

Bright Young Things

LIFE IN THE
ROARING
TWENTIES

ALISON
MALONEY





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About the Book

For anyone who ever wanted to know more about the 1920s...

Step into a time of hot jazz and even hotter all-night dance halls, as Alison Maloney shares the gossip about life in the Roaring Twenties. Read all about it: high society's scandalous exploits, fresh new fashions, the Charleston dance craze, costume parties, talking movies and, of course, the feisty flapper.

With chapters such as Makin' Whoopee, The Cocktail Hour and Upstairs, Downstairs, *Bright Young Things* takes a sweeping look at the changing society of the Jazz Age, as life below stairs vanished forever, loose morals ran riot, and new inventions made it seem anything was possible. Peppered with first-person accounts that convey the spirit of the era in the words of those who lived it, *Bright Young Things* is a scintillating celebration of a truly iconic decade.

About the Author

Sunday Times bestselling author Alison Maloney is a freelance writer and journalist. Her previous historical books include *Life Below Stairs: True Lives of Edwardian Servants*, *1900-1909: Life After Victoria*, *The Forties: Good Times Just Around the Corner* and *St George: Let's Hear it for England!*

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Bespoke illustrations by
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INTRODUCTION

'The parties were bigger. The pace was faster, the shows were broader, the buildings were higher, the morals were looser, and the liquor was cheaper.'

F Scott Fitzgerald on the 1920s in *The Great Gatsby*

COMING HARD ON the heels of the First World War, the 1920s ushered in a decadent decade of celebration for the young, the rich and the talented. It was the jazz age: a time for cocktails, illegal nightclubs and outrageous fancy dress parties. It was the era of the flapper, when liberated girls cut their hair, shortened their skirts and started smoking and drinking. It was the time of the Charleston, when debutantes and princes shared dance floors with gangsters and drug dealers ... and everyone danced all night.

With the war consigned to history – and the decline of the aristocracy as yet a distant threat – the twenties were a golden age. The previous decade had been dominated by war, with men from all walks of life fighting and dying on the battlefields of Europe, while women filled the shoes of their absent menfolk in the workplace and gained a newfound independence as a result. As the 1920s dawned, a new generation who had lost older brothers and fathers, but who had escaped the conflict themselves, were becoming adults. The shackles of wartime gave way to the euphoria of peacetime freedom and the sadness of loss

made the young survivors all the more determined to live life to the full.

The rich, young and beautiful of elite London society - the Mayfair set in particular - blasted into the Roaring Twenties in a cacophony of motorcars, loud parties and shocking antics. Dubbed the 'Bright Young People' by the British press, they made headlines and filled endless gossip columns with their scandalous costume parties, bathing parties and midnight scavenger hunts.

In the United States, meanwhile, Prohibition sparked the rise of speakeasies and Mafia mobs, and Wall Street merrily traded with no hint of the impending crash of '29. In Paris, novelists and artists hung out with exotic dancers in seamy nightclubs, forming a new avant-garde.

As the novelist Barbara Cartland explained in her autobiography, *We Danced All Night*: 'We were like nuns who had never seen over the convent wall until now. Everything was unexpected, fascinating, thrilling, unusual.'

The twenties, perhaps more than any other decade, expressed an explosion of *joie de vivre* for a post-war generation for whom life was to be lived with no-holds-barred passion. It was party time at last ...



*'If it's naughty to rouge your lips,
Shake your shoulders and shake your hips,
Then the answer is, "I wanna be bad!"'*

Ray Henderson, Lew Brown,
Buddy DeSylva, 'I Want to Be Bad'

THE TWENTIES WERE the years of the bob-haired, calf-flashing flapper, who stayed out late and danced the Charleston. But being a flapper was more than a fashion statement; it was an attitude. The headstrong, carefree and liberated young women of the era attended jazz clubs and parties, drove cars, drank alcohol and smoked - always with a long cigarette holder, naturally. They used modern slang, calling things 'the bee's knees' and 'the cat's pyjamas', and were thought to have loose sexual morals.

Although many were wealthy, these impetuous creatures were often scorned by their aristocratic peers as 'nouveau riche'. Loelia Ponsonby, later the Duchess of Westminster, was a young debutante in the early 1920s. In her autobiography *Grace and Favour*, she remembered, 'Teenagers had not been invented. I doubt my parents knew what an

adolescent was. Flappers were definitely middle class.'

A Testament to Youth

In 1923 journalist Samuel Hopkins Adams published the novel *Flaming Youth* under the pseudonym Warner Fabian. The heroine, Patricia Frentiss, is the archetypal flapper and the author's dedication summed up the wild young women of the Roaring Twenties:



To the woman of the period thus set forth, restless, seductive, greedy, discontented, craving sensation, unrestrained, a little morbid, more than a little selfish, slack of mind as she is trim of body, neurotic and vigorous, a worshipper of tinsel gods at perfumed altars, fit mate for the hurried, reckless and cynical man of the age, predestined mother of - what manner of being? To her I dedicate this study of herself.

Defining the Flapper

The word 'flapper' originally meant a very young girl, likened to a young bird that is learning to fly.

In northern slang, a flapper was a girl with flapping pigtail, illustrated by a 1910 article in *The Times*, which stated, 'A "flapper", we may explain, is a young lady who has not yet been promoted to long frocks and the wearing of her hair "up".'

However 'flap' was also an ancient term for prostitute and by the end of the First World War, the flapper had grown up from a mischievous teenager to the brazen young woman we now know.

In a 1920 lecture, Dr R Murray-Leslie claimed the lack of eligible young men in post-war Britain had created 'the social butterfly type; the frivolous, scantily clad, jazzing flapper, irresponsible and undisciplined, to whom a dance, a new hat, or a man with a car, were of more importance than the fate of nations.'

Going Up in Smoke

Drinking and smoking in public became a symbol of female emancipation seized on by the eager flapper. In previous years it was considered unbecoming of the fairer sex to touch alcohol outside of private homes and social events, but the rise of the nightclub and, in the US, the speakeasy changed that.

Similarly, smoking in public had been a taboo for women until the twenties. In the US, a female smoker could be arrested in the early 1900s and it wasn't until 1929 that a ban on women lighting up in railway carriages was lifted. Cigarette manufacturers soon got wise to the new market,

and US favourite Lucky Strike used pictures of attractive young ladies enjoying the 'Torches of Liberty' at suffragette marches in New York.



The brand also promoted the cigarette as a slimming aid, using actress Constance Talmadge, an actress and famous flapper, in a 1927 ad which urged girls to 'Reach for a Lucky instead of a sweet.'

Speak Easy

'Now I am old-fashioned. A woman, I consider, should be womanly. I have no patience with the modern neurotic girl who jazzes from morning to night, smokes like a chimney, and uses language which would make a Billingsgate fishwoman blush!'

From *Murder on the Links* by Agatha Christie

Who's That Girl? Zelda Fitzgerald



Famous For: After filling the gossip columns in Alabama, she married author F Scott Fitzgerald in 1920 and the couple became the darlings of the New York literary set, drinking with Ernest Hemingway and Dorothy Parker.



Career Notes: Dubbed 'The First American Flapper' by her husband, she became the model for the heroines in his bestselling novels, including *The Beautiful and the Damned* and *Tender is the Night*. Diagnosed with schizophrenia in 1930, she spent much of her later life in asylums, dying in a hospital fire in 1948, eight years after Fitzgerald.



Sound Bite: In the article 'Eulogy on the Flapper', published in *Metropolitan* magazine, Zelda wrote, 'Mothers disapproved of their sons taking the Flapper to dances, to teas, to swim and most of all to heart.'



Famous Flappers

Clara Bow, Louise Brooks and Joan Crawford all epitomised the flapper on the silver screen but perhaps the most iconic of them all, in looks and lifestyle, was the hedonistic Zelda Fitzgerald. Claiming she was no good at anything but 'useless pleasure-giving pursuits', she lived for the party lifestyle and drove her husband, F Scott Fitzgerald, crazy by stripping off at parties and flirting with his closest friends.

Chop Chop!

Columnist Louella Parsons interviewed the eighteen-year-old actress Clara Bow for the *New York Telegraph* in July 1922 and described her as 'the flapper who now flaps in up-to-date juvenile society. She is the unconscious flapper.'

Asked whether she wanted to eat lunch at 'the Astor, the Biltmore or the Chatham?' she gave the archetypal 'flapper' response. 'Let's go to a chop suey place,' said Clara. 'I know a wonderful restaurant here on Broadway where they dance at noon - don't you love to dance?'

The song 'Tea for Two' from the 1930 musical *No, No, Nanette* has the 'Flippant young flappers' singing of 'Petting parties with the smarties. Dizzy with dangerous glee.'

Petting Parties

The original flappers hailed from the jazz clubs of the United States and brought with them a more liberated view of sex. The 'petting party', where teenagers kissed and

cuddled to their heart's content, was born and spread like wildfire among the young socialites of the American scene.

In his first novel, *This Side of Paradise*, F Scott Fitzgerald wrote, 'On the Triangle trip Amory had come into constant contact with that great current American phenomenon, the "petting party"'. None of the Victorian mothers - and most of the mothers were Victorian - had any idea how casually their daughters were accustomed to be kissed. "Servant-girls are that way," said Mrs. Houston-Carmelite to her popular daughter. "They are kissed first and proposed to afterward."

For most young women, however, the petting was reasonably innocent and, if it went further than a kiss, was usually within a long-term relationship or perhaps engagement.

An 'Anti-petting League' set up by female students at the University of Southern California decreed that a girl should only have sexual contact with a man she intended to marry. The rule stated: 'She must kiss and squeeze and be kissed and squeezed by only a man to whom she is engaged.'

Speak Easy

"I do not want to be respectable because respectable girls are not attractive" ... "boys do dance most with the girls they kiss most" ...

'Perceiving these things, the Flapper awoke from her lethargy of sub-deb-ism, bobbed her hair, put on her choicest pair of earrings and a great deal of audacity and rouge and went into the battle. She flirted because it was fun to flirt.'

From 'Eulogy on the Flapper' by Zelda Fitzgerald,

published in *Metropolitan* magazine, 1922

Scourge of Society

The precocious, carefree, modern girl was frowned upon by society and frequently berated in conservative newspapers such as the *Daily Mail*. Eminent doctor and sociologist Arabella Kenealy, writing in 1920, claimed, 'Many of our young women have become desexed and masculinised, with short hair, skirts no longer than kilts, narrow hips, insignificant breasts.' But she could also see the positives, going on to say, 'There has arrived a confident, active, game-loving, capable human being who shuns the servitude of household occupations.'

In Defence of a Flapper

Other scholars and medics were also excited about women's changing identities. In his 1924 lecture on psychoanalysis, eminent psychologist Dr Frank Stanton claimed the flapper was a more honest creature than her mother and one with more common sense. In an article in the Connecticut paper the *Hartford Daily Courant*, he is reported to have said:

People have been afraid of admitting their natural longings and have become unhappy and ingrown. The Flapper knows what she wants and goes after it. Her cigarettes and snappy manner are her first feeble symptoms of her declaration of independence. She is fast becoming rationalised as she understands herself better. She is the hope of the future and we should be proud of her.

Poetic Licence

In 1922, reader Laurena Berg sent a poem called 'Version of a Flapper' to the *Los Angeles Times*. The four stanzas, published as a letter under the heading, 'The Flapper Flaps', are preceded by the words, 'I am a Flapper and in self-defence I wrote this verse.' Laurena's poem sums up the rebellious nature of this new breed, ending with:

*If she likes a lot of boys,
She's a Flapper
If she uses hearts for toys,
She's a Flapper.
If she's really wide awake
If she's game to give and take,
If she lives for pleasure's sake,
She's a Flapper.*

Speak Easy

'[Flappers] were smart and sophisticated, with an air of independence about them ... I don't know if I realised as soon as I began seeing them that they represented the wave of the future, but I do know I was drawn to them. I shared their restlessness, understood their determination to free themselves of the Victorian shackles of the pre-World War One era and find out for themselves what life was all about.'

Silent film actress Colleen Moore
in her autobiography *Silent Star*

Smart Talk

The true flapper shot from the lip, with slang phrases designed to show how hip and modern she was. Here are a few of the popular slang terms of the 1920s:

Alarm clock - chaperone

Alibi - bunch of flowers

Appleknocker - a yokel or hick

Applesauce - flattery or flannel

Barney-mugging - love-making

Biscuit - a pettable girl

Butt me - give me a cigarette

Cake basket - Limousine

Clothes line - a neighbourhood gossip

Corn-shredder - young man who treads on one's feet when dancing

Dapper - father

Terms for things that are good:

The cat's pyjamas, the bee's knees, the elephant's instep, ritzy, spiffy, swanky, swell, ducky, hotsy-totsy, It.

Terms for things that are bad:

Banana oil, bunk, hokum, hoey, horse feathers, lousy.

Dimbox - taxi

Dingledangler - a persistent caller on the phone

Dropping the pilot - getting divorced

Finale hopper - a man who arrives after the bill is paid

Flat tire - dull person

Handcuff - engagement ring
Hush money - allowance from parents
Let's blouse - let's go
Oilcan - imposter
Plastered - drunk
Snugglepups - young men at petting parties
Sugar - money
Whisk broom - man with facial hair

Hopping the Pond

The cult of the flapper originated in the United States, but by the dawn of the decade, her carefree attitude and party lifestyle had already spread through the drawing rooms of London and infected the wealthy young aesthetes of Chelsea and Mayfair. In post-war Britain, the era of the Bright Young People was born.



*'Bright Young People,
Ready to do and to dare,
We casually strive, to keep London alive,
From Chelsea to Bloomsbury Square.'*

Noël Coward, 'Bright Young People'

OUTRAGEOUS ANTICS, ALL-NIGHT parties and high-speed treasure hunts filled the fun-packed days of the Bright Young People. For this small group of artists, writers and socialites, London in the 1920s was a playground of hedonism and thrill-seeking. Their festivities filled the daily gossip pages in the tabloid press, who gave them their famous nickname, while their elders tutted over their wild behaviour and uncaring attitude.

While newspapers and advertisers tried to capture the zeitgeist of the wider group of the 'Bright Young Things', meaning anyone between eighteen and thirty-five, the Bright Young People were a much more select band - legends of the London social scene.

The Mayfair Set

But who were these lucky Bohemians whose only ambition was making whoopee?