



HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES
BY DR. LYNN VEACH SADLER

The “Jersey Lily,” Lillie Langtry, Emille Charlotte Langtry, née Le Breton, was born in 1853 on the British island of Jersey and was the sixth of seven children and the only girl. Her father, Rector and Dean of Jersey, purportedly had illegitimate children, and his wife left him, but, apparently, his relationship with his daughter remained constant. Perhaps some of Lillie’s unusualness was the result of being educated by a brother’s tutor.

Lillie moved to London when she married and was an actress in Britain and America, a performer in some Vaudeville shows, and a producer. She wrote her autobiography and one novel (All at Sea) and was a character in George MacDonald Fraser’s novels, The Flashman Papers, and may have inspired the character Irene Adler in Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes. In Katie Forgetting’s play, Sherlock Holmes and the Case of the Jersey Lily, she is blackmailed over her past relationship with the Prince of Wales, and she and Oscar Wilde employ Holmes and Dr. Watson to investigate. In A Scandal in Bohemia, she bests Holmes and is said to be the only female to do so. The auditions in the “Burns’ Heir” episode of The Simpsons are held in the Lillie Langtry Theater. My play, Lillie Langtry’s “Lash La Rue Sweet Potatoes” World Crusade, Or, Why You Can’t Buy Quintessential Western Wear Boots [Lynn Veach Sadler Plays, Volume I. Grimbergen, Belgium: Aquillrelle Press, 2018, 93-148] tells the story of a woman named for her who is crazy about the Old West.

Langtry often sat for portraits by artists. Once when she was mourning the loss of a brother, she wore a simple black dress, with no jewelry, to a society event, and these became a trademark, as did her ivory complexion. She was the first woman to endorse commercial products such as cosmetics and was especially known for her Pears Soap advertising. Oscar Wilde was a close friend, and it was he who suggested that Lillie try the stage. By 1882, she had started her own company. When she arrived by ship that same year to tour in the U.S., she was met by Wilde, who was lecturing here. The public loved her, and she returned for additional tours. She also owned a ranch in America and had a winery (red wine), Langtry Farms, in Middletown, California, now the

Lillie Langtry — darling of Britain and America



Actress and socialite Lillie Langtry photographed by William Downey, courtesy National Archives UK.

privately-owned Langtry Estate and Vineyards about fifteen minutes north of Napa Valley. She eventually secured American citizenship and divorced her first husband.

Lillie was known for her beauty, charm, and ways. In The Lady Eve (1941), with Barbara Stanwyck, we hear, “The dropped handkerchief! That hasn’t been used since Lily [sic] Langtry.” Two bars in New York apparently continue to operate as “Lillie’s Victorian Establishment.” One of many areas in London associated with her still has a “Langtry Walk” and a local pub identified with her. Scotsman George Alexander Baird gave her betting tips and had her register her some 20 horses for thoroughbred racing under the name “Mr. Jersey” because women were not permitted to register horses. Most of those horses subsequently died in a fire. She owned the White Ladye, a steam auxiliary yacht.

As suggested by the Fraser novels and Forgetting play, her relationships and affairs were widely known, too. They included American Frederick Gebhard, who was 22 to her 29 and gave her a house at 362 West 23rd Street in Manhattan. As mentioned in connection with Sherlock Holmes and the Case of the Jersey Lily [sic], she also had a relationship with the Prince of Wales (the “Bertie” who became Edward the VII), and, among others, with British Prime Minister Gladstone and

himself the “Law West of the Pecos” and named his saloon, which he used as his courthouse, “The Jersey Lilly.” Others referred to him, apparently without accuracy, as “The Hanging Judge.” Although located in Langtry, Texas, however, his town was actually named for an engineer, George Langtry. In the third season of Fantasy Island, in the episode “Legend” (October 1982), Andy Griffith played Bean. He is also referred to in The Sopranos in the episode “Live Free Or Die.” Many restaurants and bars (including one in NYC) are named for him, and the comedic video game West of Loathing has “Roy Bean’s House of Justice and Jelly Beans.” At Six Flags Over Texas, the wooden roller coaster, “Judge Roy Scream,” is named for him. Death Valley Days, in the episode, “A Picture of a Lady” (first presented 12/30/1965), depicts Lillie Langtry stopping in Langtry after his death, and she described this in her autobiography. The two apparently never met, but he wrote to her frequently.

Today, many know of her through movies. Lilian Bond played her in The Westerner (1940) with Walter Brennan as Judge Roy Bean, who loved her from afar; Ava Gardner, in The Life and Times of Judge Roy Bean (1972), with Paul Newman as Bean. But other film and media connections were numerous and interesting. The Scarlet Claw (1944), not based directly on a Sir Arthur Conan Doyle story but said to be the best of Universal’s twelve Sherlock Holmes films, is generally thought to refer to her as its first murder victim (Lady Penrose, former actress “Lillian Gentry”). In 1978, London Weekend Television dramatized her story as Lillie, in a miniseries biopic starring Francesca Annis, who had played her in two episodes of ATV’s Edward the Seventh. Jenny Seagrove portrayed her in the 1991 made-for-television film Incident at Victoria Falls.

Judge and Justice of the Peace Roy Bean, famous and infamous in his own right, called

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LOVE

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Just the other day I was talking with a co-worker at The Haw River Canoe & Kayak Co. about what I see as important in life and in a job. I said it all boils down to feeling loved and to feeling secure. A loved one does not have to be physically present to feel their love. I know this because my parents and my sister have been dead for quite a while, but I still feel their love and I still feel a great deal of love and appreciation for them. My love for Nature is the same since life is the gift of Nature whether or not I am in wilderness or a city. How can you not love Nature because it makes your life possible?

Reading back over what I have written, I realize that what I have done is write a love letter to someone who loved me enough to leave everything she knew to move across the country to live with an incurable environmentalist who just happens to love her, and to also be in love with Nature. Lucky me.

Joe Jacob, a Chatham resident for more than 30 years and a marine biologist by training, is president of The Haw River Canoe & Kayak Co., www.hawrivercanoe.com, 336.260.6465. He worked for The Nature Conservancy for 20 years and served as Director of Science for TNC’s Southeast Region.

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