

Elsie Locke: anti-nuclear arms veteran

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By KEN COATES

SHE has the front door of her cottage fronting the Avon River already open. It is typical of her. There is no porch, and she does not want me standing in the drenching rain while she comes to the door.

Elsie Locke at 79 is as sharp as ever. She should be declared a national treasure. But then she probably would not be all that keen, particularly if she felt her role was being overstated.

As a historian, she is a stickler for balance and accuracy. As an activist she is tough and resilient, and a straight talker.

She rejects the idea of an interview in which she would describe her life as a woman battling for women's rights. She has done that a dozen times lately.

But her eyes light up as she slips into the role of peace activist and responds with vigour on how she feels about the possibility of New Zealand going back into the ANZUS alliance.

New Zealanders would go as voluntary puppets, she says, with the US demanding that the country not only let American warships visit but that it also wipe the anti-nuclear legislation.

"That's absolutely appalling, and if we went in on those conditions, we would be saying: 'No matter what you ask, we'll do it'."

"No fear... not for this chick," she says, using a phrase that strips back the years. "To me it would be such cringing. I can't bear the thought of it."

Opposition to militarism and nuclear arms has been much on Elsie Locke's mind over the last few years. She has been working on her latest book, "Peace People", a history of New Zealand peace activists. This will be published in Christchurch and is due out in February.

She talks in the little book-lined den in which she has written dozens, maybe hundreds, of letters to "The Press" on this and many other subjects, as well as her well-known children's and other books with New Zealand social history themes.

She lives with her husband, Jack, in the same cottage they have occupied for 47 years in the Avon Loop, the quiet, neighbourly character of which they value highly. They still support efforts to retain it.

What makes Elsie Locke so interesting and worth listening to is that she has insights based not only on her research, but on her own involvement and experience in many of the events about which she writes.

She is adamantly opposed to New Zealand giving up its nuclear-free policy. This would be "letting the side down all over the world".

"The side" consists of people's organisations rather than governments, and New Zealand's non-nuclear policy has been an inspiration to them, she says.

Elsie Locke moves a little stiffly as she gets up to answer the telephone. She had a double-knee operation for

arthritis more than a year ago, and she says it has been most successful.

She takes morning swims in the Centennial Pool, rides her bicycle and walks, although not on the same scale as her beloved tramping of former years.

She is a small woman, alert, perceptive, and well informed. She raised a family of four children and among other things is the successful author of 20 books, both children's and adult. She is a long-time activist on environment and women's issues and a one-time member of the Communist Party (this is another subject she is not prepared to discuss).

Elsie has plenty of natural stamina, according to those who know her. She gives the impression of a person strongly motivated by the desire to continue writing what she feels deeply has to be written.

She travels around the country, visits schools, gives addresses, and follows a carefully planned routine with little concession to age other than taking a short rest now and then.

Why has she spent a lifetime opposing armed conflict?

Childhood memories include that of her parents in the small town of Waiuku, near Auckland, reading down the long lists of war dead in the newspaper.

At Anzac parades there were always people crying, she recalls. "I would ask: 'Mum, why is Mrs Davis crying?' She would say: 'For her son who didn't come back'."

"And I asked why Miss So-and-so was crying, and my mother would say because she lost the young man she was going to marry."

Her mother told her that World War I should never have happened, and could have been avoided. Elsie Locke never forgot that because it was in the context of what war could do to people.

Later she read a book that contained photographs of people who had their faces badly disfigured in the war.

"It was horrible, and when visiting people at Warkworth I was taken to see a man whose face had been half shot away and who never went off his farm."

Then an English nurse, who had worked in a hospital in England for returned soldiers, came to New Zealand and spoke out in the anti-conscription movement at the start of World War II until it was suppressed by Prime Minister Peter Fraser.

Some of the men in the English hospital had been so badly disfigured that their children did not even know they were still alive.

The nurse said the children were brought into an area where their fathers could at least see them at play, but not be seen. She could never forget

the tears that ran down the men's faces as they watched.

It was then, the nurse said, that she swore that as long as she lived she would never support another war. Those words had a big impact on young Elsie Farrelly (as she was then) and she never forgot them.

It is nonsense, she adds, to suggest that New Zealand would have a greater voice if drawn into a military alliance with the Americans.

The only important voice New Zealand has, she asserts, is through the United Nations where NZ has won respect through its nuclear-free stand. If public opinion remained strongly in favour of retaining the legislation, then it would be retained.

"I don't think a Government that has lost so much popularity on other issues would risk its neck over that," she says. And as an afterthought: "Maybe that's a hope — we don't know how much arm-twisting is going on."

"David Lange's book was quite a revelation as to that, with ambassadors and diplomats not leaving him alone, and no doubt the same thing is going on now."

Elsie Locke cites evidence that in the Gulf War information was controlled to a greater extent than has happened in any other war.

She describes as very frightening the power of the United States to control public information. The Gulf War had been represented as a UN war dealing with aggression.

BUT, she says, there have been other aggressions, the most notorious of which was Indonesia taking over East Timor. Even more recently, what right did the US have to invade Panama?

"Did anyone say this was naked aggression and we must send our armies? Of course we didn't," she says. "The Gulf War was over oil and if it had not been there, there wouldn't have been all that action."

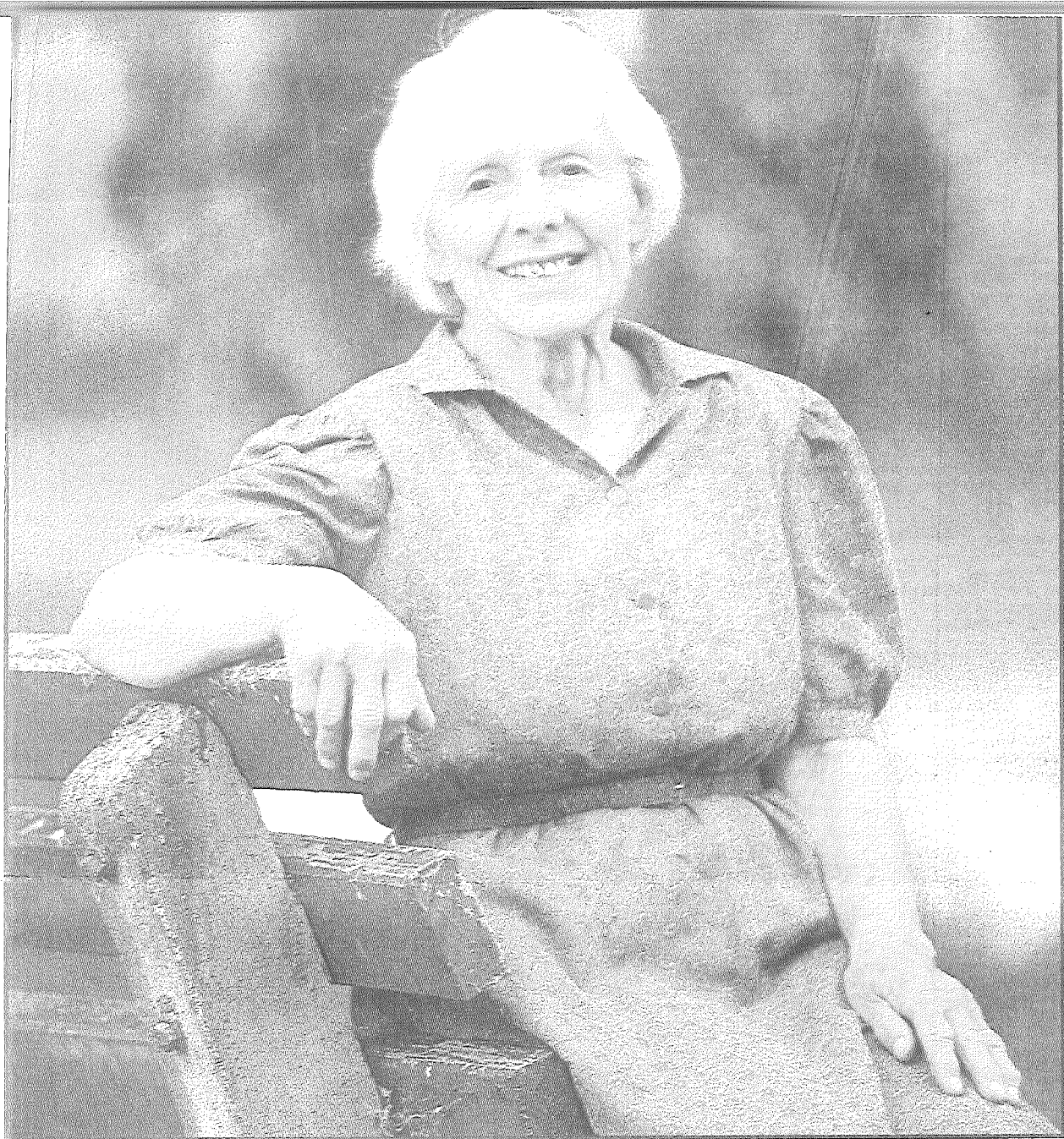
As a long-time campaigner for nuclear disarmament, Elsie Locke says she has always regarded nuclear weapons as worse than Hitler's gas chambers — "a complete atrocity".

All attempts since 1945 to internationalise nuclear weapons broke down, and the problem compounded.

"And yet when someone comes forward with a measure to partly dismantle them, generally people are pathetically grateful. We should never have had them in the first place."

Elsie Locke considers that President Bush's announced reduction in nuclear arms has less to do with a desire for disarmament than with finance. A third of the world's arms spending is American, she says, and far too heavy a burden for any nation to carry for a long time.

One reason why the Soviets are in



Elsie Locke: "Incorrigible optimist".

— Photograph by DEAN KOZANIC

such a bad economic position is because too much expenditure has gone on armaments. They just cannot afford it, she observes.

This woman who, when quite young was shocked by the realisation of what horrific damage war could do to humans, maintains that most people do not realise the enormity of the threat posed by nuclear bombs.

"They think of them as just worse weapons, not as weapons in a totally different category," she says.

She asked why people should stand in judgement on Iraq over its nuclear weapon project when many other nations were in the same position.

"That's one side of it. The other is: where did Iraq get all the materials from to build these things? The whole question of the arms trade comes into it."

Of course she is pleased at the decline of the Soviet Union as a world military power, and the end of the Cold War.

But she warns that as long as nuclear weapons exist, there is the danger they can be used. The Americans threatened to use them in the Korean War, and they had them on vessels facing Iraq in the Gulf War.

One of the saving graces of the US, she says, is that it still has freedom of publication.

"Most of the information we have on these things comes from the US, so we don't know whether the Soviet Union has been doing the same."

At first it comes as a surprise to hear Elsie Locke say she has never been a complete pacifist, but it soon becomes clear that even-handed views and

understanding people and their rights underlie her stance.

"I have never said there are no circumstances in which you would not fight; for example, the Maori would have been a lot worse off if they had not resisted in the colonial wars."

While she opposed conscription, she does not object to voluntary service. She does not oppose armies and navies on principle, but thinks they should be purely for home defence.

"I don't like it when they're trained for jungle warfare," she says. "We haven't got any jungles to be warring in."

"Most people say: 'Let's have patrol vessels and keep an eye on people pinching our fish, and let's have planes ready for search and rescue'."

"There's a strong current thought that says we would be available for peace-making or mediatory efforts."

Elsie Locke says the war with Hitler became unavoidable although it could have been stopped earlier. But New Zealand should never have been involved in Vietnam or Korea.

On the other hand, what were the Nicaraguans to do? she asks. And people in the Philippines who feel their lands are being taken from them, she says, are fighting back.

Whatever one thinks about Elsie Locke's views, they are always forcefully but cogently put. The spirit that prompted her, as the youngest of six children in a family that was far from well off, to get first a secondary and then a university education, is still very much alive.

She retains a strong sense of optimism.

Campaigning for peace brought her

flak in the early days, "but not recently; it's a feather in the cap now".

She adds: "I really think there is a ground-swell of revulsion against war, in general everywhere, though there'll still be people who'll say we can't avoid it and we've got to be ready for it."

As for what is happening to New Zealand and the welfare state, her views on that are literally another story. But here, too, she describes herself as "the incorrigible optimist".

She says that most New Zealanders have been brought up to support and help one another. Co-operation has been a big part of national life.

"Now the ideal put forward is that it's every man for himself and the devil take the hindmost."

WILL that spoil the national character? She does not think so. People are finding new ways to look after one another in the "underground economy" in line with the old saying that it is the poor that helps the poor.

"I don't think we will lose out in the end and be reduced to a totally grabbing society," says Elsie Locke. "I think there's enough resistance in the ordinary population for this not to happen."

A knock at the door precedes the entrance of a woman with a petition against widening leafy Avonside Drive. It seems to be a worthy cause and I sign.

"Have you given enough consideration to the proposal and the implications to sign?" asks Elsie. Again, it is so typical of her.

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