

VOGUE

nostalgia

once made a film about the English artist and poet Stephen Tennant, who was a touchstone of the “bright young things” in the 1920s. Everyone talked about him as a shining light of his generation, but he didn’t leave much behind. He was creative, frivolous, a master of the ephemeral, and I loved that about him.

The same could be said of Adele Astaire, a woman who was once the absolute biggest star of the American and British stage, the very symbol of her age. This picture shows her, arms bare, hair bobbed, playing table tennis in New York. You see her elfin charm and Cheshire-cat grin: She’s a modern girl whose chief goal isn’t to exude respectability or demure femininity. She’s vivacious and fun, risk-taking and devil-may-care.

With fitting serendipity, it was Tennant who led me to Adele. I had cast his grandniece the model Stella Tennant as a sort of fabulous stand-in for him in the film, and Stella introduced me to her cousin William Burlington, son of the Duke of Devonshire. William is now an inspired patron of the arts who has created a spectacular gallery at Lismore Castle, the Devonshires’ Irish seat, where Adele was briefly chatelaine. Knowing my love of history, he invited me to visit last year.

The castle is tremendously picturesque, built on a steep bluff above the River Blackwater, which is a surprise to the first-time visitor. You approach through the gates, drive through the gardens, arrive at the courtyard, enter the drawing room through a high-ceilinged hall, and then—when you walk to the windows—see the sheer drop to the river below. It has taken everyone’s breath away for 1,000 years, and it still works perfectly.

I was totally seduced by the place, with its butlers’ pantries and huge kitchens with great chimneys. We had started a tour of the gardens, where William’s father had installed a number of sculptures some years earlier—a Richard Long, an Antony Gormley—when I spotted an enormous cement rectangle visible only in outline, its interior grassed over, surrounded by trees. I thought it was a piece of minimalist land art, circa 1975, and I said, “What’s this? I don’t know this artist.” William laughed and said, “Oh, actually that’s the pool.” This was Adele’s pool, a relic of the days when she had lived at Lismore as the wife of William’s great-granduncle Lord Charles Cavendish and had optimistically tried to import a Southern California lifestyle to Ireland’s soggy shores.

The pool seemed so at odds with the very tasteful English garden at this historic site: It suggested a rush of the Jazz Age, the glamour of early cinema, like some leftover tinsel from a party that you find in a dusty corner. It spoke of an era when the English aristocracy and American show-business royalty held each other in the highest esteem and came together to create a new sort of modern society. In movies of the period, you often see English-noble types wandering around, but I hadn’t thought that environment really existed outside Hollywood soundstages. In fact, it touched down on the Earth for a moment in this little Irish village. When I saw the remains of that pool, I knew I had the subject for my next film.



GAME FOR ANYTHING
ADELE ASTAIRE
PLAYING PING-PONG IN
NEW YORK CITY, VOGUE,
SEPTEMBER 1, 1931.

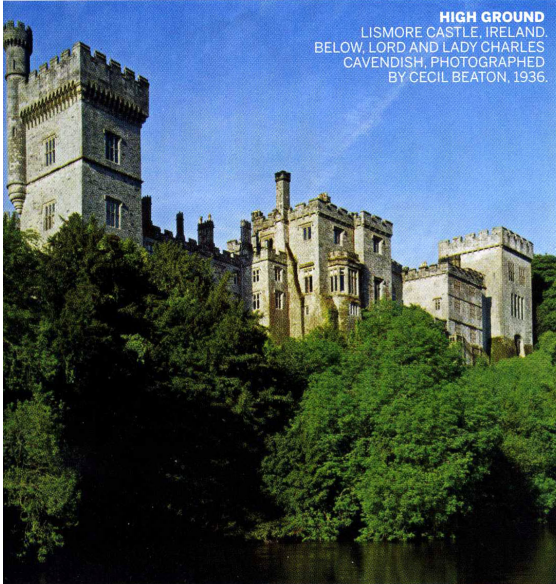
THE HEIR
AND
ASTAIRE

How a grassed-over swimming pool in Ireland inspired artist T. J. Wilcox to explore the forgotten life of 1920s It girl Adele Astaire.

Adele had grown up a vaudevillian. She and her brother, Fred, who was a couple of years younger, were born in Nebraska, she before the turn of the century (though she was always a little mysterious about her age). After Adele had taken two dance classes as a six-year-old, their mother decided that her daughter was destined for fame and fortune, and moved to New York City with the children. Amazingly enough, she was right: They were stars almost immediately *nostalgia* >78

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BLITHE SPIRIT



HIGH GROUND
LISMORE CASTLE, IRELAND.
BELOW, LORD AND LADY CHARLES
CAVENDISH. PHOTOGRAPHED
BY CECIL BEATON, 1936.

and spent their childhood in trains, flea-bitten hotel rooms, and the backs of cars. Later Adele was famous for her vocabulary—she spoke like a salty sailor—which probably stemmed from this time. Though very correct in her behavior, she had a vulgar wit. She would say things like “He gave me a pain in the place that’s supposed to give me pleasure.” At the time, everyone thought Fred was a nice kid and a perfectly fine partner for his sister, but she was universally acknowledged to be the real star.

Adele represented the pinnacle of modernity, a new kind of American woman, both shocking and incredibly appealing. She had an outgoing, athletic, bright personality that was forthright and wild in a way that women had not been before. A lot of the clichés of the twenties originated with Adele: She was the girl who raced around the fountain in front of the Plaza and drank champagne all night, bobbed her hair, drove a car, and had lots of boyfriends—including, surprisingly enough, Cecil Beaton. Beaton once made her a set of paper dolls. She was the model for the doll, which he drew in heavy card stock; he then designed a series of tea gowns, with paper tabs you fold over, along with hats and gloves and shoes. But rather than showing her in a slip, Beaton drew her completely nude: Pubic hair, red toenail polish, and jewels were her accoutrements. And the doll looks fantastic, standing with her hands on her hips and that Cheshire-cat smile on her face, with her own brand of sassiness. If Adele were your lover, she probably would be the kind of girl who stomped around the bedroom naked in her jewels, with fire-engine-red toenails. She was very comfortable with herself.



When Adele fell in love with Charles, who was a few years younger, and married him in 1932, she was at the peak of her popularity. Later Hollywood movies, like *The Prince and the Showgirl* and *Royal Wedding*, centered on the idea of the classless American entertainer who captures the eye and the heart of the ancient aristocrat through her sheer talent and pizzazz. That spirit was what their union seemed to symbolize, both for each other and for their generation.

But as the second son of a duke, Charles felt himself to be in a very difficult position; he was truly the spare. I think he saw in Adele, and in their early life together, a vision of being a new kind of couple. He wanted to turn Lismore into a very contemporary place, where all their friends from London could come and swim and play tennis and Ping-Pong, sporty activities only recently introduced as social pastimes. Adele, for her part, was very seduced by the idea of being Lady Charles Cavendish. She was going to live in the Irish countryside, maintain her glamour-girl status, invite Noël Coward to visit, give pool parties, and have a bunch of babies, and it would be just this fantastic life.

It didn’t quite play out that way. In her earliest letters to him, Adele’s relationship with Charles comes across a little like Zelda’s with Scott Fitzgerald. Depression ran in the Cavendish family, and Charles became a very heavy drinker at a young age. Adele referred to it in her letters to him in

the euphemistic argot of the day. “Don’t bend your elbow too much when you go to the party,” she’d write. But soon after they were married, it became clear that his problems went deeper than drink. Besides that developing tragedy, Adele became pregnant twice, with a daughter and then twin boys, all of whom she carried to term but who died within days of birth.

Their marriage started to fall apart because of Charles’s illness, and with the approach of the Second World War, the era in which they had met was also coming to a close. Unable to serve because of his alcoholism, Charles took to his bed and the bottle in a big way, and eventually died in 1944, aged 38. Adele had gone to London

and started working for the USO. Still a huge star, she would go to the hospitals, dance with the GIs, and write letters home for them. After Charles’s death, Lismore became Adele’s until she remarried, which she did a few years later to a CIA operative named Kingman Douglass, and eventually moved back to the States. She was given the right to spend summers at Lismore, and she did so for the rest of her life. Beaton would come to visit, and John and Jackie Kennedy, and later, Jackie with her children. It was a place that held Adele, even with all she had lost there.

And then, when she, too, died, in 1981, this woman who, in her heyday, had symbolized youth itself, the way that Janis Joplin and Madonna did in later years, became illegible, grassed over and mostly forgotten.—AS TOLD TO EVE MACSWEENEY

T. J. Wilcox’s work, including the film The Heir and Astaire, is on view at Metro Pictures, NYC, through June 12.