

Elsie Fairfax-Cholmeley: from Brandsby to Beijing.

Elsie was born into a family of landed gentry. Gentry have a coat of arms, but generally do not have titles, they form a lower rank of the aristocracy. They are a landowning class invested with the responsibility of serving King and country by carrying out a variety of civil functions. Her father was unusual in his day in that on leaving university he became involved in ideas of social reform and regeneration. On succeeding to the family estate at a young age, he took these ideas from London to his estate in Yorkshire in the North of England and spent his life endeavouring to improve agricultural and social conditions, during what was then a very difficult time for agriculture economically.

Elsie's interests in agriculture and co-operatives, therefore, came from extending the ideas and example of an unusually enlightened father. She studied at Reading Agricultural College - this was unusual in those days as a girl of her class would not normally have been educated to work, but her father ensured that all his daughters were educated and fitted to earn a living. Her first farming venture in Yorkshire which was chickens, failed, but this merely paused rather than halted her interest in agriculture. She was then recruited in London to work in a secretarial capacity for an international academic body, based in New York, the *Institute of Pacific Relations*, this took her on a round the world trip which was crucial in forming her world views. Whilst still working for the IPR, now in New York, she got to know Chinese citizens who had left China because of their opposition to Chiang Kai-shek, and was very impressed by them.

Whilst still working for the IPR, in 1939 she was sent to Hong Kong, and became more and more involved in the Chinese cause. She became involved in the movement to boycott imports from Japan. She was a supporter of China's armed resistance movement and the wartime Chinese Industrial Cooperative movement. It was there she and Eppie, Israel Epstein, first met. Elsie left the IPR and started work for the Chinese Currency Stabilisation Board (a joint Chinese, British and US organisation). During the 118 day battle for Hong Kong, Elsie met Eppie several times and together they did their best to burn or hide documents relating to the China Defence League, the Chinese Industrial Cooperative and the Stabilisation Board to stop them falling into Japanese hands.

In 1941 they met again in Stanley camp, one of the five Japanese internment camps in Hong Kong. They escaped from there together with two other people, this was one of the only two successful escapes from Japanese camps in Hong Kong. They had found an old boat and improvised oars out of a plank and a porridge spoon and succeeded in sailing to Kowloon. From there they found help to get to the Chinese mainland in a pirate junk. They then walked through China ahead of the Japanese invasion.

In 1943 they were back in Chongqing, Elsie still working for the Chinese Industrial Cooperative and Eppie still a journalist. Also both resumed their work for the China Defence League. They married in Chongqing by the simple ceremony of buying a marriage certificate decorated with two ducks which they signed, witnessed by some friends, and then put an advertisement in a local newspaper. From then on, as Eppie states in his autobiography "...we chose not only each other but the same road-map through life." (Page 9 of *My China Eye* by Israel Epstein). It was their work with the China Defence League which brought them into contact with Soong Ching Ling, with whom they became not only colleagues, but firm friends. They worked together as journalists, supporting the Left in Chinese politics against the Guomindang. They were not always

popular with international authorities for this and their ability to work and report together was sometimes impeded.

In 1944 they made a conscious decision to leave Chongqing in order to campaign for US “friendship, recognition and trade with China”. Their journey to the US was long and difficult, there being no civil transport at that time in the Far East. They went via India and Britain, where they stayed on for two months in each country, meeting both old friends and new thinkers and talking about China and socialist ideas. In 1945 they arrived in New York. They spent five years in the US in the inhospitable political post-war climate of support for Chiang Kai-shek, but they worked tirelessly to help the Western world understand the Chinese Revolution. From 1949 they were increasingly subject to surveillance and harassment and witnessed a number of their friends and colleagues being harassed or disgraced, during the rapidly developing McCarthy (fiercely anti-communist) era, but they both continued their work of writing and speaking whenever possible. In 1950 Elsie left for England. Eppie soon afterwards received an invitation from Soong Ching Ling to return to China to work on the English language magazine, *China Reconstructs*, which she had founded. Being stateless, Eppie’s travel arrangements were difficult. Elsie had been able to retain her British citizenship so did not suffer the same constraints. They met each other in Poland and from there travelled back to China where they both worked for the rest of their lives.

During the *Great Leap Forward*, Elsie undertook her two-week stints of physical labour with enthusiasm. On the first, labouring on the Ming Tombs Beijing water conservancy project, she won an award from her fellow workers of ‘model builder’, though by then she was 53, a lot older than most of the other workers.

Besides her work on *China Reconstructs*, Elsie contributed, with Eppie, to many other ventures. She contributed to the Conference for Peace in the Asian and Pacific Regions in 1952 and to China’s National Trade Union congress. Also she and Eppie attended the Laos Peace Conference in Geneva in 1961 as part of the Chinese journalists delegation. Here they were also able to meet Elsie’s cousin Martin Fairfax-Cholmeley and they entertained him for about a week.

Elsie adopted the blue “Moa suit” which she wore on a vest to Eland to the shock of her family and friends, who were unused to seeing the elegant and beautiful Elsie so unflatteringly clad. Her relatives in England remember her as full of enthusiasm and excitement for the development of China, particularly with regard to agriculture, to which she always retained a strong interest, seeking out new methods and ideas to take back to China.

Unable to have any children of their own, Elsie and Eppie adopted two Chinese children in the 1960s, Sonya Ai and Songping Ai, of whom they were very proud. Sonya eventually settled with her husband and child in Los Angeles, while Songping remains in Beijing, no retired, but having lived the life of a normal worker.

Though in poor health by then, in her seventies, with some heart trouble and recovering from a severely broken ankle, Elsie insisted on accompanying Eppie on his third trip to Tibet. She concealed her physical difficulties, not least caused by the altitude: from officials who would have packed her straight off back to Beijing to be cared for, as a precious Foreign Expert whose health could not be risked! It is to Elsie that Eppie credited his ability to write his book *Tibet Transformed*.

Like many others, Elsie suffered during the Cultural Revolution. Both she and Eppie were arrested separately, on 18th March 1968, ironically on the same date as their famed escape from Hong Kong. They did not see each other or their children for five years. Eppie and Elsie were released from prison in 1973 and returned to their apartment and their work for *China Reconstructs*. Elsie also started to teach English to young members of the staff. Elsie always looked to the future with enthusiasm and it is to her the Eppie credits their ability to so quickly re-energise after their release from prison.

Elsie died on 24th September 1984, after suffering breast cancer then complications. If she had lived longer, she would no doubt have shared in the many celebrations and honours which, as China emerging from its chrysalis, began to visit on Eppie in recognition of their contribution to the Revolution in China. Eppie's contribution to China is rightly acknowledged and feted, and particularly in the 21st century, China has shown gratitude to those who worked so tirelessly and gave their expertise to aid its development. However, at every event or occasion, Eppie tried, in his quietly spoken way, to remind people that the accolades being heaped on him, belong also to Elsie, his partner in their joint hopes, dreams and work. It is significant that he ends his autobiography more or less with the year of her death in 1984, though, of course, he continued work and offer his expertise until his own death in 2005.

Elsie's sister Rosamond brought back half of her ashes to the UK and they are interned with the mains of her parents in the very English Churchyard of Brandsby in Yorkshire, their home village, where some remnants of her father's social reforms can still be seen. The Hall which he built to provide a place for workers to gather and read newspapers and discuss affairs, still functions as a village hall. The village shop and post office continued to function, though as a private enterprise until 2005, but then followed the fate of so many other village shops, in that it was no longer possible to economically run it.

In Beijing, Elsie's ashes are interred with Eppie's at the Babaoshan Revolutionary Cemetery, which is Beijing's main resting place for the highest-ranking revolutionary heroes, high-ranking party and state leaders and, in recent years, individuals deemed of major importance due to their contributions to society.

Patricia McCarthy
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