

Tilda Swinton

The Winter Queen

A family historian's view of the ancestry of
Katherine Matilda Swinton of Kimmerghame

by

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As an introduction to the ancestry of Katherine Matilda Swinton of Kimmerghame it is perhaps appropriate to look at her success as the eponymous Orlando in the film which, before she became famous as the White Witch, the Winter Queen of the Chronicles of Narnia, best demonstrated her extraordinary talents. This was the adaptation for the screen of Virginia Woolf's intriguing and complex novel, described by Nigel Nicolson as the longest and most charming love letter in literature, in which her gender-shifting hero/heroine was modelled on her Sapphic lover, the highly intelligent, socially accomplished, shockingly uninhibited Vita Sackville-West.

Virginia Woolf had been overwhelmed by the Sackvilles and their great house, Knole, in a substantial proportion of whose three hundred rooms the family had lived since the reign of Elizabeth I, and was initially seduced primarily by the patrician charisma and aristocratic ancestry of the woman she adored. The higher and most important titles of the family had been extinguished with the death of the unmarried 5th Duke and 11th Earl of Dorset in 1843, but the Knole estates continued and a new peerage title, Baron Sackville of Knole, had been created for Vita Sackville-West's great-uncle. When he died its special remainder allowed his brother to inherit, and then on the brother's death without legitimate offspring the title passed to his nephew, Vita Sackville-West's father. She thus was raised in surroundings of great privilege and vast wealth.

But, as so often in the history of the British aristocracy, the story of the family is more complex than this. The 2nd Baron, a genial figure popular in both London society and the diplomatic world, formed an adulterous relationship with a Spanish dancer, Victoria Josefa, known as Pepita, the wife of Juan Antonio de la

Oliva, and daughter of Pedro Duran, a barber in Malaga, by his wife Catalina Ortega, of gypsy ancestry. Of Pepita's three children by him the elder boy was prevented from claiming the title because his mother's husband was formally registered as his father; the second son, who insisted he was legitimate, had his claim to the title and estates dismissed by the High Court; and the daughter Victoria married her cousin, her father's nephew and heir, and was Vita Sackville-West's mother.

This unusual mixture of English nobility and the blood of Spanish barbers, gypsies and dancers bewitched Virginia Woolf, leading her to create Orlando as the embodiment of all she found so fascinating and all she worshipped in the character and ancestry of her lover. It was no secret. In the book's early days its author wrote, "But listen: suppose Orlando turns out to be about Vita; and it's all about you and the lusts of your flesh and the lure of your mind? Shall you mind?" And the enthusiastic reply was: "My God, Virginia, if ever I was thrilled and terrified it is at the prospect of being projected into the shape of Orlando."

So this quite extraordinary woman, Vita Sackville-West, was transformed into the trans-sexual Orlando, and the extraordinary character that emerged from the pages of Virginia Woolf's book onto the screen required a quite extraordinary actress. The one chosen, Tilda Swinton, suffered from a script whose inescapable economy could not carry the profundity of the novel, but her thespian skills conveyed pages of description with a raised eyebrow or the flash of an eye, her personal ancestry must surely have helped her understand the Vita in the Orlando, and she was supported by quite brilliant camerawork.

So what exactly is her ancestry?

The lands of Swinton probably took their name from someone known as something like “Swin”, perhaps only vaguely so, and subsequently an owner of the Swinton lands styled himself “de Swinton”. This could easily have been well before heraldry was established as a key factor in military life, social life, and all the routines of mediaeval administration and law, but eventually, when arms became an essential component of life, and canting (or punning) heraldry was found everywhere, someone adopted the heads of three swine to signify Swinton.

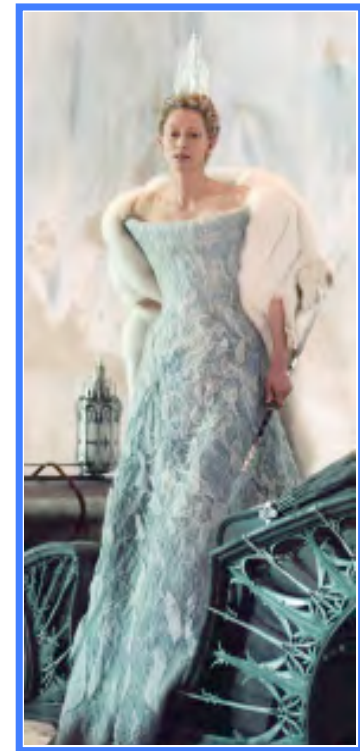
But the Swinton line goes back to long before that time, with the first owner of the lands claimed to be Eadwulf, Lord of Bamburgh, who ruled Bernicia (which stretched from Bamburgh to the Forth), accepted King Alfred the Great as his overlord *circa* 886, and died in 912. Eight generations of his blood succeeded him, and then in the 12th century Cospatrick de Swinton, whose relationship to his predecessor Ernulf de Swinton is uncertain, had two sons, Alan and Hugh, the latter of which founded the Arbuthnott family.

Alan’s line then continued to Sir John de Swinton, 14th of that Ilk, a great warrior who served in France under the English John of Gaunt, the son of King Edward III, commanded the successful Scottish army at Otterburn in 1388, and was killed at the battle of Homildon Hill in 1402. It was his son, Sir John Swinton, 15th of that Ilk, who, as mentioned in the webpage introduction, rode down and killed Thomas, Duke of Clarence, brother of King Henry V, at the battle of Beaugé in France in 1421. It was of this incident that Sir Walter Scott wrote in *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* —

And Swinton laid the lance in rest
That tamed of yore the sparkling crest
Of Clarence’s Plantagenet



The Achievement of
Swinton of that Ilk



Two pictures of
The Winter Queen



Political struggles then reduced the powers of the Swintons, but John Swinton, 18th of that Ilk, recaptured some in his later appointment as Warden of the East March, and his son John, 19th of that Ilk, was politically active in the Royal Court. The next two generations produced Sheriffs and Members of Parliament, but more problems came with the Civil War. First, John Swinton, 23rd of that Ilk, fought for the King, was captured at the battle of Worcester, and was forfeited; then, second, he changed to support Cromwell and became a Quaker; then, third, at the Restoration he was tried for High Treason, was forfeited again, and was imprisoned.

His second son, Sir John Swinton, 25th of that Ilk, fled to Holland at the first forfeiture and became a successful merchant there. When the second forfeiture was rescinded in 1690 he returned to Scotland, recovered the family estates and became a Member of Parliament. His eldest son John Swinton, 26th of that Ilk, was the direct ancestor of John Walter Swinton, 35th of that Ilk, the present Chief of the Name and Arms of Swinton, but our attention at this point switches to his fourth son Archibald Swinton, a Captain in the Honorable East India Company's Service who married Henrietta Campbell of Blythswood and acquired the estates of Kimmerghame and Manderston. (It was Henrietta who brought in the Campbell arms now borne in the 2nd and 3rd quarters of the Swinton of Kimmerghame arms.)

His son John Campbell Swinton, 2nd of Kimmerghame, had two sons: Archibald Campbell Swinton who succeeded him as 3rd of Kimmerghame, and George Sitwell Campbell Swinton, Lord Lyon King of Arms, whose son Brigadier Alan Henry Campbell Swinton, MC, Scots Guards, succeeded his cousin as 6th of Kimmerghame. His son, Major-General Sir John Swinton who succeeded as 7th of Kimmerghame, has together with three sons, a daughter, Katherine Matilda "Tilda" Swinton.



