

## A Man and His Women, Affairs of the Heart

By Stephen Hoy

It has been labeled *La Belle Epoque*, The Beautiful Era. During the reign of Britain's King Edward VII (1901-1910), the upper class enjoyed long, leisurely afternoons and summer garden parties. England's population had doubled in the previous fifty years. The British Empire was hale and hearty. English authors H. G. Wells, Joseph Conrad, Vita Sackville-West, and George Bernard Shaw published famous literary works. Composers Edward Elgar, Ralph Vaughn-Williams, and Gustav Holst birthed a renaissance of English musical composition. The image of the Gibson Girl, beautiful, yet emancipated, arose from the influence this era had on fashion and culture.

The English landscape garden, characterized by the philosophy that "all nature is a garden," had dramatically altered the countryside. The extensive plant-collecting expeditions of previous centuries had broadened the English gardener's palette of plants. Gertrude Jekyll (1843-1932) was at the height of her fame as a garden designer. Extensive private and public gardens were created, many of which survive to this day.

Among the lavish catalog listings available to plant lovers was a new class of roses known as the *hybrid teas*. Still in their infancy as a class, a number of cultivars were uniquely possessed of only one or two rows of petals.

Called "single" hybrid teas, many were included on "most popular" rose lists.

Among them was a group labeled the "Irish" singles, including *Irish Beauty*, *Irish Glory*, *Irish Modesty*, *Irish Brightness*, *Irish Engineer*, *Irish Harmony*, *Irish Elegance*, and *Irish Fireflame*, all hybridized by Alexander Dickson before 1914 (of the group only the last two remain available today). At least thirty other single or nearly single (by the ARS's current definition) bush and climbing forms of hybrid teas were introduced through 1937.

The hybridizer responsible for the most popular and commercially successful single hybrid tea ever created was a gentleman by the name of William Edward Basil Archer. A furniture designer originally, he began breeding roses as a hobby.

He, his wife, two sisters, and his daughter moved to Monk's Horton in Sellindge, Kent, in the south-east corner of England in the early 20's. There he and his daughter Muriel partnered in introducing a number of roses from the 20's through the 40's following several unusual breeding lines.

Sometime in the early 20's a cross was made by Archer between the exquisitely fragrant *Ophelia* and a rich red semi-double hybrid tea, *Kitchener of Khartoum*, more widely known as K. of K. The result was a stunning rose that would immortalize Archer's wife, *Dainty Bess*. Introduced in 1925, it was originally described in the 1926 ARS Annual in the following terms: "Type, distinct. Flower 3 ½ to 4 inches across, single, broad-petaled, fimbriated edges, rose color; borne several together. The large, flat cluster of stamens, held above red filaments, remind one of *R. moyesi*, but actually is very different."

Missing from the narrative is the rose's intoxicating fragrance.

"Rose" is at best a wishful description of its color. The light pastel pink on the inner side of the petals is contrasted by a somewhat darker "rose" reverse.



Dainty Bess, Photo by Stephen Hoy

## More of A Man and His Women.

During the growing season the fimbriated edging is as often not seen as it is seen. The flowers come on long stems, the growth is upright, and the foliage is matt green, and it is occasionally susceptible to blackspot. What makes this rose so widely grown? It's those stamens!!! The striking splash of garnet red filaments gaudily contrast with the bloom's subtle shade of pink, giving this rose an appeal that transcends the objections that some have regarding the "lack of petals." Its popularity shot up dramatically in 1931 when it was awarded "Best Rose in Show" at a rose show in Toronto, Canada among an exhibition of thousands of roses. A brief conversation (now a decade ago???) with Tom Carruth of Weeks Roses revealed that roughly 44,000 plants of *Dainty Bess* were sold between 1990 and 1995.

The second single hybrid tea introduced by Archer and daughter was only recently rediscovered and imported from Germany by Gregg Lowery of Vintage Gardens. *Bonnie Jean's* namesake is unknown, but she must have been a bright and cheerful young lady. Introduced in 1933, the rose *Bonnie Jean* is cerise pink with a prominent white eye and rich yellow stamens, and 3 ½" in diameter. In habit of growth this cultivar resembles another single hybrid tea, *Mrs. Oakley Fisher*, but is more densely foliated.

Two years after receiving a six inch tall rooted cutting, my container grown plant is a healthy three foot by three foot. Devotees of single flowered roses will find this hybrid tea a joy to grow.

It's not surprising that Archer named a rose after one of the most distinguished gardeners of that era, Ellen Willmott. This contemporary of Gertrude Jekyll sponsored numerous plant-finding forays and was active in breeding new cultivars of perennials. Amazingly, over sixty plant species and cultivars were named after her, including four roses.

Ms. Willmott loved old-garden roses and the simple species roses and was responsible for publishing one of the definitive works on roses, *The Genus Rosa*, beautifully illustrated by Alfred Parsons.

Three of the four roses named after Ms. Willmott include: *Ellen Willmott*, HT(A. Bernaix, 1898) mp, Dbl; *R. willmottiae*, Sp(Hemsley, Int. 1904) m, 5 petals; and *Miss Willmott*, HT(McGredy, 1917) wb, Dbl.

The rose hybridized by Mr. Archer was introduced in 1936 two years after Ms. Willmott's death.



Ellen Willmott, Photo by Stephen Hoy

A cross between *Dainty Bess* and *Lady Hillingdon* (an unusually hardy apricot yellow tea rose) the Archer version of *Ellen Willmott* is creamy white touched by a hint of lemon yellow with a pale frosting of pink around the edges of the petals, especially in cooler weather. Its stamens consist of red filaments topped with gold anthers, and are a prominent and attractive feature as evidenced by a comment recorded by Daphne Filiberti, "If roses had eyelashes this one could certainly bat her eyes." The foliage is an eye-catching dark green and above average in health. The bush produces long stems in true hybrid tea fashion.

S. Reynolds Hole, one of the founders of Britain's Royal National Rose Society, wrote that "He who would have beautiful Roses in his garden, must have beautiful Roses in his heart." Most of us would agree that growing roses is an affair of the heart. Anyone familiar with *Dainty Bess*, *Bonnie Jean*, and *Ellen Willmott* would probably agree that William Archer had beautiful roses in his heart.

In twenty years when 90% of the hybrid teas in our gardens will have disappeared from commerce, these long cherished single hybrid teas will still be found here and there occupying a place of love, not only in this garden and that, but in the hearts of those for whom it can be said,

**"As with the smitten bachelor or the steadfast mate the lady of his love is lovely-ever, so to the true Rose-grower . . . the Rose [will] always be a thing of beauty."**