

Vincent L. Barnett and Alexis Weedon, *Elinor Glyn as Novelist, Movie Maker, Glamour Icon and Businesswoman* Farnham, Ashgate, 2014. £60. ISBN 978-1-4724-2182-1 (hardback) pp. 246

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'Thrilling', 'sensational', 'front page news' were just a few of the superlatives penned by one movie commentator in 1927 as she enthused about the 'personality' that was Madam Elinor Glyn (p.5). And this new study of Glyn abounds with the many different personas she held during her lifetime; not just the novelist, movie maker, glamour icon and businesswoman of the book's title, but also as social commentator, author-celebrity, advice columnist, entrepreneur... the list goes on. Her greatest claims to fame were as a romantic novelist and film adaptor, reaching out to millions of readers and cinema-goers worldwide in more than 30 novels and 27 films. As the two authors of this doggedly researched book show, Glyn was a both a publishing sensation and a Hollywood tour-de-force; an early trailblazer of cross-media collaboration and branding, a sort of JK Rowling/Gwyneth Paltrow/Victoria Beckham rolled into one, but eight decades ahead of their time.

Born in 1864, Elinor Glyn's father was a civil engineer who died soon after her birth. Her Canadian-born mother took Elinor and her elder sister Lucille (later to be the famous couturier Lady Lucy Duff-Gordon) back to Canada where they were schooled in the ways of high-society by their grandmother. When their mother remarried in 1871, the family then moved to Jersey. Marriage to a wealthy landowner Clayton Glyn in 1892 propelled Elinor Glyn into British aristocratic circles through the couple's friendship with Lady Warwick. But Glyn's relationship with her husband soon deteriorated, as he fecklessly diminished his fortunes, and she embarked on a series of love affairs, most famously with Lord Curzon. She also began to write, firstly as a fashion columnist and then as a novelist, her first novel *The Visits of Elizabeth* was published in 1900. Later, following her husband's death in 1915, she felt compelled to write to salvage the remains of her estates and to provide financially for her two daughters but by then she was a household name, cemented by the publication of the notorious *Three Weeks* in 1907. Typical of Glyn's novels, this was a sumptuous escapade in which an exotic 'Russian' queen seduces a young aristocrat in a turbulent affair which lasts three weeks; following the birth of their illegitimate son, she is brutally murdered by the king, her young son eventually inheriting the throne.

Three Weeks is one of the phenomena that is painstakingly unpicked in Barnett and Weedon's book, revealing not only how a best-selling novel spawned several plays and films but uncovering the highly complex and turbulent legal minefield that was entered into: the contracts, copyright agreements, intellectual property rights, profit distributions, royalty negotiations and so on which were the lifeblood of the film and publishing worlds in the early twentieth century. There is no question that we are in the hands of experts here (Barnett in film and finance, Weedon in publishing), the depth of research is sometimes overwhelming. Elinor Glyn was an undoubted brand and Hollywood moguls, literary agents, her various business partners, her family all wanted a part of her. The exploration of her most famous creation 'It', first a short story and then an iconic film starring Clara Bow, is eye-opening in its depiction of the back-biting, throat-cutting world Glyn entered when she moved to Hollywood in the 1920s. The money banded about was staggering; Glyn earned almost \$47,000 royalties from the film, while her author-celebrity persona guaranteed her a degree of control not available to other screen-writers, as stylist, location consultant, dialogue coach. There is a wealth of detail on how, either through her own devices or by selling rights, Glyn astutely turned her novels, advice columns and articles into plays and films that generated huge profits, funding her lavish lifestyle and it was poignant to learn that when she died in London in 1943 she had frittered nearly everything away.

This is decidedly not a book for those who want a full biography of Glyn. The narrative thread can be hard to grasp, personal details are somewhat sparse and the wider social context is often overlooked. It is her life as a businesswoman which is foregrounded. It is also rather thin on feminist analysis. While, for example, Glyn is contrasted with a number of influential women in the early American film business, the ideologies that shaped her attitudes to sex, marriage and women's role in society are never fully explored. This is because the book draws predominantly on film, publishing and financial sources rather than women's history. It does, though, offer a fascinating glimpse into the frenetic, glamorous, crazy world of the 1920s and the eminent and iconic status Glyn would come to hold. As those infamous lines remind us: 'Would you like to sin with Elinor Glyn on a tiger skin...' certainly had a strong resonance eighty years ago.