

GOOD BYE MRS. LOWNDES

Susan Antonia Priestley Lowndes was born in London in 1907 of a well-educated intellectual family, her most famous ancestor being J. Priestley, a parson of the Unitarian Church, a physician and a scientist who discovered oxygen in 1774. Her mother Marie Belloc Lowndes was a well-known fiction writer (she started writing at the age of 16) and her detective story "The Lodger" was the subject of Alfred Hitchcock's first film (a silent film) "Jack, the Ripper". She mixed with the prime of the intellectuals in Paris, the brothers Goncourt, George Sand, Pierre Loti, Emile Zola, Jules Verne, Guy de Maupassant, etc. The family still hold letters from these celebrities. She married Frederick Lowndes, a journalist for the *London Times*.

Susan Lowndes's passion for travelling and getting to know the world and its peoples, her passion for writing especially, make her, no wonder, worthy of such ancestors.

In August 1938 her father retired from the *Times* and brought her to Portugal with him for a short holiday. (Her mother did not come because she was finishing one of her books). They contacted some cousins resident in Portugal, the Wanewrights, who introduced Susan to one of their friends, Luis Marques, a Portuguese journalist. They fell in love (a love that lasted all their lives). They got engaged at the end of that fortnight and were married in London in December of that same year. "My in-laws, whom I did not know came to meet us at the ship. They were probably wondering whether I was one more of those English misses with big teeth! As soon as I saw them I gave them a big hug and I must say they were always very good to me and our relationship was always the best. They accepted me as I am and did not attempt to change my ways. I was very lucky" (Interview given to her daughter Ana Vicente for the "DN").

Luis Marques, besides teaching English (he had a remarkable accent) was the correspondent of the *Daily Telegraph* and the *New York Times* and worked for an English paper, the well known *Anglo-Port-*

tuguese News founded in 1937, which he later acquired and directed until his death in 1976. In those days, the early forties, that paper was a great defender of and believer in the victory of the Allies and a great support to the English residents, so much so that it was subsidised by the English Government during the war. The German propaganda bureau hated it and called it, in a radio programme "The voice of Churchill in Lisbon". It was insulted by Goebbels who considered Luis Marques a man to be destroyed. And no wonder, for the APN was, during the war, the only British newspaper published in the whole of Continental Europe. Susan wrote a lot for the APN and, after the death of her husband became the director for a time until she sold it.

During the war the Marques couple also worked for the British Embassy and Susan read carefully through the Portuguese newspapers cutting out the most relevant news for the Military Attaché.

Her debut as a writer came about soon after the war with the book "The Selective Traveller in Portugal", a co-editor with Ann Bridge, wife of the British Ambassador and a writer herself. The book was a bestseller at the time (it still is) and encouraged hundreds of British to visit our country and make the acquaintance of Britain's oldest ally. Susan by then knew her new country well and travelled it far and wide and it was a daring and amusing feat, this travelling of the two ladies on the appalling roads of the forties, always in the quest of convents, churches and museums.

Next she wrote for the Thornton Cox Guides, the book "Portugal". I'm honoured to possess a copy of this book signed "To F.H.R. from a fellow explorer in Portugal". It has 144 pages, 16 coloured photographs and half a dozen maps and was again and understandably, a best seller, a synthesis of Portugal, focussing on the essential, omitting nothing, objectively informative, of an aesthetic rigor and good taste so characteristic of Susan. It was normal in her time not to go to the university but she compensated for that easily with her intense cultural auto-didacticism in the milieu where she was brought up. Amongst her famous friends were Aldous Huxley, Evelyn Waugh and Graham Greene.

Susan loved and adopted her new country. She was especially interested in architecture, paintings and the decorative arts (she had an antique shop in London for a time) and often revisited the places where she knew precious things were for fear they would be sold, and kept on discovering new treasures like the tiles in the small chapel lost in the pine forest near Abrantes that said "Pray for the conversion of England". She also

discovered that the Marquis of Pombal had ordered 400 English grandfather clocks for the ministries and public buildings and she found precious English alabasters in a chapel in Castelo Branco. An indefatigable writer, besides many articles and talks for conferences, she also wrote "Good Food from Spain and Portugal", "Diaries and letters of Marie Belloc Lowndes", a book of memories of her mother and very recently, just before she died, a co-edition with Alice Berkeley "A arte inglesa em Portugal" which INAPA will publish very soon. She loved travelling in Portugal but her interest in the world often took her to other places. She frequently travelled to England to visit her sister, Lady Iddesleigh, in a mansion full of tradition, to give lectures (very recently "Lisbon during World War II").

She was an ardent catholic, dedicated to serve and help others in an authentic spirit of charity that is the fundamental duty of any catholic, but very few know how to do it. She did it always spontaneously as if it was the most natural thing in the world. She had done this since her youth including giving help to the refugees here during the war. She helped the British in Portugal and she was decorated with the OBE by Her Majesty the Queen of England.

By making our country known by writing so brilliantly about it she deserved to be decorated by Portugal but no one thought to reward her due to the usual indifference of our governments.

On her first trip to Russia, still under the communist regime, she questioned the catholics openly and succeeded in having a priest say mass in one of the rooms of the hotel. (She returned to Russia at the age of 80 to visit St. Petersburg and the Hermitage which she had never seen).

She was always on the lookout for the old unemployed destitute "misses" in order to help them get out of their unhappy situations and very recently in her eighties, helped set up the British Retirement Home in S. Pedro do Estoril. To get the subsidy from the British Government, Susan needed to have some cases of real poverty and an amusing thing occurred. Partly due to her efficiency in finding help for people, it became more and more difficult to discover English people in need. She found an English teacher so 'poor' that he even lived in a tent in the Montsanto camping site. She tried to convince him to come to the home but he ran away from her. He was happy where he was and 'loved camping'. This must have been her only frustration. . . .

Susan, who had an independent and individualistic mind always took her decisions alone. Only this Christmas she drove herself to midnight mass where she read one of the readings serenely. She was 85 years old.

A true English woman, she had a terrific sense of humour. Only two days before she died, when the oxygen mask was presented to her, she managed to make this grateful, loving, admirable remark about her ancestor:

— ‘ Dear Doctor Priestley’

Editors note: The original Portuguese text is by Francisco Hipolito Raposo published in *O Independente* on the 19th of February, 1993 and translated by M. I. Mollet.