

Elsie Locke: A Tribute

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Association, children's novelist and persistent contributor to the letters to the editor column, as well as wife, mother, grandmother. She died in Christchurch in April 2001. Alison Kagen convened a panel of speakers for 2001 Women's Studies Association Conference who spoke about their memories of Elsie. These tributes to Elsie are offered by three generations of women who loved her and were inspired by her.

Jackie Matthews

In August 1952 Elsie Locke saved my sanity. She was 40, I was 25 and just back from two years as a translator/journalist for a peace/politics international review in Paris. I had a child of 14 months and was pregnant with the next. Elsie saved me by writing in an article in *Here and Now* a left wing monthly that suggested that I should not be terrified by John Bowlby. Maternal deprivation would not ruin my son if I went back to work teaching. So I did.

I went on to read other articles of hers on nuclear weapons, colonialism, discrimination against women and the Cold War. All expressed clearly and accessibly views we shared. It was strictly one-way traffic from her to me. Then came the big one, 'Looking for answers' in *Landfall*, 1958. It traced her journey from the 1932 march of the unemployed in Auckland, through the thirties, and the war, and the atom bomb, to the revelations of the 20th Congress of the Soviet Union Communist Party and the tragedies of Hungary and Suez in 1956. Elsie subjected her convictions to a painfully scrupulous scrutiny. She retained her belief in internationalism uniting the human race, and her awareness of class. She had confidence in community, cooperation and collective action, as against individualism, competition and market forces. She envisaged possible alternative forms of socialism. She made explicit what many of us were groping for.

The immediate and healing project was the New Zealand Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. We had Aldermaston-style peace marches on Parliament (Elsie believed we first met there. But how could I forget the dynamo she must have been at 50?) I remember receiving in Wellington heaps of well-argued CND material from Elsie and Mary Woodward and used it when Pauline Stafford and I appeared before the House Petitions Committee to support a Nuclear-Free Southern Hemisphere petition.

Then in the sixties Elsie began writing a social history for the School Publications Branch of the Education Department. 'I had to tramp a path through thousands of words for every word I wrote', she said later. The six booklets were published in 1984 as 'The Kauri and the Willow'. The stories were vividly told through credible three-dimensional characters. Her novel, *The Runaway Settlers*, won an award for a much-loved book over 30 years later. There were regular articles in *Comment* and the *New Zealand Monthly Review* on a huge range of topics.

The next situation where in retrospect Elsie and I might have been close was in 1970s feminism. I was involved in a Women's Studies course founded with Phillida Bunkle at Victoria University of Wellington in 1975. At the 1977 United Women's Convention in Christchurch, Elsie spoke in a plenary session to hundreds of women.

But I wasn't there. I was in France on my first sabbatical leave. I came home and read her words but they were still disembodied.

So it wasn't really until I began researching Robin Hyde and exploring the thirties that I realised where Elsie had been for the twenty years before her work touched me in 1952. She'd had a whole socialist feminist life while I was still at school. Looking for Hyde in *Woman Today*, I found Elsie joining the Communist Party, editing *Working Woman* then *Woman Today*, co-founding The Family Planning Association (initially called 'The Sex Hygiene and Birth Regulation Society' but a mis-spelt advertisement for 'Girth' helped persuade members a name-change was needed), appearing before the McMillan Abortion Commission in 1937, working full-time as a solo mother in 1938 after her marriage to Fred Freeman ended.³ She was never an unquestioning Communist Party member. Officials were heard to mutter that she suffered from feminist and pacifist illusions. Then she married Jack Locke and moved from Wellington to Christchurch, had three more children, wrote poetry and faced two years in hospital with tuberculosis. There she did a little light reading – one and a half volumes of *Das Kapital*, Oliver Shreiner's *Women and Labour*, Bebel's *Woman and Socialism*. It's odd to think of Elsie and Rona Bailey and Sonya Davies in the 40s and 50s all in hospital with tuberculosis and reading Marxist literature.

While in the 80s I was going back to explore her life of writing and militancy, Elsie was moving forward, writing *Stranger at the Gates*, *Peace People* and *Two Peoples, One Land*, all major books, involving tremendous research. Once I wrote to Elsie asking had she personal memories of Hyde in the thirties. 'Not anything significant' she wrote in mild reproof, 'but I'm glad you're writing about her and you're hardly short of material!'

So I didn't finally meet Elsie in the flesh till less than ten years ago, when we began working on *Stick out, Keep left*, the memoirs of Margaret Thorn. She had preserved and promoted the manuscript for 30 years and now it was finally to be published. We met for a brisk day's work in Wellington. Next I went to stay in her little house with the big vegetable garden and fruit trees in the Avon loop where she was caring for Jack. Later she came to me and looked incredulously at my rambling house and weedy large unproductive garden with tree houses and weedy lawns. We worked hard together editing and referencing Margaret Thorn, but Elsie's mind was already moving on. East Timor, the environment, globalisation. Had I read this? Protested about that?

It's strange. The friendship with Elsie of the last years seems now to go right back into the past so that when I read her again, I hear her distinctive voice in everything she wrote. I hear her as a young woman of 25 appearing before the McMillan Inquiry into Abortion and Contraception, rebuked for requesting public funding for contraception, which some sections of the community strongly opposed. She said firmly, 'In that case I think the Government has to look at it from the point of view of the majority of the community, not from that of the minority . . . Taxes are made for quite a lot of things that many of us don't believe in.'

Rosemary Du Plessis

I first encountered the words of Elsie Locke when I read *The Runaway Settlers* to my daughter in the mid 1970s. It fired both our imaginations and, as recent immigrants to New Zealand, it transformed our engagement with Lyttleton and Banks Peninsular. But it was not until 1977 that I encountered Elise in person on the stage at the Christchurch Town Hall during the United Women's Convention. I remember being struck by her vitality as she spoke from the podium at the controversial closing

ceremony of this gathering from which male members of the media had been excluded. She spoke about her mother and aunt escaping through the window to exercise their vote in 1893 with the same vivid attention to detail that she brought to writing for children. Elsie also embraced the necessity for debate and division between women arguing that: 'I don't think dissensions and divisions are anything to weep about. I think that they are an indication of vigour, passion and commitment. Stormy controversy is a sign of life, and peaceful agreement can sometimes mean nobody is really doing any thinking.'¹

Elsie's political activism exemplified the multiplicity of women's struggles for civil rights, jobs, wages, contraception and maternity care, but also for peace, justice, health and equality. She wrote about the value of women's domestic labour and the importance of their access to education, jobs and earnings in the 1930s. She recognised the necessity of women's opportunities to control whether or not they conceived children and worked in very practical ways to facilitate women's access to contraception. She marched against the use of nuclear weapons in the 1950s and wrote about the Treaty of Waitangi in the 1980s. And she made a significant contribution to the early years of the Feminist Studies programme at University of Canterbury in the late 1980s, cycling out from her home in the Avon loop to talk to students. I remember her arguing at a university International Women's Day seminar that her experience as a working class teenager at a country school provided her with the independence and resourcefulness she needed at university – an independence that young women were less likely to acquire at elite girls' schools. She was also generous with her time, especially when students contacting her could demonstrate that they had 'done their homework'. Every now and then I would get the odd photocopied article that she thought would be of interest to me or to students. The last was an article relating to women's rights activism in Canada with a little note: 'How clearly parallel it is to our women's history!'

Women Today, edited by Elsie in the late 1930s, was, like the *Women's Studies Journal*, a collectively produced publication with a few people who took responsibility for putting the final issue together. There was an Advisory Board of women from all over the country who were called on now and then to contribute and provide advice. There was also a Sponsors' League who took on the job of publicising and selling the magazine and encouraging women to contribute articles. Those involved in running the magazine were involved in discussion groups, musical evenings and conferences where they addressed their goals of 'peace, freedom and progress; advancement of women's rights; and friendship with women of all nations'. Like many women activists today, they also disagreed among themselves. Elsie's Communist Party connections were targeted by conservative politicians during a national promotional tour she embarked on for *Women Today* and some members of the editorial committee wanted Elsie to leave. Finally, at the end of 1939, the committee made the decision to close the magazine. The ostensible reason was finances, but political differences and the beginning of the war were the key factors. Elsie would take her journalistic skills into other forms of writing over the next fifty years.²

New Zealanders were once, unfairly perhaps, described as 'passionless people'. Elsie Locke was one of the most passionate people I have known. She radiated an interest in what was going on around her and in the work of others. She worked with words and she believed in them as tools for change. Her presence in Christchurch made me feel proud to live in this city and I am going to expect to see her face on all sorts of occasions in the future and feel her absence. But I will not forget the luminous energy, the sharp wit, the swift turn of her head or her wonderful laugh.

Alison Locke

I am the youngest child of Elsie Locke. Others will write about her influences on them in regard to her more well-known and public achievements. I want to write about all the personal gifts she gave to me.

The first is a deep love of the New Zealand landscape and in particular the mountains. My mother was a country girl at heart and our adventurous summer holidays saw us travelling the length of New Zealand, always to a different place each year. With no car, public transport and hitchhiking led us to strange places and interesting people. My mother introduced me to tramping and we had the best of times away from city life in the hills and mountains. She went tramping to more wild places than I have been yet, including distant parts of Fiordland and the Copland Pass. I learnt a lot about people from all walks of life on our trips as well as learning to love our landscapes.

The second gift is that of music. Mum encouraged me to learn music from an early age, which must have stretched a tight family budget paying for lessons and instruments. She also took me to see all sorts of live music from the Vienna Boys' Choir to *Showboat*, to Peter, Paul and Mary. I was always aware too that my grandmother, who I never met, was responsible in the same way for encouraging and enabling Mum to learn and appreciate music. This chain has continued because in later years we both enjoyed supporting my daughter Jessie on her musical path. Mum came to see me perform with my choir recently, which carried on a well-kept family tradition of supporting family members in any of their endeavours. Our last outing together was to watch the Christchurch City Choir sing Belshazzars' Feast in the Town Hall. Watching Mum listening it was easy to see how good music enriched her spirit, as it does mine.

A third gift was that of setting me on the path of deciding to have all my children born at home. The beginning of this journey was the familiar story of my birth in the house at Oxford Terrace. Our children were welcomed into the world in the heart of the family, a joy shared by all of us.

Another gift is the ability to support friends and colleagues. Mum was generous with her time and energy and there was always a letter, a phone call or a visit when there was something to celebrate, for an achievement or in sad and difficult times. It will be hard to keep up to Mum's standard in this respect, but worth trying.

Although I am in no way a public person, the inheritance from Mum and my father is a deep sense of social justice, integrity and service to others, all of which influences the work that I do as a school counsellor and in my approach to family life. I have found that since Mum's death I have attended several peace events, somewhat more than usual for me, which may say something about Mum being a hard act to follow in life, and it having been easier for me to stay out of her shadow. All of her gifts to me are even more precious to me now, as I attempt to follow in own way, my inheritance.

Libby Plumridge

Many people know now of Elsie Locke. Indeed during her lifetime, Elsie used to joke she was a 'living archive'; 'living treasure' I used to answer, but with her peremptory good sense and lack of egotism in a bad sense, she sniffed this away. Elsie will be justly celebrated as a heroic figure for her zeal for the rights of women to health and happiness, a zeal that lead to work in politics, in feminist journalism, and in women's health organisations that flourish today in the Family Planning Association. But for me, Elsie's importance as a feminist came while I knew nothing

of such achievement. Indeed in the days when I first became aware of Family Planning for instance, other women were at the helm, women like Phyllis Zeff, and committed workers like my own mother. I did not associate Elsie with this.

For me Elsie's impact as a feminist came through the way she lived as a woman. She not only believed in women's rights to equality, she expected it for them and of them. This, despite being a woman of her generation and shouldering the usual task of housework without question – at least without causing me to question. The division of labour in the Locke home was in most ways like the division of labour in my own home. The separation of spheres between her and Jack had been so complete, she once told me, that when Jack retired and came into the domain of the kitchen he did not know what uncooked rice looked like. But her attitude to housework was that it should never contain women. When I got married she gave me a set of bright orange pots 'because being in the kitchen is so boring'. While she was a really inventive cook, serving vegetables grown by Jack in dishes I encountered nowhere else, cuisine was not a pastime, and her pleasures lay elsewhere.

In her pleasures she opened the door to intellect and culture otherwise impossible for a working class girl like me. Elsie validated for me the world of literature and the arts. Jack, like my parents, worked hard in manual labour all his working life. I felt Elsie and her kids were of my world. But they relished things that were unknown or incomprehensible in my family. Like most working class families, we just did not go to the opera, live theatre, or art exhibitions. We did not discuss literature and books. Life was hard, and while there was great respect for education in my family, education had been so completely denied to my parents and they hardly knew the pleasures it could deliver.

Elsie did, and she encouraged its enthusiasms and pleasures in me and other young women. I well remember tramping up Mount Herbert, eating her Chinese chew and talking ideas. I remember tramping in Stewart Island, expounding and wrestling with the doom and gloom of Dostoyevsky. She must have been amused at me, and other young women like me, gulping down ideas and gobbling up books. Because of her, I went to operas, concerts, plays, invited as Ali's friend. She took me to opening nights of the Group in Christchurch, confident in the expectation that one day I'd be a significant painter. Indeed she introduced me as such. Her confidence in me couldn't effect that result, but in other ways her confidence was hugely important. I always felt she expected intellectual engagement by women as normal. She expected young women of the working class to relish the pleasures of high culture that many regarded as the domain of the middle class. There was no pleasure of intellect, culture and the arts which she saw as not for working class girls. In her own commitment to writing, she exemplified how to be serious about creative process. These things were within the capacity of woman. And if she did struggle with the burdens of the 'double shift' before there was any analysis even, of such a thing, she deeply loved her family life.

As I was able to engage more with her, so she revealed more of her thought and analysis. She was a complex woman and had a fine mind of the first intellect. She was the most thoroughgoing nationalist I ever met, and yet a deeply committed internationalist. She read more widely about the international scene than anyone I met; yet New Zealand was where she saw her political commitments. She dismissed as contemptible the heritage of the 'colonial cringe' that led so many to esteem everything foreign as more important, significant and somehow worthy than that to be found in New Zealand. She would have none of this; New Zealand was where she would fight her political and intellectual battles; New Zealand cultural forms were as

exciting and stimulating as any. I doubt her contributions to the New Zealand scene of politics and culture are as yet fully appreciated. By the end of her life she was an almost irresistibly charming figure, tiny yet indomitable. While it is true that she thus became part of the character of Christchurch life, she was never just a 'character'. Hers was a solid intellectual contribution to art and letters, culture and politics in New Zealand. At the same time, she embodied what she thought. To have had Elsie in my life has been an almost daily reassurance and comfort in the possibilities of being woman. And the best thing was that she did it through pleasure as well as struggle. I hope other young women of working class families have such feminists in their lives.

Gina Moss

Elsie Locke was my Grandmother and she had a strong influence on my life. As a kid I was always aware that Elsie knew a lot of people and that most of those people thought very highly of her. I knew that she supported the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament because she had a sticker on her door that said 'Nuclear Free New Zealand'. But, I always assumed that most Nanas had those stickers on their doors. The part of her career that I was most aware of was her writing. I was very proud to be a granddaughter of the author of *The Runaway Settlers*. I didn't know anything about her involvement with feminism, I didn't realise that she had brought my mother up to be a feminist, and that in turn I would be one too.

She wasn't a conventional Nana. She didn't spoil us, or do the usual cooking and craft that most grandmothers are supposed to do. She left that up to Grandad. She used to give him pocket money each week because otherwise he would have spent all their money on us. She was definitely an equal partner in the Locke household, and I never thought that it was anything unusual because Alison, my 'mother' and Elsie's youngest daughter, is also an equal partner with my Dad in our family. It was the way she lived her life day to day which has had the most effect on me.

I have always believed that women can, and deserve to be able to, do anything they want to. It is not something I have ever really thought about consciously because in our family it is the way things are. Not many women can say that they are a third generation female attending university in New Zealand, but I can.

Elsie was a woman with a 'no fuss' attitude. She was never sentimental, but always emotional about things she believed in. I only saw her cry once. That is a character trait that I have inherited and am very proud of. I don't think that it is useful to get passionate about small, trivial, unimportant things because we should save our energy for the things that truly matter. I am sure that Elsie would agree with me on that. I try to keep this in mind when I am in meetings with the Aoraki Young Greens.

The Aoraki Young Greens is a young persons' group within the Green Party of Aotearoa New Zealand and I am a member. Meetings can easily become bogged down with trivial issues, and it would be easy to burn out from the stress of it all. One thing I would ask Elsie if she was still around, is how she managed to stay motivated and escape burnout during her long life as an activist.

Some of the most valuable things Elsie has taught me are; to enjoy education, that one person's contribution can make a difference in the world, women deserve to do anything they wish to, to keep a sense of humour about life and that to be respected a person needs integrity. Although, having said that, the most important thing Elsie Locke ever did for me was to be my Nana.

Notes

- ¹ Elsie Locke, 'Towards the Future' in Joan Browne et al. (eds), *Changes, Chances, Choices: A Report on the United Women's Convention 1977* (United Women's Convention, Christchurch, 1978) pp. 60-1.
- ² Elsie Locke, 'About *Women Today*', *Turnbull Library Record*, 29 (1996) pp. 47-58.
- ³ McMillan Report AJHR, 8 31A (Government Printer, Wellington, 1937).