

Valerie Eliot, Poet's Wife and Defender, Dies at 86

By BRUCE WEBER NOV. 12, 2012

Valerie Eliot, who married the poet [T. S. Eliot](#) near the end of his life and steadfastly guarded his literary legacy for nearly half a century, died on Friday in London. She was 86.

The Eliot estate announced her death.

Mrs. Eliot, who was almost 38 years younger than her husband, had been his secretary for several years at the publishing house Faber & Faber when they married in 1957. By all accounts it was a happy marriage. Like many who considered Eliot one of the greatest poets of the 20th century, she had admired his poetry since she was a teenager; she had sought out the job at Faber & Faber specifically because he was there.

Eliot, who guarded his privacy fiercely, died in 1965, having stated his wish to keep biographers from stirring the ashes of his life. His wife became the stewardess of his estate, doling out permissions to quote from his work with extreme parsimony and routinely turning away requests from scholars and the dreaded biographers.

She herself, however, edited a much-admired edition of "The Waste Land," consisting of a facsimile and transcript of its original drafts and edited annotations by Ezra Pound. And she approved a theatrical adaptation of her husband's book of poems for children, "Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats," which became the musical "Cats," bringing her and the estate great wealth, from which she created a charitable trust.

The major project of her later life was editing her husband's letters, though for almost 25 years only one volume of them — covering 1898-1922, from the time Eliot was 10 until he was 34 — was published, in 1988, leading some to speculate that she had been too intimately involved with the material.

"Valerie Eliot has been editing her late husband's correspondence for three decades," Karen Christensen, who had worked for Mrs. Eliot on the first volume and who later founded the Berkshire Publishing Group in Massachusetts, wrote in 2005. "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 claims that filling in the collections' gaps takes time, and despite "the scrupulousness of her editing," Ms. Christensen continued, "her reluctance to publish the next volume of letters cannot simply be a matter of scholarship."

With the aid of co-editors, Mrs. Eliot published a revised edition of the first volume in 2009; a second volume, covering 1923-25, was also published in 2009; and a third volume, 1926-27, came out last year. A fourth volume is expected in 2013.

Esmé Valerie Fletcher was born in Leeds, England, on Aug. 17, 1926. Her father, who was in the insurance business, was a bookish sort who passed on to his daughter his love of poetry. She said she fell in love with Eliot — or at least his work — when, at 14, she heard John Gielgud's recording of "Journey of the Magi."

After her schooling, she worked at a library at the University of Leeds and then as a secretary to the novelist Charles Morgan. When a family friend who knew Eliot mentioned that he was looking for a secretary, she applied.

Eliot's previous marriage, to Vivienne Haigh-Wood, whom he had met at Oxford, had been grievously painful, and many have presumed that its high emotional cost was reflected in his bleak assessment of the 20th century in "The Waste Land."

Haigh-Wood was a troubled woman whom her brother committed to a sanatorium in 1938, five years after she and Eliot formally separated. Eliot had effectively turned his back on her, though they were still legally married when she died in 1947. The next year he won the [Nobel Prize](#) for literature. And two years after that Valerie Fletcher came to work at Faber & Faber.

The second Mrs. Eliot looked after him closely, monitoring his cigar smoking — he had emphysema, and his doctor allowed him one cigar a week — and though they sometimes traveled, usually to warm climates to improve his health, their life was largely quiet and domestic.

"He was made for marriage, he was a natural for it, a loving creature, and great fun, too," Mrs. Eliot said in a 1994 interview. "We used to stay at home and drink Drambuie and eat cheese and play Scrabble. He loved to win at cards, and I always made a point of losing by the time we went to bed."

After her husband's death, Mrs. Eliot was wounded by criticism that he had been cold and self-absorbed, that he had been an anti-Semite, that his treatment of his first wife had been ruthlessly self-serving. She rarely responded publicly, though the release in

1994 of a movie about Eliot's first marriage, "Tom & Viv," starring Willem Dafoe and Miranda Richardson, prompted her to speak out.

The film, adapted from a play by Michael Hastings, presented Eliot as the villain of the marriage and suggested that Vivienne Haigh-Wood may have written swaths of "The Waste Land." In a long [interview in The Independent](#), Mrs. Eliot defended her husband on every front, even producing copies of letters to refute the film's unflattering assertions, including a scene in which Vivienne pours melted chocolate into the Faber & Faber mailbox after being unable to get into the office.

The doors at Faber were always open, Mrs. Eliot said, so the chocolate story was a fabrication.

"What Tom did like was vanilla ice cream with chocolate sauce," she added. "He was eating it in a restaurant once and a man opposite said, 'I can't understand how a poet like you can eat that stuff.' Tom, with hardly a pause, said, 'Ah, but you're not a poet,' and went on eating."

Correction: November 16, 2012

An obituary on Tuesday about Valerie Eliot, the wife of the poet T. S. Eliot and the editor of several volumes of his correspondence, misstated the surname of a woman who worked for Mrs. Eliot on the first volume, and also misstated the name of the company she later founded. She is Karen Christensen, not Christiansen, and her company is the Berkshire Publishing Group, not the Berkeley Publishing Group.