

Marjorie Cox, (married to H.E. 31st July 1931)

(1909-2004)

Madge may not appear in *The Birthday*, but H.E. wrote it immediately after their very first meeting, inscribing the manuscript to her with his pet name for her at the time, Irene: '*that she may not forget the best of all that loving time*'.

She appears as 'Fanny's girl' in *A Love Story*, and in *Death in Spring* he describes a scene straight out of his autobiography in which he took Madge to see a family of fox cubs. The girl in the story is called Irene. At the end the old man says to them '*...if you wish to do anything, do it. Do what you feel you must do. Don't listen to other people. You're young. Let them go to the devil. It's your life, not theirs.*' It was a sentiment that summed up Madge and H.E.'s approach to life.

H.E. dedicated the story collection, *The Black Boxer*, 'To my wife'.

Marjorie (Madge) was born in Kennel Row in Higham to John Cox and Fanny Bailey. She had an older brother, Bertram, who she was very close to. In his autobiography H.E. describes Madge's young life as if 'being pushed from pillar to post'. When she was 4 her father moved the family to Birmingham, leaving Madge in the care of an uncle and aunt in Rushden. She spent a year in Birmingham (although it is unclear if she was living with her parents or a relative), and returned to Rushden with her mother and brother in 1915 when her father joined the army, to live with her maternal grandparents and family. The relationship between her mother and father was not a happy one and after the war her father did not live with them again. Madge was 9 when peace was declared and it's unclear whether she believed her father was dead or whether she simply found it easier to believe that rather than the truth, but there's no doubt she felt the loss of her father very deeply. It also left her mother in very poor circumstances, which may well account for Madge's ability to make ends meet whatever the circumstance, and her great strength of character.

She left school at 14 to work as a closer in a boot and shoe factory, enjoying the camaraderie with her friends on the shop floor, and the factory outings. She was still only 15 when she met H.E. and continued to work until they could afford to marry, 6 years later. She was a Sunday school teacher at the Baptist church in Rushden, but agreed to H.E.'s terms that if he had to be married in church then it would only be by a young Wesleyan preacher who he admired, which meant being married in the

Methodist church where his parents worshipped. Defying tradition Madge wore a multi coloured dress and straw hat, perfect for a summer day.

It could be said it was brave of her to marry a man whose job gave them absolutely no financial security, and despite moving to an idyllic village in Kent the first ten years of their marriage, with four young children to care for, were uncertain and very hard going. But her early life gave her the resilience needed to navigate the years of financial uncertainty. She had an innate intelligence and an acutely sharp intuition about people and shared with H.E. a great love of nature and an understanding of its sensuous powers. There was about her a sort of girlish gaiety and larkiness and a great warmth which drew people to her. Most importantly perhaps she was immensely practical and a very natural person, able to create the perfect environment in which H.E. could write, and ready to join him wherever the adventure took them.

After the war it was Madge who took the wheel, driving the family across France to Switzerland, with the 4 children and sometimes a family friend as well; a journey she made many times.

And, she was a wonderful cook. A shy man by nature, H.E. much preferred the company of friends and family at home at The Granary. With plenty of home-grown vegetables and fruit Madge's relaxed Sunday lunches, many of which seemed to continue effortlessly to a spread of tea and cakes, and more, were relished by everyone who knew her, from the children's friends to film stars. Although she didn't share Ma's waist size there is no doubt that Madge was the joyous inspiration for Ma Larkin in *The Darling Buds of May*. Before the story was even written she and H.E. were known in the family as Ma and Pop, and at home, as in the books, 'Pop' never made a decision without consulting 'Ma' first.