

The strange loves of Mariella

Anthony Frewin

The Novotny Papers

Lilian Pizzichini

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Illustrations, index, 253 pages, £18.99, h/b

Stella Marie Capes was born on 9 May 1941 in Sheffield. Her mother Constance was unmarried. Stella became more widely known some twenty years later as the self-styled Mariella Novotny. She claimed she was related to the former President of Czechoslovakia, Antonín Josef Novotný, and that, after returning to Prague post-war, she later had to flee, Jerzy Kosiński-style, across a war-torn Europe of rape and brutality to get back to England. In London in 1960 she married Horace 'Hod' Dibben, who was nearly forty years her senior, and he introduced her to the swinger sexual underworld of the time. The marriage was 'open' and in that same year she went to New York at the behest of a small-time film and TV producer, Harry Alan Towers, ostensibly to pursue a modelling career but in reality, to work as a hooker (sorry, sex worker). In March 1961 she was arrested in New York for soliciting and a few days later Towers was charged with violation of the White Slave Traffic Act (transportation of Novotny for immoral purposes). Novotny fled under an assumed name on the Cunard liner, *Queen Mary*, while Towers probably escaped via Canada. Once back in London, Novotny was selling her story to the *News of the World*, and further claiming she had slept with the nascent US President, John F Kennedy. She was also hosting sado-masochistic sex orgies with Dibben, including the 'Man in the Mask' party, and became a figure on the periphery of the Profumo Affair.

That in a nutshell is the Mariella story. So, the biographer has some heavy lifting to do sorting out fact from fiction. Right? Wrong in this case.

A few years ago, a troll-like figure appeared on the internet. He hid behind the name of Sven, was apparently in Sweden, and claimed he was a very close friend of Stephen Ward and had first-hand experience of the last year or two of Ward's life as the Profumo Affair unfolded. I followed

his postings and thought he was a fraud. He revealed nothing that couldn't have been gathered from existing books and articles. He was teasing his readers, beckoning them with as yet unspoken secret knowledge, and none of that existed.

The opening page of Chapter One has this:

'Accounts of her childhood vary. The primary source I have for the following account is an elderly gentleman living in Sweden who says he met Mariella through the omnipresent Stephen Ward . . . My Swedish correspondent was a model for Stephen Ward in films that he made for his osteopath practice. "Sven" became Mariella's lover at the age of fifteen, when she was seventeen . . . '

My jaw dropped. Pizzichini's listening to this guy and seems to think that because he has or had a website he's credible? Remarkably, she takes him at face value, and I'll give a further instance below. She describes Sven as her primary source, which he isn't. Mariella talking about her past would be a primary source. Sven is a secondary source. What Pizzichini means to say is Sven is her *main* source.

So, where does this leave us? A relation of President Novotny or the result of a one-night stand in Sheffield? Well, our biographer leaves it in the air. We could have it either way. If we look at Mariella's continual reinvention of herself and its associated phantasies, it seems the Czech connection must be nonsense.

At the end of the first one hundred pages, I stopped and asked myself what had I learnt that was new? In fact, just one thing. Before Mariella and her mother were in Sheffield, the mother lived with her brother and mother in Grimsby (which Pizzichini helpfully describes as being in East Anglia). Grimsby! All we need now to step into the frame is Albert Osborne aka John Howard Bowen, also from Grimsby, the murky character who sat next to Lee Harvey Oswald on his bus trip to Mexico.¹

If there is nothing new in the first chapters, there is little new in those succeeding it, as the ups and downs of Mariella's life are rehearsed. It's re-fried beans that draws heavily on the *News of the World*, the Summers-Dorril book, *Honeytrap: The Secret Worlds of Stephen Ward*

¹ The best and most detailed account of Osborne is by John Kowalski, 'The Dual Life of Albert Osborne,' that can be read here:
<<https://kennedysandking.com/john-f-kennedy-articles/the-dual-life-of-albert-osborne>>

The late Michael Eddowes believed there was another Grimsby-JFK connection, that the famous phone call to the *Cambridge Evening News* advising them to phone the American embassy for some 'big news' shortly before JFK was assassinated, was made from there, probably by Osborne. See the present writer's piece, 'JFK, the FBI and the Cambridge Phone Call,' *Lobster* 30, December 1995.

(1987) especially, Mariella's columns in Paul Raymond's sleazy mag, *Club International*, and a couple of demi-monde Soho characters. Mariella breezes in and out of Pizzichini's text towards the end and you keep wondering whether you've missed something, and you hope she'll re-appear, and some sense will be made of the narrative. But then we're off on another tangent, and you're left doubly wondering.

Did Mariella sleep with JFK? Probably not, but the claim made good copy, and others could make political capital out of it whether it was true or not.

The 'Man in the Mask' party has a chapter to itself. This was a party in Hyde Park Square held by Mariella and Hod where a man, dressed only in a 'masonic apron and leather mask', was whipped and made to perform as a slave. His identity was long a mystery until Hod suggested it was the film director Anthony Asquith,² the son of the Liberal Prime Minister. But 'A writer of my acquaintance told me he thought not' continues Pizzichini. So, who was this slave? Our author doesn't bother to hang around and offers nothing up.

In May 1983 Mariella died in a cheap rented property in Fulham she was sharing with the aged and infirm Hod Dibben. Her death was found to be misadventure by Dr Paul Knapman, the Westminster Coroner. Pizzichini states that a Dr Joan Gomez, who was Mariella's psychiatrist, revealed at the inquest that Mariella had an 'hysterical personality disorder.' However, Dr Gomez was *not* present at the inquest and her comments only emerged much later. One might regard the inquest as Mariella's final appearance on the public stage, and only three people sat in the public gallery: Michael Eddowes, his secretary, and myself. No press at all.

There are four main problems with the book. The first is that Pizzichini is not a natural writer, and her prose is frequently awkward and strained. The next two are that it hasn't been edited or copy-edited. By edited I mean a senior editor taking an Olympian view of the book and structuring it. This would, one hopes, obviate the chronology dancing back and forth in such a confusing manner. Further it is often unclear who is speaking: is it Pizzichini, Mariella or someone else? Then there is a lot of padding, unnecessary stuff that adds nothing to the story. For instance,

² Anthony Asquith (1902-1968). His films include *The Winslow Boy* (1948), *The Browning Version* (1951), *The Millionairess* (1960), *The Yellow Rolls-Royce* (1964).

Leslie Frewin³ published Novotny's novel, *King's Road*. Do we need a chapter on him? Ditto, Eddie Chapman with whom Mariella had an affair. And there are other instances.

As regards copy editing, this seems not to have been done. If it has been done, it was by a novice. But we cannot blame a copy editor who may or may not exist; Pizzichini has to shoulder the responsibility whatever the case. Let's take some examples.

Lord Longford is described as a 'rake and gambler' who 'indulged' his 'curiosity' at Mariella's sex parties. Michael Eddowes⁴ is said to be a married man at the time – which he wasn't – and as 'small and rotund,' a 'dapper little man', making him seem like a figure on a wedding or birthday cake. This couldn't be farther from the truth. Michael was about 6' 2", slim and ramrod straight, an imposing figure with a commanding presence. She writes that Eddowes had a 'chummy, confiding conversation' with an *Evening Standard* reporter 'at his chambers in Yeomans Road'. Michael was a former solicitor but had no 'chambers' in Yeomans Road (*sic*): that was where he lived. Further, there is no Yeomans Road, it is Yeomans Row (just down from Harrods). Eddie Chapman's health farm, Shenley Lodge,⁵ is described as being in Berkshire. It's not, it's in Hertfordshire, near to the village of Shenley. Yes, there is another Shenley, by Milton Keynes, but that is in Buckinghamshire, not Berkshire. So Pizzichini couldn't even get that right.

We are told Mariella's novel, *King's Road*, was published in the States by 'New England Library'. It wasn't: there was no US publication and there never was a publisher known as New England Library. This seems to be a confusion with New American Library that was founded in the late 1940s (and is now part of the Penguin Group). New England Library gets a further outing a few pages later when they are said to publish the UK paperback edition of the novel. But Pizzichini gets this wrong too: the publishers were New *English* Library. And how about this? Mariella was 4ft 7ins tall. 4ft 7ins? In fact, she was about 5ft 4ins

³ No relation to the present writer. I had a couple of years working in publishing and most people assumed I was related. Frewin was an affable if raffish chancer. But here history was repeating itself. My father worked at ABPC Film Studios in the 1950s when Frewin was the publicity chief there. People assumed they were related. This assumption irritated my father as much as it did me twenty years later.

⁴ Eddowes, it will be remembered, believed that the 'Oswald' who returned from Russia was a Russian impersonator. See his *The Oswald File* (New York: Clarkson N Potter, 1977).

⁵ Used for the 'cat lady' sequence in Stanley Kubrick's 1971 film, *A Clockwork Orange*.

when I knew her when she lived in Down Street, Mayfair.

There are more instances I could give, but I think the point has been made. If we cannot trust Pizzichini on the small stuff, how can we trust her on the big stuff?

The fourth problem with the book is the research is basic and rudimentary as noted above. It's an armchair scissors-and-paste job. She hasn't gone where no man or woman has gone before, which rather belies her biographical claim that she spent ten years on the book. Let's take one example, something that involves the writer of this present review and raises a number of points. Pizzichini has this:

"Sven" was a model used by Stephen Ward in his promotional films for osteopathy and the early, amateur producers of pornography. The story of "Britain's first porn star", as he terms himself, is the basis of Anthony Frewin's cult novel, *London Blues*.⁶

The basis of my novel? Huh? Who said that? It certainly wasn't me and thus could only have been Sven. But she accepts his statement as fact rather than writing that he *claims* he was the basis for the novel. Now, could Frewin confirm or deny the claim and, indeed, be the source of further information? Worth sending me an e-mail, surely? She never did.

Does she understand what research is? One would have thought so. She has already published a biography of the novelist Jean Rhys, which I haven't seen, and she tells us she teaches a Creative Writing (*sic*) course at the City Literary Institute.

There are no notes in the book, and sources are rarely given, but there's a scattering of footnotes, 35 over 253 pages. On page 224 she writes, "I liked him straight away," Charlie told Steve Haywood, a reporter from *Time Out*.⁶ This sentence is footnoted. You look down and the footnote in its entirety is: '*Time Out*.' Shouldn't be too difficult locating that reference, eh?

I kept feeling that while Pizzichini had invested some time and trouble in research, she wanted to show something for her work, not least to the Royal Literary Fund and Society of Authors for their 'generosity'. So, helter-skelter, this was rushed through and the cracks papered over with novelettish exposition.

It's unlikely another book will be produced on Mariella. Perhaps the best we can hope for is an article or two exploring aspects of her life as there is still plenty to do. And I can't see this becoming the 'go to' book on her as there is so little of substance.

⁶ Harpenden, Herts: No Exit Press, 1997.

Two final things. The index is rudimentary and selective, name after name is left out. Now the book jacket. The work was published on 21 May and my copy arrived from Amazon on that day. At the top of the jacket front is this:

'A beguiling performance: nostalgic, deadpan, humorous, authoritative . . . As chilling as fog, as casual as a razor slashed across a cheek . . . This memoir is as good as a novel'

THE TIMES

Funny I thought, *The Times* seems to have reviewed it prior to publication. Later in the day I realized there was a line above this quote in almost invisibly faint type that reads:

'By the author of *Dead Men's Wages*'

So, the quote referred to that earlier book of hers not *The Novotny Papers*. A sleight of hand.

To sum up: this is a book that should not have been published, certainly not in its present form.