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Book Review: 'Price of Fame' by Sylvia Jukes Morris

By 39 Clare Boothe Luce had written three Broadway hits, divorced a drunken golfing millionaire, masterminded Vanity Fair magazine, married Henry Luce and covered both Europe and the Pacific as a war correspondent.

By Edward Kosner
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SAVE PRINT TEXT

Few people today without a Medicare card who Clare Boothe Luce was, but in her prime, at the midpoint of what her husband grandiloquently proclaimed "The American Century," she was as dazzling a figure as any Hollywood goddess.

Actress, playwright, magazine editor, war correspondent, congresswoman, diplomat and consort to Henry Luce of Time Inc., the world's most influential publisher, she marshaled brains, beauty and boundless brass into a long run at the pinnacle of American power and popular culture. Not a bad record for the illegitimate daughter of a quondam prostitute and kept woman born on the wrong side of the Manhattan trolley tracks.

PRICE OF FAME
By Sylvia Jukes Morris
Random House, 735 pages, \$35



Clare Boothe Luce in 1953, the year she became ambassador to Italy. © BETTMANN/CORBIS

But "La Luce," as the adoring Italians called her during her stint as U.S. ambassador in Rome, turns out to have been a tormented soul—lonely, driven, sex-starved and drug-addled, an insecure monster of self-regard. A dervish one moment, an inconsolable depressive the next, she might be diagnosed today as bipolar.

In "Price of Fame," the second volume of her stellar biography of Ann Clare Boothe Brokaw Luce (1903-87), Sylvia Jukes Morris takes up the story she began in "Rage for Fame," published 17 years ago. Both books are models of the biographer's art—meticulously researched, sophisticated, fair-minded and compulsively readable.

The new book stands on its own, but reading the first in tandem enhances appreciation of the Luce phenomenon and the author's achievement.

"Price of Fame" begins in 1943 at one of the crests of Clare's life, as she takes her seat in the House of Representatives as a Connecticut Republican. She was just 39 but had already written three Broadway hits, including "The Women," married and divorced a drunken golfing millionaire, masterminded Vanity Fair magazine, married Henry Luce and covered both Europe and the Pacific as a war correspondent for his Life magazine.

Her ambition for power and beauty for financial reward were insatiable. They were force-fed by her mother, Ann, a lowborn beauty who never married her father, a violin virtuoso and piano salesman, and devoted her life to ensnaring rich men and clambering up the social ladder. Ms. Morris blames Ann Boothe for warping her daughter beyond repair. Clare grew up, she writes in the first volume, "tainted by distorted values, neglecting her own extraordinary talents and becoming pathologically hungry for adulation, wealth and power. Not until extreme old age could she admit, 'Mother poisoned my life.'"

From adolescence through two marriages, Clare was obsessed with powerful men, the richer the better. She had many ardent young suitors but routinely dropped them for insufficient funds. She carried on a long liaison with the financier and presidential kibitzer Bernard Baruch, whose fortune compensated for the inconvenient fact that he was twice her age and Jewish. Baruch magnanimously paid for her trousseau in 1923, when, just 20, she married George Brokaw, who found his flask and putter far more enticing than his gorgeous young bride.

During World War II, she had handsome generals as lovers in both theaters of operation—a top aide to Gen. Douglas MacArthur in Asia and Lt. Gen. Lucian Truscott Jr., who commanded Allied troops in Italy. In her 40s, she converted to Roman Catholicism—and promptly began collecting prominent prelates as her spiritual soul mates. Msgr. Fulton J. Sheen personally shepherded her into the church, and another top-shelf priest served as her personal confessor. And, of course, she gravitated toward politicians, the bigger the better, although, oddly, their power didn't prove much of an aphrodisiac for her.

The main man in her life for 32 tempestuous years was Henry Luce, and their marriage was so antically dysfunctional that Clare (as Ms. Morris calls her throughout the books) could have used it as material for one of her savage Broadway comedies. The austere, imperious Luce of Alan Brinkley's 2010 biography appears here as a dim, shambling presence with mismatched socks holding forth excruciatingly to captive audiences of politicians, Time Inc. editors and dinner guests.

With characteristic modesty, he thought of himself and his wife as "The Luces, the Magnificent." They were interested only in "top" people, but these paragons didn't always see the Luces as the Luces saw themselves. After one sumptuous dinner with the couple at the Plaza, Evelyn Waugh concluded that Henry was "densely stupid" and Clare "clever as a monkey."

Luce seems to have been unmanned by his luminous bride, and their sex life petered out soon after their marriage in 1935. Luce and his wife were forever flying off in opposite directions, and they sublimated their thwarted libidos in a torrent of agonized letters at once threatening divorce and pledging eternal love. After years of cheating on him, Clare learned from Luce that he had managed many one-night stands during their barren marriage and had developed a passionate attachment to young Lady Jeanne Campbell, the granddaughter of Lord Beaverbrook (and later, briefly, the third wife of Norman Mailer). It's somehow delicious to contemplate that Luce and his wife, who imperiously lectured presidents and prime ministers on how to run the world, conducted their private lives like dopey high-school sweethearts. "I would with the utmost joy die for you this or any other night," she once wrote.

Indeed, the histrionics of Clare's marital life and her equally fraught extramarital amours compete in Ms. Morris's narrative with the compelling saga of her life as a congresswoman, as a writer on public affairs, as a right-wing Republican crusader and campaigner, and, most successfully, as the U.S. ambassador to Rome in the early 1950s, when Italian communists flirted with seizing power.

As a politician and pundit, Clare had some notions that were considered progressive for their time. She was an early advocate for civil rights and was one of the first to exorcise Hitler for his persecution of the Jews. After the war, she championed Israel as a homeland for Holocaust survivors. But from the start, she was a shrill critic of Franklin D. Roosevelt and never changed her tune. On a tour through the American West early in 1944, Rep. Luce complained that in the "tragic era" of FDR, America had become a nation of "hypochondriacs, introverts and psychotics." She liked Ike so much that she made more than 100 stump speeches for Dwight Eisenhower in 1952.

Her reward was Rome, making her the first woman in American history chosen to head a major U.S. Embassy. The chancery staff greeted their new leader with trepidation, but Ambassador Luce quickly won them over with her energy, industry and shrewd grasp of the issues. The biggest was a tug of war between the Italians and Marshal Tito, the Yugoslav strongman who had broken with Moscow, over Trieste, the Adriatic port declared a free city by the United Nations after the war. The Italians made Trieste a bargaining chip in negotiations to join a Western military alliance, but the Americans also wanted to encourage Tito's independence from the Soviets. Clare came up with a compromise plan, lobbied tirelessly for it with Ike and his secretary of state, John Foster Dulles, and resolved the issue—a triumph for her.

Typically, her time in Rome was frantic. "Jittery, cranky and miserable over her press image," Ms. Morris writes, the ambassador was dosing herself with nine different drugs, including Benzedrine and Dexedrine, as well as weekly hormone-replacement injections. She was suffering from "frequent attacks of bronchitis, sinusitis, colitis, rheumatism and bouts of fever, not to mention gingivitis and ulcers between the teeth." At length, it was suspected—although never conclusively proved—that Clare had been slowly poisoned by arsenic in the old paint that flaked off the ceiling in the embassy residence. After 3½ tumultuous years, she finally resigned the Rome post, plainly the high point of her public career.

Clare was 53 when she left Rome, and she grew increasingly conservative as the years went by. She was supposed to be working on her memoirs in her desert home in Arizona but couldn't keep her nose out of Washington. One day, she picked up the phone and harangued Sherman Adams, Ike's chief of staff, about the deficiencies of the Eisenhower administration. After the president suffered a cerebral incident, she called Vice President Nixon and demanded that he attend a European security conference in Ike's stead. Finally, in 1959, Eisenhower named her ambassador to Brazil, but her suggestion that neighboring Bolivia be dismembered caused a furor, and she resigned before ever leaving the U.S.

Her paranoia intensified. After Fidel Castro took Havana, she and Luce financed anti-Castro commandos in speedboats to harass the regime. She begged her husband to build a bomb shelter to protect them in a nuclear war. At a dinner party, she accused FDR of having been a communist sympathizer and warned of a cabal of rich Jews who met secretly to rule the world—a classic anti-Semitic trope straight out of "The Protocols of the Elders of Zion." Barry Goldwater was her candidate in 1964.

Out of power in the 1960s, Clare found a new enthusiasm: LSD. She experimented with the drug over the next decade and even got Luce to try it. At the 1972 Republican convention in Miami, she found herself sharing an elevator with the hippie prankster Abbie Hoffman, who asked her: "Hey, have you ever dropped acid?" Ever on guard, Clare admitted using LSD but fibbed, "it was only once and quite some time ago."

Luce's health had been failing for years, and he died of a heart attack in 1967. This was a crushing blow for Clare, who had never really gotten over the death of her 19-year-old daughter, Ann, a Stanford student, in a car crash in 1944. Over the remaining 20 years of her life after Henry Luce's death, increasingly frail and painfully lonely, she retreated from their last home in Hawaii and wound up, as it happens, in a flat at the Watergate in Washington, that landmark of Republican ignominy.

She stuck up for Richard Nixon as the scandal enveloped his presidency. She urged the president to defy Congress's demand for his incriminating White House tapes, Ms. Morris writes, even sending him the 15th-century Scottish admiral Sir Andrew Barton's self-exhortation, "I am hurt, but I am not slain."

She was now even fairer game for her critics. In a 1974 Esquire profile, her old Vanity Fair colleague Helen Rowland delivered an uncharitable verdict that could have come from Clare's own sharp pen: "I believe that despite the stunning and ineluctable procession of her triumphs, she was basically an unhappy woman, never satisfied, never content. . . . She parlayed a nimble, mousetrap mind, apodictic nerve, and a will as tough as lignum vitae beneath an exquisitely angelic façade into one of the most strategically calculated and fascinating success stories of the century. Her technique was simple: aim for the top."

Clare Boothe Luce died of brain cancer in 1987 at the age of 84. She had outlasted her family, her old loves, many of her enemies and most of her fame.

—Mr. Kosner is the former editor of Newsweek, New York, Esquire and the New York Daily News.

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