

'Remembering Elsie Locke' (1912-2001)

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My mother would get irritated with the oft-asked question "What are you writing now, Elsie?". She was too open and genuine to be able to pass off the question with a superficial answer. A full answer would have taken half the day!

Even in the year since her death, new publications have appeared: "The End of the Harbour" (1968) has been reprinted by W.J. Deed Printing Ltd with minor changes that she approved just before her death. The School Journal published a delightful illustrated story about a cat and ducklings, "A Present for Pudding" last year. This year another Avon river inspired tale "The Anti -Litterbug" was reprinted by Rainbow Reading in their series of remedial reading books for older clients.

Towards the end of her life, the long-promised autobiography was under way with its haunting and powerful account of her key role in the left movements of the 1930s. She told me she was looking forward to writing the 'romantic bit' - meeting and falling in love with my father, Jack. But the events of the day kept intervening, and she needed to join the debates about 'Privatisation and the Public Good' (Christchurch Press 6/6/1998) and to write articles and radio contributions about nuclear war. Always positive, she wrote at the millenium of her hope to see in the listing of the events of the coming century, "the total elimination of all nuclear weapons from the face of the earth."

When my brother Keith, sister Alison and myself sorted her papers for archiving in the Turnbull Library we realised we did not know as much as we thought we did about the depth and extent of my mother's literary, historical and activist contributions. For example while we knew well her past leading role in the family planning movement, we did not know that in recent years she had been engaged with the issue of female genital mutilation.

There is a thread of course, and it is about the individual responsibility that each of us has to work for the common good: " We don't want to lift our eyes to recognise the preparation of a crime; we don't want the labour and the heart-searching of getting at the truth, or the loneliness of crossing from the complacent majority to our anxious minority. And yet the first thing is to care, and to accept our share of the responsibility; to see that humanity won't survive unless we root out the lingering belief that some humans are less than human and can be treated in a sub-human way." [ "We, the Accusers" New Zealand Monthly Review February 1966.]

There is humour and novelty among the Turnbull papers also - an early unpublished novel, poetry, and writing dating back to primary school. There is an extensive personal correspondence including the wonderful warm and chatty letters she received from her sisters while they were caring for 3 of us children in the 1940s. Mum was bedridden in hospital for two years with TB in her spine - a difficult time, but a time that had the compensation of giving her invaluable space for reflection and writing.

Alistair Campbell, as editor of the School Publications in the 1960s, gave my mother great encouragement when she first began to contribute stories to "The School Journal." He commissioned her to write the series of social history bulletins which later led to the

production of the historical compendium "The Kauri and the Willow" and to the bicultural history "Two Peoples, One Land".

Of my mother's published novels it is generally agreed that her first "The Runaway Settlers" is her finest and a New Zealand classic. It well deserved the "Gaelyn Gordon Award for a Much loved book" granted in 1999, after having been in print continuously since 1965 and it has been translated into several languages. Other children's novels include "Journey under Warning", "A Canoe in the Mist" "The Boy with the Snowgrass Hair", "Moko's Hideout", "Look under the Leaves", "Explorer Zach" and the 1995 "Joe's Ruby" which was an Honour Book in non-fiction in the 1996 AIM Children's Book Awards. The adult works like most of the children's books are also founded in the past "Mrs Hobson's Album"(1989) , "The Gaoler" ( 1978) , "Peace People" (1992) and the autobiographical "Student at the Gates"(1981).

Historians praised her not only for her painstaking accuracy , but also for her wide view of the past 'that encompasses Maori and Pakeha, young and old, male and female – just the way it did when the past was the present' (Hugh Laracy's tribute on her 85<sup>th</sup> birthday, 1997).

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