

Friday 18 September 2009
Launch, Grand Hall, Parliament Buildings, Wellington

Maureen Birchfield, *Looking for Answers: A Life of Elsie Locke*, Canterbury University Press: Christchurch, 2009

When Maureen contacted me earlier this year asking if I would speak on this occasion, it took me half a nano-second to think of what my answer might be – yes! Both Elsie and Maureen were people I respected. I was intrigued to see how they would meet on the page.

In short – the answer is very well indeed.

When Elsie came to Wellington from Auckland in 1933, as 21-year-old Elsie Farrelly, she took a job as a cook-general. It was a live-in position with a wealthy family. She was to be paid £1 a week with a half day off on Thursday. Elsie worked conscientiously to meet the exacting standards set for the work she was to do but came unstuck when the daughter of the house was forced to miss her weekly golf game to show Elsie how to roast a chicken. A cook-general should have known how to do this.

Elsie was given 3 days' notice and shown the door – but as her employer was ushering her out while also admonishing Elsie's gall in taking a position for which she was not qualified, she was staggered to receive the following reply: 'Mrs Brown, if you found yourself in a strange city with four shillings in your pocket, I don't think you would be so fussy about the rights and wrongs of it.' (p.99)

Here is Elsie, in Chapter 4 of Maureen Birchfield's wonderful *Looking for Answers: A Life of Elsie Locke*, speaking out from the page with all the directness that those who knew her will recognize.

It wasn't easy to get a job in 1933. And if you were young, single and female – even with a university degree – the options were limited and circumstances were pressing - as you weren't eligible for the dole.

Elsie wasn't someone to be deterred by obstacles, or someone who sat around waiting for something to happen. She'd come to Wellington – hitchhiking with Bob Lowry – to continue with political work as well as to earn a living. In what she described as her 'extended family' of the relatively young New Zealand Communist Party, Elsie found a home. And in her, the Party found someone who could type. And think, and write, and organize, and cycle from the Hutt Valley to Wellington for evening meetings.

Between chapters 4 and 8 Elsie becomes a key person in the Party, founds and writes the newspaper *Working Woman*, convenes women's meetings, helps produce the *Workers Weekly*, marries, has her first child, negotiates the snakes and ladders of being wife then mother; simultaneously plays a key role in setting up the Sex Hygiene and Birth Regulation Society – the predecessor to Family Planning; founds, writes for and edits a more broadly based progressive magazine *Woman Today*, whose striking early covers (from 1937) are reproduced in the book (p.169); gets unmarried; meets Jack Locke, remarries, moves to Christchurch and a little later, sets up house at 392 Oxford Terrace, has 2 more children. Depression, governments and parties of extreme left and right, world war, were also Elsie's world, and daily business.

There are another 7 chapters, another child, and much of the life yet to come.

What Maureen Birchfield has brought us is a magnificently rich book. Rich in the depth of research, rich in scope, and most of all, finely weighed in its warm but clear understanding of her subject. The book – the life – has also been beautifully, almost lavishly, presented – with many stunning photographs and documents reproduced through it. I never thought I'd be *thanking* the NZ Security Intelligence Service (and its predecessor agencies) – but I do – their recordkeeping has proved valuable – even if put to a very different purpose than originally intended. One finds research assistants in strange places! Congratulations also to Canterbury University Press for their commitment to the project.

For someone who spent so much of her life working for *collective* good, and writing about ‘ordinary’ people, Elsie might not have approved of a biography on this scale. For while she wrote her memoirs (and encouraged others to do so – notably Margaret Thorn, whose work, with Jackie Matthews, she edited and published in 1997¹) she was certainly ambivalent about the kind of valorisation - extravagant veneration – directed to her and some of her generation as elder stateswomen later in life. Having her work recognized was one thing, having her life put on a pedestal was something different.

Maureen’s biography is not a life on a pedestal – an old fashioned monument to a heroic life. It is something more powerful and I think something more enduring than that.

There are many, many things this book does and tells. I’m going to point to three:

First, it gives us a history of the 20thC as lived by someone who persistently, and insistently, engaged with the major events, dilemmas and ideas which shaped that world (a world that is now past and is fast receding from general memory). Elsie was born in 1912, grew up in Waiuku, and died in Christchurch in 2001 – her life spanning almost the whole of the century which Eric Hobsbawm has described as *The Age of Extremes* and Mark Mazower has termed (in relation to European 20thC and its influence) *The Dark Continent: Europe’s Twentieth Century*.²

Elsie became politically aware as a student at Auckland University College in the early 1930s, and never ceased to pursue answers to the questions of power, justice and conscience. Apart from one trip out of New Zealand (to Canada) in 1976, she spent all of her life in this country (and most of it living

¹ Margaret Thorn, *Stick Out, Keep Left. An autobiography of Margaret Thorn*, edited by Elsie Locke and Jacque Matthews, Auckland University Press/Bridget Williams Books, 1997.

² Eric Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes: a history of the world, 1914-1991*, Michael Joseph: London, 1994; Mark Mazower, *Dark Continent: Europe’s twentieth century*, Vintage Books, London, 2000.

at the same address in inner Christchurch), yet her engagement, her interest, was always in the world at large, as well as the world at her gate.

How many other New Zealand 'housewives' (as she was often described, and which in some ways her life did resemble) would have been writing to Nikita Khrushchev, the new General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, in 1953; dedicated huge energies and formidable organizing powers to setting up CND, anti-Vietnam, peace and anti-nuclear groups?

Elsie's political life of course, encompassed 20 or so years as a member of the NZ Communist Party - and later disengagement from that membership, a passage in her life that was difficult, and at times painful, for her and others to explain (let alone understand). It was one thing to be an advocate for an unpopular cause that subsequently proved popular (anti-nuclear, anti-Springbok tour, the environment, etc) – or as Elsie noted wryly to be made a '*Distinguished* Alumni of the University of Auckland in the 1990s when she had been an *undistinguished* student in the 1930s. It was a different thing to have been at the centre of a movement that became *less* popular, and much less understood. Maureen's discussion of this passage of Elsie's life is superb – goes a long way to providing that explanation that proved taxing in the life as lived.

Second thing that this biography gives us is a new history of New Zealand and New Zealanders in the 20thC.

Elsie's *life* itself is a part of the history of 20thC NZ as it happened. And she did much to shape the historical *imagination* through which we have come to understand our own society – especially in her writing for children. Think of the success that was – and is – her novel *Runaway Settlers*, first published in 1965. And her many articles in the *School Journal* (which is where I first encountered her).

More than this, Elsie's life as we now have it, gives us a view of NZ that gets beyond the predictable narratives and places where History tends to dwell –

so we have a view of politics and activism from the typewriter, from the hands pulling sheets through the printer and from feet energetically pedaling the bicycle around distributing pamphlets and papers; from parties and groups beyond the parliamentary circles (until 1999, and chapter 15 with son Keith Locke's election as a member of the Green Party); from someone who was writing soup recipes in one column of the paper, and critiques of international policy in another. We see a view of the 1950s that is anything *but* the conventional 'quiet domesticity' or grey conformity through which that decade is often characterized, but one that is full of tumult and controversy.

While the book focuses on Elsie what emerges from every chapter are many more people who draw our attention – Alice Minchin, the Auckland University College librarian; Emily Gibson – early campaigner for the vote and for peace in WW1; the much loved and mourned Gordon Watson; the very modern Lois Suckling (co-founder of the Sex Hygiene and Birth Regulation Society); 'Gran' Macgowan, doyenne of the left; Sid Scott – and many, many more.

Elsie, of course, outlived many of her contemporaries; and lived long enough to find herself in later life researching her own past. There are some lovely moments of these circles of reflection.

For all that is *in* the book, Maureen, I'm sure, will be aware of how much more there could have been. Even in a book of 560pp. What is left *out* of a book is what, especially at this stage, is agonizing for an author. What the book has done is provided a very skillful account of a life which had many branches. And a book between two covers is always a much tidier thing than a life. But what it does, is tell us more about that life than any of us ever knew, and opens doors to further projects. The extensive notes, the listing of Elsie's publications (underlining her hugely prolific output), and the many sources used in research for the book make that possible – and are just brilliant. (See, for eg, 17 boxes of peace materials deposited at Canterbury Public Library.) So, this book will be springboard for future histories – looking for answers appropriately, prompts further questions.

Third thing the book does is give us a study in politics. When Elsie founded *Woman Today*, in 1937, it carried the banner 'Peace, Freedom and Progress'. To many of her political friends at the time that was a wishy-washy nothing, to others it smelt of subversion. Elsie's precise political position changed through her life – but those headings were ones which did stand through much of her life. As a socialist, a humanist, a feminist – of an 'up with women rather than down with the men kind' as she described herself, an environmentalist, peace activist – in all these ways she sought justice.

She also saw political work in the broadest terms – it was what you ate, as well as what you said or believed, how you lived as well as what was enunciated. And it was in the making of the world through song and music, story telling, poetry, play acting as well as in pamphlets and public meetings.

The verse that came to mind to encapsulate Elsie's deep and broad commitment to work for a better world was that Anonymous piece written at the time of the 18thC Enclosures and put into circulation again in late 19th/early 20thC by William Morris – someone Elsie drew on for inspiration in the 1950s:

The law locks up the man or woman
Who steals the goose from off the common
But leaves the greater villain loose
Who steals the common from the goose.

The book we are celebrating tonight gives us all these things (a new history of 20thC, a new history of NZ and NZers, and a study in politics), and does so in abundance because Elsie Locke had the great good fortune to have Maureen Birchfield as her biographer. Maureen is, of course, a gifted activist and writer in her own right – and as such brings to this project the bonuses of being an 'insider' – knowing Elsie and the world in which she lived, and sharing some of her experiences, together with those often associated with the 'outsider' - distance and research expertise. There is no blurring of the edges in these pages.

What you have produced Maureen is a tour-de-force – a major addition to contemporary history and scholarship. Warmest congratulations.

There is much painstaking work behind these gorgeous pages, much ‘tramping through words’ as Elsie termed it, but that work has been worth it.

In launching *Looking for Answers: A Life of Elsie Locke* this evening it gives me great pleasure to congratulate the author Maureen Birchfield and publisher, CUP; to thank the Locke family and Elsie’s close friends for their generosity – their open hearts and minds – in letting the story be told, and to ask all of you to raise your glass to celebrate the life of Elsie as *lived*, and now in enduring gift to those who knew her and to many more in future who will not, to celebrate the life as *told*.

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