

Register

Obituaries

Valerie Eliot

Wife and literary executor of T. S. Eliot who strove to protect his legacy by tightly controlling his archive

At her death, Valerie Eliot was probably the last person in the world who could talk unaffectedly, if startlingly, about "Tom" and "Ezra". Her life had been devoted to the work and wellbeing of her husband. From her school days, she devoted herself to meeting him, working for him, making him happy as his second wife, and then protecting his posthumous reputation. Not, perhaps, since Boswell has anyone been so dedicated to a literary figure, in life and in death, as Valerie Fletcher was to T. S. Eliot, yet almost the entirety of his enormous literary output was behind him before they met.

Because he was 38 years older than she, the worlds in which they grew up were entirely different. He had a complicated, if distinguished, family background in America, which he rebelled against but never entirely left behind, and studied classics, literature and philosophy at Harvard before settling in London in 1915. She was an unremarkable girl from suburban Yorkshire, whose life from adolescence was lived under his influence, and subsequently under his wing.

Esme Valerie Fletcher was born in 1926, in Headingley, Leeds. By this time Eliot and Ezra Pound had changed the course of poetry, and Eliot's position was well established. *Prufrock and Other Observations* (1917) had buttholed a tiny readership for his poetry; the essays of *The Sacred Wood* (1920) had proclaimed Eliot's academic credentials and mastery of the tradition he was carrying forward, and *The Waste Land* (1922) had enjoyed a huge vogue with the young. Then in 1925 Eliot had given up his post at Lloyds Bank to become a director of the new publishing house of Faber & Gwyer, soon to be famous as Faber & Faber.

He had married Vivien Haigh-Wood in 1915, but the match was very unhappy. Eliot turned the misery to remarkable account in the "Game of Chess" section of the *The Waste Land*, though at Vivien's request, he omitted the desolating line, "The ivory men make company between us". He supported her dutifully through years of encroaching madness, although eventually she was committed to an asylum.

When Valerie Fletcher was reading his poems at school in the 1930s, Eliot was no longer the nervy avant-gardiste camouflaged in what Virginia Woolf called his "four-piece suit". He was a revered man of letters.

In 1927 he had become a British subject and been baptised and received into the Church of England, and from *The Hollow Men* and *Journey of the Magi* onwards, his poetry took the form of a pilgrimage. The first of what were to become the Four Quartets, *Burnt Norton*, appeared in 1935, and the last, *Little Gidding*, in 1942, setting a seal on his reputation as the greatest poet of the century. His dominance — as the leader (with Pound) of the modern movement, as a very active literary and social critic, and as editor first of *The Criterion* and then of the Faber poetry list — is without contemporary parallel.

Valerie became besotted with him after hearing John Gielgud's recording of *Journey of the Magi* when she was

just 14. Like schoolgirls today setting out to marry Prince Harry, she decided that she must work for this most eminent of figures and took a secretarial course with this express purpose. Against her parents' wishes, she moved to London to work for Charles Morgan at Faber's (Eliot joked that he was prepared to overlook this), and in 1949, against stiff opposition and to the annoyance of rivals who regarded her as very much a "downstairs" part of the company, she was promoted to be secretary to the man who the previous year had been created OM and awarded the Nobel Prize.

Eliot suffered from continual poor health, including a touch of rather relished hypochondria, and he became increasingly dependent upon the women around him. Friends such as Mary Trevelyan had for some years chivvied him, cheered him, and ferried him around London. But a special sort of friendship with Valerie developed over lunches in the Russell Hotel, and friendship led to love. Eliot undoubtedly fell deeply in love with her, and for Valerie this was the goal of her life. Eliot proposed to her at the Faber offices in Russell Square at the end of 1956, nearly eight years after she had begun working for him. She gave him the love of a woman which he had been denied for 40 years. "There was ... a little boy in him that had never been released," she later said.

They were married at 6.15am on January 10, 1957, at St Barnabas Church, Kensington, where — they delightedly discovered — the French poet Laforgue had also been married. The priest then took them to breakfast at his house, which to Eliot's surprise was at 10 Kensington Church Walk, where Ezra Pound had once lived. None of their colleagues had known of the impending wedding, except one director, who had to find a secretary to replace Valerie.

Her editing of the many drafts of the Waste Land was a scholarly triumph

But the world's most famous poet could not marry his secretary in secret, and the couple were inevitably tracked down by a fascinated press.

Sadly, Eliot had kept his intentions secret from John Hayward, the bibliophile and editor with whom he had shared a flat for ten years, telling him about the wedding only at the last minute. His note saying that he would of course pay his household bills, as though that were the important thing after decades of friendship, was astonishingly ill-judged. Hayward felt abandoned, and the friendship effectively ended.

After the honeymoon, the Eliots moved to a commodious flat in Kensington, where Valerie continued to live, latterly behind a blue plaque, until her death.

Eliot was now showered with honorary degrees and greeted by crowds wherever, inseparably, they went. His last play, *The Elder Statesman*, was produced in 1958, and the printed version contains Eliot's dedicatory



poem to his wife. It was reprinted in a revised and more intimate form in *Collected Poems 1909-1962* — "private words addressed to you in public" — but F. R. Leavis so disliked it that when lecturing in Cambridge he would flourish his copy with the offending pages Sellotaped together.

Some critics thought that the cosy domestic happiness Valerie provided for Eliot had been detrimental to his writing, but his creative work had been effectively over by the time they were married. What she gave him was a few more years of life. Although he suffered repeatedly from colds, bronchitis, emphysema and the London smogs, they spent eight blissful years together. There were winter months in the Bahamas and Bermuda (which the doctor ordered and he found dull, except for her company), and on their several visits to the United States he showed her many of the places that had been important to him in childhood.

Even though they were under the same roof, he wrote her a letter every



Valerie Eliot with her husband in Chicago in 1959, above. They married in 1957 and spent eight blissful years together before his death in 1965. In later years, left, she enjoyed the fuss of being photographed like a film-star

week. He also put down many of his thoughts and feelings in his notebooks, and went through his works with her, making her better informed about the personal aspects of his work than anyone else in the world.

Three years after his death on January 4, 1965, a series of manuscripts of Eliot's poems up to 1922 was found to be in the Berg Collection at the New York Public Library. The most important note of welcome by Ezra Pound, whose collaboration in the poem half a century before had earned him the dedication as *Il miglior fabbro* ("The better maker"). Deciphering the manuscripts and distinguishing the hands was a scholarly triumph for Valerie, and the book was acclaimed and remains standard. For this achievement, she was awarded the Rose Mary Crawshay Prize. Honorary doctorates followed, from Boston College, Kent

and Emory universities, and Newnham College, Cambridge.

As keeper of the flame, Valerie received requests from scholars all over the world — at least one doctoral student a week, she said — and as a director of Faber's she tightly controlled the way the firm handled his legacy. In accordance with his wishes, she refused to co-operate with biographers, although at least one falsely claimed that he had been denied access to archives that are open to the public.

She also prevented quotation of the notes made by the barrister Michael Rubinstein at a meeting with Eliot in which he had expressed his willingness to testify on behalf of Penguin Books in the Lady Chatterley trial, and a biography of the bibliographer and critic John Hayward was frustrated by her refusal to release papers. "There is an unfortunate contrast," wrote Roger Kojecky, "between Eliot's own principled advocacy of an Arnoldian free flow of ideas and the blockade now imposed by his executrix."

As it became notoriously difficult to gain permission to quote Eliot even in the most favourable contexts, Faber — where his affairs were handled by her husband's friend John Bodley — began to claim that quoting as little as five or six lines was a breach of copyright. In 1997, however, this stance was challenged by an author who wrote to Mrs Eliot pointing out that in *After Strange Gods* Eliot had quoted six lines of Yeats without payment or elaborate acknowledgment. Grudging permission to quote *The Waste Land* without payment was granted.

Mrs Eliot's fears for her husband's reputation were at their most acute over the oft-repeated allegations of anti-Semitism (which Eliot himself had strenuously denied). In 1996 Anthony Julius grossly exaggerated these charges in his book *T. S. Eliot, Anti-Semitism and Literary Form*, which gave rise to a frenzy of impatient and ill-judged press speculation.

In 2003 Professor Ronald Schuchard published details of a previously unknown cache of letters from Eliot to Horace Kallen, which reveal that in the early 1940s Eliot was actively helping Jewish refugees from Germany and Austria to resettle in Britain and America. In letters written after the war, Eliot also voiced support for modern Israel. Mrs Eliot herself said that she never heard Eliot make any remark that was at all anti-Semitic, and that it would have been quite out of character.

Yet her own reactions could be disproportionate — and imperious. When Faber published Christopher Ricks's calm and judicious book *T. S. Eliot and Prejudice*, which argues that Eliot's fascination with the power of prejudices scarcely ever slipped into regrettable indulgence in them, she wondered whether Ricks was "one of us". "We didn't really like that book," she said.

Ricks's book was one of a series that grew out of the T. S. Eliot lectures at the University of Kent, over which Mrs Eliot annually presided. But she was distressed, reasonably enough, to find that several of the lecturers, such as Richard Poirier, went on to deprecate Eliot, as a reaction against the idolatry of an earlier era. She was also a patron of a fund set up in Eliot's name, and of the T. S. Eliot Poetry Prize, administered by Faber, which has become the most prestigious annual award to a poet in Britain.

Meanwhile, Mrs Eliot had commissioned other scholars to edit her sift the great archives of material left by her husband. Helen Gardner revealed the genesis of Eliot's final masterpiece in *The Composition of Four Quartets* (1978); Ronald Schuchard edited the Clark and Turnbull lectures as *The Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry* (1993); and Christopher Ricks was entrusted with the cache of unpublished early poems that had been found with the manuscript of *The Waste Land* at the New York Public Library (which appeared as *Inventions of the March Hare* in 1996).

She said she was determined that all of Eliot's writings should be brought into the public domain, but she was equally determined to exercise control over when and in what form. She found it hard to delegate scholarly work, especially on the more personal material. As a result, the first volume of what are likely to be a dozen or more of Eliot's letters took some 20 years to compile, before its eventual publication on his centenary in 1988. John Haffenden became general editor of the series in 2008, publishing Volume II in 2009 and Volume III earlier this year.

An edition of all of Eliot's prose — including the literary criticism he

Cyclist who twice won bronze at the 1948 Games Tommy Godwin

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Lives remembered

Geraldine Mucha

Jill Gomez writes: Geraldine's (obituary, November 5) gifts were recognised from her earliest years when she could improvise at the piano before she could read. She went on to study (piano and composition) at the Royal Academy of Music and her mentors included Benjamin Dale, Alan Bush, Arnold Bax and William Alwyn.

Her substantial body of work includes pieces commissioned by the oboist George Caird and I felt privileged that she wrote many songs dedicated to me which I hugely enjoyed performing both in concert and in recordings for the BBC. The ideas for them were often conceived during the many holidays that Patrick Carnegie and I were lucky enough to share with her at her idyllic house near Ballater on Deeside. There she loved to spend the summer months gardening, walking in the Cairngorms, plunging spontaneously into icy mountain streams, collecting wild mushrooms and, most importantly, writing music.

The songs for me included five John Webster songs, including *Cinco Canciones de Antonio Machado*, and *Four Sonnets of Hawthornden* to words by William Drummond. *En Los Pinares De Júcar*, a Golden Age Spanish ballad by Luis de Góngora, was written for myself, oboe d'amore and small string ensemble, premiered with the string players of the Scottish National Orchestra in Glasgow to critical acclaim in the 1970s.

An orchestral version of the *John Webster Songs* featured alongside her Piano Concerto and Ballet Suite for *Macbeth* in the celebratory concert for her 95th birthday given at the Prague Conservatory on September 26 and recorded by Czech Radio. Ever excessively modest about her music, much of which was recorded over the years by Supraphon, the success of this concert gave her great pleasure.

Among the many famous visitors to whom Geraldine enjoyed showing the home that was also a shrine to Alphonse Mucha, was Sir Georg Solti. Seeing the piles of music MSS on her piano, Solti demanded to know what it was. "Oh, that's nothing," she replied. One of the most beautiful things she ever wrote was *Epitaph: In Memoriam Jiri Mucha*, for oboe and string quintet, which was played again at her own funeral in Prague.

Hilary La Fontaine

Angela Humphery writes: Although your obituary of my friend Hilary La Fontaine (November 8) described her exploits as a senior British intelligence officer who was known for her skilful handling of clandestine agents as well as for many other accomplishments, what perhaps many people did not know was that she was a great advocate of animal welfare.

It was in this field that I first met her about four years ago at a fundraising event for the animal charity PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) and subsequently at events held in aid of the Mayhew Animal Home and SPANA (Society for the Protection of Animals Abroad).

She was one of the kindest and most compassionate women I know.

If you would like to add a personal view or recollection to a published obituary, you can send your contribution by post to Times Obituaries, 3 Thomas More Square, London E9 8LT, or by e-mail to tributes@thetimes.co.uk

Valerie Eliot, wife and literary executor of T. S. Eliot, was born on August 17, 1926. She died on November 9, 2012, aged 86