



Dear Mrs Eliot ...

She is a devoted keeper of the flame but has Valerie Eliot, widow of TS Eliot, done the poet's reputation a disservice by delaying publication of his letters? Karen Christensen, who worked on the first - and so far only - volume of correspondence, reports

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In January 1988 I helped Valerie Eliot into a taxi outside her flat in Kensington Court Gardens in London and handed two heavy cardboard boxes in after her. We settled them against the wall behind the driver where she could keep her eye on them. The pavement shone under

the yellow street lights, and the black cab's engine made a comfortable purr in that quiet corner of Kensington. Mrs Eliot and I made yet another survey of the contents. We'd called Faber & Faber and someone would be waiting outside, an extra set of photocopies was secured inside the flat, and yes, the door was double-bolted. That was everything. Mrs Eliot settled back in the cab to make a stately progress across London.

That was that. My day's work was done, and I could take the Tube from Gloucester Road home to south London. But as I waved good-bye, one of Mrs Eliot's stories came to mind. I saw Tom Eliot himself watching us from the chair he'd set up next to the red pillar post box at the top of the street. He had waited patiently for hours to retrieve a letter he'd changed his mind about. How, I wondered suddenly, would the man whose first criterion for a literary executor had been that no biography would ever be published, feel about the typescript of his and his first wife's letters going off to press?

Valerie Eliot had two editorial assistants before me. She has had others since I left, only a few weeks after that chill winter's evening. But I am the only one who has seen any of TS Eliot's letters go to press. Only a single volume of his voluminous correspondence has been published. There have been plans to publish five volumes. The lengthy wait has puzzled and frustrated many people, but it's particularly puzzling to me, because the boxes I put into the taxi contained enough finished material for two books.

For more than a year we had worked on the assumption that the first volume of the TS Eliot Letters would go through to 1927, the year Eliot converted to the Church of England and became a British subject. How many of the small quarto pages Valerie Eliot insisted on - because that's what they'd always used when Eliot was alive - would it take to make a book? We'd had to estimate, and I was chagrined to find how far off I'd been. The Letters, Volume 1, was a solid 618 pages, published on September 26 1988, the centenary of Eliot's birth. It contained only the years from 1898 through to 1922, half the manuscript that went into the taxi that day. Five years - a vital half-decade - were missing.

Seventeen years have passed since then. The Eliot letters still linger in the flat in Kensington, and it's said that it is unlikely that more will be published during Valerie Eliot's lifetime because there are vital gaps, letters of Eliot's that must be found before the work can be finished. I'm not only puzzled but impatient, because the letters in the second volume were the most moving of all the hundreds I worked on. They catalogue the breakdown of Eliot's first marriage, the bewilderment and despair of two people who seemed unable to avoid destroying each other. We had not only Eliot's letters, but dozens of letters written by Vivien Haigh-Wood Eliot, Eliot's first wife - the hysterical Viv of Michael Hastings's play *Tom and Viv*. A second volume of letters would do much to reveal what really went on between them, and would, I feel sure, create sympathy for Eliot.

Eliot was singularly private, but had a complicated and troubled personal life that naturally intrigues people. If he had been contentedly married for 50 years to a devoted wife like Valerie, we would not be so interested. Almost 40 years after Eliot's death, his widow is as protective of his reputation as she was during their eight-year marriage. Then, she guarded him from London smog and from reporters who booked seats behind them on a holiday flight to the Bahamas. Today, she continues to guard his letters, restricts access to the Eliot papers at universities and refuses permission to quote his work. Scholars are tremulous in dealing with the Eliot estate.

My husband is a cultural anthropologist and he is mystified by these literary manoeuvrings. "Aren't we talking about a dead poet?" he asks, insisting the fear and awe inspired by the Eliot estate is an invented tradition, a myth designed to heighten the importance of literary scholarship.

Valerie Eliot has every legal right to burn the letters, should she choose (as Eliot did: he asked his family and friends to burn large collections of his letters). But since the thousands of letters that remain have been carefully catalogued and transcribed, privacy would be a surprising excuse for not publishing.

Tom and Viv, which Valerie Eliot referred to as "that dreadful play", shows Thomas Stearns Eliot as an avaricious social climber who wants to be part of Vivien's respectable, wealthy English family. This is a distortion. Eliot may have been American, but he was patrician, and his desire to be English wasn't about table manners and silver teapots. The major accusation against Eliot is that he committed a sane Vivien to an asylum, a genteel sanatorium where she died at 58. Valerie Eliot denies this, and has produced letters as proof that it was Vivien's brother, Maurice Haigh-Wood, who signed the papers - though

Eliot, who at that point had been separated from Vivien for five years, agreed to and wanted the committal. But Vivien was hardly sane (neither was Eliot, it seems to me, during those years). She stalked him after their separation and his refusal ever to see or communicate with her was a matter of self-preservation.

I knew nothing about this when I went to work for Valerie Eliot, though I was soon to have access to material Eliot scholars would have killed to see. I saw a small boxed advertisement in the Times. "Experienced part-time secretary required for literary estate in Kensington. Word processing experience an advantage." I was surprised to receive a telephone call, only a day or two after I'd put my CV into the post, asking me to come to meet Mrs TS Eliot. Rosemary Goad, a director at Faber & Faber, greeted me warmly, while Mrs Eliot was remote and magisterial. But things warmed up as we talked about the recent unveiling of a plaque for Eliot.

"On the 26th?" I asked, "That's my birthday, too." Mrs Eliot brightened. I mentioned that my baby's name was Tom and that I came from the American Midwest. At the end of the interview Rosemary offered me the job, with Mrs Eliot nodding happily.

I started two days later, dropping Tom at the childminder's before nine, then catching a bus to the Oval to get the Tube. I was breathless as I raced up the stairs at Kensington High Street and dashed round the peaceful square that led to Kensington Court Gardens. There could hardly have been a greater contrast between the litter-strewn, gritty borough of Southwark - my own waste land - and the tidy streets of Kensington, where every house had shining windows, spotless steps, and perfect window boxes.

Mrs Eliot would be hovering at the door when I arrived - on tiptoe with anxiety to get me inside. "Good morning, dear. Put your things down, catch your breath. I'm just holding the coffee for you." Over the threshold, I was in the Eliots' world.

She would rush into the kitchen for the milk while I put my things down. We settled in armchairs in the sitting room, with a jug of steaming coffee and hot milk and a plate piled with chocolate biscuits (she disapproved of "slimming", especially for a young mum).

On the days I didn't come in, she would visit the British Library with questions written on the backs of envelopes, so as we sipped the milky coffee she would fill me in on her discoveries. She would tell me about calls or letters that had come, listen to the latest news from south London and ask what she should do about yet another troublesome American academic.

She dictated to me from those envelope notes after our morning coffee. Her correspondence went out on small white sheets with the address printed in royal blue. To get her message exactly right, with the tone she strove for - of gracious condescension and absolute knowledge - we did letters over and over again. I would cringe at the waste of money and time that should have been going into getting Volume 1 ready, but I was amused by the way she dealt with the scholars: dry, formal, excessively polite notes giving

them the least help possible. Yet they would write back and pretend to be profoundly grateful.

A good deal of our time was spent dealing with what she called the PhD industry. The devotees annoyed her as much as the critics. One American scholar had the effrontery to rent the house next door. He wrote and said he would like to bring his three-year-old to meet her because the child could recite "Sweeney" by heart. "Who," she exclaimed, "would teach a child 'Sweeney'?" She refused to see him.

She enjoyed hearing about my baby Tom and I got used to her talking about Tom, too - her Tom, whom she referred to as if he had just popped out to buy a newspaper. At 4.30 she would bring me a glass of "Tom's" sherry and pour herself a whiskey or a gin and tonic.

The precious Eliot letters were stored in three large filing cabinets in more or less chronological order. I would sit on the floor with my lap full of letters from James Joyce, Ezra Pound, Marianne Moore and dozens of others, reading them for clues. Eliot kept carbon copies because so many of his letters - even to friends - were related to his work in publishing, as editor of the *Criterion* and at Faber. I never knew what decade I'd walk into. One week we would be organising letters from the 50s. For a while I was immersed in typing up letters written during the second world war.

We worked in the study, a large square room dominated by a wildly expensive Wang word processor. Even in 1986 we were talking about a database for her research and electronic mail to check archives in Texas and Oklahoma. After I had typed a batch of the letters, she would sit in the black leather armchair next to the word-processing station and we would proof-read. She held the originals and I would read aloud from the screen, spelling out any unusual words and saying "comma", "full stop", and "open brackets". This is when we would have to agree on a date for undated letters and add footnotes.

Valerie Eliot had an instinct about the letters and seemed to know everything about Eliot's early life. Tom Eliot, who died in 1965, was alive for her, and our rough-and-ready editing was dictated by her sense of who he was. But the tinkering went on endlessly, without an explicit editorial strategy.

I've often been asked if she's holding out because there are terrible revelations in the letters. To me, the time she talked about burning two letters is proof that she has a strong sense of obligation to preserve the record. I was at the word processor that afternoon. She came in and sat down next to me. "These two letters," she said, "I'm just not sure about them." She was often "not sure about" a letter - not sure, that is, whether to include it. This was different. She wondered if perhaps she ought to burn these two. They gave, she thought, "the wrong impression". Would I read them and tell her what I thought?

The letters had nothing to do with topics that ignite so much frantic curiosity about Eliot - his anti-semitism or his supposed homosexual tendencies. One, to Moore, editor at the *Dial*, showed Eliot furious about the rejection of one of Vivien's stories. The other, to Lady Rothermere, who funded his literary magazine, the *Criterion*, described how Lucy Thayer,

the cousin of Eliot's Harvard classmate Scofield Thayer, had made a pass at Vivien, falling on her knees and professing her love. Eliot warned Lady Rothermere not to believe anything Lucy Thayer might say. Valerie Eliot thought the letter to Moore would be "misinterpreted", and when it came to Lucy Thayer that Eliot had misread the situation or been misled by Vivien.

I was baffled by her anxiety. Was it the bullying, hysterical tone of the letter to Moore that worried her? Was she worried that other people would think, as I did, that he had been having a breakdown? But even if I had encouraged her to burn them, I don't think she would have; it would have been impossible for her to destroy anything of Eliot's.

I only once saw her give up anything of his. There was a desk in the study where we sat to type letters and envelopes. Eliot had bought it at a secondhand furniture shop on Tottenham Court Road after they married. Somehow the desk embarrassed her; she'd painted it mint green to match the walls. One day she announced that she'd bought an antique desk "suitable for a home". I held my breath. "Perhaps you could use the old one," she said at last. I still have it.

When I first began working for her, I had tried to imagine the young Valerie Eliot, a woman my own age, obsessed with marrying an elderly poet in poor health who lived with another man. As the months went by I learned that the disdain of some of Eliot's friends for her still hurt.

She has described how her life revolved around TS Eliot from the age of 14, when she first heard his poetry - "Journey of the Magi" read by John Gielgud. We're told it was a mystical connection, "a revelation", fated and essential. She was determined, she has said, to "get to Tom". She was 18 when she applied for the post as Eliot's secretary at Faber, where he was a director. In her eight years as his devoted employee she did everything she could to get closer to him, including moving to Kensington and becoming a member of his church. He'd praised her extravagantly from the start but no one imagined that the aloof Eliot would fall in love.

Valerie Eliot, née Fletcher, who in middle age resembled Margaret Thatcher, was not a conventionally pretty girl, but in letters written in the weeks after their secret marriage in January 1957, Eliot was rhapsodic about his new wife's charm and beauty. She would say, "Tom liked bright frocks." Photos from the 50s show her in unflattering colours and styles much too old for her. But Eliot was enchanted. He loved the fact that her new initials were EVE (Esmé Valerie Eliot) and had them engraved on a silver dressing table set as a wedding gift. He went through her books, crossing out Fletcher and writing in Eliot.

She could hardly have been less like Vivien. Vivien was wild, fragile, intense, tragic. Valerie was solid, strong, and matter-of-fact. This made her confidence in talking about poetry quite startling to me, but hers was a deep and individual sensitivity, an instinctive conviction that poetry was of supreme importance.

When she told me stories about her youth, she seemed to be arguing for her right to marry a patrician figure like Eliot. Only recently, when I learned more about Eliot's friend John Hayward, have I understood what the girl from Yorkshire faced when she decided to marry the famous poet.

Hayward was the sociable and well-connected flat-mate of 10 years from whom Eliot kept his second marriage a secret. Hayward was crippled by muscular dystrophy, but loved company and attractive women. He had been friendly towards Eliot's previous secretary, who found their flat on Cheyne Walk and helped sort his books. His fondness didn't extend to Valerie; he disliked her from the start. One biographer, TS Matthews, thought he instinctively saw her as a threat to his way of life, but it's more likely he was jealous of the praise Eliot heaped upon her at home. Hayward referred to Miss Fletcher as "that flower of the Yorkshire marshes". Valerie Eliot just did not "pass muster".

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The steamy yellow kitchen in Kensington Court Gardens, with its huge bank of plants at the end, was a homely place, but I wasn't allowed in it, not even to make a drink. One day I daringly took some herbal teabags to work and asked if I could have some hot water. After quizzing me, Mrs Eliot insisted on taking a teabag. A little later she appeared with a tray. On it there was a cup and saucer and a small white and gold teapot. "Tom always had mint tea before bed," she said. "I had to wash up the teapot." It hadn't been used since he died in 1965.

I tried to imagine myself in Valerie Eliot's place. She had rescued Eliot, made him happy, and triumphed over his friends. But she had devoted her life to him for almost half a century. In the end, everyone had agreed that Eliot was a lucky man. But I've come to wonder whether she was so lucky.

The question of sex inevitably comes up in conversations about the marriage of Eliot, 68, to a 30-year-old woman. Naturally, I wondered too. My conclusion - at 29 - was that one reason he'd married Valerie (after rejecting two other women) was that he felt confident that no physical act - or its absence - could change their perfect bond. I still wonder why the robust Valerie Fletcher's family was so thrilled by her marriage. Perhaps they were just happy to have their daughter married, and they were certainly proud of their connection with the famous poet. Most peculiarly, according to Valerie Eliot, her mother valued her son-in-law for his "virginal" quality (quoted in the Observer Review, February 20 1972) - an odd thing to prize in a man married to one's only daughter.

Eliot's relationship with Emily Hale, which was kept a secret for more than three decades, certainly shows his reticence about intimacy. Eliot knew Hale most of his life and wrote that he'd been, unawares, in love with her when he married Vivien. Their connection revived after he separated from Vivien and she became his companion (but not his lover). He told her he could not divorce for religious reasons, but Vivien's early death, in 1947, brought them to a crisis. Hale expected him to marry her.

When I worked for Valerie Eliot I learned one account of the end of his relationship with Hale. Eliot and his sister were sitting at breakfast on a porch overlooking the Atlantic. Hale was staying nearby. Eliot said he was going to walk over after breakfast and ask Hale to release him from a promise that they would marry when he was free. Then Eliot added, "If she refuses, I shall have to kill myself." The release in 2020 of Eliot's letters to Hale, which she deposited at Princeton, infuriating him, will be the next major revelation about the poet's life, unless another volume of Eliot's own letters are published first - but this looks increasingly unlikely.

Valerie Eliot has been editing her late husband's correspondence for three decades. When I worked for her, I often wondered if she would be able to let go of any of the letters, and was breathless with relief when the first volume went off. Despite her continued protestations that she needs to fill in this or that gap in the collection (for several months when I worked for her it was missing letters to Scofield Thayer), and the scrupulousness of her editing, her reluctance to publish the next volume of letters cannot simply be a matter of scholarship.

Perhaps there is an element of overprotectiveness - not unlike the protectiveness of Eliot's mother that is revealed in the very first letters of Volume 1. Eliot's reputation is done no good by the delay, and his work needs fresh air, the freedom of publication. For Valerie Eliot, he was the perfect husband. His failings, or the railings of scholars, can't change that. I am still waiting eagerly to reread the rest of the manuscript I settled so carefully in the back of a taxi in 1988.

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