

et les mouvements culturels qu'il prend en compte dans son étude. Sa démarche critique dévoile une réflexion plus large sur la place du classicisme français dans l'histoire intellectuelle et esthétique européenne, en analysant l'influence exercée par le modèle – réel ou en partie imaginaire – du classicisme français.



MIHAI DUMA

LIA BRAD-CHISACOF

Prințesa Elisabeth Bibescu

—*așa cum a fost*

(Princess Elisabeth Bibescu, the way she was)

Mogoșoaia: Ed. Centrului Cultural
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ELISABETH BIBESCO (1897–1945) was born in an illustrious family of the British aristocracy. Her father, Herbert Asquith, was prime minister of Great Britain between 1908 and 1916. Her mother, Margot Asquith, was a writer and socialite who contributed a lot to her husband's political success through her aristocratic connections. In 1919, Elisabeth married Antoine Bibesco (1878–1951), a Romanian aristocrat who was Romania's diplomatic representative in London at the time. It was not a happy marriage. Both the age difference and Antoine Bibesco's sexual preferences¹ gradually made Elisabeth find comfort in alcohol and/or in other men's arms. For instance, the tryst between Elisabeth Bibesco and the literary critic, John Middleton Murry, the partner and, later on, the husband of Katherine Mansfield is very well known.² In spite of all these complicated *amours*, divorce was not taken into account as an

option by the Bibesco spouses. Elisabeth accompanied her husband on his missions as Romania's diplomatic representative in Madrid or Washington, D.C. and did her duty as an ambassador's wife with grace, charm, and aristocratic distinction. From this point of view, Romania owes a lot to Elisabeth Bibesco, who represented her husband's country at the highest level and helped the ambassador with her family's social network. World War II caught the Bibesco couple in Romania while Priscilla, their daughter, had remained in Great Britain with her maternal grandmother. Mother and daughter were never to meet again. In April 1945, a month before World War II was over, Elisabeth Bibesco died and she was buried in Mogoșoaia, near Bucharest. Officially, she died of a devastating flu that developed into pneumonia. But this diagnostic may have hidden the sad reality that death was caused by a deadly combination of sleeping pills and alcohol.

Elisabeth Bibesco started writing at a very young age. She published poems, plays, novels, collections of short stories, and children's literature. Bibesco tried to approach the famous Bloomsbury Group which promoted modernism in British literature but neither Virginia Woolf, nor the other members of the group accepted her. Bibesco was not taken seriously as a writer. She was considered a spoiled aristocrat who only dabbled in literature. Bibesco belongs to the literary family of Henry James, Edith Wharton, or the Victorian Ouida, writers from well off milieus who wrote about existential problems. Wealth does not protect from unhappiness. The unhappy matrimony held together by social conventions or the erotic triangle often sublimated as death draws near, these are frequent themes in Bibesco's fiction. A global writer before globalism, Elisabeth

Bibesco often made her characters travel all over the world or meet diplomats from all over the world. Her cosmopolitanism always has a psychological corollary, the writer paying much more attention to the psychological effect of various landscapes than to the events occurring during the voyage. The Bodleian Library in Oxford holds the Elisabeth Bibesco and the Margot Asquith collections, where the researcher can find Bibesco's letters, manuscripts, and quite a few still unpublished texts.

Scientific researcher Lia Brad-Chisacof has recently published a book dedicated to Elisabeth Bibesco based on visual materials and photos from the Museum of Agriculture in Slobozia, the Archives of the National Theater of Bucharest, and from two books by Margot Asquith: *The Autobiography of Margot Asquith* and *Places and Persons*. The photos follow the chronological flow of Elisabeth Bibesco's life. All photos are accompanied by commentaries that situate the visual material in its historical and/or cultural context. The reader can see Herbert and Margot Asquith, Elisabeth as a child, Antoine Bibesco, as well as the traditional wedding photo (Elisabeth, the bride, and Antoine, the bridegroom). Of special interest is the photo of the Corcova manor, the residence of the Bibescos in the Romanian countryside. The manor is mentioned repeatedly in the correspondence between Antoine Bibesco and his friend, Marcel Proust, who planned a visit to Corcova. Unfortunately, Proust's death put an end to these plans. Lia Brad-Chisacof has also included photos of literary personalities who came into contact with Elisabeth Bibesco: Virginia Woolf, Katherine Mansfield, Marcel Proust, Victor Eftimiu, Mihail Sebastian, painter Édouard Vuillard,³ as well as the Bibesco's

residence in Paris, the mansion located at 45 Quai Bourbon.

The picture at p. 8, which also appears on the front cover of Lia Brad-Chisacof's book was taken somewhere in the Romanian countryside. It shows a huge beautifully carved wooden cross and the English aristocrat wearing a richly decorated Romanian folk costume. Elisabeth Bibesco followed the fashion introduced among Romanian elites by Queen Elisabeth, the wife of King Charles I of Romania. Wearing a folk costume was a sign of appreciation of the Romanian female peasants' artistic abilities but also a deft strategy to blend in. The ethnic masquerade could only be suitable for a diplomat's wife who was expected to represent Romania's interests abroad to the same extent as her spouse. The cross must also have reminded Elisabeth of the spiritual dimensions of life, of bitter Christian duties or of the divine sacrifice that must inspire all of us.

The photos of Elisabeth Bibesco's book covers as well as the poster of *Ana Is Dreaming*, one of Antoine Bibesco's plays, probably inspired by Elisabeth's life and staged at the National Theater in Bucharest on 28 April 1945, visually prove the intense literary activity of this couple. Finally, the photo of Elisabeth Bibesco's gravestone rightfully ends an album dedicated to a life and a personality that is not without interest for interwar Romania and England.

The comments that accompany the visual material are not only relevant but also very well documented. For instance, Victor Eftimiu's photo is accompanied by an anecdote. On a social occasion, Eftimiu complemented Bibesco on her intelligence, which he considered to be "a man's intelligence" (16). When asked rather meanly

by Eftimiu whether she did not regret that she was not a man, Elisabeth gave a witty Shavian answer: “Sir! I like men too much not to be satisfied with my gender!” (16). Mihail Sebastian used to be a frequent visitor of the Bibescos. His photo is accompanied by a portrait of Elisabeth who dared to express “her love of the Jews” (15). This was during the fascist regime of Ion Antonescu.

Until 1989 Elisabeth Bibesco and her ties to Romania were not to be mentioned for political reasons. From the narrow ideological perspective of those times, Bibesco was a *persona non grata*. It is high time for this woman writer be taken into consideration and for Romanian English Studies specialists to pay attention to her work. Romanian culture owes Bibesco at least the translation of her work into Romanian. Lia Brad-Chisacof’s book is the beginning of a long overdue Romanian reception.



MIHAELA MUDURE

Notes

1. The main character of Guillaume Apollinaire’s erotic novel *Les onze mille verges ou les amours d’un hospodar* (1907) is most probably Antoine Bibesco.
2. Information about this episode can be found in Katherine Mansfield’s correspondence. Katherine Mansfield wrote to Elisabeth Bibesco warning her that she would not give up Murry.
3. Édouard Vuillard (1868–1940) painted one of the most beautiful portraits of Elisabeth Bibesco.

AARON PEGRAM

Surviving the Great War: Australian Prisoners of War on the Western Front, 1916–18

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019

AMONG THE important contributions dedicated to the First World War and published in recent years by Cambridge University Press we also find Aaron Pegram’s book about the Australian prisoners of war on the Western Front. Its author is a senior historian in the Military History Section at the Australian War Memorial and has contributed to the understanding of the aforementioned conflagration and its memory through exhibitions, studies, articles and books.

Segmented into seven big chapters and accompanied by two appendices (pp. 171–211), the book starts with an introductory chapter (pp. 1–17) that provides an overview of the general situation of the Australian lands during the investigated period. The author emphasizes the fact that:

The First World War casts a long shadow over Australian history. In four years, the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) suffered more than 215,000 casualties, of whom around 60,000 died, and countless others and their families lived with the war’s physical and psychological consequences for decades after. Among them were 4,044 Australians who become prisoners of war. Some 200 were taken prisoner by the Ottomans in Mesopotamia, Gallipoli and the Middle East, while 3,848, were lost to German forces in the fighting on the Western Front in France and Belgium. (p. 1)