



Carstairs, Marion Barbara "Joe" (1900-1993)

by Ruth M. Pettis

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M. B. Carstairs, a colorful gender-bending figure of the twentieth century, first gained fame as a speedboat racer in the 1920s. Her knack for self-invention propelled her through an exuberant life of sports and womanizing. Coming of age in an era when women's fashions turned androgynous and women of means could explore unconventional paths, she provided a fascinating subject for the popular press.

"Joe," as she was known to friends throughout her adult life, was born in London on February 1, 1900 to a family of heirs of Standard Oil wealth. Her family's money enabled Carstairs' pursuit of speedboat trophies, business ventures, travel, and hobnobbing with celebrities. Finally, it allowed her to become lord of the manor on her own private island.

Her mother's mercurial temperament, aggravated by heroin and alcohol addiction, alienated her from Carstairs early on. Carstairs's father vanished from her life after her parents' divorce when she was still a baby.

A lively tomboy, she acquired the nickname "Tuffy" after falling off a camel at the London zoo. Her "wild" behavior was the family's reason for shipping her off to boarding school in Connecticut at age 11, though Carstairs later managed to recast this exile as a self-initiated beginning of an independent and adventurous life.

That longing for adventure lured her to Europe to become an ambulance driver during World War I. After landing a job with the Red Cross in Paris, the newly independent Carstairs had her first lesbian experience at age 16. She later reflected, "What a marvelous thing. I found it a great pity I'd waited so long."

It also drew her into a Bohemian circle of lesbians in Montparnasse and an affair with Oscar Wilde's histrionic niece. Dolly Wilde identified with her tragic uncle and perhaps was an exemplar for Carstairs of the art of self-reinvention. (She was likely also the model for "Doll Furious" in Djuna Barnes' *Ladies Almanack*).

To comply with her mother's demand that she marry or be disinherited, in 1918 Carstairs wed childhood friend Count Jacques de Pret. It was purely a marriage of convenience. Soon after the wedding, the two split the dowry and went their separate ways.

The union was annulled for non-consummation after her mother's death in 1921, but it led to Carstairs' rechristening as "Tuffy de Pret" by her new chums in her next job with the Women's Legion Mechanical Transport Section in Dublin.

The Transport Section chauffeured British officers as they attempted to put down a rebellion by Sinn Fein. Several of her fellow drivers became lifelong friends, especially the boyish Barbara ("Bardie") Coleclough and her sister Molly.

In 1919 Carstairs and friends crossed the Channel to France to drive for the Royal Army Service Corps. This operation had the job of retrieving remains and reburying the dead. The workforce consisted of German POWs and Chinese laborers, whom the women transported to their grim assignments. They also ferried wounded and shell-shocked soldiers to hospital. They had to manage the heavy and cranky vehicles over muddy and bombed-out roads and carry out repairs themselves.

Carstairs loved the work, the camaraderie, the off-hours escapades and the freedom of men's clothes. She returned to England "hungry for men's work" and drove a taxi until her inheritance came through. She used it to finance her first business venture, the X Garage, and employed her buddies in chauffeuring well-heeled clients all over Europe.

During the 1920s she lived with lover Ruth Baldwin in London. The pair maintained a primary though famously non-monogamous partnership until Baldwin died in 1937.

Baldwin gave Joe Carstairs the jaunty leather Steiff doll that the latter christened "Lord Tod Wadley." Wadley became Joe's lifelong talisman, the subject of much speculation by biographer Kate Summerscale and others.

Carstairs spent lavishly on Wadley's wardrobe. He accompanied her everywhere except, for fear of losing him, on the speedboats she raced.

He was the one constant in an otherwise frenetic social whirl and love life. Carstairs partied, spent freely on girlfriends, courted actresses and other female celebrities and had numerous affairs, including one with Tallulah Bankhead and, later, one with Marlene Dietrich.

In 1925 Carstairs commissioned the building of her first speedboat, christened "Gwen" after a lover, actress, comedienne, and horsewoman Gwen Farrar, and raced it to her first trophy at Southampton Water. It was the first of several boats customized for Carstairs.

In them she sped to more than a dozen victories between 1925 and 1930--winning the Duke of York's Trophy, the Bestise Cup, and the Lucina Cup among others--though after three tries the prestigious Detroit-based Harmsworth Trophy remained beyond reach.

Carstairs surfaced from race capsize with a grin and cut a handsome figure in the press coverage. "I did look like a boy . . . but I was not a stomper," she reflected later.

But by the end of the 1920s homosexual chic had run its course and the press grew meaner.

After a decade and a half as a bon vivant, Carstairs shifted into a different mode. Intrigued by a real estate ad, she sailed over to the British West Indies (now the Bahamas) to investigate.

In 1934, for \$40,000 she became the owner of an eight-by-sixteen-mile island named Whale Cay. She spent the next four decades turning it into a private paradise complete with walled Spanish-style residential compound, dock, fish cannery, wireless station, church, and restored lighthouse.

She launched an agricultural enterprise that eventually employed 500 Bahamians, for whom she built workers' quarters, clinic, school, and general store. Backed up by her own security force, she ran the operation paternalistically. But she also promoted education and self-sufficiency for the local population. "I had a country going," she reminisced later.

Whale Cay became the refuge from which she could escape the spotlight and entertain chosen guests on her own terms. The Duke and Duchess of Windsor paid her a visit in 1941 that was recorded by *Life* magazine. (*Life* called her "Betty Carstairs," a name she detested according to a *Saturday Evening Post*

story published the following week.)

A regular visitor was singer Mabel Mercer, whom Carstairs had met during the 1930s in Paris. Summerscale depicts the friendship as platonic, quoting Carstairs describing Mercer as having "become my sister almost. . . . She was very proper, you know, just the opposite to me."

Carstairs urged Mercer, who was biracial, to leave Europe before the Nazis invaded France, and paid her passage to Whale Cay in 1938, where she resided until 1941, when she gained entry to the United States.

Carstairs never lacked for girlfriends during the Whale Cay years--a glass-topped table in the main house held photos of some 120.

After Ruth Baldwin died Carstairs tried her hand at poetry for a while, which she published privately under the pseudonym Hans Bernstein. Some of it, like "Perversities of Mankind," was whimsical: "There's / The man / Who / Wants / A Skirt / And / The girl / Who / Wears / A shirt / Even/ Fish / That / Want / To fly -- / I / Wonder why?"

In other poems, she made a short-lived attempt at introspection: "Lovely vital statue / Pure as a dream / That has / No touch / Of the human / Horrors of tomorrow / No time / No place / No afterwards--."

But Carstairs preferred action to reflection. She presided over her island until age and declining health interfered. She sold it in 1975 and retired to Florida. She traveled frequently to New York and kept up a social life, but in her final years it was Wadley who provided her chief source of comfort.

Carstairs died on December 18, 1993 in Florida, aged 93. She was cremated with her worn and cherished companion. Their ashes and those of Ruth Baldwin were finally deposited together on Long Island.

Prankishly flamboyant, Carstairs' dress and self-presentation were masculine more often than not; according to Summerscale, she exercised to ward off womanliness.

Carstairs constructed a self-narrative of embellished half truths and contradictions. Her passion for women was prodigious, yet--measuring herself against male standards--she did not consider herself promiscuous.

She required her Whale Cay workers to adhere to moral values that she did not apply to herself or her friends. But she was notably generous, financially supporting Bardie Coleclough, her boat mechanic Joe Harris, and several former girlfriends and Bahamian employees long after their formal relationships had ended.

Larger than life even by today's standards, Joe Carstairs was one of a kind.

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