



**The Three du Maurier Sisters:**  
Daphne, Angela & Jeanne

**Michael Williams**

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*The three du Maurier sisters on Hampstead Heath, 1918, from a painting by Frederick Whiting.  
Left to right: Daphne, Jeanne and Angela.*

## INTRODUCTION

The three du Maurier sisters: Daphne, Angela and Jeanne.

They all looked completely feminine but they should perhaps have been brothers. Someone, who knew them well, reckoned ‘They would have made energetic boys.’

My late stepson Richard had three daughters and looking at them I sometimes think of the du Maurier sisters. Various talents and natural rivalries. Kindred spirits, yet individuality. Richard’s fourth child, a son, doing well in the film business as I write. Gerald du Maurier longed for a son and Daphne was his favourite and middle daughter.

Angela was the oldest, born in 1904, but Daphne was the most famous: two writers. Jeanne was the youngest, a painter.

Dame Daphne may not have been Cornish but she was one of the greatest writers to have come out of Cornwall: that rare character, a bestseller who defied classification. Critics calling her ‘a romantic novelist’ were wide of the mark, her most successful novel *Rebecca* capturing readers’ imaginations in a way that few other twentieth century novels matched.

Her long short story *The Birds* was turned into Hitchcock horror for the cinema screen and her factual *Vanishing Cornwall* should be required reading for all planning officers, a writer for all seasons.

*The Birds*, in fact, grew out of a ploughing scene at Menabilly Barton, gulls swooping, circling round the farmer's head. In a flash, she wondered 'What if those birds attacked?'

The du Maurier ancestry is intriguing. Dr AL Rowse, writing of Daphne, reflected: 'The historian is naturally fascinated by her fabulous historical background, the brilliant gifted and variegated Anglo-French family from which she comes. Every good fairy seems to have stood at her christening, including the clergyman who performed the ceremony - a Reverend Bernard Shaw.'

There was the girls' great-great grandmother Mary Anne Clarke, mistress of the Duke of York, and the considerable influence of their father Sir Gerald du Maurier, eminent actor-manager of Wyndham's Theatre. Their childhoods were glamorous and coincided with Gerald's top successes.

Angela, on the surface, was the most conventional of the three though, now and then, in conversation and in her authorship, you detected a whiff of the Bohemian. A great traveller, who was reputed to have as many friends as the night has stars: people like Cecil Beaton and Gladys Cooper. She was the only one of the three to follow in her father's footsteps and act on the stage, and throughout her long life Angela remained loyal to the high Anglican faith, at ease in the ritual.

Jeanne du Maurier is arguably the underestimated sister, her painting embracing still life, landscape and flowers and occasionally a portrait. A pianist too with a liking for Bach

and Mozart, Ravel and Chopin, Jeanne rode horses and kept canaries and, in her youth, she enjoyed tennis and hockey. She became a Roman Catholic, saying she was simply returning to the beliefs of her forebears. While Daphne was the only sister to build her own chapel, in the basement of her final Cornish home Kilmarth.

I had the good fortune to know all three sisters – acquaintances, rather than friends. Though Daphne was an influence and inspiration and gave good sound advice during my early years as a regional publisher.

They each had an inner mechanism which is not easily defined, that mechanism somehow setting them apart. Without showing off in any way, there was a hint of theatricality – moments when they might have stepped out of a West End production by their father.

There was no suggestion of acting: they simply stood out, different like the Foots, another Westcountry dynasty, and the Leaches yet another creative family producing quality pottery.

The relationship between Daphne and her elder sister was especially close: Angela frequently confiding in Daphne about her “pashes.” And they refrained from criticising one another. Angela too understood her sister needed to be alone, while Daphne was aware of Angela’s need to have circles of friends. Margaret Forster though expressed the view that in the 20s and 30s Foy Quiller-Couch was ‘the person she (Daphne) was closest to...’ It’s no coincidence then that some of her novels and short stories explore the contrasting themes of sociability and solitude.

What would Jeanne have made of her sisters as portrait subjects? The character, the blue eyes and beauty in Daphne’s face? Or an action portrait of the novelist, not working at her

desk but her swinging stride on a walk with her dogs? And Angela? There is a stunning studio shot of her by Anthony Buckley, of London: the back cover for the 1963 edition of her Irish novel *The Road to Leenane*. Surely something like that: eyes mirroring an unasked or unanswered question. Or if Angela insisted on Ferryside, then there watching river life would be fine. The actress is there always. But would she have the time to pose? 'I've only two minutes,' was a frequent comment.

And what would Jeanne have made of a self-portrait? I suspect she would have said 'No, thank you.' She would have preferred a portrait by her mentor and friend Dod Proctor.

All three du Maurier sisters developed along different routes, the influence of their father Gerald never far away. In the eye of imagination, we can picture them talking over afternoon tea or perhaps Angela enjoying a Cinzano: the conversation witty and wise, occasionally Bohemian. Daphne spoke with a slight beguiling lisp, a lovely voice on radio. Jeanne had a quite different voice, like the River Fowey flowing gently in the upper part of the Fowey Valley, just below Jamaica Inn. I heard Angela speak at a meeting. Her command of language, her ability to argue her case and hold the attention of her audience had the hallmarks of a Member of Parliament.

Writing about them is a pleasure and a challenge. I like to think their spirits may be with us on this Cornwall-Dartmoor journey.

Let us head for Menabilly and hope it's high tide.



*Menabilly, the Rashleigh mansion and Daphne's home for many years. In 1824 William Rashleigh of Menabilly had alterations made. These included masons demolishing the buttress against the north-west corner of the house. In a small room or cell, they found the skeleton of a young man dressed in the clothes of a Cavalier, as worn during the Civil War. On Mr Rashleigh's orders he was buried 'with great reverence' in Tywardreath churchyard. The owner later learned members of the Grenville family had hidden at Menabilly before the rising of 1648. Today Menabilly is strictly private and not open to the public.*



*Daphne du Maurier was professional and prolific - and a biographer's dream. Not until her parents bought their house by the Bodinnic-Fowey ferry crossing did she begin to find herself as a person and the deep pleasure of solitude, Cornwall, in a way, becoming the window of her writing. 'du Maurier is able to view the whole of Cornwall as a bird would, but also walk along the ground and experience that same world in detail... Landscape is key to the concept of ancient Cornwall put forward in Jamaica Inn and du Maurier uses it to create an atmosphere of mystery and foreboding in her Gothic tale'. That was the assessment of Dr Gemma Goodman of the University of Warwick in her thesis on Daphne and Jack Clemo, the china clay country poet and author. And interestingly Daphne herself said standing in a field on the edge of Bodmin Moor she felt like 'an astronaut in time'.*

## DAPHNE

Daphne had a deep love of the sea and it was at high tide that her stories invariably began.

Menabilly, seat of the Rashleighs and her home for more than a quarter of a century, was the great passion of her life pouring energy and fantasy into it. Three miles from Fowey, Menabilly is a property which has you searching for adjectives.

Daphne told me she first came across the name in an old guidebook. She was determined to see it. Locals warned: 'The house is all shut up and the owner lives in Devon. The drive is about three miles long and overgrown.'

But trespass she did and she later wrote an essay in *Countryside Character*, published in 1946. It was the moment of discovery: 'I edged my way on to the lawn, and there she stood. My house of secrets. My elusive Menabilly...'

When I once asked her about its influence on her writing, she replied 'Menabilly and I are one...'

And it is interesting to reflect when someone tackled Alfred Hitchcock about *Rebecca* he said ‘A story about two wives, one alive, the other dead, and a house and the house is the strongest character.’

The strength and success of *Rebecca* surprised Daphne.

Probably the most read Gothic novel, it has scored in six art forms: novel, film, play, opera, musical and television series – and it has spawned two follow-up titles, both hugely readable. First, *Mrs de Winter* by Susan Hill in 1993 and in 2001 *Rebecca’s Tale* by Sally Beauman whom I had the privilege of meeting at the du Maurier Festival in Fowey. Sally opening her first chapter with ‘Last night I dreamt I went to Manderley again. These dreams are now recurring with a puzzling frequency, and I’ve come to dread them.’

Though Manderley is based – to a degree – on Menabilly, Daphne started working on it, drafts in a notebook, late 1937 when her husband Boy Browning was commanding officer of the Second Battalion, Grenadier Guards in Alexandria. She later confessed she had to attend certain cocktail parties but all she wanted to do was write this novel set in Cornwall.

Notebooks and the first few chapters were put aside until their return to England some months later. Daphne calculated she completed the manuscript in about four months making some changes. The husband Henry now became Maxim: Henry too dull she thought. In due course she sent it off to her publisher Victor Gollancz wondering if it was ‘overdone.’

Fortunately for all of us du Maurier fans, he liked the work – the rest is on-going publishing history.