

Rich, vivid and successful: the life of Coco Chanel

The fashion icon's incredible life and colourful sexual habits are explored in this latest biography, says **Frieda Klotz**

Chanel: An Intimate Life

Lisa Chaney

Fig Tree, Hardback, €34.00

THERE is often something poignant about old photos. One in Lisa Chaney's *Chanel: An Intimate Life* has a particular innocence to it. It shows Gabrielle Chanel sitting astride a grey horse wearing jodhpurs and a tie. A handsome young man stands close by, looking at her with affection, while the 27-year-old Chanel, with short hair and a childish grimace, glances at the camera.

The man was Arthur Capel, a half-Irish horse-mad playboy and businessman, who was the love of her life. The picture dates from 1910. Ten years later Capel would leave her, and not long after that he died in a car-crash.

Chanel's boyish outfit would have been shocking at the time, but its androgynous simplicity bears the hallmarks of her style. It was just around this time that she set up her business. It was unusual, even scandalous that she should work, but she had a desire to make money and did not want to be a kept woman. Already she had travelled an immense way from her love-starved and traumatised childhood.

Chanel: An Intimate Life gives a rich and vivid account of one of the most successful and entrepreneurial women of the 20th Century. Not only that: Chanel changed how

women dressed. Nineteenth-century clothes were restrictive and elaborate. Chanel's designs were innovative, even revolutionary, in giving women freedom of movement. The short, beaded and fringed dresses of the Twenties; the classic woman's two-piece suit; and the little black dress itself — her elegant, crisp styles suited the newly liberated women of that era.

Lisa Chaney deftly charts Chanel's almost incredible journey from an impoverished childhood to an adult life of stunning lavishness and wealth, as she developed a brand that only society's elite could afford. Gabrielle Chanel was born in 1883 to a profligate, alcoholic father and a downtrodden mother whose family had rejected her when she married. When Chanel was 11, her mother died, and she spent the rest of her early years in orphanages being cared for by nuns. Afterwards, she embarked on a career (ultimately unsuccessful) of singing and entertaining in local cafes — it was here that she earned the nickname La Petite Coco.

At this time Chanel may have dabbled in prostitution to supplement her income. Her relations with men — and with women — are a recurring theme. When she was young affluent men offered the only escape from poverty. She attracted the attentions of an officer called Etienne Balsan and he invited her to join him in his country palace, an experience that gave her access to an exclusive social circle.

Through Balsan she met Capel, whose father was a successful entrepreneur. Chanel's first business venture was a milliner's shop in Paris, and Capel encouraged her (and helped financially) when she decided to make dresses too.

Chaney conjures up a glittering, colourful world in which fidelity did not exist. Chanel shared Etienne Balsan with a famous courtesan, Emilienne d'Alençon — with whom she may in turn have had an affair. Later, when she was with Capel, he had many flings with other women. To complicate matters, even after he left her to wed the English beauty Diana Wyndham, he would return to Chanel, tormented by an inability to decide between the two.

Chanel pursued her own romantic conquests, embarking on affairs with the Russian grandson of Tsar Alexander II, the English Duke of Westminster, with Igor Stravinsky, Pablo Picasso and Salvador Dali. In later years she acquired a reputation as a sexual predator. A young French woman on the staff of American *Vogue* recalled, "I had to go once to see her, and was told to be careful. I believed, and all others did too, that Chanel was bi-sexual. One assumed it to be the case. British and French laws were different. It wasn't illegal in France and people were just less fussed about it really."

The most sordid juncture in Chanel's life occurred well after she was established. During World War II, she lived in the Ritz Hotel in occupied Paris with the German spy Hans Günther von Dincklage. At one point, in fact, she shared her room with two men who were both active

Nazi supporters. Chaney, who has fallen slightly in love with her subject, explores this period in dutiful detail and records that one evening an acquaintance noted in his diary, "Coco goes into a tirade against the Jews."

Chaney's observations that Chanel was pro-British (she was friendly with Winston Churchill) and that she wept when France was occupied, do little to excuse her behaviour. In fact another biographer, Hal Vaughan, has recently argued (in *Sleeping with the Enemy*) that Chanel was actively involved in the war effort — as a secret agent for the Germans.

After World War II thousands of French women were publicly humiliated, their heads shorn, for their so-called horizontal collaboration with the Nazis. (Chaney suggests that the anger they faced arose from "the sense of personal and national emasculation felt by French men, living under an occupying army.") Chanel, however, was not punished and travelled to Switzerland where she remained for some time. She continued to pay von Dincklage an allowance.

Chanel was known for being generous and kind to friends, but as time passed she became cantankerous, and her harsh outbursts alienated many of those around her. At the end of her life she was lonely. She gave a brutally honest description of herself to an early biographer who was also a friend. "The hardness of the mirror reflects my own hardness back to me... it expresses what is peculiar to myself, a person who is efficient, optimistic, passionate, realistic, combative, mocking and incredulous, and who



HIGH DESIGNS: Coco Chanel had many lovers, men and women, some of whom helped finance her beginnings as a milliner and dressmaker. Once wealthy, however, she in turn paid an allowance to Hans Günther von Dincklage, her German spy lover

feels her Frenchness. Finally, there are my gold-brown eyes which guard the entrance to my heart: there one can see that I am a woman. A poor woman."

Chanel died in 1971, never really coming to terms with the changes of the swinging Sixties (she hated the

miniskirt and complained that knees were ugly). But, however prickly she was as a person, her creative spirit left its mark on fashion forever. A line from *Vogue* summarises her achievement, for she introduced "the heady idea that a woman should be more important than her clothes".

THE SUNDAY POEM



ANTHONY

It was no wonder that Edwin Muir should have remained so passionately preoccupied with the story of the Garden of Eden all his life. He was born in Orkney, the northernmost of the Scottish islands and the least touched by contemporary civilisation, but his family moved to Glasgow when he was 14 and before five years had passed both of his parents and two of his brothers were dead. In many poems he explored the idea of a lost paradise brought to an end by exul-