

Book review

LOOKING FOR ANSWERS: A LIFE OF ELSIE LOCKE

Maureen Birchfield

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While a wrong remains unrighted
While children go unfed
While willing hands are idle
And strong men beg for bread;
While Might is right and Giant Greed
Enslave the human race,
In the vanguard by her brother ...
That is the woman's place.
(Emily Gibson)

'I learned Emily Gibson's message at my mother's knee ... (Mother) taught us that, apart from using brute strength, there is nothing that a man can do that a woman cannot attempt.'

So said Elsie Locke, at the 1977 United Women's Convention in Christchurch Town Hall. As this quote demonstrates, the origin of her lifelong commitment to social justice and feminism can be traced back to her mother. Elsie described her as always supportive and the original believer in 'Girls Can Do Anything'.

Other reviewers have described Elsie as a low profile New Zealander and this has been echoed by the author too, though with a rider that Elsie was very important and a key player in the social and political scene from the 1930s until she died in 2001. However, although she was very modest about her achievements, for me Elsie is a noteworthy character, a heroine even, albeit one that many people found formidable. There will be very few Gender and Women's Studies students I have taught since the 1990s who have not heard me talk about Elsie Locke and her historical importance in Aotearoa/New Zealand. Historian Charlotte Macdonald shares my opinion as she included Elsie on her list of 10 "Top Kiwis" as someone who had made a significant contribution to New Zealand. Unsurprisingly therefore, I welcome this biography as an opportunity for more people to learn about someone who has previously been largely "hidden from history".

"Elsie Energy Farrelly", as she was named in her youth, lived most of her childhood in Waiuku. She was indeed a bundle of energy, devoting her prodigious skills to many organizations throughout her lifetime: the Communist Party of New Zealand (CPNZ), the Family Planning Association (FPA), the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND), the Save Manapouri Campaign, to name just a few.

Although Elsie thought globally, having a continuing interest in international issues, she also acted locally. For example, she was a foundation member of the Avon Loop Protection/

Planning Association (ALPA), an organization formed to save her immediate neighbourhood on the Avon River in Christchurch from planned extensions to the Avon Motor Lodge. It was there she first met Rod Donald, later to become co-leader of the Green Party.

In addition to, and sometimes in combination with, her social and political activism Elsie Locke was a writer of distinction, particularly of children's books, an avid tramp and conservationist, and a mother of four children who all, in their own way, appear to have inherited their parents' commitment to social activism – Green MP Keith Locke and East Timor campaigner Maire Leadbetter are probably the two better known.

This is a well-researched book that draws on Elsie's own collected papers and her unfinished memoir as well as interviews with family and friends, official documents, publications and (released just in time) declassified information from the SIS. This is Maureen Birchfield's second biography, the first being of her mother, Connie Birchfield. Connie and Elsie were friends who met in the CPNZ in 1933. They were two of very few women in the Party and Connie did not share Elsie's feminist perspective. Both left the CPNZ after the invasion of Hungary, in 1956. Their departure was a traumatic time for them both. Connie had a nervous breakdown and for Elsie it led to marital tension, as her husband Jack remained in the Party after her resignation. Elsie avoided discussing this publicly but the biography draws on Elsie's correspondence to reveal how she coped with their political differences:

I have remained silent at times when I should have spoken, this being a concession because I am old-fashioned enough to love my husband, home and children; and since there is only one of me and four offspring, I feel I have no right to play ducks and drakes with their welfare and happiness and contribution to life in the future. The concessions that Jack and I have both had to make have worked reasonably well up to now ...

As stated previously, Elsie was an avowed feminist, though one critical of what she perceived as more radical elements: for example she always described herself as a feminist who was "up with the women" rather than "down with the men". Aspects of Elsie's life perhaps of most interest to a feminist readership are her work among women in the Communist Party of New Zealand (CPNZ); her editorship of several early women's publications in the 1930s; her involvement in what was to become the Family Planning Association (FPA); and the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND). However, Elsie was a woman of wide-ranging interests and, following her departure from the CPNZ, a believer in grassroots rather than party politics, so there may well be something for everyone here.

Elsie's feminism evolved from the 1930s when, as she herself admitted, she had a tendency to be dogmatic. When she was first involved with the party, Elsie described marriage as a form of capitalist bondage. Later she came to view men and women as having complementary roles in marriage. Although a stay-at-home housewife and mother after she married Jack Locke in 1941 and valuing caring work, "a positive role that should be cherished", she did not mince her words when it came to traditional expectations of appropriate behaviour for women and men: "What we have to fight is the misuse of that caring role by manipulating men, and its overuse by women who pander to their husbands and families when in fact these folks would be better to get off their chuffs and do some caring too." And:

[To move into a world on equal terms] I judged that women must be able to deal with men on the straight, without using 'feminine wiles' or expecting gallant concessions ... I couldn't bear to be patronised and had a nasty habit of deflating men who showed themselves too protective ...

Maureen Birchfield claims that Elsie's role as a stay at home wife and mother gave her choices that "many less assertive, less well-informed and educated, and less politically and socially aware 'housewives' did not take":

For most of her life she had the luxury of independent thought, unshackled by any restriction on freedom of

expression that might be imposed by a sensitive employer. She was – and we are – fortunate that she was a plucky woman of a generation that did stay home.

However, when Elsie first joined the CPNZ she was a single woman and was involved in work among women almost immediately after her move from Auckland to Wellington in 1933. She believed that her high profile involvement in the CPNZ was serendipitous; she just happened to be in the right place at the right time and possessed skills deemed invaluable, particularly the ability to type; other important writing and organisational skills revealed themselves later. She convened the first National Conference of Working Women in 1934 and wrote a “Women’s Corner” in *The Workers’ Weekly* until the formation of *The Working Woman* in 1934.

Elsie recognised the need to network with women outside of the CPNZ and made genuine attempts to unite along non-party lines. To this end *The Working Woman* was closed down and *Woman Today* began publication. Its avowed goal was to “unite all those women who want(ed) peace, progress and a fuller, freer and happier life for women and children”. However, Elsie’s Communist sympathies proved to be problematic in this and later organisations, notably the CND in which Elsie tried very hard initially to remain in the background. She later admitted that she found it difficult to stay away from things she felt strongly about. And she felt strongly about a wide range of issues.

Two CPNZ members, Elsie and Freda Cook, called the first meeting which led to the formation of what eventually became the Family Planning Association in 1936. A whole chapter is devoted to this topic. As was Elsie’s wont she would not accept sole credit for the founding of the society – “there were others whose services lasted much longer than mine. I know better than anybody else the quality of my fellow founders, as individuals and as a team”. This statement reinforces feminist claims that women often “understate things, rarely mention personal accomplishments, and disguise statements of personal power”.¹ However, others argue that women who write about themselves with the intention of letting their work be published, and presumably this was the intention behind Elsie’s memoir, do have a certain sense of their importance”.² Nevertheless they often tend to “subordinate the self in their texts”. Elsie certainly seems to have consistently acknowledged other people’s contributions but played down her own. However, a possible explanation for this reticence may stem from her childhood: “To this day I curl up inside with embarrassment if I am praised in my own presence”.

Modesty notwithstanding, Elsie received many plaudits in her lifetime including the Katherine Mansfield Memorial Essay Award (1959), an Honorary Doctorate from the University of Canterbury (1987), The Goodman Fielder Wattie Book Award (1991), Children’s Literature Association of New Zealand Award for Distinguished Services to Children’s Literature (1992), Ngati Te Ata Achievers award for Tikanga Maori (1997), and the United Nations UNESCO Peace Builder’s Award (2000).

Maureen Birchfield’s close association with the Locke family had the advantages associated with an authorised biography – access to people and personal papers. However, the potential drawbacks of this are that the biographer feels ethically bound to be sensitive to the needs and wants of those who commissioned the work and perhaps withhold some material or analysis.³ This could be one reason why there is more focus on the public rather than the personal life. However, more likely is that what I and many feminist readers are looking for was unlikely to be obtained. Elsie herself was a private person and kept many of her feelings to herself or an intimate few. For example, when she was in hospital for over two years with a tubercular spine, a period when she was unable physically to touch her children and could only see them outside the hospital via a strategically placed mirror inside, over her bed, her sister wrote: “You

never say much how you feel ...". Her friend Guy Harding wrote: "Some ... say Elsie retires behind a barrier and doesn't reveal ... the real Elsie". Elsie wrote poetry to express her feelings according to Maureen Birchfield and she includes "private poems" demonstrating this. They reveal the fragility of Elsie's relationship with Jack in the early 1950s.

Some academics are critical of biographies that seek "to reconstruct in exhaustive detail the daily movements of the subject", describing such books as "works of reference, a compendium of documentary fact".⁴ It could be argued that to some extent this applies to this biography. It is meticulously researched and supported with numerous quotes, extracts from correspondence and SIS files, copious endnotes and photographs that accompany the text. However, I personally enjoyed the kind of detail that some might consider minutiae and the photograph of Fred Freeman, Elsie's first husband, which emerged from the SIS files, was a real find.

This is a conventional biography in the sense that it is not self-reflective of the writing process and the final product, something that is of huge interest to many feminist academics. There is *some* interpretative analysis but the book is more a documentary record of many significant organisations and events in Aotearoa/ New Zealand as well as the achievements of one of Aotearoa/ New Zealand's feminist foremothers, one Margot Roth described as "politically unconventional".

This following extract from the 1977 speech: "Towards Our Future" referred to in the introduction seems an appropriate way to conclude this review of a biography I hope many people will be encouraged to read. A wider audience needs to be introduced to the life of this remarkable woman:

... I want to illustrate that the flame lit by those pioneer feminists has never died. It has sometimes flickered, sometimes flared, sometimes lain almost invisible beneath the ashes – but what is it here? It's a terrific blaze isn't it? They would have been proud. I don't think that 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.

Notes

- 1 Etter-Lewis, G. (1992). cited by M. Fahlgren. The subordinated self: women's autobiography in twentieth century Scandinavia. In I. Donaldson, P. Read & J. Walter (Eds.), *Shaping Lives: Reflections on Biography*, Canberra: The Humanities Research Centre, The Australian National University.
- 2 Fahlgren, M. (1992) The subordinated self: women's autobiography in twentieth century Scandinavia. In I. Donaldson, P. Read & J. Walter (Eds.), *Shaping Lives: Reflections on Biography*, Canberra: The Humanities Research Centre, The Australian National University.
- 3 The work was not commissioned in the sense that it was funded by the Locke family. The research was in fact supported by Creative New Zealand and the New Zealand History Research Trust Fund of the Ministry of Culture and Heritage. However, the family invited Maureen Birchfield to write the book because of her family connection and it was launched at a function hosted by Elsie's son, Keith Locke, in the Grand Hall at Parliament.
- 4 Eakin, J. Writing biography: a perspective from autobiography. In I. Donaldson, P. Read & J. Walter (Eds.), *Shaping Lives: Reflections on Biography*, Canberra: The Humanities Research Centre, The Australian National University.

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