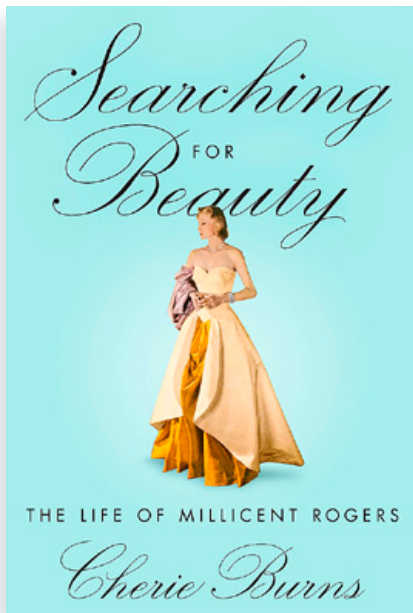




BORN BEAUTIFUL



ONE WONDERS why Cherie Burns has called her biography of Millicent Rogers, who lived from 1902 to 1953, *Searching for Beauty* (St. Martin's Press, 2011). The magnificently elegant society heiress may have had a turbulent and short life, but there was never any question about her God-given beauty. No search needed here.

Here's how Colonel Serge Obolensky, the swashbuckling Russian prince and American war hero, described her in his memoir, *One Man in His Time*: "I met Millicent Rogers, an exquisite American girl with the wide, slant eyes of a dear... terribly attractive, one of the most beautiful girls I have ever known. She was an exotic creature, with a curious languid manner. Even her voice, soft and pensive, was that of an Oriental, and

she generally dressed the part."

Millicent was not yet 21, technically a maiden, but that didn't stop Obolensky from proposing marriage. He writes, rather suggestively, "we got unofficially engaged." He was crushed when she suddenly dropped him. Perhaps she had found out that Obolensky was already married—to a daughter of Czar Alexander II!

Travelling in Italy with her parents, Millicent met the Duke d'Aosta, the son of the king of Italy. Burns writes that he was smitten by the young heiress and asked her to marry him. However, the king and Mussolini combined forces to oppose the match. They proclaimed that a son of the royal House of Savoy could not marry a foreigner.

This was not the first time she turned the head of royalty. The Prince of Wales had visited the U.S. in 1919, the year of Millicent's debut, and the newspapers were full of the Prince's infatuation with the beautiful heiress, monopolizing her dance card at balls in White Sulphur Springs, Washington, and New York.

By Burns' account, Millicent Rogers had a colorful romantic life. She married three times and had love affairs with Roald Dahl, Ian Fleming, and Clark Gable. There are a couple of indiscreet details, such as the revelation that Clark Gable had bad breath and that her third husband, the "fiercely handsome" New York stockbroker Ronald Balcom, had an appendage "the size of a horse."

The Rogers fortune, one of the greatest from America's Gilded Age, was built by Millicent's grandfather Henry Huttleston

Rogers, who lived from 1840 to 1909. He partnered with the Rockefellers in the founding of Standard Oil. He was also a force on Wall Street, known as "Hell Hound Rogers," and was a figure not only in oil refining, but also in steel, mining, and railroad and other transit systems. His fortune was said to be worth \$150 million, an amount that Burns says is the equivalent today of nearly \$4 billion.

Classed vulgarly as a "robber baron," Rogers was, in fact, a business genius and a closet philanthropist. He gave a school and a library to Fairhaven, Massachusetts, the town of his birth. He paid for Helen Keller's education at Radcliffe. He supported and was a strong friend of Booker T. Washington. He rescued Mark Twain from near bankruptcy, becoming a close friend of the great humorist. It is said that Twain was one of the best tellers of "colorful" stories suited for a male audience. A favorite diversion of Rogers' was to cruise in his 225-foot steam yacht, *Kanawha*, with some fellow millionaires and Twain along to provide the jokes.

Millicent's father, Henry Huttleston Rogers, Jr., known as "Colonel Rogers," was more interested in military matters than business. He served in the army on the Mexican border and in France with the American Expeditionary Force. He had a house in Tuxedo Park and, most notably, built two spectacular residences in Southampton. The first, the beach house, was a Walker and Gillette villa on 60 acres where Old Town Road meets Gin Lane. Badly damaged by the 1938 hurricane, the house was later ravaged by fire, and eventually dismantled.