CHAPTER TWO

LIFE HISTORY OF DAME EDITH SITWELL IN BRIEF
EDITH LOUISA SITWELL, D.B.E. was born in Wood End, the north-east side of Scarborough, on 7 September 1807, the year of the Golden Jubilee of Queen Victoria. She was the eldest of three children of Sir George Sitwell, a baronet, and Lady Ida Denison, an earl's daughter. She and her two younger brothers Sir Osbert Sitwell and Sir Sacheverell Sitwell are commonly known as the Three Sitwells. She grew up at her parental home Renishaw Hall which was built in the year 1625 in Derbyshire estate that was in possession of the Sitwell family since the Middle Ages. She was a violent child, she had "a wild beast's senses, a painter's eyesight." For the lack of true parental devotion and care she suffered an unhappy childhood.

The second and the third stages of any relay race are most difficult, both physically and psychologically. An athlete breezes through the initial stage, the second and the third require much effort to maintain and advance the initial success. Much the same can be said of Miss Edith Sitwell. Her literary career can be divided into three stages — (i) the first stage up to the year 1922 when she published Façade, (ii) the flowering stage from 1923 to 1946 when she wrote The Shadow of Cain, and (iii) the ebbing stage from 1947 to 1957 when the latest edition of her Collected Poems was published by Macmillan. The last stage from 1958 to 1964 is the prolongation of the third stage. Her mind was then absorbed into spiritual realization.

She told about herself that "perhaps I, at four years old, knew the incipient anguish of the poet I was to become," One day she met her mother's friend Rita, a delightful young woman, at Wood End. The conversation between Rita and Edith Sitwell or
Little E (as she was addressed in her childhood) followed thus;

'You remember me, little E? *** Don't you remember me?'
'No.'
*** ***
'What are you going to be when you are grown-up, Little E?'
*** ***
'A genius,' 4

Little E came of a rich aristocratic family. The children of such families get the opportunity of displaying their uncommon gifts in one branch or other. Edith Sitwell who had a deep love for music, poetry and painting from her childhood, incurred displeasure of her parents for being born a female. She however got the opportunity of reading many books collected at Renishaw and at her grandmother Sitwell's home in Surrey. She made full use of them. Miss Sitwell was educated privately at home by the governesses, Davis and Miss Helen Rootham. Her father was deeply engaged with her business and garden layouts, and her mother felt embarrassed with her studious daughter when mingling in society or entertaining the guests. Miss Sitwell had therefore to find friends among her nurses and caretakers, Davis was not only little E's old nurse but also her friend. But Davis basking in the sunshine of Lady Ida's favour truckled to and grovelled before the master—Sir George Sitwell, and then went away. Sir Osbert Sitwell had told of Davis that:

"*** Davis, indeed, helped to influence our future more than she can have known, and far beyond her own departure—which left us desolate..." 5

Miss Sitwell's playmates were the Hume children, four or five years of age. One day the Hume children were crying because their mother died. Miss Sitwell asked Davis why they were weeping,

—'Because their mother is dead.'
—'Yes, I know, But why did they cry?' 6
The significance of death was explained to her at that tender age by her nurse. Her another friend was Henry Moat, her father's valet.

In 1903 a musician and literary artist, named Miss Helen Roothar came to the Sitwell family as a teacher but was soon converted to a friend, philosopher and guide of Miss Sitwell. Helen Rootham possessed certain sensibility, she was a pianist and translator of French poetry. She translated Less Illuminations of Rimbaud and poems of Baudelaire. Miss Sitwell read carefully these translations which were of prime importance to her future development. She was profoundly affected by Miss Rootham's translation of Baudelaire in 1904. She had already gone through the works of William Shakespeare and P.B. Shelley. She had the opportunity of going through Poems and Ballads of A.C. Swinburne. In a letter to John Lehmann on June 1: 1951 Edith Sitwell wrote (Letter No. 133):

"When I was 13, I learned the whole of The Rape of the Lock by heart, but I don't think I've been influenced by Pope.

I had an absolute mania for Swinburne as a girl, and learned a lot about vowel-technique from him." 7

In another letter to Judge and Mrs. H.C. Leon she wrote on June 25, 1964 (Letter No. 204):

"I was 17. I was staying in my grandmother Sitwell's house in Bournemouth, and at 6 o'clock in the morning, I ran away to visit Swinburne's grave in the Isle of Wight, taking with me a bunch of red roses, a laurel wreath, and a jug of milk; also my extremely disagreeable lady's maid."

* * *

When I returned to my grandmother's house there was, of course, a terrible row, and I found that (in my absence) a man called Losev and his wife had induced her to burn my volume of the 1st Swinburne Poems and Ballads, because these would corrupt my mind. (I hadn't the slightest idea of anything wrong in them).
Miss Sitwell used to sit in her writing table in the early morning.

"My usual time for starting work is 5.30 a.m. I'm never later than 6. It is the only time when I can be sure of being quiet." 9

Miss Rootham was a woman of independent type and Miss Sitwell inherited the peculiar traits of character of that respectable chaperone. Miss Rootham's influence on the young poet, Miss Sitwell, vibrated in a variety of ways. 'Denial of the loyalty' to any one was so deep-rooted in Miss Sitwell's character that she could not accept any one as her husband although her mother tried to find a suitable bridegroom since her daughter's age of 17. Alvaro de Guevara and Pavel Tchelitchew came in close contact with the poet but she could not unite with either of them with the marriage tie. Alvaro de Guevara, seven years younger and handsome to look at, met the poet when the painter Roger Fry was painting the poet's portrait, and the poet instantly fell in love with Alvaro. But he was already infatuated by Nancy Cunard and Miss Sitwell's love failed to win over Cunard. Frustration in love is the prime factor in the poet's life which took away her passion for her lover at the middle of her age but she always remained delightful, amusing, fascinating and witty. For sometime she served in the Pensions Office at Chelsea from 9 A.M. to 5 P.M. £25s a week and two shillings war bonus. In a poem she depicted herself as the 'cockscomb-raged hair'. She also described herself 'Tall as crane,' in the poem Aubade.

'Jane, Jane,
Tall as a crane,
The morning light creaks down again;'

The poet in analysing the poem observed that

"I am the crane—tall Jane of my poem Aubade! — although, in the poem, I had changed my situation to that of a poor young country servant ....". 10
Miss Sitwell travelled many countries of Europe, America and Australia for different reasons. When she visited Australia about two years before her death her ship called in at Ceylon, but the author does not think that she ever visited India.

The poet acquired friendship in her early age with Aldous Huxley and Maria Huxley and enlisted him (Aldous Huxley) to contribute to her annual anthology Wheels. Later on her friendship grew with D.H. Lawrence and Mrs. Lawrence when they came on a visit to the poet's parents at Motegufoni. The poets Roy Campbell and Dylan Thomas were friends of Miss Sitwell. In the year 1922 Arnold Bennett recommended favourably Miss Sitwell as a poet in the Outlook. She had many other friends like Stephen Spender, Phylis Boyd, William Walton, and a number of fans like Lincoln Kirstein, an American, Mr. Noël Coward, a talented young actor who disregarded her with contempt when Façade was staged, but later reconciled and transformed as her friend. Donald Davie and Patrick Cruttwell did not accept that Miss Sitwell possessed the exceptional quality to speak in simple words the most profound things. The poets W.B. Yeats and Robert Graves and the critics John Lehmann, C.R. Boura, Geoffrey Singleton, R.L. Mégroz, Max Wykes-Joyce acknowledged her as a gifted poet and praised her in different colours and forms. But Geoffrey Grigson denounced Miss Sitwell as a poet and he considered her images as "monstrous" and "untruths to nature". F.R. Leavis remarked that "the Sitwells belong to the history of publicity rather than of poetry." Wyndham Lewis attacked her with bitter criticisms. Still then he was an admirer of her works.

Miss Sitwell is known as a great poet as well as a successful critic, a biographer, a literary historian, and an anthologist. She was conferred with the honours by the different universities. In the year 1933 she was awarded the medal of the Royal Society of Literature. Later on she became a Fellow and Vice-President of the Society. In 1948 she was awarded Honorary D.Litt. (Durham) and Honorary Litt.D. (Leeds). In 1949 she became Honorary Associate Member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters. In 1951 she was awarded Honorary D.Litt. (Oxford). In the year 1954 Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II awarded the honour and made her a Dame Grand Cross of the order of the British Empire. In 1958 she was awarded the William Foyle Poetry Prize.
Her favourite haunt was the Sesame Club where she used to receive her guests and admirers.

Her earlier poems are infused with pleasurable feelings and the latter poems combined the poet's kindliness for the suffering multitude as well as her vision of life. In religion she was a Roman Catholic. Her war poems are the portrayals of her religious belief.

In her last publication *Music and Ceremonies* the poet dreamed of the waking up of the feelings of her first blushing in *The Mother and Other Poems*, but it was like a deep sea free from turbulent waves.

Winter walked majestically over St. Thomas's Hospital on 9 December 1964 when Dame Edith Sitwell on completion of her 77 years of age breathed last at night and her combatant queenly spirit left her earthly home.