



Berners, Gerald Hugh Tyrwhitt-Wilson, Baron (1883-1950)

by Patricia Juliana Smith

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Gerald Hugh Tyrwhitt-Wilson, the fourteenth Baron Berners, was, as his friend Osbert Sitwell reflected, a dilettante, but a dilettante in the best sense of the word. A composer, painter, and novelist, he was, first and foremost, a genuine British aristocratic eccentric whose life was, in a sense, a grand performance.

He was born September 18, 1883, at Apley Park, Shropshire, to a family with a long noble pedigree. A shy and effeminate boy, he was discouraged from pursuing his love of art and music by his pious and conventional mother, who felt such inclinations unbecoming a young man of his class.

Berners was educated at Eton and, in 1899, entered the diplomatic service, despite failing its written examinations. He was first posted as an honorary attaché to Constantinople, where he met Harold Nicolson, later the husband of Vita Sackville-West. Subsequently he was posted to Rome, where he became a friend of Ronald Firbank, who was his major literary influence, and Igor Stravinsky, who admired his musical compositions.

In 1918, he inherited his uncle's title, fortune, and properties. Consequently, he left the diplomatic service and retired to the family estate at Faringdon, Oxfordshire, in order to devote his life entirely to the pursuit of his pastimes and pleasures. As Lord Berners, he cultivated a considerable reputation as an eccentric.

He was known for such antics as dyeing the doves on his estate various colors, arranging color-coordinated meals, and traveling through Europe with a spinet piano in the rear seat of his Rolls-Royce. He also frequented many of the literary and artistic circles of his day, and numbered Evelyn Waugh, the Mitford sisters, and the Sitwells among his friends and guests.

Even while entertaining extravagantly, Berners still found time to pursue his various artistic careers. As a composer, he was largely self-taught; nonetheless, he produced an impressive number of compositions that could be deemed light-hearted "serious" music influenced by contemporary French composers. He wrote a considerable number of songs and pieces for solo piano.

His best known and most enduring works, however, are his ballets, particularly *The Triumph of Neptune* (produced by Diaghilev, choreographed by Balanchine, 1926), as well as *Luna Park* (1930) and *A Wedding Bouquet* (with words by Gertrude Stein, 1936). He also commissioned Stein to write an opera libretto, *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights*, but he never actually composed the music for it.

Berners also achieved some success as a writer. His published work includes three volumes of amusing autobiography, including *First Childhood* (1934), *A Distant Prospect* (1945), and the recently discovered *The Château de Résenlieu* (published 2000).

In addition, he wrote a number of short, campy Firbankian novels, including *The Girls of Radcliff Hall* (1934), a roman à clef (published under the pseudonym "Adela Quebec"). This fiction is set in a girls' school (the name of which alludes to the lesbian author of *The Well of Loneliness*) in which all the "girls" are

disguised portraits of his various gay male acquaintances. The volume has become rare, as several of those portrayed, particularly Cecil Beaton, were offended and thus bought and destroyed many of the copies.

In the 1930s, Berners enjoyed a brief vogue as a painter as well; his landscapes, though not terribly original, sold for extraordinary prices.

For over twenty years, Berners lived openly with a much younger man, the equally eccentric Robert Heber-Percy (1911-1986). In 1934, Berners had a "folly" tower, perhaps the last such structure built in England, erected on his estate as a birthday present for the "Mad Boy." Despite Heber-Percy's short-lived wartime marriage to a woman, Berners left him his estate and fortune upon his death on April 19, 1950.

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