

The
WOMAN
before
WALLIS

A NOVEL of WINDSORS, VANDERBILTS,
and ROYAL SCANDAL

**BRYN
TURNBULL**

"Brimming with scandal and an equal amount of heart...
sweeping yet intimate... A must-read."

CHANEL CLEETON, *New York Times* bestselling author of *When We Left Cuba*



BEHIND THE BOOK

Fur coats and beaded fringes. Champagne in coupes, held aloft by silk-gloved hands. Lipstick-stained laughter from across the room, drifting over the heads of black-tie dancers, poised in the moment before the music begins. The sights and sounds of the interwar period are familiar—irresistible, really—to those with a taste for glamour and an airy disregard for social stratification.

Those are some of the qualities with which I imbued Thelma Morgan Furness, heroine in *The Woman Before Wallis*—and which I confess to share, to no small degree. Thelma is a creature of her time, limitless in her ambition yet boxed in by circumstance. She is, by all the measures of her world, successful—yet powerless when pitched against the true titans of high society.

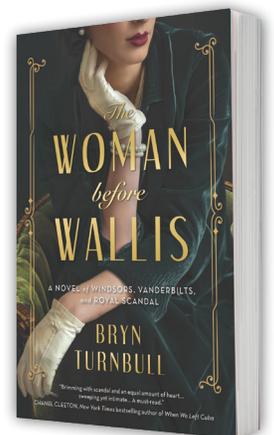
This is a book about power and belonging: how power is created, and ultimately wielded, both by those born to it and those who believe themselves immune to its thrall. I wrote *The Woman Before Wallis* while attending one of the UK's powerful, old-world universities: as a middle-class “colonial” I shared Thelma's sense of unbelonging, an outsider fascinated by the wealth around me. Champagne drinking games and beachside polo; weekly black-tie balls and scarlet academic robes. I asked the question that plagues Thelma throughout the whole of this novel: Do I truly belong here?

As a woman eclipsed by the world's most enduring love story, Thelma was fascinating to me from the outset. Given what I already knew about Edward and his overbearing neediness, I had to wonder whether Thelma's directive to Wallis (Take care of him) was truly a favour asked of a close friend—or whether she was giving Wallis implicit permission to pursue the world's most powerful man. I was genuinely surprised when I found out that final, poignant detail of Thelma's life: she died with one of Edward's keepsakes in her handbag. That was the genesis for my story, and ultimately shaped Thelma's direction towards self-determination. It's noble to love a flawed individual; it's nobler still to recognize when a relationship has run its course.

This book is, at its heart, a love story—but it's not a royal romance. It's about the unbreakable love between sisters: a love that overcomes prejudice, greed, and jealousy. Thelma and Gloria share a connection that leaves room for criticism, but never for disloyalty. Gloria's storyline gave me space to grapple with some of the more interesting idiosyncrasies of the 1930s, including attitudes towards homosexuality and motherhood. Did upper-crust parents really limit the time they spent with their children to the short hour between teatime and diner?

I truly enjoyed conducting research for this novel—a journey that took me to Thelma's old stomping grounds in Mayfair and St. James, Scotland and New York. I had cocktails at the Carlyle Hotel and traveled through the archives of the New York Supreme Court in pursuit of transcripts from Gloria's court case; I traveled the greens of Melton Mowbray and dove deep into ever-growing piles of newspapers and biographies in libraries on two continents. I lost sleep over communication methods of the 1920s and 1930s, and admired the impeccable tailoring on gowns by Schiaparelli, Lanvin, and Chanel. I sat in Edward's flashy biplane, and took flight in a plane of similar vintage (sadly, for a scene that never made it into the final edit—all that engine oil in my hair for nothing!).

When I first encountered Thelma's story (in a movie directed by Madonna!) I thought I'd found an interesting sidebar in history—fodder for a blog post, or perhaps an hour or two of time spent down a Wikipedia rabbit hole. What I discovered was something so much more: my first novel.



TIMELINE OF EVENTS

23 AUGUST 1904



– Thelma and Gloria Morgan born

6 MARCH 1923



– Gloria Morgan (19) marries
Reginald Claypoole Vanderbilt (42)

20 FEBRUARY 1924



– Gloria Laura Morgan Vanderbilt born in NYC

4 SEPTEMBER 1925



– Reginald Vanderbilt dies of cirrhosis of the
liver, leaving a \$5 million trust fund to be split
between his two daughters

27 JUNE 1926



– Thelma Morgan marries Marmaduke Furness,
First Viscount Furness

OCTOBER 1926



– Thelma and the Prince of Wales dance at a
ball at Londonderry House

14 JUNE 1929



– Thelma Furness and the Prince of Wales meet
again at the Leicestershire Agricultural Show

AUGUST 1929



– Thelma visits Gloria and Nadejda Milford
Haven in Cannes

SEPTEMBER 1929



– The Prince of Wales attends a country house
party hosted by Gloria Vanderbilt in Windsor
Great Park

10 JANUARY 1931



– Thelma Furness invites Wallis Warfield
Simpson and Ernest Simpson to a country
house party at Burrough Court

10 JUNE 1931



– Wallis Simpson presented at court;
Thelma meets Aly Khan

SEPTEMBER 1934



– Thelma asks Wallis to “take care” of Prince of
Wales while she’s away

1 OCTOBER 1934



– Gloria Vanderbilt custody trial begins

21 NOVEMBER 1934



– Gloria Vanderbilt custody trial ends

Q & A WITH BRYN TURNBULL

Everyone knows the story of Edward and Wallis. What drew you to Thelma's story instead?

Thelma's affair with Edward is only aspect of her story because she was not only on the periphery of the abdication crisis, but also the biggest custody battle in U.S. history to date. She can easily be dismissed as a socialite—famous for being famous—but she was also strongly principled, and willing to stand up for those she loved. Other people have written beautifully about Wallis and Edward, but Thelma's story deserved to be told on its own merits.



Photo Credit: Louise Claire Johnson

This novel contains the real-life stories of real life people—some of whom have living descendants. How did you balance the drive to tell a good story against the historical record in terms of character development?

It's a tricky balance to strike, but at the end of the day my job is to tell a good story, taking as much historical fact into consideration as I can without sacrificing the plot. I spent a lot of time researching the people who make up my book: luckily, Thelma and Gloria wrote a memoir, and we have plenty of letters, biographies, and recordings of Edward VIII and Wallis Simpson, so by the time I started actually writing, I had a very good sense of who they were. Wallis in particular leapt out of the pen, and I think that's because she's left such a legacy behind. I certainly hope that they would see themselves in the characters I've created, but at the end of the day these are fictional representations.

How did you find Thelma's story?

I'd long been interested in the abdication crisis and had read biographies of Wallis Simpson before, but I'd never really picked up on Thelma's story until I watched *W.E.*, a movie directed by Madonna about Wallis and Edward's relationship. In the film, we see Wallis and Thelma have the conversation where Thelma asks Wallis to "take care" of Edward for her while she's travelling, and I remember thinking it was such a strange request to make of a friend—even one as close as Wallis was to Thelma. After watching the movie I found myself down a bit of a Wikipedia rabbit hole, where I discovered her connection to the Gloria Vanderbilt trial and recognized that this was a story that ought to be told.

One of the major relationships in this novel is between Gloria and Nada. Why was it important to you to show a relationship between two women in the 1930s?

I truly believe that Gloria loved Nada, and had they lived in a different time period their story would have ended quite differently. What's more interesting to me is the fact that their relationship was permitted because of social privilege—and when Gloria lost that privilege, their relationship fell apart.

How does Gloria's experience as a queer woman shape Thelma's actions?

To me, *The Woman Before Wallis* is a love story—but it's not a royal romance. While the abdication crisis looms large over Thelma's life, this is a book about the love between sisters: Thelma supported her sister in a day and age when being gay was seen as unacceptable—except, as Gloria points out, in the highest echelons of society. In the history books, Thelma has often been dismissed as a lesser socialite, but when it comes down to it, she was a deeply principled woman, and her experience as an ally spoke to me.



After spending so long with his character, how do you feel about Edward VIII and his decision to abdicate?

I think Edward VIII would have found an excuse to abdicate, regardless of whether Wallis Simpson had come into his life or not. He was a fundamentally weak man, and would have made a fundamentally weak king—and while in my novel I have him discuss the sort of king he wants to be with Thelma, I don't think he ever honestly intended to take up his crown. If it hadn't been Wallis, he would have found another excuse to abdicate.

That said, Thelma was genuinely in love with him. It was important for me to find a way into that love, and to be able to portray him with some compassion.

Edward VIII and Wallis Simpson are known to have been Nazi sympathizers. Why don't you address this in your book?

I don't address it for three reasons. First, Thelma and Edward's relationship ended in 1934. Hitler only became chancellor in 1933, so while he would have been a topic of conversation around the dinner table, he wouldn't have been the main topic of conversation. Second, Thelma was not a political person. One of the biggest complaints the government levied against Wallis Simpson was her political activism—in fact, when it became clear Edward wouldn't give Wallis up, the government floated the idea of inviting Thelma back to England to catch Edward's eye again because she wasn't seen as someone who would interfere in politics the way Wallis did. Finally, the sad fact is that many members of Britain's upper crust had extreme right-wing leanings in the 1930s, and many were generally supportive of Hitler's policies. At the time, socialism was seen as a far greater threat than fascism, particularly because the General Strike of 1926 had been so successful in disrupting industrial production. Oswald Mosley's British Union of Fascists had 50,000 members at the height of its popularity in the 1930s.

In the end, I find it incredibly interesting that history shook out in such a way that Britain had the king it needed during the war. Could you imagine what would have happened if George VI hadn't been on the throne during the Blitz?

Do you think Wallis intended to replace Thelma?

I don't think she did. Whatever else has been written about her—and there has been a lot written about her—Wallis was extremely ambitious. I believe that Wallis was genuinely trying to keep Edward's eye from straying, for Thelma's sake, but when it became clear that his affection had transferred to her, she didn't feel too much guilt in taking advantage of the situation.

She certainly didn't intend to marry Edward—that much is clear. In 2011, Anne Sebba published a biography of Wallis Simpson which contains previously unpublished letters between Wallis and Ernest Simpson—she wrote to him until the end of his life, and expressed regret at having ended their marriage. I believe that Wallis had hoped to take advantage of Edward's attraction to make new friends and move in the highest social circle in Britain. She genuinely believed that Edward would tire of her before too long—when he didn't, I think she was as surprised as anyone else.

What did you enjoy most about researching this book?

I wasn't on any fixed timeline to complete this book, so I was able to spend two full years researching—just researching!—the time period. I particularly enjoyed researching the fashion of the 1930s—the attention to detail is incredible, especially for someone who had Thelma's budget. I was able to access a lot of newspaper articles about the Vanderbilt trial at the New



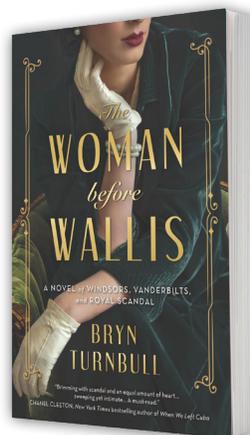
York Public Library, which really helped me understand the frenzy that the trial had created. A photographer actually did try to rappel down the side of the courthouse to get a picture of the proceedings! The trial reached newspapers in Pakistan! I went to London and walked Thelma's neighbourhood—while Duke's Arlington townhouse is no longer there, I visited her home in Mayfair and had drinks in the Ritz.

My favourite research moment, though, was finding Edward's plane, and while I wish I'd had the right place to put it in the manuscript, it did help me come to an understanding of who he was as a person. One of his planes is at the Vintage Wings museum in Gatineau, Quebec, and I was able to visit it: it's a beautiful little biplane with an open cockpit and a closed cabin for passengers. The plane itself looks like a Rolls Royce, with beautiful a chrome and indigo body and burgundy leather interior: but the best part of it is that Edward had a small generator installed on one of the wings so that he could power a wireless radio. While that sounds like a good idea, Vintage Wings was kind enough to take me up in a plane of a similar age, and I was struck by how unbelievably loud it was up in the air. Even with headphones on, it would have been extremely difficult to hear anything on a wireless.

I think this really sums up who Edward was. He was so concerned with his image—with looking and feeling like a modern royal—that he forgot to take into account the practicalities of the situation.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. How does Thelma's relationship with her mother fundamentally shape her attitude towards men and money ?
2. Thelma's abusive first marriage occurs in the years before the book begins. How does that experience impact her relationships, not only with David and Duke but with all of the people in her life?
3. Thelma's relationship with Gloria has room for criticism, but never disloyalty. How does her attitude towards homosexuality differ from other characters in the novel? How does class distinction play into rules of gender in the 1930s?
4. When Thelma first meets Gertrude Whitney, Gertrude blames Reggie's choices for leaving Gloria in such a dire financial state. Do you think her own choices are justified in seeking custody of Little Gloria?
5. Thelma is genuinely surprised that Duke believes their marriage fell apart because of her relationship with David. Do you think this is fair judgement on Duke? How do Duke's own actions contribute to the end of the marriage?
6. Thelma's relationship with Averill grows and deepens over the course of the book, but Thelma struggles with the idea of being Averill's stepmother. How does that struggle shape her decision to tell Duke about Averill's plan to elope?
7. At the end of the book Thelma calls David a "weak" man. Given his actions over the course of the novel, do you feel he would have made a weak king?
8. Thelma considers Wallis a trusted friend. Do you think her feelings were reciprocated? How does Wallis's conduct change during the course of the book?



CHARACTER COCKTAILS

EDWARD VIII

Edward—or David, as Thelma knew him—had a well-known predilection for gin—in fact, in 2002, Christie’s auctioned off the Duke’s spirits cabinet: 72 lots in total, including bottles of cognac from the 19th and 20th centuries, scotch and Irish whiskeys, and an entire case of Gordon’s gin.

DRY GIN MARTINI

2 1/3 oz Gordon’s Dry Gin
1/3 oz Martini Extra
Dry Vermouth
1 dash Orange Bitters
(optional)

Stir all ingredients with ice in a cocktail shaker. Strain into a chilled glass and serve with a twist of lemon zest.



WALLIS SIMPSON

Wallis Simpson was known as one of the best cocktail hostesses in London in the 1930s, due in no small part to her ability to brandish a cocktail shaker. When Wallis accepted David’s proposal in 1936, David supposedly took one of those cocktail parties as an opportunity to create a new drink fit for his new bride: one which matched her famously blue eyes.

WALLIS BLUE

1 1/2 oz Gordon’s Dry Gin
1 oz cointreau
1 lime, juiced
1 dash creme de violette

Mix all ingredients in an iced shaker and shake well. Strain into cocktail glasses and serve with a garnish of acerbic wit.



THELMA FURNESS

In celebration of Thelma’s South and North American heritage, this cocktail is a Peruvian version of a Manhattan—a bold, standout drink that holds its own against the Wallis Blue.

EL CAPITÁN

1 oz Chilean pisco
1 oz red vermouth
1 dash bitters

Stir with ice in a cocktail shaker. Strain into a chilled coupe, and garnish with a twist of orange or lemon, or an olive.

