

Lord Lexden

Conservative peer and historian

Drawing on the letters and diaries Clarissa Eden bequeathed to him upon her death age 101, Hugo Vickers reveals many secrets in this affectionate biography

Clarissa, Muse to Power

The Untold Story of Clarissa Eden, Countess of Avon

By **Hugo Vickers**
 Publisher **Hodder & Stoughton**

Clarissa Churchill, as she then was, did not think much of her future husband, Anthony Eden, when she met him for the first time in 1936. "AE in green suit," she wrote in her diary. "O save us if England is ever in the hands of Mr Eden." He seems to have taken no interest in the cheeky school-girl. She was 15. The debonair foreign secretary was 38.

They barely came across each other in the years that followed. As his first marriage crumbled ("Mrs E seems a dull spot," Clarissa wrote unkindly), the immensely attractive Eden had a number of affairs, fathering more than one child. He also had two sons by his first wife. The elder was killed in Burma at the very end of the Second World War, leaving his father distraught. The younger son, who later got on extremely well with his stepmother, died of AIDS in 1985 while serving as a junior Tory minister in the Lords. The callous behaviour of the Conservative Party at the time was disgraceful. It escapes the condemnation it

deserves in this book.

According to her birth certificate, Clarissa was the daughter of Winston Churchill's dull stockbroker brother Jack, and his lively wife known to everyone by her unattractive nickname, Goonie. In fact Clarissa's real father was a brilliant Liberal MP, Harold Baker, much favoured by HH Asquith, who abandoned politics in favour of classical scholarship.

Uncle Winston regarded his niece with wary affection. She had a sharp tongue, and was not much given to amusing, light-hearted conversation. Churchill's favourite daughter, Mary Soames, had no time for her when they were both young. The two cousins made disparaging remarks about each other in their respective diaries.

Everyone agreed that Clarissa was clever as well as beautiful. In post-war Britain talented women were all too frequently denied the responsible positions they deserved. For a time she contributed incisive articles on a wide range of subjects to literary journals, and later assisted the famous film director, Alexander Korda, and a newly established firm of publishers. Nothing truly satisfied this demanding

woman, who was always free with her complaints.

She had a number of gay men among her closest friends. Curiously, Hugo Vickers says nothing about their sexuality, which will leave readers wondering why these important relationships were platonic. Her bed-time companion for several years before her marriage was a promiscuous married playboy, Raimund von Hofmannsthal, "a pampered pet of grand ladies and beautiful heiresses".

Much to the surprise of many people, she turned out to be exactly the wife that Anthony Eden needed. Churchill amused the wedding guests in 1952 by an inadvertent slip in his speech, referring to "the marriage

we have just seen consummated". The wedded bliss which now began was marred only by two miscarriages.

Eden, one of our greatest foreign secretaries, became one of our most tragic prime



August 1952 Winston Churchill at the wedding of his niece Clarissa and Anthony Eden

ministers. Throughout the Suez crisis, his wife was constantly by his side. She wrote later: "I felt that I had to spend all my time making everything as easy for him as possible, because I had never seen anybody working like that in my life before, from dawn till two in the morning." Her devotion never wavered during the terrible bouts of ill-health that he suffered with some frequency until his death in 1977.

Clarissa Eden was guarded in what she said about her experiences in and out of politics during her long life. She died in 2021, aged 101. Hugo Vickers, who inherited her letters and diaries, reveals many secrets in this affectionate biography. 📖

