

TIM CARROLL

THE DODGER

THE EXTRAORDINARY STORY OF
CHURCHILL'S COUSIN AND THE GREAT ESCAPE



Also by Tim Carroll

The Great Escapers

THE DODGER

The Extraordinary Story of Churchill's
Cousin and the Great Escape

Tim Carroll



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He was an incredible man: intelligent, fearless . . . he never had anger or hatred for anyone, not even the Germans. To me, he was like a nineteenth-century man in the twentieth century. I was impressed with his generosity of spirit. He turned his back on a life of privilege and put himself in dangerous situations.

*Christopher Reeve, actor, famous
for his role in the 1978 film
Superman, who starred as Johnny
Dodge in the 1988 NBC television
mini-series
The Great Escape II: The Untold
Story*

He was one of the kindest and happiest men I have ever met and was always ready to help anybody in trouble.

*Jimmy James, Great Escaper, and
great friend of Johnny Dodge*

To Patrick Owen Carroll
Be like Johnny

Author's Note

THROUGHOUT THIS NARRATIVE I REFER to Johnny Dodge as 'Johnny'. This might imply a lack of objectivity, but it should not do so. I have been critical or wryly mocking of my subject on several occasions, not least because his wealth and lofty connections made Johnny's war a far more comfortable one than that endured by millions of the less fortunate. However, a central feature of Johnny's appeal is the uncommon affection he aroused in others of vastly different social backgrounds and political temperaments. They usually called him Johnny, and it would seem odd to refer to him as anything else.

Acknowledgements

I MUST BEGIN WITH A posthumous thank you to the late Phyllis Boushall Dodge, whose tireless work on a prospective biography of Johnny did not come to fruition, but whose notes and indices form the bedrock upon which this book rests. Phyllis spent several years travelling the United States and Europe compiling an intricate card index of Johnny's life and times, and making voluminous notes. The result was a short unpublished biography entitled, 'John Bigelow Dodge, 1894-1960: A Précis of his Life', which she wrote in 1990. Without this material my job would have been very much harder. It was provided to me by Phyllis's daughter, Alice Berkeley, whom I must also thank, not least for her patience and good humour while I took far too long to write the book. Alice also supplied me with dozens of photographs belonging to Johnny, many of them taken in the prison camps he was incarcerated in during the war, and some of which appear in these pages. They are an invaluable treasure trove of material, much of which has never been seen before.

This book would not have been possible without the help of Jane Aitken, Johnny's former daughter-in-law, the ex-wife of his second son, Tony, and niece of Lord Beaverbrook, Johnny's great friend. Jane saved hundreds of Johnny's letters, diaries and other papers, and also some family photographs, another valuable material resource that, again, has formed the basis for much of this work. Jane's archive is remarkable in that it charts Johnny's life from his very first letters to his mother Flora when he was a boy of five at the Fay School in Massachusetts, through his

adventures in the Far East and Caucasus, to almost every single letter he sent from prison camps during the Second World War. Jane was kind enough to allow me to copy much of this material, and patient enough to endure my presence in her condominium one snowy Toronto week in early 2010. I am most grateful to her for her patience and good nature.

I must also thank Camilla Dodge, Tony's second wife and widow, for an entertaining lunch and afternoon at her Hampshire home. (She told me that when Tony was asked about his father he would sometimes say, 'I don't really know much about him: he was in prison for most of my life.') Equally, thanks to Johnny's elder son, David, and his wife, Elizabeth, who live in Devon, for their recollections and memories of Johnny. I am inordinately grateful to Johnny's stepson, Peter Sherman, in Tampa, Florida, for giving me carte blanche to use segments of his extremely entertaining memoir of his own remarkable life, 'Memoirs of Another Time', much of which concerns Johnny. 'Memoirs of Another Time' has thus far failed to find a publisher, which is sad given the quality of its content, so I hope this book might encourage a publisher to consider Peter's fine manuscript.

Thanks also to June Bowerman, the daughter of 'Wings' Day, Johnny's great friend, for her memories of 'a noble man'. The late Sydney Dowse and the late 'Jimmy' James, who endured captivity with Johnny in many camps and escaped with him in the most famous escapades, were generous with their memories over the years, before they both died within weeks of each other in 2008. Other former inmates of Stalag Luft III were also helpful, not least Alan Bryett and Bill Ash in London, and the late Albert Patton Clark, Senior American Officer at Stalag Luft III, whom I interviewed on several occasions at the United States Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs for a television series about the 'Great Escape'.

David Saunders of the Gallipoli Association, who, like so many others, has long hoped that a biography of Johnny

Dodge would be written, was particularly helpful, as was Leonard Sellers, author of *The Hood Battalion* (1995), who provided me with photographs of Johnny during the First World War, and Valerian Freyberg, the current Lord Freyberg, grandson of Johnny's First World War commanding officer, who granted me permission to use them. I have used excerpts from *The Hood Battalion* for my chapters dealing with the First World War, with grateful thanks to Leonard. Thanks to Peter Elliott, Head of the Department for Research and Information Service at the Royal Air Force Museum, Hendon, the staff at the British Library, the British Newspaper Library, the German Historical Institute, the Imperial War Museum and the National Archives, who were, as ever, generous with their time and patient with my queries.

I am indebted to my fellow author David Garnett, who was kind enough to give me a leisurely summer tour around Ferring, the Sussex seaside home and resting place of Johnny and his wife, Minerva. David guided me to their tombstones in St Andrew's Church and showed me 'Florida', the quaint home where they enjoyed so many happy days, and the site of 'Wookyi-Tipi', where Johnny's mother, Flora, lived with her husband, Lionel Guest. He was also good enough to introduce me to Ed Miller, who provided me with valuable historical background to the Guests' and Dodges' life and times in this beautiful seaside haven.

At Mainstream Publishing I am grateful to my friend Bill Campbell, publisher and joint managing director, for commissioning this book, and to Ailsa Bathgate, Graeme Blaikie and Claire Rose in the editorial department; I also thank Eleanor Collins, my editor, for her patience and assistance in scrutinising the manuscript and bringing it up to scratch. Any errors are entirely my own. I apologise in advance for any that might occur and, if they are brought to my attention, will do my utmost to correct them in future editions.

Finally, but not least, I would like to thank Ian Sayer for providing me with letters, which I draw upon in the following pages, written to Second World War camp commandants by various prisoners, such as Johnny and Wings Day. Ian has been unstinting in his generosity with advice and material in a wide variety of areas relating to the war over the years that we have known each other. I would further like to thank him for allowing me to stay at his home in Spain in order to finish this book. Thanks also to his beautiful partner, Marielle, who overindulged me throughout my stay, and his charming son, Jamie.

Casa Acuarios, Bel-Air, Estepona

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Preface

THE NAME JOHNNY DODGE CROPS up repeatedly in almost every book written about 'the Great Escape', that 'Boys' Own' escapade of World War II immortalised by the eponymous 1963 Hollywood movie starring Dick Attenborough and Steve McQueen. That is how I came to know about 'Johnny' when, several years ago, I began researching my own book about this fascinating episode of wartime folklore. Johnny Dodge, and the myths and legends around him, were forever present. His story cannot help but grab the imagination. Johnny's heroism at Gallipoli and on the Western Front in the Great War, his epic 1,700-mile horseback ride across Asia in between the wars and his imprisonment at the hands of the Russian secret police as a suspected spy made him seem like a swashbuckling adventurer of a bygone era.

His record during the Second World War was no less compelling. That he was a central figure in the Great Escape is well documented. But his subsequent time behind enemy lines is even more interesting. Johnny was thrown into a 'special' compound for potential hostage prisoners at Sachsenhausen concentration camp, no doubt because he was related by marriage to Winston Churchill. He was threatened with death if he ever tried to escape again. But he did escape, in a tunnel break that the Germans judged was far more audacious than that of the Great Escape. Johnny was recaptured, but the SS thought his political connections were valuable enough not to have him shot. It's no wonder that Johnny earned the sobriquet, 'the Dodger'. The SS took him to Berlin instead, for a meeting with Paul

Schmidt, Hitler's one-time personal interpreter. Schmidt, possibly at the behest of SS intelligence chief Brigadeführer Walther Schellenberg, dispatched Johnny to Britain to persuade his 'cousin' in Downing Street of the merits of an Anglo-German anti-Bolshevik pact. Johnny's quixotic travels through the dying embers of the Third Reich in the company of a former Nazi newspaper correspondent is one of the great untold tales of the war.

Perhaps American-born Johnny was no different from many of his wealthy contemporaries, not least his great buccaneering friends Kermit Roosevelt, the president's son, and Fred Dalziel, the big game hunter. The privileged classes of the early part of the twentieth century belonged to a gilded generation, which produced many titanic figures to fuel the popular imagination. Johnny's membership of The Ends of the Earth Club testifies to his position in this international fellowship of indomitable Anglo-Saxon adventurers. When Johnny was incarcerated in Hermann Göring's 'escape proof' camp in German-occupied Poland, he found himself among scores of larger-than-life personalities from Britain and its Commonwealth, many of them intriguing characters in their own right.

There was always something about John Bigelow Dodge, however, that set him apart from the many other great men of his life and times. Perhaps it was the benevolent innocence he displayed throughout his life, and his extraordinarily amiable nature. Nobody seemed to dislike Johnny, and almost everybody appeared to look up to him as a brotherly figure who could be trusted and relied upon. His first German prison camp commandant liked Johnny so much that he 'transferred' him from the British Army, in which he was a major, to the RAF, so that he could be a prisoner of the Luftwaffe. Even those who were radically opposed to Johnny's hopelessly antediluvian conservative views were inclined to treat him affectionately. Another POW, John Casson, was a left-winger who at the outset of

the war had considered becoming a conscientious objector. 'My dear chap,' Johnny once said to him, 'I agree with you entirely.' Exasperated, Casson protested, 'But you *don't* agree with me.'

What Johnny had probably meant was that they were both friends, and that was all that mattered, for comradeship was everything to him; his life was a celebration of human fellowship. When he stood as a Conservative candidate in Mile End, he lost the election but won the hearts and minds of hundreds of constituents in the poverty-stricken borough of east London. When, in the 'Khaki Election' of 1945, he stood for Gillingham only to lose to the Labour candidate Joseph Binns, Johnny told his disappointed followers, 'We must all pull together behind him.' Fair play, honesty and civic-minded decency were other cornerstones of Johnny's simple philosophy.

Simple, in fact, was a word often used in connection with Johnny, but never in the pejorative. 'Inquisitive and simple hearted,' wrote the poet Rupert Brooke. Johnny's great friend Jimmy James, the greatest of the Great Escapers, once wrote that he would not call Johnny 'simple' - though that had been the immediate word to cross his mind - but would say that he possessed a childlike innocence that was enchanting. 'He was one of the kindest and happiest men I have ever met and was always ready to help anybody in trouble.'

It was this childlike faith in the power of goodness that gave Johnny his appealing aura, I think. He believed that so long as he was decent and honest and good towards other men, then they would reciprocate in kindness. He was rarely wrong. When he and four officers escaped through a daring tunnel out of Sachsenhausen concentration camp, none of the others wanted to partner him. While they all had worked out cover stories and had detailed plans for their escape routes, Johnny was simply going to head vaguely west in the hope of bumping into the Western allies, or vaguely east in

the hope of bumping into the Red Army. In the end he found himself vaguely travelling north and lodging in a pigsty. But while his friends were all recaptured quickly, Johnny was on the run for a month. He would have been caught much sooner, but the policeman who knew of his hiding place didn't want to arrest him - because everybody said what a thoroughly good chap he was.

Johnny survived the war but did not live long enough to enjoy the peace he had fought so valiantly for over so many years. He died suddenly on 2 November 1960 at the age of 66. At his memorial service in London's elegant Chester Square, some of the most eminent people of post-war Britain were among the congregation, including Lord Longford (or Frank Pakenham, as he was then) and Enoch Powell, as well as Group Captain Douglas Bader and fellow Great Escapers. Giving the address was Johnny's old Gallipoli commander, the redoubtable Lieutenant General Bernard Freyberg, who said:

Johnny was built on heroic scale both in physique and character. Tall and splendid looking, he had a selflessness, a simplicity and a generosity of nature that made him loved by all who had the good fortune to call him their friend . . . So on this day we say 'goodbye' to a fighting soldier with great sorrow, but with pride and thanksgiving, for it is through the example and inspiration of such men that the British tradition endures.

Several people have tried to tell the story of John Bigelow Dodge and his remarkable life. The first was the author of *The Great Escape*, Paul Brickhill, who was researching Johnny's biography when he died. The *Superman* film actor Christopher Reeve played Johnny in a made-for-television movie based on the Great Escape but which was purely fiction. Reeve was so enthralled by Johnny's character that he embarked upon producing his own film about him. Unfortunately Reeve, as is well known, suffered a terrible riding accident and tragically became incapacitated. He too died before his pet project could be realised. Finally,

Johnny's namesake Phyllis Dodge also passed away before she could put pen to paper on her proposed book about Johnny. This book, then, represents the aspirations of many people who think a life well led is a life worth writing about. It is the first biography of Johnny 'the Dodger' Dodge.

Wookyi-Tipi

JOHN BIGELOW DODGE WAS BORN in Manhattan on 15 May 1894. 'Johnny', as he was almost invariably known from childhood onwards, was the second child and only son of Flora Bigelow and Charles Stuart Dodge. His parents both came from old New York families, descended from the early settlers of the Massachusetts Bay Colony who had come out from England in the first half of the seventeenth century. The Dodges were the wealthier; the Bigelow side of the family was more intellectually accomplished.

Johnny's paternal grandfather, General Charles Cleveland Dodge, had been one of the youngest brigadier-generals on the Union side during the Civil War. In peacetime he became a successful, if obscure, businessman. Johnny's grandfather on his mother's side was a towering figure of his time. John Bigelow was a Renaissance man of the modern age, one of the foremost United States diplomats of the time, a renowned newspaperman, author and historian. Bigelow was a co-owner and editor of the *New York Evening Post*, a liberal democratic newspaper strongly in favour of humanitarian reform. Bigelow broke with the Democratic Party when it supported the expansion of slavery, and instead gave his endorsement to the Republican Party, which was opposed to slavery expansion. In the years before the Civil War, Bigelow used his influence to staunchly oppose slavery. When he became an American envoy and

minister to the court of Napoleon III in France, Bigelow helped block the Confederacy's efforts to acquire ships in Europe.

Johnny's parents were never to achieve quite such conspicuous distinction as his grandparents. His father Charles has been described in family legend as 'worthy but dull' or, more crushingly, 'just plain boring'. The most adventurous endeavour Charles Stuart Dodge undertook, it seems, was to spend a year in Europe after he graduated from Yale. It is difficult to know whether this is true or not as there is, sadly, little record remaining of Charles to paint a fuller, and perhaps more fulsome, picture of him. It would be unfair to malign a man on such slender authority. It is clear, however, that Charles played a distinctly distant role in his son Johnny's life.

The same could not be said of Johnny's mother, Flora Bigelow, who was one of John Bigelow and his wife Jane Tunis Poultney's nine children. The Bigelows were a boisterous and colourful clan. One of Flora's brothers, Poultney Bigelow, followed in his father's footsteps to become a celebrated man of letters, an inveterate explorer, travel writer, journalist and the author of 11 books. A childhood friend of the future Kaiser, Poultney Bigelow was an enthusiast about everything German and penned several books about his pet subject. Poultney would have a great deal of influence on his nephew Johnny. Flora's early years were spent between the Bigelows' substantial homes, a large house in Gramercy Park, the genteel oasis of stately town houses and apartment buildings above the Lower East Side of Manhattan, and an upstate New York estate at Highland Falls called 'The Squirrels' (which is now listed on the National Register of Historic Places).

Described variously as 'vibrant', 'flamboyant', 'melodramatic' and 'gushing', Johnny's mother was felt to be a domineering figure by everyone she encountered. Flora was to be the dominant person in her son's life, even, in

later years when he was married, in comparison to his wife. The bond between mother and son was an extraordinarily strong one. Whichever part of the world Johnny found himself in over the forthcoming decades of his adventurous life, and in whatever circumstances - no matter how oppressive - he rarely missed an opportunity to write home to the woman whom he invariably addressed as 'My Precious Mother'.

Johnny had one sibling, his older sister Lucy, who had been born in 1890. The first nine years of Johnny's life were spent in happy harmony with Lucy in their parents' New York home, a handsome brownstone on East 37th Street in the Murray Hill district of mid-Manhattan. They grew up surrounded by the retinue of nannies and servants that was usual in those days for children of their class. But in other ways their upbringing was not quite so conventional. Flora was not the distant figure that many mothers of her elevated status so often were. At night she would sit by her children's bedsides and sing them to sleep, accompanying herself on the guitar. Under her patient tutelage, Lucy and Johnny learnt to play several instruments.

When Lucy and Johnny were older, Flora took them to Sing Sing Correctional Facility, the infamous jail on the banks of the Hudson River, some 30 miles north of New York City. Her father John Bigelow was a volunteer inspector at Sing Sing. There, his boisterous daughter and her two children entertained the captive audience with mandolin, trumpet, guitar and popular songs. Philanthropy has long played a prominent part in American society, but Flora's efforts on behalf of some of the most hardened criminals in New York State were an unusual display of charity that must have required a great degree of commitment and personal sacrifice.

It was this commendable social consciousness, and Flora's belief in the affirmative and nurturing force of song and music that were, perhaps, her greatest gifts to Lucy and

Johnny. Lucy became a proficient guitarist and violinist. Later in her life, as the chatelaine of a beautiful Westchester estate, she began the Caramoor International Music Festival, which is dedicated to fostering musical talent and continues to thrive to this day. Music and singing were to sustain Johnny's soul during the many dark days he was compelled to endure the misery of incarceration at the hands of both the Soviet and Nazi regimes. Like his mother, his life was one of unstinting service. When he stood for election in London's impoverished Mile End, Johnny purposely moved into a house in the borough to be amid the destitute people he sought to represent.

Unfortunately, Flora and Charles' relationship was not quite such a melodious affair. The union began to founder soon after the children were born, though the reason remains a mystery. It might simply have been because of the manifest difference in their personalities. 'Flora was a vibrant, one might even say flamboyant person, whilst Charles Stuart was worthy but dull,' observed Johnny's would-be biographer, Phyllis B. Dodge, in her 'John Bigelow Dodge, 1894-1960: A Précis of his Life'.

Around about 1900, when Johnny was six years old, his parents separated. Then, in the autumn of 1903, Flora went to South Dakota, which was one of the few states where it was possible to get a divorce on grounds other than adultery. In Sioux Falls Flora bought a handsome cottage and gave it the Indian name 'Wookyi-Tipi', which means 'peaceful teepee'. It was the beginning of her lifelong fascination with Indian customs. Flora became particularly interested in Indian methods of healing, and throughout her life would surprise friends with her insistence that she had learnt their ways of curing medical conditions. As the years unfolded Flora attempted to try her methods on the likes of the English poet Rupert Brooke and Herbert Asquith, son of the British prime minister.

Flora lived at Wookyi-Tipi with Lucy and their faithful maid, Delia, but Johnny was sent to school on the East Coast. For a boy with such an attachment to his mother it must have been a dreadful blow to be separated from her. Nevertheless, he dutifully enrolled in the elite Fay School in Southborough, Massachusetts, and began his first formal education away from home. Fay School was established in 1866 to cater for the rapidly growing number of wealthy families in America's North East. The school's simple philosophy was to educate the whole child to his fullest potential in preparation for a productive and fulfilled life. Its stated core values - 'Academic excellence, earnest effort, honorable conduct, dedicated service, wellness of mind and body . . .' - were ideals Johnny would maintain for the rest of his life.

Johnny might have hoped that he would be able to spend the Christmas vacation of 1903 with Flora and Lucy at Wookyi-Tipi, but he was to be sorely disappointed. Instead he spent it with Jane and John Bigelow, his grandparents, at their Manhattan home in Gramercy Park. Johnny no doubt enjoyed the love and adoration of his grandparents, but there are hints he was beginning to feel the strain of separation from Flora. At about this time he wrote to his mother somewhat plaintively, 'I do want to see you before I am 10 years old. Life is so short.'

He appeared less concerned about the absence of his father in his life. In his many letters to Flora, Johnny mentioned Charles Dodge infrequently. In early 1904, Dodge had evidently proposed to visit his son over the Washington Birthday holiday (sometimes called Presidents' Day), which is celebrated on the third Monday of February. For one reason or another, however, the visit did not take place. The impression is left of a disorganised man, insensitive to his son's feelings. To be fair to Charles, that was not an unusual trait among men of his generation and social position.

Johnny was to spend much of his life among men who came from fractured families and who hardly knew their fathers.

Thankfully for Johnny, Flora bowed to his wish that he see her before his tenth birthday. A few weeks after Charles' putative visit, Flora invited Johnny to Wookyi-Tipi. He had a wonderful time indulging his passion for rural life, riding his mother's bucking bronco (named Dakota) and shooting a gopher. Shortly after his return to Fay, Flora's divorce was granted, and she was awarded custody of the children. From school in April 1904, Johnny wrote to his mother to say he was 'so glad to get your letter saying your Div [divorce] was over'. On his tenth birthday Johnny pleaded with Flora, 'Will you please tell me if father can come and see me this month?' Her reply is not known. But two weeks later Johnny wrote that 'Papa sent me 20 dollars for a birthday present'. It is the last mention of his father in any of his letters.

At Fay Johnny was not academically brilliant, but he threw himself enthusiastically into physical pursuits. On Founder's Day he came third in the 100-yard dash. He was elected captain of the football team, played tennis and sailed. He liked boxing, baseball and running. He also took up the mandolin, a pleasure he would indulge in for the rest of his life. He was fascinated by motorcars and wrote home about rides he had had in the Packard of Mrs Fay (presumably the wife of the owner of the school) and the Peerless of Mrs Mitchell (possibly a wife of one of the masters). Johnny's letters from school reveal the innocent and enthusiastic soul that was to beguile so many people throughout his life. They were littered with appalling spelling mistakes, which fortunately did not persist into manhood, when his handwriting became neat and accurate.

While Johnny was at Fay, his sister Lucy enrolled in Montreal's Royal Victoria College, a female-only arm of McGill University. By then Lucy was a tall, handsome girl of slim build with light-brown hair and blue eyes, and she was developing firm ideas about the way she wanted to live her

life. Unlike her brother, Lucy did not relish the idea of her life being dominated by the overbearing Flora. But Lucy's growing independence from her mother was but one small development amid far more dramatic changes in the world that would alter their family circumstances.

As Lucy and Johnny were growing up, the tectonic plates of world power were shifting decisively. While Britain still boasted an empire that held sway over a quarter of the world's population, she could no longer presume that her superiority in international affairs could be sustained as effortlessly in the future as it had been in the past. Old rivals like France and Spain and rising nations such as Germany resented Britain's power and were rapidly developing their industries. It was plainly obvious that the United States, with its vast landmass and natural resources, and seemingly limitless capacity to absorb immigrants, was poised to overtake the United Kingdom as the world's dominant industrial, and perhaps military, power.

The landed aristocracy of England were particularly irked by these changing circumstances. Their fabulous power had reached its peak in the late 1870s when 80 per cent of Britain's land was owned by 7,000 families, the greatest of whom were the 400 or so that had hereditary peers in the House of Lords: the famed barons, dukes, earls and viscounts of the United Kingdom. Their staggering worldwide clout was based almost entirely upon wealth generated by agriculture.

But as the iron grip of industrialisation took hold, the source of their immense wealth began to weaken. Agricultural rents would be the same in the 1930s as they had been in 1800. What had been the lifeblood of the great estates for hundreds of years was rapidly being cut off. To add to the aristocracy's misery, taxation began rising punitively as socially progressive governments adopted more egalitarian policies. Death duties were introduced in 1894 - the year of Johnny's birth - at 8 per cent. It was a

fiscal innovation that would have had the dukes of England rolling in their faux-Grecian mausoleums, if only their descendants could still afford to maintain them. It was the dawn of the age of meritocracy, and the 'undeserving rich' faced their pending doom with trepidation - but not without ingenuity.

In response to these dire economic straits, many of the great landed families of England sought marital alliances of convenience on the other side of the Atlantic. Where the Americans could bring cash to the table, and mountains of it, the British could supply the sort of social elan and centuries-long pedigree that their nouveau riche 'cousins' were hopelessly in awe of. As early as 1892, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle had noted in *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* that: 'One by one the management of the noble houses of Great Britain is passing into the hands of our fair cousins from across the Atlantic.' Typical of this unseemly trend was Consuelo Vanderbilt who brought a \$2.5 million dowry (\$66 million in today's money) when she (reluctantly) married the Duke of Marlborough. In 1895, nine American heiresses married titled British aristocrats. In between 1870 and the Great War, 100 aristocratic marriages were contracted with Americans. The United States advanced into English society on a variety of fronts. Nancy Astor, a divorcee from Virginia, competed with the flamboyant, gay Henry 'Chips' Channon, a native of Chicago, and Elsa Maxwell, author, songwriter and professional hostess from Iowa, to be the leading lights of London society. Elsa Maxwell was the first person to be nicknamed 'the hostess with the mostess'. 'Chips' Channon became a Conservative MP and was strongly anti-American in his views, feeling that American cultural and economic imperatives threatened traditional European and British civilisation. And Nancy Astor became the first woman Member of Parliament to sit in the House of Commons.

The most controversial and famous - if not infamous - imported American wife was to be Baltimore's Wallis Simpson, the double divorcee who would fall in love with Edward VIII of Britain. But before Wallis appeared in British society, Flora Bigelow made her own bid to join the two-way marital trade of convenience between the New World and the Old - with dramatic consequences for the future of her son, Johnny.

Age Quod Agis

IT WAS THANKS TO ONE of Flora's best friends, Marguerite Hyde Leiter, that she found herself migrating from America to Britain. Marguerite Leiter, better known as Daisy, was a member of a fabulously wealthy nouveau clan that part-owned the nascent Marshall Field retail empire and huge chunks of Chicago real estate. Levi Ziegler Leiter was Marshall Field's business partner. He and his family lived in grand style on DuPont Circle in Washington, D.C. Daisy's sister Mary Victoria had become Lady Curzon thanks to her marriage to the Viceroy of India, Lord Curzon. It was when Daisy Leiter followed in her sister's footsteps and married Henry Molyneux Paget Howard, the 19th Earl of Suffolk, that her friend Flora Bigelow met his best man, the quiet and self-effacing Englishman she would marry.

The Honourable Lionel Guest was the fourth son of Ivor Guest, the Earl of Wimborne. Lionel's mother, Lady Cornelia Spencer-Churchill, was the daughter of the 7th Duke of Marlborough and sister of Lord Randolph Churchill, father of the thrusting political enfant terrible and swashbuckling adventurer, Winston. Thus Lionel Guest was a nephew of Randolph and first cousin of the future wartime prime minister. Lionel Guest's family was one of the wealthiest in Britain, having made its fortune in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in the iron and steel industries. Lionel's eldest brother Frederick was said to be the richest man in

Britain. Lionel, for his own part, had built up a successful business in electrical and hydraulic engineering in Canada. There he became aide-de-camp to the Governor General. Lionel owned a pied-à-terre near Montreal: a farm on an island in the St Lawrence River called the Île St Gilles, where he kept a herd of pedigree cows and liked to devote his private hours to rustic pursuits.

Guest was some ten or so years younger than Flora, but the difference in ages did not present an obstacle to their admiration for each other. They both enjoyed their idiosyncrasies. As Flora was drawn to the mystical practices of ancient Indian tradition, so Lionel was attracted to the boundless possibilities of the stars and galaxies of outer space. It was an interest he would pursue with some distinction to the end of his life, becoming one of the foremost amateur astronomers of his age. While Flora was forcible and often overbearing, Lionel was modest and scrupulously polite and could appear to be painfully shy. But despite their divergent personalities, Flora and Lionel immediately struck up a friendship and embarked upon a brief courtship.

On 6 July 1905, a year after Flora's divorce from Charles came through, Flora and Lionel were married. Flora was 35, and Lionel was 24. The ceremony took place in Wookyi-Tipi but the married couple would not spend much time in the isolated idyll of Flora's South Dakota home. Immediately after the wedding Flora signed the deeds of Wookyi-Tipi over to a friend from New York. The transaction complete, she and her new husband set off on a grand tour of a honeymoon to Montreal via Minneapolis and Duluth by way of the Great Lakes. From then on, the little island of the Île St Gilles would be Flora's main residence. It became a much-loved refuge for Johnny, too, who from then on spent all his school holidays on the island and came to appreciate it in all the seasons of the year. Many a happy week was