

The woman who wrote 'Mary Poppins' leaves Dublin

"YOU sound as if I were going to Kamchatka or something, or that I was a kind of shooting star, poof! you see it one minute and then you don't..."

P. L. Travers, creator of Mary Poppins, poet, essayist, friend of A.E., was all set to leave her Pink House in Leeson St. for a new headquarters in London's Chelsea and was treating the whole thing with her usual disregard of fuss.

"I mean, I will often be back. I can't give up Ireland. It's my father's country and although I was born in Australia in a sense I was brought up here. Even the lace of our clothes was sent for from Ireland."

"I won't have a house here, but maybe and I think of this very seriously, maybe I'll get a place in the country sometime. Donegal is a favourite county of mine."

Over the years I have passed the Pink House many times. It's storeybook colour suggesting that it's architect's child had lent a hand with the design. On rainy days the loosely spread stones on the drive twinkle like stars and steam rises in small drifts from its parked cars. It seemed fitting that someone like P. L. Travers should live here.

"Don't ask me about dates", she was saying. "I don't even know my own age until I look at my passport."

At 17 she became a reporter in Australia with a Sydney newspaper. Already she had had many poems published. "I was a rookie reporter for a short time but my whole aim was to get to this part of the world where I could really test myself. Was I a writer or wasn't I?"

As a reporter in Sydney she specialised in human interest stories, interviews with visiting actors or musicians. "I wasn't a bit good at human interest stories. However a friend of mine, a reporter on the paper, said to me: 'Well I can give you ideas for human interest stories, but you can't have them for nothing. So you'll have to pay

By Michael Fitzgerald

for them. I'll charge you 9p each for them.' Well I bought them. Eventually I saved enough money and I came to England."

It was after she sent a poem to A.E., then Editor of the New Statesman, that a friendship developed which lasted until his death.

"He was just a wonderful big living soul of a man. I have often been asked to write about him. After all I saw him very often and I was with him when he died. But I always felt that I couldn't write his biography because with A.E. you would have to write a biography of a soul and who am I to do that?"

"I was very young and very small amidst all these giants. I remember in one poem I described Yeats as 'that old hawk of the West' and Yeats said to A.E. afterwards: 'I rather like being called a hawk of the west but not an old hawk'. Still, to me he was a very old hawk, he was an antique."

"I didn't know Yeats nearly as well as A.E. but I often saw the two together. Yeats would ask A.E. to bring me when they would have evening talks together. I would sit there alone listening to these two great men."

"Once I went to the lake Isle of Inishfree. I got the boatman to row me there and he said, 'Inishfree! You mean rat island'. But he brought me anyway and I cut as many rowan branches — which were fruiting — as I possibly could. I then brought them to Dublin, to Yeats. I got to his house I prayed that Yeats wouldn't open the door because it was raining and I was bedraggled and there were my great branches which I regretted immediately bringing."



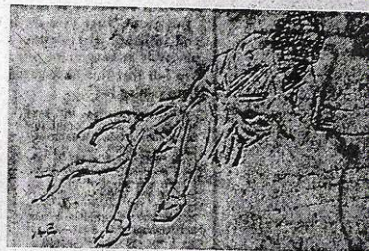
'I called Yeats the old hawk of the west—he didn't like being called old...'

"However, he did open the door. He took one look at me and shouted for someone to come and get me. He wasn't going to deal with this situation at all."

"So somebody took the branches and took me into the kitchen where I could dry my hair and be warm. Then they said 'the master will see

you'. I went upstairs shyly and there in a glass was a little sprig of my rowan berry, not a branch—a sprig was enough. Ah he said to me was, 'I want you to see my canary, she's laid an egg'."

At the moment she feels that the names of A.E., Yeats and James Stephens, have



A drawing of P. L. Travers by A.E.

become synonymous with tourist attractions. 'Tourists are told 'You must see Yeats' Tower, you must see the graveyard where he is laid'. But I would think that the greatest tribute you could make to any of these men would be to read them and make their poems your own."

The first Mary Poppins — was written during an illness. "I wrote it to please myself really and I was very surprised when a friend saw it and said he would take it to a publisher. I was more than surprised when the publisher took it immediately and got all publishers in America fighting to have it."

Why children's books? "Well, C. S. Lewis, creator of the Narnia books, and a great hero of mine, once said: 'I write children's books because the form of a children's story seems most likely to fit what I have to say. I think this is true of myself."

Had she noticed the child's taste in reading material declining over the years since the first Mary Poppins was published in 1934? "Isn't the child's imagination always the same," she answered. "His mind is, of course, different in the sense that he knows about the atom bomb and the metric system... his knowledge has increased. But what about his inner life — isn't that always the same, the questing spirit of wonder, looking for his own myth, and won't he always return to myths?"

"I should be terribly sorry for any child who did not know the fairy stories," she said. "West Disney's production of Mary Poppins became per-

haps the most loved children's film of them all, but what were her impressions? "I cried when I saw it. I said 'Oh God, what have they done'. I really hadn't wanted Disney to do it—I didn't think he was the man I had been with him in Hollywood, and he had made me certain definite promises as to about 20 items. And it seemed to me that these promises had not been kept. But when I got over my first shock, I saw that he had, in a sense, kept to the letter—not the spirit but the letter. So I began to forgive him."

"I began to try to live in the same world as the film. It has a certain clean air about it, although it is not very like my books. In a sense I think it betrays the chief character. But in another sense, it doesn't, because Julie Andrews, who is a friend of mine, has all the necessary integrity, to play the part. She was just directed wrongly. She was quite prepared to put on a black wig with a mob of hair at the back, and a turned up nose, she's a great trooper, and very honest. But to her surprise, as well as mine Disney turned her into a very pretty girl, which really loses the point."

And as for her future — she seems to set back and put it in the light of the same fantasy world from which her many excellent books come. "I'm not in a position to make plans," she says. "I am waiting for the future to come to me. I have something peenthing in me, but if I were to tell you what it was, do you know what would happen... I'd lose it."