Hilary Spurling notes, she lived and wrote like one of her own characters: with total control, emotional reserve and a deeply buried sense of irony.

Unfond of interviews, she seldom gave them. Of those she did give, many are referred to here and listed below. One of her more notable interviews is with Margaret Jourdain, a discussion that was first published in *Orion: A Miscellany, Vol. I* in 1945. The piece was presented as a dialogue between the two women and offers a rare glimpse into their relationship, Dame Ivy's literary philosophy and views on fiction, in particular her distinctive use of dialogue and minimal exposition. It has since been reprinted in various publications, including either in whole or excerpt form in: *The Art of Ivy Compton-Burnett* by Charles Burkhart and *The Life of Ivy Compton-Burnett* by Elizabeth Sprigge. Additionally, it was adapted for a BBC radio broadcast, further highlighting its significance in understanding Dame Ivy's literary philosophy.

Another notable conversation in print was with Kay Dick, whose book *Ivy and Stevie: Ivy Compton-Burnett and Stevie Smith – Conversations and Reflections,* was first published in 1971. This edition comprises transcriptions of recorded conversations with both authors, accompanied by Dick's personal reflections.

Dame Ivy and Kay Dick had been friends for many years, their friendship having formed as an easy alliance between the two authors. Kay had Ivy's trust and vice versa, with both women respecting each other's privacy while still feeling able to address some of the more sensitive areas of life and their own experiences.

When Ivy sat for Cecil Beaton in 1949 - then at the height of his fame - she was characteristically put out by his instructions to pose on a particular chair between two delicate fire screens. She complied, but not before discussing the image he intended to create and giving her approval, a 'collaboration' Beaton was unlikely to have been accustomed to. Cicely Greig disliked the resulting portraits, as she did most published images of Ivy; she felt they failed to reflect her warmth or kindness.

Beaton's photographs in particular seem to lean into the archetype of what a writer of such tyrannical, deviant characters might be imagined looking like. As Hilary Spurling observed, the 'formal, hieratic' style of the portraits, with their extreme simplicity, severity and rigidity: '…Did much to fix the impression Ivy and her work were from now on to make on the public.'

The image helped cement a lasting impression of Ivy as composed, remote, perhaps even a little sinister, — the reflection of a mind capable of conjuring such coldly contained dramas without flinching.

This and Beaton's other images were at odds with Lee Miller's portraits, taken in 1942 at the Vogue studios in London. In one of the photographs Miller recreated a scene whereby both Margaret and Ivy were sat at a small round table set with the trappings for tea, with Ivy pouring from a silver tea pot whilst Margaret looks on, resplendent in a large, feathered hat. This domestic scene, with a nod to their famous tea parties, doesn't contrive to represent Ivy in any other way than a benign figure engaged in the quotidian tasks any of her characters in Edwardian drawing rooms could have undertaken. Ivy, with an unreadable expression, is focussed on pouring the tea.

At the time nine of her novels had been published — including *Dolores* — with her tenth already written. Miller would have known of Ivy, but ostensibly the photos were commissioned by Vogue to honour Margaret whose own celebrity, as an authority on the decorative arts for over thirty years and the author of several seminal books on the subject, was being marked. The image captures a quality of the two women engaged in the ordinary, whilst quietly acknowledging the extraordinary in them both. The photograph was more recently used in *The Furniture History Society Newsletter* in 2012, the accompanying caption reads: 'Margaret Jourdain taking tea with her lifelong friend and companion Ivy Compton-Burnett'.

In 1962, the broadcaster — in some ways a forerunner to the modern-day podcaster — Studs Terkel was granted an interview over tea with Dame Ivy at Braemar Mansions. Beforehand, he consulted their mutual friend Julian Mitchell for guidance and was advised on the importance of the correct pronunciation of her name and what to expect. The interview is compelling not just because we hear Ivy's voice, but because it offers a clear sense of her cadence and language, echoes of which can be found in her novels. Her phrasing, wit and quick grasp of a question's intent are striking, as is the speed of her response: sometimes oblique, sometimes disarmingly direct, occasionally evasive or dismissive. More often than not, she follows up with an enquiry of her own. The enquiry does not sound as if she is seeking affirmation, but rather a vocal tic designed to test any questioner and perhaps catch her interviewer off guard.

Since her death many articles and reviews have appeared over the years, some of which have

been referred to here. In 2001, as *The New York Review of Books* reissued two I. Compton-Burnett novels (*Manservant and Maidservant* and *A House and Its Head*), Maria Aitken wrote about her appreciation of the author in *Bomb* magazine. She wrote: 'Reading her has been compared to coming upon a nest of vipers in a sewing basket. As I put each [book] down, I ask myself delightedly: 'how can people behave so badly? And why do I enjoy it so much?' Her remorseless humour and savagery are a unique cocktail. There's no middle ground with this novelist - you're either bewildered by her or you become an addict. The technical term for the latter is an 'Ivyist'. I do urge you to find out where you stand.'

Her recognition of the enduring themes of human behaviour — those that tantalise the reader and provoke a frisson of schadenfreude — firmly places Dame Ivy as an exemplar of contemporary literature.e

# Uncompromisingly Highbrow

*'Ivy Compton-Burnett is one of the most original, artful and elegant writers of our century. To read her for the first time is a singular experience. There is almost no description or scene setting; the writing is pared to the bone, the technique is a gavotte on needles. The story unfolds in page after page of spiked dialogue. It is not always clear who is speaking; the words themselves are unlike any you have come across before.'*

Hilary Mantel

In 2021 Pushkin Press republished *A House and Its Head* with a foreword by Hilary Mantel — the above extract also appearing in the *Telegraph* prior to the book's publication. Maria Aitken described Ivy Compton-Burnett's novels as 'sui generis'. They are structured almost entirely through dialogue with plots that unfold in Edwardian drawing rooms, the language thick with irony, menace and domestic tyranny. John Updike noted: 'She wrote as a poet writes: the words cut, the sentences stun.'

In each novel she returns to themes of power, repression and familial cruelty. Francis Wyndham observed that her work, though largely composed of talk, rendered: '…A world as solid and complete as any created by Dickens or Tolstoy.'

In her conversation with Margaret Jourdain, published in 1945 under the title *A Conversation Between I. Compton-Burnett and M. Jourdain*, Dame Ivy says of her readership: "I would write for a few dozen people; and it sometimes seems that I do so; but I would not write for no one".

As for insight into how or why Dame Ivy wrote as she did there are clues, but she herself seemed unable or possibly unwilling to describe her process. In her conversation with Kay Dick, she was asked: 'What question do you most dislike people asking you about your work?', to which she responded: 'Do you find other people's conversation useful? I went to a cocktail party the other day, and some woman I was talking to said, "Mustn't this be useful to you?" Of course it wasn't useful. Whatever good would it be to put down "Do you feel that draught?" and "Are you sure you won't have another sandwich?" Conceit, because they don't say a thing that would be any good at all. One would be only too glad to take it down if one heard something deep or revealing or interesting. Certainly not at a cocktail party, which is a dreadful function in itself.

Several years later, in conversation with Studs Terkel, she reaffirmed this belief, saying: "I think that actual life provides one with characters much less than is thought…. [people] are not keyed

up high enough…they don't seem to have their qualities on a large enough scale. I think if you drew them from actual life photographically, they'd all come out too flat".

Similarly, she rejected any suggestion that she took inspiration for story lines or plots from real life, or her experience of it - though she did accept that: "Some sort of starting point is useful. As regards plots, I find real life no help at all. Real life seems to have no plots. And as I think a plot desirable and almost necessary, I have this extra grudge against life. But I think there are signs that strange things happen, though they do not emerge. I believe it would go ill with many of us, if we were faced by a strong temptation, and I suspect that with some of us it does go ill."

Her distinct writing style is composed almost entirely of rapid, stylised dialogue. It has a minimalist quality, in which everything is pared down to its 'essence' - there's no exposition, no florid descriptions, no wasted words. Conversation reveals character, conflict and even plot. Novelist and friend L. P. Hartley wrote of Dame Ivy's succinct style: 'Her prose has the exquisite economy of poetry: every word is chosen with the utmost precision.'

And writing in the *New York Times* in 1971, long-time admirer Guy Davenport wrote: 'All her novels are as alike as a row of bayonets…Some can read these novels; some can't. One must first have an ear for the crisp insults, the merciless innuendos, the precise, frank words that mean ten times what they say. And one must be patient.'

This unique way of writing captured the imagination of writers and critics alike. John Updike wrote: 'She achieves the remarkable feat of writing novels that exist almost purely in the realm of speech, yet never feel weightless or artificial.'

Once again, her conversation with Margaret Jourdain provides insight into her thoughts on descriptive writing and her instinctive preference for the use of dialogue: 'As regards such things as landscape and scenery, I never feel inclined to describe them; indeed, I tend to miss such writing out when I am reading, which may be a sign that I am not fitted for it…In the case of Jane Austen, I hurry through her words about Lyme and its surroundings in order to return to her people.'

In a televised interview with Alan Pryce-Jones, he remarked that he was very fond of *A House and Its Head,* to which she replied: "Yes, I like that very much too. I rather like them all, in fact. After all, they are mine."

Dame Ivy felt compassion for her characters. She considered the houses of her novels and their occupants to be middle class and believed that they were all written equally, since they

are written as themselves. In her interview with Studs Terkel, she explains this by saying: "I don't think you should draw human beings as servants, I think you should draw them as human beings who happen to be servants."

From *Pastors and Masters* (1925) to *The Last and the First* (published posthumously in 1971), Ivy's novels form a distinctive body of work, each as spare and sharp as the last. Maria Aitken wrote: 'There's no middle ground with this novelist: you're either bewildered by her or you become an addict.'

I. Compton-Burnett novels often feature tyrannical parents, emotionally fraught siblings and the quiet horrors of well-mannered society. In 1983 *More Women Than Men* was reissued by Allison & Busby garnering renewed interest in her singular voice. Fellow writer and admirer Elizabeth Bowen said: 'She is an acquired taste, but once acquired, a passion.'

Her prose is famously dry, cool and laced with not an inconsiderable sense of irony, often dissecting family power struggles and human cruelty with a detached, almost surgical precision. Gore Vidal noted of Dame Ivy's eviscerating pen that: 'She writes about power — its wielding and its victims — with the merciless precision of a scalpel.' Again, Elizabeth Bowen observes: 'Her detachment is what makes her so deadly: she can eviscerate a character with a single line.'

Dame Ivy set her novels in the late Victorian and Edwardian world, roughly the mid-1850s to 1911. As she explained: "I do not feel that I have any real or organic knowledge of life later than about 1910… When an age is ended, you see it as it is." Margaret Jourdain once advised a young Robert Wyndham that: "Ivy lives in the past, and nothing after 1914 has any reality for her."

Dame Ivy herself admitted to a quiet aversion to modern-day living, saying: "When war casts its shadow, I find that I recoil". Thus, ruling out both her current era and either war-time period as settings for her novels. Robert Liddell recognised the efficiency of constantly placing her novels in a particular time period, noting in his book *The Novels of I. Compton-Burnett*: '[Not] that her novels are dated — their action is set in a period when family life could be lived and studied in isolation better that it can at present…'

In her introduction to *A House and Its Head*, Hilary Mantel noted that Dame Ivy's novels are not limited by their historical setting: 'In no sense are her novels period pieces. Because they are of one time, they are of no time.'

Her focus on character and conversation lifts the work beyond its era, rendering it strangely timeless, with the possible exception of certain turns of phrase which may sound dated to the

modern ear. But perhaps it is in the dialogue where the magic happens.

## Themes of Power and Dysfunction

As has been emphasised, any of I. Compton-Burnett's novels focus on 'tyrannical parents, suppressed emotions, and the hidden violence of domestic life'. She strips away sentimentality and exposes power dynamics and their impact within families in a way that feels both timeless and unsettling.

Hilary Spurling compares Dame Ivy's style to the Classics she studied at college, noting: 'Her novels are like Greek tragedies played out in drawing rooms — where every polite exchange is laced with menace.'

In terms of themes, the comparison to the Greeks was often made. In their published conversation, Margaret Jourdain considers the literary influences on her friend and asks how the Greek dramatists had influenced her, and Dame Ivy responds in her usual dismissive, non-committal way: 'Greek dramatists I read as a girl, as I was classically educated and read them with the attention to each line necessitated by the state of my scholarship; and it is difficult to say how much soaked in, but I should think very likely something. I have not read them for many years — another result of the state of my scholarship.'

However, as noted above it is undeniable that much of her early life, including her school experiences, sibling relationships and various figures from her past (such as her overbearing mother and domineering, albeit loving, father) are directly referenced in several of her books.

Returning to her conversation with Margaret Jourdain, Dame Ivy says: 'I have been told that I treat evil doing as if it were normal and [I] am not 'normally' repelled by it. This may be putting my own words in another form. There are many doubtful characters in other fiction. Something must happen in a novel and wrongdoing makes a more definite event. Virtue tends to be more even and less spectacular and it does not command so much more sympathy, as is proved by the accepted tendency of the villain to usurp the hero's place.'

Ivy herself rarely expressed religious views, preferring instead to speak of morality rather than belief. After the death of her brother Noel during the First World War, she appeared to turn away from religion altogether. Morality, on the other hand, was the framework upon which she hung many of the 'deeds' of her characters. In her conversation with Kay Dick, Dame Ivy acknowledges that moral laws essentially need to exist to give humans context, meaning and boundaries. She draws a distinction between religion and faith, saying that: "When people had religion and thought they would suffer a lot and know everlasting damnation if they sinned, it

might have prevented their sinning."

Instead, she considered herself not to have sinned, since she had never committed murder or adultery. She did not see pride as a sin - nor, it would seem, greed. These were merely basic human instincts.

Perhaps then it is not only the seeming extremes of her characters' behaviour that shocks the reader, but how these extremes are treated as commonplace, almost normalised. At times, her characters are mute with indifference; elsewhere, it is due to the repressive regime they find themselves under. Either way, it can be an uncomfortable read when the oppressor, aggressor or deviant appears to go unpunished and life carries on, often with the 'villain' victorious.

# A Distinct, Acquired Taste

*'Reading her is like deciphering an intricate code - you either break through and are transfixed, or you are left entirely baffled.'*

Angela Carter

Because of her highly unusual style I. Compton-Burnett was (and remains) a polarising figure. Some readers find her work cold and impenetrable, while others see it as genius. Both Hilary Spurling and Elizabeth Sprigge refer to Richard Kennedy's diary from his time at the *Hogarth Press*. In 1929, as a young assistant to Leonard Woolf, Kennedy was given the manuscript of *Brothers and Sisters* to review. Unsure of his own judgment he passed it to his uncle — the architect George Kennedy — who returned it with the simple but emphatic verdict: "It's a work of genius. I can't say any more."

Encouraged, and excited by the idea that he might have discovered a major new voice for the Press, Kennedy submitted his report which simply read: "A Work Of Genius". Woolf, who along with his wife Virginia had established Hogarth Press, was unconvinced and rejected the novel and the opportunity of publishing it, saying of its author: "She can't even write".

Some weeks later, after the book had been published by Heath Cranton, Ivy herself having paid for the cost of publication, it was picked up by the literary set of London, spurred by Raymond Mortimer's glowing review. As a result, the novel come to the attention of the esteemed author Arnold Bennett, who was the literary editor for the Evening Standard at the time, and it is his review which further secured Ivy as a rising star: 'Miss I. Compton-Burnett's new novel is a work of genius…[she] may be a new star, low on the eastern horizon.'

Richard Kennedy was vindicated, but the Woolfs appeared to be oblivious of their literary faux pas when later they became admirers of her work.

Though her Edwardian drawing rooms and rigid class hierarchies may appear distant from twenty-first century life, the emotional terrain her novels chart (familial trauma, psychological violence, and the quiet savageries of domestic life) remain startlingly relevant. Her style is perfectly attuned to the inner torment of her characters: searing, woundingly precise and unrelenting. Yet for all the brutality embedded in her dialogue, it is often what remains unsaid — what is merely implied or allowed to hang delicately in the air — that chills the most.

And yet, amid this restraint there is humour; dry, knowing and exquisitely timed. Some of her most devastating remarks are often observations or remarks made by female characters, or

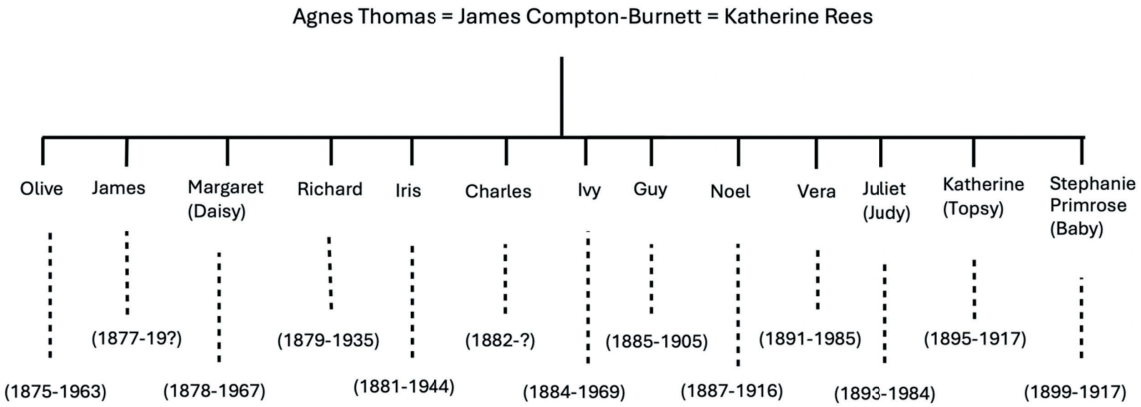
senior members of the domestic household such as butlers. These characters tend to wield understatement like a rapier drawing laughter not with overemphasis or exaggeration, but with irony and reserve. Dame Ivy's touch is so light it can be missed on a first reading, but for those attuned to her style a single wry line can reveal both a character's interior world and the author's opinion of formal hierarchy and human impulse.

Of the uniqueness of her writing V. S. Pritchett said: 'Her novels are so utterly unlike anyone else's that they exist in a category of their own'. Certainly, reading her works can be challenging and often passages will need to be reread several times for sense and to establish correctly who the dialogue is attributed to. Dame Ivy herself remarked: "Anyone who picks up a Compton-Burnett finds it very hard not to put it down".

And yet, she elicited such admiration from those readers who discovered the uniqueness of her work that they became dedicated to it. Dame Ivy Compton-Burnett's writing remains a singular achievement in English literature. Perhaps Hilary Mantel summed it up best in her introduction to Ivy Compton-Burnett's novel *A House and Its Head* writing that Dame Ivy was: 'One of the most original, artful, and elegant writers of our century'.

# Appendix I

## Ivy Compton-Burnett Family tree



# Appendix II

## The Works of I. Compton-Burnett

Hilary Spurling, Robert Liddell and Elizabeth Sprigge include lists of I. Compton-Burnett's novels in their respective works, Spurling and Liddell noting the dates of first edition publications, with Sprigge also recording the original publishers. Cicely Greig adds Dame Ivy's age at the time each novel was published. For clarity and completeness, these details are combined below:

| Year | Title | Publisher | Age |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1911 | Dolores | Blackwood | 27 |
| 1925 | Pastors and Masters | Heath Cranton | 41 |
| 1929 | Brothers and Sisters | Heath Cranton | 45 |
| 1931 | Men and Wives | Heinemann | 47 |
| 1933 | More Women than Men | Heinemann | 49 |
| 1935 | A House and Its Head | Heinemann | 51 |
| 1937 | Daughters and Sons | Gollancz | 53 |
| 1939 | A Family and a Fortune | Gollancz | 55 |
| 1941 | Parents and Children | Gollancz | 57 |
| 1944 | Elders and Betters | Gollancz | 59 |
| 1947 | Manservant and Maidservant | Gollancz | 63 * |
| 1949 | Two Worlds and Their Ways | Gollancz | 65 |
| 1951 | Darkness and Day | Gollancz | 67 |
| 1953 | The Present and the Past | Gollancz | 69 |
| 1955 | Mother and Son | Gollancz | 71 |
| 1957 | A Father and His Fate | Gollancz | 73 |
| 1959 | A Heritage and Its History | Gollancz | 75 |
| 1961 | The Mighty and Their Fall | Gollancz | 77 |
| 1963 | A God and His Gifts | Gollancz | 79 |
| 1971 | The Last and the First | Gollancz | 85 ** |

* Published in the U.S. as "Bullivant and the Lambs".

** Written in 1969 - her 85th year - and published posthumously.

# Appendix III

## Selected Published Works by James Compton-Burnett

For a more detailed account of James Compton-Burnett, his life and contributions to the field of homeopathy, refer to *Life and Work of James Compton Burnett*, published in 1904, which includes an account of his memorial:
https://archive.org/details/b28992799?utm_source=chatgpt.com

1. *Natrum Muriaticum as Test of the Doctrine of Drug Dynamization* (1878)
2. *Gold as a Remedy in Disease* (1879)
3. *Curability of Cataract by Medicines* (1880)
4. *The Medicinal Treatment of Diseases of the Veins* (1881)
5. *Supersalinity of the Blood* (1882)
6. *Vaccinosis and Its Cure by Thuja* (1884)
7. *Diseases of the Skin from the Organismic Standpoint* (1885)
8. *Diseases of the Spleen and Their Remedies Clinically Illustrated* (1887)
9. *Fifty Reasons for Being a Homeopath* (1888)
10. *On Fistula and Its Radical Cure by Medicines* (1889)
11. *On Neuralgia* (1889)
12. *Five Years' Experience in the New Cure of Consumption by Its Own Virus* (1890)
13. *The Diseases of the Liver* (1890)
14. *The Greater Diseases of the Liver* (1891)
15. *Ringworm: Its Constitutional Nature and Cure* (1892)
16. *Curability of Tumours* (1893)
17. *Tumours of the Breast and Their Cure* (1893)
18. *Delicate, Backward, Puny, and Stunted Children* (1895)
19. *Gout and Its Cure* (1895)
20. *Organ Diseases of Women* (1896)
21. *The Change of Life in Women and the Ills and Ailings Incident Thereto* (1898)
22. *Enlarged Tonsils Cured by Medicines* (1901)

# Appendix IV

## Glossary of Terms

**Nosode** /ˈnəʊsəʊd /

Noun (in homeopathy) a preparation of substances secreted in the course of a disease, used in the treatment of that disease.

**Paracelsian** /ˌparəˈsɛlsiən / Adjective

Refers to the teachings and practices of Paracelsus, a 16th-century physician and alchemist. Paracelsian theory emphasised that all bodily functions and health are governed by chemical processes, and that medicine should be prepared through chemical means. It also included the concept of the human body as a 'microcosm' reflecting the larger 'macrocosm' of nature and introduced new approaches to clinical diagnosis and treatment using specific chemical remedies.

# Appendix V

## Primary Sources

### 'A Conversation Between I. Compton-Burnett and M. Jourdain'.

The conversation between Dame Ivy Compton-Burnett and Margaret Jourdain was first published in 1945 in *Orion: A Miscellany*, Vol. I, by Weidenfeld and Nicolson. A complete version is available online at: https://turtlepointpress.com.

### 'Ivy Compton-Burnett discusses her life and work while Studs is in London, England ; part 1'.

A recorded conversation between Studs Terkel and Ivy Compton-Burnett, broadcast in 1962. Duration 34 minutes, 24 seconds. Studs Terkel Radio Archive, owned by The Chicago History Museum: https://studsterkel.wfmt.com/programs/ivy-compton-burnett-discusses-her-life-and-work-while-studs-london-england-part-1

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For more information please contact Richard Compton-Burnett
E: Richard@comptonburnett.com T: +44 (0)7747 111 330