

Ethel Lina White

Introduction by **Martin Edwards** to “*Water Running Out*” a short story that appears in *Crimes of Cymru, Classic Mystery Tales of Wales*, British Library, 2023.

Ethel Lina White (1876-1944) was born in Abergavenny and – as a woman who eschewed personal publicity during her lifetime – she would no doubt be astonished to discover that her birthplace in Frogmore Street is now marked by a blue plaque. This recognition highlights the intrinsic merit of her novels of domestic suspense but there is more to it than that. Her writing was vivid and atmospheric and ideally suited to adaptation for film or television. Of all the screen versions of her work, the most famous is the classic Hitchcock movie *The Lady Vanishes*, based on *The Wheel Spins*, which has also been adapted for television and the stage. *Some Must Watch*, set in Welsh border country, was also memorably filmed as *The Spiral Staircase*.

Ethel's father William was a successful builder. His experiments with cement and bitumen led to his inventing Heiga Rock, a waterproof building material which was used for construction work on the London Underground and made him a rich man. He built new family home, Fairlea Grange, in Belmont Road and Ethel was still living there in her mid-thirties at the time of the 1911 Census. For a few years thereafter she worked in the Ministry of Pensions before concentrating on writing. She died of ovarian cancer in 1944 and because of her fear of being buried alive (reflected in her novel *The First Time He Died*) she bequeathed her entire estate to her sister “on condition she pays a qualified surgeon to plunge a knife into my heart after death”.



Sources of Information on Ethel Lina White

Gwent Local History Journal No 133 May 2023 http://gwenthistory.org.uk/?page_id=150
Alex Scurko - *An Overlooked Heritage: The Life and Work of Abergavenny-born Writer Ethel Lina White*

Abergavenny Street Survey

<http://www.abergavennystreetsurvey.co.uk/ethel-lina-white/>

Wikipedia

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ethel_Lina_White

BBC News Wales

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-59550580>

Golden Age of Detection Wiki

<http://gadetection.pbworks.com/w/page/7932464/White%2C%20Ethel%20Lina>

Birth

April, May and June 1876 - White, Ethel Lina, Abergavenny, 11a 60

Baptism

April 26 1876, Ethel Lina White, born 2 April 1876, daughter of William White, builder and Charlotte Eliza White, No 4 Derry View Abergavenny

1881 Census

39 Frogmore Street Abergavenny - William White, head, builder, Elizabeth White, wife, Florence, Ada, Herbert, Mabel, Ethel (5yrs), Sidney, Roland, Wilfred + two servants

1891 Census

Fairlea, Belmont Road Abergavenny - William White, head, Patentee & Maker of Hygeian Rock Building Composition, Elizabeth White, wife, Florence, Ada, Herbert, Mabel, Ethel (15yrs), Sidney, Roland, Wilfred, Annis, Marjorie, Richmond + two servants

1901 Census

Fairlea, Belmont Road Abergavenny - Eliza White, widow, head, Hygeian Rock Building Comp: Manufacturer, Mabel, Ethel (24yrs), Sidney, Roland, Wilfred, Annis, Marjorie, Richmond + one servant

1911 Census

Fairlea, Belmont Road Abergavenny - Eliza White, widow, head, Hygeian Rock Building Comp: Manufacturer, Ethel (35yrs), Wilfred, Annis, Marjorie, Richmond + two servants

1921 Census

65 Sternhold Avenue, Streatham, Wandsworth – Ethel Lina White, head, Author (45yr): Annis Dora White, sister, Private Secretary: Marjorie Hilda White, Sister, Artist

1939 Register

2 Arlington Park Mansions Hounslow – White Ethel Lina, single, novelist: White Annis Dora, single, Private Secretary, ARP warden

Death

July August and September 1944, White Ethel L. 68, Brentford, 3a 328

1944 Probate record

White Ethel Lina of 2 Arlington Park Mansions Chiswick London W.4, spinster, died 13 August 1944. Probate Llandudno 30 October to Annis Dora White spinster. Effects £5737 5s 9d.

Birthplace of Ethel Lina White

Abergavenny Street Survey

<http://www.abergavennystreetsurvey.co.uk/37b-frogmore-street/>

History Points

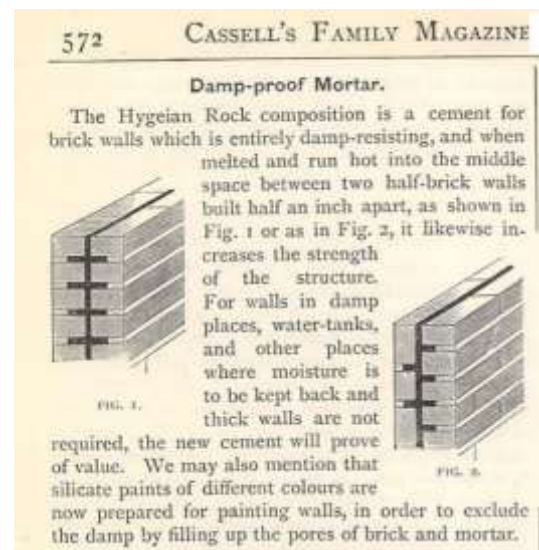
<https://historypoints.org/index.php?page=novelist-ethel-whites-birthplace-abergavenny>

Fairlea and The Hygeian Rock Composition

British Listed Buildings -

<https://britishlistedbuildings.co.uk/300002755-fairlea-abergavenny>

Fairlea Grange can now be booked as a 9-bedroom holiday let - <https://www.fairleagrangeco.uk/> This website has lots of photographs of the interior of Fairlea.



AN OVERLOOKED HERITAGE: THE LIFE
AND WORK OF ABERGAVENNY-BORN
WRITER ETHEL LINA WHITE

by Alex Csurko

On 20 February 1939 the Abergavenny Coliseum was crowded as it screened Alfred Hitchcock's, then newest release, *The Lady Vanishes*. The film was adapted from the 1936 novel *The Wheel Spins* by Ethel Lina White, a native of Abergavenny, who made a personal appearance for the screening. She was invited onstage by the Mayor Alderman W. Rosser who, on behalf of the borough, congratulated her on her successful achievements – to which she modestly responded that 'Gainsborough made the film and they ought to be on the stage', but that she was there because she 'did not take up much room'.¹

White evidently had an aversion to publicity and a desire for her personal life to remain private. In a rare interview with writer Peter Cheyney, when asked about herself White responded: 'I was not born. I have never been educated and have no tastes or hobbies. This is my story and I'm sticking to it'.² Furthermore, rather than remaining quiet on the subject, there are indications that White purposely gave out false information about herself. Mark Sutcliffe believes that White seemingly 'adjusted the date' of her birth year, similar to other female Golden Age authors, 'a move which has hitherto led to a great deal of confusion and speculation'.³ With researchers unable to identify truths from lies, the scattered pieces of factual-fictional biographical information have made White an elusive historical figure. Consequently, for the general public, Ethel Lina White's life and substantial contribution to literature is chiefly encapsulated in a solitary blue plaque, supplied by The Abergavenny Local History Society. Nevertheless, despite the Society's momentous action towards recognition for the author, the blue plaque signifies the critical neglect in the years following her death. Although White's career spanned almost fifty years and produced seventeen full-length novels, over one hundred short stories, a play, and (at least) two poems, over the last half-a-century White's legacy has seemingly faded into air so that nowadays a limited few readers and researchers are aware of her existence. This study seeks to revive interest in one of Abergavenny's outstanding writers and affirm her legacy.

What follows is the result of extensive historical, census, field, and newspaper research to present an account of Ethel Lina White's life and work. Previous scholars have provided their own biographical findings including Malcolm J. Turnbull, Mark Sutcliffe, Irena Morgan, and Tony Medawar. Together, however, their summaries are selective and sometimes speculative. Whilst in debt to these predecessors, this article marks the first comprehensive and accurately-referenced narrative of the Abergavenny-born author. Of course, certain secondary sources may themselves contain untruths orchestrated by White's responses due to her aversion to publicity. One can only attempt to identify these possible red-herrings and suggest alternate facts based on concrete evidence. Furthermore, this article represents an ongoing investigation into Ethel Lina White's biography meaning that some areas of her life are unknown at present.

Ethel Lina White was born 2 April 1876,⁴ the sixth child of William White and his second daughter from his marriage to Eliza Charlotte.⁵ A carpenter and joiner originally from Clifton, Gloucestershire, William White's first marriage was with Emma Bruton on 26 December 1864 – at the ages of 25 and 23 respectively. During this marriage the couple moved to Abergavenny, living on Merthyr Road,⁶ before

having three children: Rosabelle Mary in 1865, Florence Emma in 1867, and Ada Louise in 1870. After Emma's death in March 1871 William married Eliza, also from Clifton, on 29 April the following year,⁷ and continued to live on Merthyr Road.⁸

William and Eliza's first son, Herbert Leonard, was born in 1873, and their first daughter, Mabel Eliza, the following year. From 1874 the White family lived at 4 Derry View on Frogmore Street, a terrace erected by William, where Ethel Lina White's blue plaque is now located.⁹ After Ethel's birth, Sidney William, Roland Hill, and Wilfred Ivor John were born in 1878, 1879, and 1880 respectively.

On the corner of Belmont Road and overlooking surrounding mountains is located an imposing structure. Devised by Ethel Lina White's father and erected in 1881, the house is reminiscent of the Elizabethan age.¹⁰ Built in a mock-Tudor style, combining timber and a bitumastic substance called

Hygeia Rock that was invented by William, 'Fairlea Grange' was constructed to showcase Hygeia Rock's ability to sound- and damp-proof buildings.¹¹ The family – including Annis Dora and Marjorie Hilda, born in 1883 and 1888 Fairlea Grange, Belmont Road/White's Close, Abergavenny respectively, and finally Richmond George, in 1890¹² – continued to live here until shortly before the end of the First World War.¹³ Manufactured at William's workplace, in the yards of the Great Western Railway situated behind Fairlea, Hygeia Rock was used for the building of prisons and the underground railway tunnels, amongst other things.¹⁴ William would take his invention to exhibitions of building materials to demonstrate its damp-proofing abilities,¹⁵ and his business became successful enough for him to establish a London office.¹⁶ William evidently regarded his creation as unique for, nine years after building Fairlea Grange, he took asphalt manufacturer William Briggs to court in Arbroath for 'publishing colourable imitations' of 'a series of five pamphlets relating to hygeian rock composition'. Briggs 'denied that the leaflets were copied' and 'claimed to have invented a similar process'. The judge refused William's appeal, believing advertisement did not constitute copyright infringement, and consequently found him 'liable in expenses'. Undeterred, William appealed to the Court of Session — but the Second Division abruptly refused, adhering to the Sheriff's judgment.¹⁷

Fairlea itself has an interesting history. In 1884 the Abergavenny Chronicle reported that the house had caught fire.¹⁸ There is no evidence, however, that any members of the family were injured. Fairlea was put up for sale and advertised in the Western Mail on 10 October 1898.¹⁹ There are rumours that William forfeited the house during a game of cards with the landlord of The London Pub.²⁰ Regardless as to whether those rumours are true, the White family continued to live at the property for around twenty years; therefore, the advertisement as unsubstantiated. If the rumours are true, however, this and the Arbroath case raise questions about William's personality and conduct. All that is known about William beyond the invention of Hygeian Rock is that he was a Freemason.²¹

Fairlea constitutes an historical landmark signifying William's achievement, and it is furthermore infused with the zeitgeist of White's developing youthful literary interests and the composing of her early short stories. In conjunction with the wattle-and-daube façade, Fairlea's rooms are laden with peculiar paraphernalia.

Particularly, several pieces of furniture are endowed with themes pertaining to authors; as Jennifer Elliott describes in a review of Fairlea for the Abergavenny Chronicle:

The drawing room mantelpiece is carved oak, has a fire surround of Minton tiles, designed by a Frenchman named Pugin, which each depict scenes from Walter Scott's novels.

The study fireplace, with a ladder of shelves reaching to the ceiling on either side, has tiles showing water babies from Charles Kingsley's famous novels. The second-floor master bedroom has tiles of scenes of La [sic] Morte d'Arthur.²²

Fairlea Grange's interior evidently inspired White's writing career, given that she had spent her adolescence in a 'literary' environment. The house itself even influenced some of the locations within her novels, such as *The Summit in Some Must Watch* (1933) – compare, for instance, the set design of its film adaptation *The Spiral Staircase* (1946). Furthermore, the stone lions guarding the front steps of Fairlea feature in the Alderman's house in *Wax* (1935).

Relatively little can be determined about White's childhood beyond what she outlines in a letter to her publisher, which was first discovered by Sutcliffe. Of note, White explains it was a 'jolly childhood' and that the family had 'Welsh nursemaids whose lurid stories were probably excellent training for a future thriller writer'.²³ Despite herself being undoubtedly English, as both her parents were from England and some might argue that Abergavenny (and the whole of Monmouthshire) was a part of England until 1972,²⁴ White was, at least, evidently sentimentally Welsh; she infused her narratives with Welshness – 'with its love of the dark and the macabre, its beliefs in cards and omens'.²⁵ From *Some Must Watch*'s location being 'on the border-line between England and Wales' to Iris Carr's square on her palm signifying safety, in *The Wheel Spins*, and the fortune-tellers in *Put Out the Light* (1931), *The Third Eye* (1937), and *She Faded into Air* (1941), to name a few, White was a pioneer of the underappreciated Welsh Gothic.

Having been educated at a local private school,²⁶ Ethel Lina White was an avid reader and expanded her literary knowledge: 'I was brought up with *Little Women*, *Melbourne House*, and a bound copy of *Harper's Young People*'.²⁷ Her novels also make reference to other authors' works she must have read or been familiar with, ranging from Lewis Carroll to Alighieri Dante, Robert Browning to Algernon Charles Swinburne. *Put Out the Light* and *Some Must Watch* particularly evidence the influence Shakespeare had on her plots, with both titles being direct quotes from *Othello* and *Hamlet* respectively. Moreover, many of her plots parallel or parody other well-known works. To name one, *The Man Who Loved Lions* (1943) has similar plot elements to Agatha Christie's *And Then There Were None* (1939).²⁸ The earliest known evidence of White's interest in writing places her at six years old. White and several of her older siblings – Florence, Ada, Herbert, and Mabel – were members of 'The "Little Folks" Humane Society', which was a children's magazine that ran regular literary competitions.²⁹ During her adolescence, Ethel Lina White contributed various essays and poems to magazines.³⁰ The 9 March 1899 is the first known reference to White's writing in print. At 22 years old White won One Guinea for a poem – entitled 'The Modern Young Man' – for *Hearth and Home*'s literary guild competition. The poem itself was not included in the magazine; the judge's remarks, however, describe it as 'a clever poem, full of sarcasm and irony, yet neither exaggerated nor envenomed'³¹ – therefore anticipating White's humorous commentaries on life in her later work. The earliest known printing of White's writing was in *Hearth and Home*'s literary guild competition, four months later. White's certificate-winning entry — an encomium entitled 'Lines on Oliver Cromwell's Bust' — was, ironically, beaten by Mabel's Guinea-winning attempt.³² William White died aged 61 on 21 February 1901. Eliza Charlotte took over as head of the *Hygeia Rock Manufacturing* company, and various siblings helped out with the business including Roland as builder and Sidney as labourer.³³ By this time several of the siblings had moved out of Fairlea. Rosabelle had moved to Exeter

around 1884, achieving a third-class degree from Cambridge in Religious Knowledge.³⁴ By 1901 she had moved to Wiltshire as a teacher.³⁵ Similarly, on 7 January 1888 17-year-old Ada advertised as junior governess and subsequently moved to Shrewsbury as a teacher.³⁶ On 29 March 1902 Florence married George Jacobs. Finally, Herbert had relocated to train as a solicitor.³⁷

In 1906, five years after William's death and three years after Rosabelle's sudden death aged 38, Ethel's short story 'An Advertisement Baby' was published in the June edition of *The Royal Magazine*. Over the next four decades Ethel would publish a variety of tales – mostly of romantic entanglements – for several leading fiction magazines of the period, including, but not limited to: *Pearson's*, *The Lady's Realm*, *Lloyd's*, and *The Windsor*. During this time White had gained the nickname 'Dell'³⁸ as a possible light-hearted reference to the author Ethel May Dell Savage (whose pen name was Ethel M. Dell) – a popular writer of romance novels between 1911 until her death in 1939.

Eliza Charlotte passed away on 24 April 1917. A *Western Mail* article published over a decade later explains that during the First World War the White family lost all of their money.³⁹ The details of Eliza's will, however, apparently contradict the *Western Mail's* information. As stated in the will, Hygeian Rock Manufacturing was entrusted to Herbert, Sidney, Wilfred, and Richmond,⁴⁰ who could continue to work for the business and earn an annual salary. Additionally, a sum was to be set aside and divided equally between the five daughters annually on the condition that they didn't marry. If the business was discontinued then the money would be converted and paid out amongst the children. Finally, the children could continue to live at Fairlea, albeit with an agreed rent. If they decided to leave, however, the house would have to be sold as per William's will and all debts cleared.⁴¹ Given the instructions of Eliza's will, the family merely sold the business and the house.⁴² Therefore, as it is likely the *Western Mail* interviewed Ethel for their article, the fact that 'the family lost all of their money' might be yet another untruth which ensured her personal life remained private.

Upon selling Fairlea, and possibly swayed by the prospect of work in London, along with her two younger sisters – Annis and Marjorie – Ethel moved to the capital city, where the three sisters quickly found jobs: Annis as a private secretary, and Marjorie as a childrens-book illustrator. Ethel continued to publish short stories alongside working as a clerk in the Ministry of Pensions.⁴³ In her letter, however, White explains: 'I couldn't stand office-life, because of the lack of fresh air'; therefore, in 1919, she 'threw up a safe job [...] on the strength of a ten-pound offer for a short story'.⁴⁴ By 1921 the sisters lived at 65 Sternhold Avenue, in Streatham Ward, where Ethel and Annis would reside for the next seven years.⁴⁵ On 20 June 1923 Marjorie married John Napier List and moved out of the property.⁴⁶ Unfortunately List's marriage was short-lived, as Marjorie suddenly died aged 37 in 1925.

Between 1919 and 1926 White continued to publish short stories of both romantic entanglements and criminal follies. A variety of White's magazine contributions allowed her to experiment with plots that would later be adapted and expanded to publish as novels. For instance, to name a few, 'Twill Soon Be Dark' (*Pearson's Magazine* [P.M.], August 1925) became her second mass-market 1929 novel of the same name; 'An Unlocked Window' (P.M., March 1926) – itself adapted for the third series of *The Alfred Hitchcock Hour* in 1965 – became *Some Must Watch*; and 'Miss Loveapple's Luck' (P.M., May 1927) became *While She Sleeps* (1940); Furthermore, the corpse substitution in 'The Flaw' (P.M., March 1925) was

reworked for *The First Time He Died* (1935); elements from 'Old Man River' (Best Mystery Stories of the Year, 1932), 'Falling Downstairs' (P.M., July 1934), and 'The Gilded Pupil' (Detective Stories of Today, 1940) were incorporated into *She Faded into Air*; and, finally, 'At Twilight' (P.M., June 1930) inspired *They See in Darkness* (1944).

In 1927 Ethel Lina White secured a deal with Ward Lock & Co. and published her first novel, *The Wish-Bone* – a tale of love akin to Bronte's *Jane Eyre* (1847). 'Twill Soon Be Dark' was published in 1929 and is similar in nature to Dickens's *Great Expectations* (1861) with its protagonist's journey from a humble beginning to a place among high society.⁴⁷ *The Eternal Journey* was White's final mainstream novel and published in 1930. It can be deemed the kindred spirit of Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* (1928) – a novel recounting the titular character's life, which spans four centuries — although White's novel focusses on the prolonged effects of guilt upon the protagonist.⁴⁸ White's first three novels can be classed as harlequin romances, infused with mystery and crime, and therefore be considered separate from her subsequent fourteen thrillers. *The Wish-Bone*'s frontispiece, however, highlights White's thoughts on the modern heroine:

In the Beginning there was, perhaps, a Perfect Woman. But she was broken into three — Mary, Martha, and Magdalen.

And neither of these three is perfect.

We have canonised Mary.

We have elevated Magdalen to the Peerage.

But what have we done for Martha — save invent the Vacuum cleaner?⁴⁹

Between *The Wish-Bone* and 'Twill Soon Be Dark' White ventured into playwriting. Her theatrical production, entitled *The Port of Yesterday*, was performed for one night only — 29th April 1928⁵⁰ — by the Repertory Players at the Strand Theatre. Copies of White's script are seemingly non-existent and so the exact plot cannot be discerned. Nevertheless, its themes were described as similar to those in Emile Cammaert's unpublished play *The Mistress of the Beeches*, performed the previous year,⁵¹ and its plot calls to mind Noel Coward's later production *Blithe Spirit* (1941). *The Port of Yesterday*'s narrative received generally favourable comments: one critic stated it was a 'well-told story'.⁵² Another believed it had 'definite charm' and 'a certain amount of wit and carefully observed character studies'.⁵³ A third described it as having 'a distinct flavour of [J. M.] Barrie'.⁵⁴ Although White's play contained a moment within which 'the impossible was constructed', the play's faults were in its design and execution.⁵⁵ One critic explained that there were 'the familiar faults of a writer who has been a novelist before turning to the drama. In other words, Miss White attempts to say too much'.⁵⁶ Provided a minor error was corrected the play would have been considered for a run in the West End.⁵⁷

In 1931 White published her first thriller, *Put Out the Light* – which, incidentally, was adapted for the third series of BBC's *Detective* in 1969. In the preface, White addresses the reader directly explaining her philosophy on the detective novel:

Most stories of crime begin with a murder and end with its solution. But as the victim is the dominant character in this novel, she has been retained as long as possible [...] Readers, therefore, may decide who is going to kill her before the murder is actually committed. They will probably reach the goal before the detective, who is built to last and not for speed.⁵⁸

Fear Stalks the Village was White's second thriller, published in 1932, and is her take on the poison-pen plot. Here, however, White parodies Arthur Conan Doyle's illustrious Sherlock Holmes in the guise of amateur London-based detective Ignatius

Brown, sent to discover the culprit with the aid of the typical heroine Joan Brook. White's final novel with Ward Lock & Co. was *Some Must Watch*, which was published in 1933 and retitled *The Spiral Staircase* after its film adaptation of the same name.⁵⁹ By 1934 Ethel and Annis had left Sternhold Avenue – possibly due to the demolition of houses 63–69, where a petrol station now resides. The pair had first moved to 6 Mount Ephraim Road by 1932, sharing with another family, before settling at 2 Arlington Park Mansions in Chiswick.⁶⁰ White's next thriller, *Wax*, was published in 1934 by her new publishers Collins – with whom she would stay for the remainder of her career. Indeed, *Wax* is an example of White contributing to the interwar years' periodic interests. Three years previously John Dickson Carr published *The Corpse in the Waxwork* featuring his detective Henri Bencolin — a novel featuring attributes that White would incorporate whilst adapting her 1930 short-story 'Waxworks' (*P.M.*, December) into *Wax*. Moreover, White's short-story 'Passengers' (*Raleigh News & Observer*, October 1933) and its novel-adaptation *The Wheel Spins* was written amidst other 'train narratives' popular during the mid-thirties, including Agatha Christie's *The Murder on the Orient Express* (1934) and Graham Greene's *Stamboul Train* (1932).

The First Time He Died (1935) recounts the 'second life' of Charlie Baxter, renamed Charles Beaverbrook, after he successfully pulls off a life-insurance scam. The final chapters of the novel evidently reflect White's morbid ideas of the afterlife. Fearful of being buried alive, Vera writes to the doctor 'Promise to run a knife into my heart when I am dead'.⁶¹ Similarly, in her will, written in 1925 White explained: 'I give and bequeath unto Annis Dora White all that I possess on condition she pays a qualified surgeon to plunge a knife into my heart after death'.⁶² Regarding the will, in his study on White, Turnbull humorously suggests that she 'was the victim of too zealous a reading of Edgar Allen Poe or, having grown up in the Victorian era, perhaps she was sceptical of the average GP's diagnostic expertise'.⁶³ Of course, an alternative explanation is that White may have had no qualms about death and wrote the codicil merely as one of her many witty responses to life.

White's most famous thriller – *The Wheel Spins*, written in 1936 – has remained in print, retitled *The Lady Vanishes* owing to the success of Alfred Hitchcock's 1938 adaptation of the same name, and the novel is most commonly used to define White's oeuvre. *The Wheel Spins* unquestionably instigated her fame. White attended Foyles' famous literary luncheons and on one occasion was the guest of honour.⁶⁴ Concurrently, Hitchcock's adaptation — which altered many aspects of the novel's plot⁶⁵ — can be considered a major cause of White's elimination from the annals of crime-fiction.

Hitchcock's film was remade in 1979, still titled *The Lady Vanishes*, starring Elliot Gould and Cybill Shepherd. The film has also inspired modern reinventions, such as *Flight Plan* (2005) starring Jodie Foster. Furthermore, *The Lady Vanishes* was adapted for the stage in 2001 and revived by The Classic Thriller Theatre Company in 2019. Hitchcock's role in the production of *The Lady Vanishes* is well known and the acknowledgement of White's existence derives from the association of her name with his adaptation. For example, the BBC's 2013 programme *The Lady Vanishes* – starring Tuppence Middleton as Iris Carr – adapts the original novel's plot. Some reviews slated the faithful reimagining, claiming that 'direct comparisons to the Hitchcock version clearly identifies it as the lesser work' and that the creators 'strip away so much of what worked about Hitchcock's film without replacing it with anything worthwhile of their own'.⁶⁶ Annie Tricklebank, producer

of the 2013 adaptation, was quoted saying that White's novel is 'a complete delight and beautifully written', therefore 'we decided to go to the book' in order to be 'purists'.⁶⁷ One question, therefore, why they retained Hitchcock's title. As is evident by the examples given above, Hitchcock's *The Lady Vanishes* has caused a detrimental overpowering of Ethel Lina White's status as author.

White would write several more thrillers; although, all would be compared and contrasted with the success of *The Wheel Spins*. *The Third Eye* was written in 1937 and the rights were sold to Universal; the film, however, was never made.⁶⁸ In the same year, White published *The Elephant Never Forgets* – which was unusually set in a Russian port. Sutcliffe discovered that White had recently visited Russia, and so 'was ideally placed to create a convincing atmosphere' for the novel.⁶⁹ By the same token, White could have been an avid traveller – evidenced by her colourful and detailed descriptions in *The Wheel Spins*, and of Brussels, Bruges, and Stockholm in her 1938 thriller *Step in the Dark*. White explains: 'I have always been very interested in America [...] and I have the greatest admiration for the photographs of New York, and I hope to visit there some day'.⁷⁰ Whether this aspiration was realised before her death is unknown; the various American publications of her short stories and novels, however, mean that – at least in spirit – White travelled across the Atlantic.

Between 1936 and 1939 Ada – now a retired Matron and widower – stayed with her sisters at Arlington Park.⁷¹ During the Second World War, Ethel wrote *While She Sleeps* in 1940 and *She Faded into Air* in 1941. These were followed by *Midnight House* in 1942, which was adapted three years later as *The Unseen* (1945). As has been mentioned throughout, several of White's narratives were envisioned for cinematic release and many – short stories in particular – read like films. White's storytelling ability was possibly influenced by cinematographic techniques, as her favourite relaxation was visiting the Pictures: 'To my mind, it is a perfect form of mental release. I used to go [...] before it was general and people sneered at me for my base taste, but I used to love the unfamiliar American backgrounds'.⁷²

The Man Who Loved Lions was written in 1943. During the later years of her career White's health declined,⁷³ and she died of ovarian cancer aged 68 on 13 August the following year shortly before the publication of her fourteenth thriller, *They See in Darkness*. Upon her heart being plunged with a knife – as her codicil was fulfilled⁷⁴ – she was cremated and her ashes were scattered in the Garden of Remembrance, at Mortlake Crematorium, in Richmond upon Thames, London. In contrast to the likes of the more earnest and generic crime writers Agatha Christie and Dorothy L. Sayers, White's thrillers both continually adhere to and subvert the genres within which she writes – providing light-hearted and witty commentaries on their various themes and plots. Despite the confession – 'I never wanted to write'⁷⁵ – White was adamant her thrillers should be well written and would reportedly produce various drafts of her novels until she was satisfied.⁷⁶ An additional reason for White's repeated rewriting of her manuscripts may have had to do with her haphazard writing style, which she candidly explains in her letter:

My method of working is so weird that it is a mystery to me that there really is a novel to show for it. I begin, about twelve, with writing materials, write a few lines, then get a glass of water – another line or so – smoke a cigarette – another line – play with the kitten⁷⁷ – and then break for a cup of tea. But somehow, a book does get written. I write such an incoherent script that I have to type it

roughly in order to realise what it is about – and then I play with the typed version quite a lot before the final typing. All this takes quite a lot of time.⁷⁸

White spent the majority of her life fascinated with the formation of fictional plots and the construction of impenetrable puzzle-narratives. She established a plethora of works to be rediscovered as a new generation of readers and scholars are introduced to the Abergavenny-born author.

Recently, for their ‘Murder Room’ series, the Orion Publishing Group printed facsimile editions of White’s fourteen crime thrillers in 2015. Ethel’s tale ‘The Gilded Pupil’ was included in Marie Smith’s collection of short stories entitled *Ms Murder* (1989). For the British Library Crime Classics series, Martin Edwards included some of White’s mislaid short stories in his edited compendiums: *Capital Crimes and Silent Nights* in 2015, and *Murder at the Manor and Serpents in Eden* in 2016, in addition to *Welsh Mysteries* scheduled for publication later this year. Valancourt Books, who republished *Wax* with its original dust jacket design in 2015, reprinted one of White’s earliest-known short stories – ‘With What Measure Ye Mete...’ (1906) – for the third volume of their *Book of Horror Stories* series in 2018; although, the tale had originally appeared in one of Ash-Tree Press’s limited-run *Annual Macabre* (2000). Begun in 2019 and currently spanning five — soon to be six — volumes, writer Tony Medawar’s *Bodies from the Library* contains further mislaid short stories from various Golden Age authors besides White. It is unfeasible to locate every short-story anthology containing White’s material; Medawar’s *Passengers and Other Stories*, scheduled for publication later this year, however, will be the first compendium dedicated solely to White and will compile the complete collection (as far as can be determined) of her crime-orientated short-stories.

Concluding his brief analysis of her life and work, Turnbull explains: ‘it is fair to say that Ethel Lina White contributed nothing new to the genre’.⁷⁹ White may not have developed the Golden-Age-of-crime-fiction or the Modern-Welsh Gothic, but to claim as such is to misguide readers and researchers of her true value. Ethel Lina White was one of many authors integral to the literary zeitgeist of the interwar years. Her works may have dated but, above all else, White’s novels contribute evidence of a particular culture and society; rather than comparing and contrasting, or assessing and judging, White’s novels should be read for what they are – novels to be read and enjoyed.

The author: Alex Csurko is currently in his final year of PhD studies researching the Abergavenny-born writer Ethel Lina White, whom he first discovered during his undergraduate studies on Alfred Hitchcock – for which he received a first degrees with honours. Alex is recognised as an upcoming authority on White after his interview with BBC Wales Online, published in December 2021, discussing the author’s life and work. As a Member of the Magic Circle, Alex also regularly contributes theoretical essays on the art of Magic for the Society’s prestigious international magazine.

NOTES

1 ‘Abergavenny Authoress: Miss E. L. White Attends Film Show’, *The Abergavenny Chronicle*, 24 February 1939.

2 Originally found in the introduction for White’s short story ‘And the Answer Was...’

(Sunday Dispatch, 13 March 1938), as quoted in Medawar, Tony. (ed.). 2021a. *Bodies from the Library: Lost Tales of Mystery and Suspense from the Golden Age of Detection*, vol. 3 (London: Collins Crime Club), p. 333.

3 Sutcliffe, Mark. 2001. 'Ethel Lina White: Author of "The Lady Vanishes"', *Book and Magazine Collector*, December, p. 21. Several articles on White provide the wrong birth year, ranging from 1877 to 1891 [to name a few, see Mary Groff's entry in *Twentieth Century Crime and Mystery Writers*, ed. by John M. Reilly (London: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1980), p. 1472; Barrie Hayne's entry for *Dictionary of Literary Biography: British Mystery Writers, 1920–1939* (Detroit: Gale Research, 1989; Gale, Cengage Learning, 2007); or, Thomas Godfrey's introduction to 'An Unlocked Window' in *English Country House Murders: Classic Crime Fiction of Britain's Upper Crust* (New York: Warner Books, Inc., 1989), p. 373].

4 All of the White siblings were baptised. Ethel Lina White was baptised on 26 April 1876 [See local baptism records].

5 See Ethel Lina White's birth certificate. All information regarding births, deaths, and marriages included in this article were discovered in certificates accessed on Ancestry, Find My Past, Genes Reunited and Government archives. To save repetition, subsequent information regarding births, deaths, and marriages will not be referenced – unless by further supporting articles.

6 As shown on Rosabelle Mary White's birth certificate.

7 William and Eliza's marriage was reported in the *Western Mail*, 3 May 1872, p. 4.

8 As shown on Herbert Leonard White's birth certificate.

9 As shown on Mabel Eliza White's birth certificate; Irena Morgan explains that William built the terrace in 'People and Places – Irena Morgan looks at Abergavenny's local history', *Abergavenny Chronicle*, 9 January 2003.

10 Fairlea is described as such in the Abergavenny Civic Society's *Exploring Abergavenny*, page 6 – a document kindly supplied by local Abergavenny historian George Beale.

11 'The Hygeian Rock Building Composition', *Western Mail*, 27 April 1882, p. 4.

12 Alongside Ethel's achievements as a writer, each sibling had particularly successful careers. One brother became a director of Seargents Brothers the printers; another became a contributor to an angling magazine. Herbert became a solicitor; and Richmond was a chartered accountant who also ran a theatre group, The Richmond Players. Of the sisters, Marjorie became a successful childrens-book illustrator, Annis a

66 The demography of the Parish of Llanarth and Clytha private secretary, Mabel a nurse, and Ada a matron. [See the 1901 and 1911 census returns, and Morgan 2003.]

13 Information found within Trade Directories, kindly supplied by the Abergavenny Museum.

14 Medawar, Tony. (ed.). 2020. *Bodies from the Library: Lost Tales of Mystery and Suspense from the Golden Age of Detection*, vol. 2 (London: Collins Crime Club), p. 320; Morgan, 2003.

15 *Western Mail*, 27 April 1882, p. 4.

16 Morgan, 2003. Furthermore, Hygeian Rock Manufacturing won an award for National Health [Thanks to George Beale for this information].

17 'Arbroath Interdict Case', *Dundee Courier*, 11 December 1890.

18 Thanks to George Beale for this information.

19 'Advertisements & Notices', *Western Mail*, 10 October 1898, p. 1.

20 Clipping of 'The House that James Built', *Abergavenny Chronicle*, 17 July 2014, kindly supplied by local Abergavenny historian George Beale. Interestingly, the article

(as well as its title) references a 'James White'. It is possible that Eliza's younger brother James Hill [see the 1871 census return] helped William in constructing Fairlea, and accounts over the coming years were misinformed.

21 'Funeral of Mr. White', Abergavenny Chronicle, 1 March 1901.

22 Elliott, Jennifer. 1978. 'Fairlea – a house ahead of its time', Abergavenny Chronicle, 6 April, p. 12.

23 Morgan, 2003.

24 For the vexed question of whether Monmouthshire was in England or Wales see the two valuable chapters by Chris Williams: 'The Question of Monmouthshire', Gwent County History vol 4 (2011), pp. 348-359; 'Who Talks of my Nation', Gwent County History, vol 5 (2013), pp. 342-236.

25 Originally included in the biographical note for the American edition of Put Out the Light (1946), as quoted in Turnbull, Malcolm J. 1997. 'Predicaments and Premonitions: The Writing of Ethel Lina White', Clues, 18: 99-132, p. 101.

26 Morgan, 2003.

27 Sutcliffe, p. 23.

28 This insight is from fellow Whitean researcher Hannah Squire. Incidentally, Agatha Christie's *The Moving Finger* (1943) is eerily similar to White's *Fear Stalks the Village* (1932).

29 'The Little Folks Humane Society', *Little Folks: The Magazine for Boys and Girls; a Magazine for the Young*, 1 August 1883, p. 120.

30 Mentions of White's various essay contributions can be found in *Hearth and Home*, between March 1899 and September 1900, on topics including 'Lines on the Transvaal Crisis', 'An Essay or Verses on John Ruskin', and 'China'.

31 'Competition XC', *Hearth and Home*, 9 March 1899, p. 721.

32 'Competition XCVIII', *Hearth and Home*, 20 July 1899, p. 444.

33 See the details of William White's will and the 1911 census return.

34 'Cambridge Higher Local Examinations', *Western Daily Press*, 6 August 1884, p. 8.

35 See the 1901 census return.

36 Ada's advertisement was printed in *The Standard*, 7 January 1888, p. 8; for Ada's relocation, see the 1891 census return.

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37 Given that Herbert returns to Fairlea by the 1911 census return.

38 Sutcliffe, p. 21.

39 'A Welsh Playwright', *Western Mail*, 31 May 1928.

40 During the First World War, Sidney and Richmond were cadets in the Royal Artillery; Wilfred continued to work for Hygeian Rock Manufacturers [See the details of Eliza Charlotte's will].

41 See the details of Eliza Charlotte's will.

42 See the *Abergavenny Chronicle*, 9 November 1917, which states that Fairlea had been sold to Mr. E. H. Ede – a solicitor from Cardiff. Trade directories show that a Mrs Sarah Straker resided at Fairlea from at least 1923.

43 See the 1921 census return.

44 Sutcliffe, p. 21.

45 See the 1921 census return, and electoral rolls between 1923 and 1930.

46 Marjorie and John's engagement was advertised in *The Times*, 15 May 1923, p. 17.

47 Comparisons of *The Wish-Bone* and 'Twill Soon Be Dark to Jane Eyre and Great Expectations, respectively, are credited to Medawar, Tony. (ed.). 2021b. *Bodies from the Library: Forgotten Stories of Mystery and Suspense by the Queens of Crime and Other Masters of Golden Age Detection*, vol. 4 (London: Collins Crime Club), p. 341.

- 48 This insight is from fellow Whitean researcher Hannah Squire.
- 49 White, Ethel Lina. 1927. *The Wish-Bone* (London: Ward, Lock & Co.). Irena Morgan (2003) believes that White would occasionally base characters on people that she must have known and sometimes retained their names for the characters. For example, during a séance in *The Third Eye*, Miss Yaxley-Moore communicates with a spirit she initially identifies as Father Ignatius – who was an eccentric Abergavenny monk active during Ethel’s childhood and adolescence [See Butters, Tim. 2018. *A–Z of Abergavenny: Places — People — History* (Gloucestershire: Amberley Publishing), pp. 35-36].
- 50 Nicoll, Allardyce. 1973. *English Drama, 1900–1930: The Beginnings of the Modern Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p. 1024.
- 51 ‘Repertory Players’, *The Stage*, 3 May 1928, p. 17.
- 52 ‘Excellent Acting in Witty Play About Man Who Lived in Past’, *Daily Sketch*, 30 April 1928.
- 53 ‘A Play with Charm’, *The Daily Mail*, 30 April 1928, p. 15.
- 54 ‘Plays and Players’, *The Sunday Times*, 29 April 1928, p. 6.
- 55 ‘Repertory Players’, *The Times*, 30 April 1928, p. 12. Interestingly, this article refers to White as ‘Mr’.
- 56 *The Daily Mail*, 30 April 1928, p. 15.
- 57 *Western Mail*, 31 May 1928.
- 58 Originally found in the preface to *Put Out the Light* (1931), as quoted in Medawar, 2021b, pp. 341–2.
- 59 Interestingly, the title of the film adaptation seemingly references Mary Roberts Rinehart’s *The Circular Staircase* (1908) — an author with whom critic and crime writer Julian Symons compares White [See *Bloody Murder: From the Detective Story to the Crime Novel*, 3rd rev. edn (London: Penguin Books Ltd., 1992), pp. 210].
- 60 See the 1932 and 1934 electoral rolls.
- 61 White, Ethel Lina. 1935b. *The First Time He Died* (London: Collins; repr. London: The
- 68 The demography of the Parish of Llanarth and Clytha
- 68 Orion Publishing Group Ltd, 2015), p. 242.
- 62 See the details of Ethel’s will.
- 63 Turnbull, p. 103.
- 64 ‘Death of Abergavenny Authoress’, *Abergavenny Chronicle*, 18 August 1944, p. 5.
- 65 In *The Lady Vanishes*, Miss Froy is revealed to be a spy attempting to smuggle a secret musical code to the Foreign Office that contains ‘the vital clause of a secret pact between two European countries’ [Masterworks of the British Cinema: Brief Encounter — Henry V — *The Lady Vanishes* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1990), p. 99]. Actually, Frank Lauder and Sidney Gilliat’s alterations do not stray too far from the source material; in *The Wheel Spins* Max Hare suggests that ‘Miss Froy is a spy who’s got some information which she’s sneaking out of the country. So she’s got to be bumped off’ [White, Ethel Lina. 1936. *The Wheel Spins* (London: Collins; repr. [The Lady Vanishes] Pan Books, 2017), p. 189].
- 66 Tallerico, Brian. 2013. ‘BBC “The Lady Vanishes” Only Strengthens Reputation of Hitchcock Original’, 15 August <<<https://www.rogerebert.com/features/bbc-the-lady-vanishes-only-strengthens-reputation-of-hitchcock-original>>> [accessed 26/3/2021]
- 67 Quoted in Chapman, James. 2018. *Hitchcock and the Spy Film* (London: I. B. Taurus & Co. Ltd), p. 124.
- 68 Sutcliffe, p. 24.
- 69 Sutcliffe, p. 24.

70 Sutcliffe, p. 23.

71 See the 1939 Government Register.

72 Sutcliffe, pp. 22–3.

73 Turnbull, p. 122.

74 See the details of Ethel's will.

75 Sutcliffe, p. 21.

76 Biographical note in White, Ethel Lina. 1962. *The Lady Vanishes* (London: Collins).

77 It is reported that Ethel Lina White kept blue Persian cats [See Morgan, 2003]. One of these cats was possibly called David, as *While She Sleeps* (1940) is dedicated to a “David” [BLUE PERSIAN]’; in the same novel, Miss Loveapple owns a blue Persian cat called David.

78 Sutcliffe, p. 23.

79 Turnbull, p. 128.