

Moving with the times

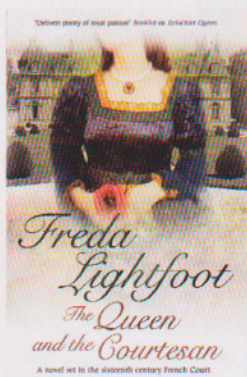
Myra Kersner learns how Freda Lightfoot has taken on the role of gritty heroine and battled with changing times

Freda Lightfoot has always been surrounded by words and by books, firstly as a writer of children's articles for *Guide* and *Brownie* magazines, 'when I got bored with the nappy routine', then moving on to 'grown up' articles for women's magazines. 'I thought writing was going to be easy, then found it wasn't.'

Having worked as a primary school teacher, she wrote a career book on primary teaching, 'but that only earned me £20 before the publisher went bust!' When her children were small and the family moved to Kendal in the Lake District Freda became physically surrounded by books as she opened a children's bookshop. But 'like Topsy the children and the shop grew,' so there was no time to 'knock off the odd novel' as she'd once dreamed. 'For one thing I was overwhelmed by the brilliance and success of the books on the shelves. For another it expanded into a general bookshop and I was also busy giving talks in libraries and schools.'

During a period of ill health, while living in a semi-derelict cottage on Shap Fell in several acres of quiet, peaceful countryside Freda dreamed of 'the good life' among the sheep and hens but gradually the urge to write grew stronger and she wanted to get back to the novel. Fortunately it rained a lot and she had to spend much time indoors so she did start writing again. Humorous articles for specialist magazines about life in the country, children's articles and short stories. 'The first was published in *My Weekly*. Overall I published about 40 in *Yours*, *Woman's Realm*, *My Story* and many others. I tried to get them out faster than they came back. The post man would say - "I've got a nice fat one for you today." I didn't like to tell him I really wanted a thin one.' At that time she also wrote a couple of Mills & Boon contemporaries.

Freda had her first Mills & Boon Historical, *The Madeiran Legacy*, published after a move to Cornwall in 1988, and it was then that she joined the RNA. 'I wrote notes by hand while sitting behind the counter of our gift shop in Fowey and had to be dragged out of the eighteenth century by the customers.' Eventually she hired



Don't believe things are always as wonderful as they appear. But it's how you deal with them that counts. You have to find the positives in life. You have to be excited about the future and whatever you're writing next.

an assistant so that she could continue writing on her typewriter. 'When I finally got the call "we want to buy your book" I ran to all the neighbouring shopkeepers I was so excited.' She wrote the next four in odd spare hours.

Her first cheque bought an Amstrad 9512, Freda's first flirtation with computer technology, though certainly not her last.

By this time the plots in her novels had become too complex for Mills & Boon and she pitched the idea of a Victorian saga to Darley Anderson. He showed no interest. She then spent the next nine months writing a saga about a woman in WWII who wanted to be a sheep farmer. This time Darley Anderson sold it in three weeks and in 1994 Hodder published *Luckpenny Land* and offered her a three-book contract. Freda went on to write 26 regional, family sagas, set around the Lake District and the environs of Manchester.

So, has everything been wonderful since being published? 'The first book was perhaps the easiest, because I had nothing to lose, but the second was very scary. However, I pushed on. You need faith in yourself, and people were very supportive, particularly after a family trauma in 1998 which stopped me writing for a while. It was my friends in the RNA that got me writing again after that, and my next book, *Polly's War*, became a *Sunday Times* bestselling paperback in 2001.' This was followed by *A Favourite Child*, which was among the *Sunday Times* top 20 hardbacks. It wasn't long before Freda was one of the top 50 most borrowed authors from libraries. 'I've always done a lot of self promotion, running creative writing workshops, giving talks. I've been to more WI meetings than

most members.' She has done lots of radio interviews and had a TV lunch time interview, thanks to the PR work of her supportive husband.

'I've always been very productive. I was writing two 120,000 word novels a year at one time.' But