

**Michael Bernard Wharton (formerly Nathan)**, satirist,

Born April 19 1913, Shipley, Yorkshire, England

Died January 23 2006

Spouse 1: Kate Derrington

Spouse 2: Susan Moller

### **Satirist whose Peter Simple column stood out against change for nearly 50 years**

Whatever the verdict of history on the satirist Michael Wharton, better known as Peter Simple, it is safe to say that his death at the age of 92 will come as a profound shock to the fabled beings whose words and works were chronicled in his Daily Telegraph column for nearly 50 years.

Even Mrs Dutt-Pauker, the unregenerate Hampstead Marxist, will not be able to suppress some sense of loss as she pours a celebratory glass of sherry, while in the vault beneath Greengarth, his stupendous mansion on Cleckheaton Moor, Alderman Foodbotham, the 25-stone, crag-visaged, iron-watch-chained, grim-booted perpetual chairman of Bradford city council's tramways and fine arts committee, already stirs in his long sleep, as if soon to be aroused by the summons to rise and rid his beloved city of the vandals, planners and social workers who have taken over.

Wharton was himself a coopted Bradfordian. He was born in the market town of Shipley, which was subsequently incorporated into "Greater Bradford" - the quotation marks are Wharton's, signifying his disdain of all meddlings with the old order of things. The surname on his birth certificate was actually Nathan - his father was from a part-Jewish German family which had migrated from Magdeburg in the 1860s to settle in Bradford and prosper in the wool trade. Wharton adopted his Yorkshire mother's maiden name, and with it a trace of her Tess of the D'Urbervilles -like belief that she was descended from the once powerful Whartons of Wharton Hall in Westmorland.

Nostalgia for a feudal society and the great days of the landed gentry was duly one of the ripe obsessions - along with a hatred of levellers-down, progressive churchmen and academics, motor cars, television and almost everything else "modern" - that Peter Simple would one day nurture.

Meanwhile, the young Wharton grew up in steadily less grand circumstances as the family business foundered. Instead of public school, he went to Bradford grammar, then to Lincoln College, Oxford, on a county scholarship. He seemed set on a blameless, if undistinguished, path when in his last year he not so much neglected as completely ignored his studies in order to write a novel, Sheldrake, which then failed to find a publisher. He left Oxford without a degree and drifted through the next 25 years of his life with a spiritual sloth which, as he described it in his first volume of autobiography, *The Missing Will* (1984), makes sad reading.

Convivial drinking in good pubs gave way to sombre drinking in horrible ones. The joy of his first marriage, to Joan Akey in 1936, was soon blotched by dreary affairs with other people's wives. He ran up bills, lived on credit, wrote a few bits for *Punch* and, not surprisingly, suffered from fits of depression. On the outbreak of the second world war, he delayed volunteering until he was due to be called up anyway, in late 1940. When Hitler invaded Russia six months later, Wharton hoped that the Germans would win on that front. None the less, he rose to be a major, even briefly a lieutenant-colonel, on the general staff in India. Though he was most of the time a long way from the sound of the guns, he chanced to be at Imphal airstrip just as the wayward Major-General Orde Wingate arrived to lead British and Indian troops on a second foray deep into Japanese-held Burma. The Chindit hero,

Wharton noted slightly in his memoirs, carried a book in one hand and a flower in the other.

Back home, and demobilised, in 1946, Wharton resumed a life of scratching around for hack work. He wrote scripts for the BBC, edited the Football Association Yearbook and ghosted a war hero's adventures. He and his first wife were divorced; they had a son. He met and married a 20-year-old blonde "with a wild, nervous manner", Kate Derrington, with whom he had a daughter.

In 1953 he was offered a full-time job in Manchester by the innovative BBC radio producer Denis Mitchell, later to blaze new trails in television. Alas, Mitchell's department turned out to include such leftwingers as the ballad-singer Ewan MacColl, with whom Wharton speedily fell out. His contract was not renewed at the end of the first year, though he lingered on just long enough to store up another swipe at a randomly encountered figure - this time a distraught gay motorcyclist called Alan Turing: "The name meant nothing to me. Now I know that he was supposed to have invented the computer."

Wharton and his wife returned to London, where he found another BBC job of sorts and finally, in 1957, seized the opportunity which was to transform him from sour malcontent into an enricher of our times. This involved no Pauline conversion, no change of character on his part at all. Destiny had merely to arrange for the Daily Telegraph to revive its old Way of the World column by Peter Simple, and put Colin Welch in charge of it. Welch, an acquaintance of Wharton, was looking for a collaborator; Wharton was handed the perfect outlet for his peculiar bundle of beliefs and talents.

In his comment paragraphs, he aired a conservatism light years to the right of most conservatives, stealing sometimes into fleeting, only half-retracted, laments for the Europe that Hitler's New Order might have created. But sooner or later one or another of the immortals of his fantasy would come forward - General "Tiger" Nidgett, late of the Royal Army Tailoring Corps; poor King Norman the Good in his council palace at Bevingdon; or Julian Birdbath, down that dank, disused lead-mine in Derbyshire, working by candlelight on his biography of the forgotten Brontë sister, Doreen. The Midlands conurbation centred on Stretchford had a whole electoral roll of familiars, many of them pop-music or football academics on the faculties of the area's numerous universities, not to mention its unique, oppressed Aztec community or the shabby conductor of the municipal orchestra, Sir Jim Gastropodi, leading his players through unmapped hectares of Mahler. To seal their success, their creator's spurned novel Sheldrake was finally published in 1958.

After a while, Welch moved on to pursue an executive career. Wharton took over, with the aid at first of contributions from Colm Brogan, Charles Herring and John Lucas, who dreamed up the mock advertisements for such desirable amenities as the Plastigarden, with clip-on flowers. These helpers gradually faded away until Wharton was writing the column single-handed, except for occasional Squire Haggard annals from Michael Green.

Wharton slid into a curiously monastic routine. He moved into a tiny, cell-like office in the Telegraph building in Fleet Street, which had room only for himself, his secretary Claudie Worsthorne (fortunately, petite) and a fire escape. At the end of the day, he would drink brandies in the King and Keys public house next door before taking the bus to his London flat in Battersea, where he would eat five fish fingers (never more nor fewer), washed down with lime juice and soda, and read until bedtime. His marriage to Kate was not formally ended until 1972, though for many years before that her affections had famously to be shared with Colin Welch. In 1974, Wharton married again, this time to Susan Moller.

Some years later, the Telegraph papers acquired a new proprietor, and were due to go over to the new technology and move to new premises in Docklands in September 1987. For Wharton, this was the signal that he should call it a day. He and Claudie stayed on in their cubbyhole long after everyone else had left, and symbolically dispatched the final column to the offices as, down below, workmen unscrewed the bronze nameplates from the portals of 135 Fleet Street. With Susan he settled full time

in the cottage in the Chilterns that until then had been his weekend home. The second part of his autobiography, *A Dubious Codicil*, appeared in 1991.

But it was not to be a final retirement. Wharton was tempted to resuscitate the column, first by the *Sunday Telegraph* and in 1996 by the *Daily*, reverting to his old platform, if now but once a week. Like Alderman Foodbotham, he had only been awaiting the call. Exactly what sounded the call we may never know. Was it the anti-climax of the downfall of the Soviet bloc? The awareness that there loomed the date whose celebration was certain to be the apotheosis of all that he held to be modish, vulgar and deceitful: the millennium? Some early intimation of Tony Blair as the once and future king?

Whatever the spur, he could still startle or warm his readers with some uncharacteristically generous sentiment. In one of his final columns, after illness had struck, he delivered a glowing tribute to the care and comfort he had experienced in a national health service hospital. His last column appeared last Friday.

He is survived by Susan and his son and daughter.

· Michael Bernard Wharton, satirist, born April 19 1913; died January 23 2006

**Source:**

The Guardian Newspaper

<http://www.theguardian.com/media/2006/jan/25/pressandpublishing.obituaries>

**Other Information:**

Wikipedia Page: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Michael\\_Wharton](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Michael_Wharton)