THE WOMAN HE LOVED



Photos: AFP, AP

IT WAS THE 20TH CENTURY'S MOST NOTORIOUS LOVE STORY WHEN A KING GAVE UP HIS THRONE FOR A WOMAN. ALMOST 80 YEARS LATER, IS HISTORY SHINING A KINDER LIGHT ON THE MUCH DESPISED DUCHESS OF WINDSOR?

WORDS **BRUCE EMOND**

She is mostly forgotten today, except among fans of British royalty and fashionista who have followed her distinct style and love of fine jewelry (the critically panned 2011 movie *W.E.*, co-written by Madonna, also gave her fleeting pop culture cred).

Although she died in pathetic circumstances in 1986 at age 89, ailing and alone in a decrepit mansion in Paris, Wallis, the Duchess of Windsor had been one of the world's most famous – make that notorious – women in the 1930s through 1970s.

The divorced American, known as Wallis Simpson, captivated the British king Edward VIII. As he could not marry someone who was divorced, he chose to follow his heart and forsake duty. Upon his abdication in 1936, he famously said that he could not carry out his responsibilities as monarch "... without the love and support of the woman I love".

He was succeeded by his younger brother, George VI, father of Queen Elizabeth II.

Historian and journalist Anne Sebba grew up hearing from her elders of "that woman", the American interloper who changed history. The author of works on author Enid Bagnold, Mother Teresa and fashion designer Laura Ashley, among others, decided to write her biography while there were still people alive who had lived through the royal crisis in 1936 and known Wallis.

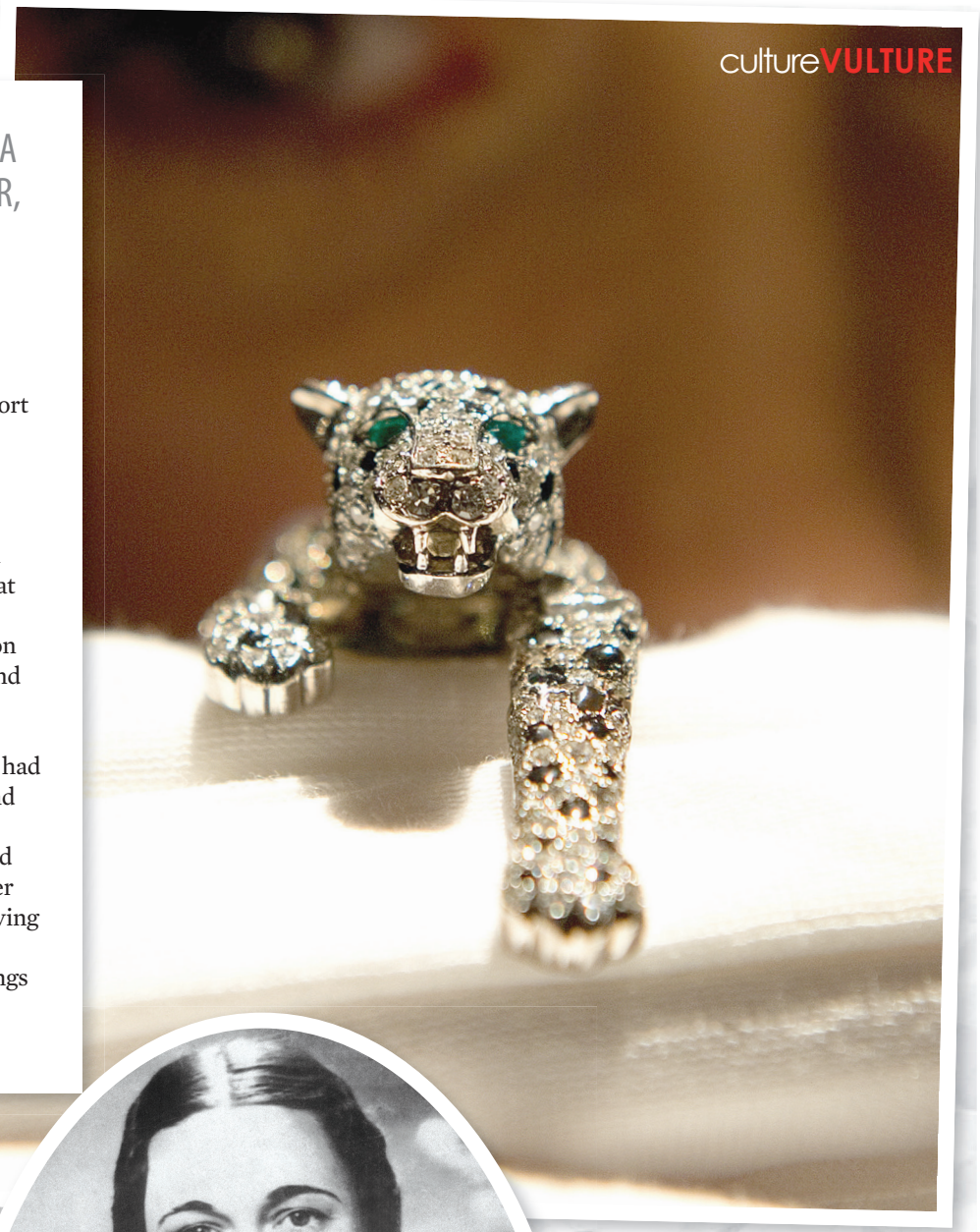
In an amazing find, a source provided her with 15 letters Wallis had sent to her second husband, Ernest Simpson, showing her anxiety about the situation and, perhaps, buying time to gauge how things would develop.

She got out of her depth in the game playing, Sebba believes, and eventually there was no turning back.

Sebba says the letters, used in her book *That Woman: The Life of Wallis Simpson, Duchess of Windsor* in 2012, gave better insight into the psyche of the woman, who grew up in genteel poverty and endured a "ghastly" first marriage, to the public today.

And she is not simply cast as the sole villain of the story.

"There is no longer such a deferential attitude toward the royal family so people are more prepared to see Edward VIII as a damaged and flawed personality," Sebba says from London.







Wallis' Cartier diamond bracelet *(photos clockwise from facing page)* and panther jewelry. The young and ambitious Wallis. The middle-aged couple together forever.

"Finally, there is great relief that she took him out of the picture at a critical time in world history and that we ended up with the much better brother. As Noel Coward famously said, 'there should be a statue to Wallis Simpson in every market town in England'."

Here Sebba gives her views on the Duchess of Windsor.

Do you think she fully understood the implications of her relationship with the king?

Absolutely not. As the discovery of the 15 unpublished letters shows, she thought she was having a little dalliance and that when Edward became king she would be dispensed with, he would marry someone more suitable and then she would go back to Ernest with more money, more social status and more jewelry. But it didn't happen like that, and she lost Ernest as well to her school friend Mary Kirk.

I think she never understood English high society. She moved in a very limited circle where a little bit of adultery was condoned. But it was not so in the rest of

the world and certainly not for the bulk of middle class women in the rest of the country ...

Was Wallis happy in her choice, or did she regret it?

I don't believe Wallis was especially happy in what happened as she felt she had lost her good name, as she put it, become a hated woman and had lost all privacy ... But she felt she had been caught by her own machinations and could not get out of the situation once Edward threatened to kill himself if she did not go ahead with the marriage. This explains why she often behaved badly in front of him because she felt she had earned the right to do that. Many people have told me how she would publicly humiliate him, and I think it was because she was either bored or believed she had given up a great deal for him, not the other way around!

Your opinion of Wallis, in three words.

I would say flirtatious, greedy, manipulative.

Was she the kind of woman who can never be truly close to other women because they always see them as competition?

Ha ha! I am often asked if I would have liked her as a friend and the answer is yes, to meet occasionally for lunch, because she would be very good company and full of gossip. But I'd never bring her home to meet my husband. She was a man's woman!

There is the famous enmity between her and the Queen Mother. Were they actually as bad as each other, even with Elizabeth's saintly reputation?

I think they probably each did "bad- mouth" the other but Wallis had the more biting tongue and acerbic wit. Wallis was definitely ruder but the Queen Mother did imply and say that Wallis was the lowest of the low, but she was not that. In fact, her family in Baltimore terms (both the Montagues and the Warfields) was patrician, elite, high born, it was just that Wallis, after her father died, was the poor outsider.

Then there was also the question of fashion, and Wallis used fashion to convey a message: she was saying look what an elegant, chic, slim woman you would have had if I had been queen, not the frumpy one with flowers in her hair!

If you look at some of the pictures in my book you can see how the two women eye each other ... I think one should say that the Queen Mother had good reason to dislike Wallis for what she did in forcing her and her family into the limelight when they desperately wanted privacy. But eventually I think Elizabeth learned to enjoy the limelight and realized that actually Wallis had done her a favor!

Many portray Wallis, perhaps due to sexism, as the domineering one in her relationship with Edward, and he as passive and weak. Do you see it as so sharply defined?

Not at all. I think Wallis was initially weak – she could not resist jewelry, furs and money – and this was the slippery slope to her downfall. She could not say "no" until it was too late. However, in her relationship with Edward she was demanding and domineering and got cross with him, and that is why so many people think she was strong!

As a style icon, was she a savvy arbiter of taste, or simply someone whose money and reputation allowed her to indulge herself as she wished?

The former ... I think even from childhood she had followed fashion by copying magazine styles and was desperate to make an entrance into a room. She didn't always get it right and some of her fashion faux pas are monstrous, but mostly, once she had the money and the figure, she dressed very elegantly.

Tell us more about her love of jewels. What did they mean to her?

In a word security, so that she would never be on the breadline and forced to beg from a man for money or support ... She had a real fear that she would never have enough money. This persisted into the latter years, when she still worried there would never be enough for the rest of her days and expected others to pay for her meals, travel or even beauty treatments at Elizabeth Arden!

If Wallis was alive today, say aged 50, what would she be up to?

She always tried to keep up with the latest fads and fashions, so she'd probably be rather like Sarah Ferguson, someone the royal family is not too keen on and yet someone who is very human who makes mistakes.

I am sure she would still be looking fashionable and doing fashionable things like instagramming, but she was never very interested in causes, doing good works or visiting schools, etc. which the royal ramily is expected to do! And she was not very interested in culture or theater.



With Queen Elizabeth II & Prince Philip, Paris, 1972, shortly before Edward's death.





Wedding day, 1937



Anne Sebba