

People and places

JOURNALIST Irena Morgan, the secretary of Abergavenny Local History Society, starts a new column writing about the town, its people and places. Today she writes about an Abergavenny-born author who seems to have been virtually forgotten by her hometown.

Author Ethel Lina White was born in Abergavenny and was one of the best-known crime and mystery writers in Britain and the USA during the 1930s and 40s. Her books were in the Collins Crime Club series - some of her work has been likened to that of Edgar Allen Poe - and three were turned into films, including two classics of 20th century cinema.

One of her most famous books, *The Wheel Spins*, published in 1936, was adapted as the acclaimed 1938 Hitchcock film, *The Lady Vanishes*. It starred Margaret Lockwood and helped to launch the career of Michael Redgrave. Yet, Ethel Lina is almost

unknown in her home town which considering the Hitchcock film title is somewhat ironic.

Some Must Watch (1933), became the 1946 RKO film *The Spiral Staircase*, starring Dorothy McGuire. There have been other - less successful - remakes of both films. The third film, *The Unseen*, based on her novel *Midnight House*, (known in America as *Her Heart in her Throat*) was released by Paramount in 1945 but made little impact even though co-adapted by another famous thriller writer, Raymond Chandler.

Now, there has been a revival of interest in Ethel Lina's work. A stage adaptation of *The Lady Vanishes* starring Victor Spinetti toured Britain in 2001 from March to July, two books - *The Lady Vanishes* and *While She Sleeps* - have been reprinted and the two films are available on video and DVD.

Abergavenny Local History Society has commissioned a blue plaque for the house where she was born. It

seems strange that while there's a veritable industry built around the works by another Crime Club favourite, Agatha Christie, until now Abergavenny's own author has received scant recognition.

My interest began nearly two years ago when I started to design a website for the history society as a project for a course at the Hill campus.

I decided to include a page on well-known people from the town. By chance, a few days later, I read a newspaper interview with Victor Spinetti talking about his part in the forthcoming stage tour and he mentioned an Abergavenny author he hadn't heard about had written the original book.

This intrigued me because I adore crime and mystery novels and could scarcely believe there was someone so close to home that I also didn't know. Few people in the town had heard of her when I started to ask questions. No one could tell me where she was born, where she lived or even what books she had written. So I started to do a little detective work of my own...

- Irena Morgan looks at Abergavenny's

At first I drew a blank at Abergavenny Library but they conducted a search on my behalf on the Internet and were happy to receive whatever information I managed to uncover. The National Library of Wales was a better source - supplying a list of her full-length novels and a number of brief mentions about her in reference books. A chance meeting with an aspiring author visiting Abergavenny for a crime-writing course during the Arts Festival led to Cardiff Library and a reference book by detective writer and critic H R F Keating called 100 Best Books of Crime and Mystery, which included *The Wheel Spins*.

Since then I've discovered that only one family member, Mrs Mary White, whose late husband was Ethel Lina's nephew, still lives in Abergavenny. One of Ethel's nieces, Mrs Angela Morton, now lives near Brecon and another, Mrs Jean Massey is in London. Although too young to remember much about her, they provided some background details.

After searching through newspaper archives, electoral reg-

isters, census returns, baptism records and asking people I finally established her date of birth as 1876 and a copy of her birth certificate revealed Ethel Lina's birthplace was 37, Frogmore Street in a terrace called Derry or Deri View. This is now a barber's shop - though the renumbering of Frogmore Street initially caused some confusion. The terrace was built by Ethel Lina's father, Clifton-born William White, an inventor and builder, who remarried after the death of his first wife.

When the Whites first settled in Abergavenny, they lived in the Merthyr Road or Brecon Road area before moving to Frogmore Street.

In 1881 when Ethel Lina was five, they moved to a fantastic-looking house, again built by her father, called Fairlea, in Belmont Road where she grew up.

The house, its layout and its closeness to the railway line, is said to have been a source of inspiration to her. It is listed as a building of special architectural interest and incor-

porated Mr White's own patented damp-proofing and soundproofing invention, a bitumastic substance known as White's Hygeia Rock.

It is thought this was used in construction of underground railway tunnels, including part of London Underground, and in major buildings, and was made at her father's works at the Great Western Railway yards where he employed a number of men. He was successful enough to have opened up a London office.

Ethel Lina was one of a talented family of 12. One brother was a solicitor, another a director of Seargeants Brothers the printers, and another was a chartered accountant who ran a theatre group, The Richmond Players which was named after him. One sister was a successful artist for children's books and another brother was a contributor to an angling magazine.

Mrs Massey says Ethel Lina was educated at a private local school and recalls that Ethel once wrote 'It was a jolly childhood. We had Welsh nursemaids whose lurid stories were probably excellent train-

ing for a future thriller writer'.

After Ethel Lina's father died, her mother ran the family firm. She lived in Abergavenny until her mother's death in 1917, then moved to London with sister Dora. Ethel Lina wrote short stories and plays, kept blue Persian cats and worked for the Ministry of Pensions until she sold one of her short stories and her writing career took off.

Mrs Massey has vivid childhood memories of her famous and glamorous aunt being invited back to Abergavenny in the late 1930s for the local premiere of *The Lady Vanishes* at the Coliseum cinema, a report of which is featured in the Chronicle archives.

Abergavenny may have provided some inspiration for Ethel Lina's work - she talks of small-town life in some novels and uses the names of townspeople for some characters - people she must have been friendly with, or at least known. Ethel Lina never married although she had many friends and admirers. She lived in Chiswick and died there in 1944.

Mrs Massey says, "It is interesting to detect

in Ethel's novels, a strong feeling of support for women's rights - this was back in the 30s. All her young heroines were feisty young ladies with minds of their own."

Since the release of *The Lady Vanishes* and *The Spiral Staircase*, both books have been reprinted under their film titles. Yet H R F Keating ranks *The Wheel Spins* as No 25 in his 100 Best Books, published in the 1980s.

He says, "Not many books can stand up to being read simply for themselves 50 years after they were written. But among those that can, *The Wheel Spins* certainly earns its place. What keeps it fresh is writing of an unobtrusively high order."

American author and historian Scott Wilson is surprised so little is known about Ethel Lina and was delighted to see her photograph on the Abergavenny Local History Society website. He contacted the society by e-mail soon after the website was launched.

His book, *Resting Places* lists the burial sites of more than 7,000 celebrities and he would like to know where she was buried or cremated.

He has also written

several film history articles, and says, "I love writers, especially mystery writers. *The Spiral Staircase* (Some Must Watch) is one of the best ones I have ever read. I cannot believe more is not known about her."

There are still gaps about what happened in

her life and some things may never be known. If anyone can help to fill in the missing pieces please contact me, or the Chronicle editorial office or e-mail me at abergavennyhistory@bt.com. The website is www.abergavennyhistory.co.uk

