

## **Elizabeth Anne Horatia FitzRoy, MBE**

**E**lizabeth FitzRoy was born on 21<sup>st</sup> October, 1912, two years before the outbreak of the Great War. It was a tumultuous year of political upheaval and tragedy, which saw the sinking of RMS Titanic in the North Atlantic in April, protests against Irish Home Rule and increasingly violent disturbances by the suffragettes over the government's refusal to grant women the vote.

Elizabeth's birthday - 21<sup>st</sup> October, Trafalgar Day - is a date of particular significance for the Royal Navy, held in commemoration of Horatio Nelson's great victory at Cape Trafalgar in 1805. Elizabeth's parents, Cyril Duncombe FitzRoy and his second wife, Margaret, gave their daughter the middle name Horatia in honour of the great hero - but no doubt Cyril FitzRoy also had his father, Francis Horatio FitzRoy in mind too. Francis had been born a mere 18 years after the Battle of Trafalgar and his father, Admiral Lord William FitzRoy (Elizabeth's great grandfather), had been a contemporary of Nelson's, although a rather controversial figure in the Royal Navy.

The FitzRois were descended from Charles II and his mistress Barbara Villiers, the Duchess of Cleveland. Their son, Henry FitzRoy, became the first Duke of Grafton and Earl of Euston and it is through the Dukes of Grafton that Elizabeth's lineage can be traced.

Arguably the best known of Elizabeth's ancestors was Robert FitzRoy, Captain of HMS Beagle. The Beagle's surveying voyage took nearly 5 years from late 1831 to 1836, and is mainly remembered for its famous passenger, the young naturalist and FitzRoy's gentleman companion, Charles Darwin. As a result, Robert FitzRoy's achievements have often been overlooked. He was a complex man - a perfectionist with a strong sense of justice and an 'unfortunate temper' as Darwin found out to his cost. He was also a man of science, who nevertheless believed that everything written in the Bible was literally true. He was an excellent sailor, surveyor and hydrographer, and in later life a Conservative MP and Governor of New Zealand (he was dismissed after he incurred the hatred of the white settlers over a land dispute). In 1845 he was appointed head of a new government department that was to become the Meteorological Office and became the first person to attempt more scientific weather predictions. As well as writing about the weather (*The Weather Book*) he was also responsible for 'Admiral FitzRoy's Storm Barometer', a vastly improved version of the 17<sup>th</sup> century instrument. Robert FitzRoy committed suicide on 30<sup>th</sup> April 1865; he had always been plagued with fears that he had inherited a suicidal trait (his uncle had committed suicide). No doubt perceived failures in his public life, together with Charles

Darwin's theories relating to evolution which were so at odds with his own deeply held religious beliefs, did much to tip him over the edge.

Elizabeth's immediate family were talented and accomplished people; her father Cyril was a gifted artist; he taught art, and was a Registrar of the Royal College of Art for many years. As an authority on watercolours, he frequently exhibited his own work at the Brook Street Galleries and Royal Academy. Elizabeth's mother, Margaret Cuninghame Durham, was a descendant of the 13<sup>th</sup> Laird of Craigends in Renfrewshire; like Cyril, she also had artistic flair and was described as "a woman of many talents, a superb needlewoman, whose embroidery in silk included many brilliant copies of the Italian Masters". Cyril's brother, Almeric, Elizabeth's uncle, was Clerk to the Privy Council from 1898 to 1923. He was a prolific writer and his memoirs, published in 1925, caused a stir in royal and government circles with its frank portrayal of Court and parliamentary life. At the outbreak of the First World War, his daughter, Yvonne, joined one of the London Units of the Scottish Women's Hospitals, a scheme instigated by Dr Elsie Inglis, and was deployed to Romania and Russia where she was appointed Nursing Orderly under Dr Inglis herself. Yvonne's record of her experiences with the Hospital Unit from October 1916 to May 1917 was published in diary form under the title '*With the Scottish Nurses in Romania*', and she was awarded both British and Allied war medals for her wartime service. After the war, Yvonne acquired the post of Private Secretary to Lady Reading, wife of Rufus Reading, Viceroy and Governor General of India from 1921 to 1925. On her return to England, she was soon off travelling again, this time around Canada by car, an adventure she chronicles in her book '*A Canadian Panorama*'. Yvonne settled at West Green House in Hartley Wintney, where she was private secretary to her friend Evelyn, Duchess of Wellington. She continued to live there until her death in 1971.

Elizabeth's interests were focussed on the theatre, though by her own admission acting wasn't her strong point; she preferred to channel her talents into stage management and writing plays. She had been privileged enough to meet many of the stars of stage and screen popular in the 1920s and '30s and had written short critiques about them in her journal '*Theatre People I Have Met*'. The journal records her meeting with the actress Phyllis Neilson-Terry, granddaughter of the Victorian actress Ellen Terry, and her visits to the Neilson-Terry home at number 4 Primrose Hill Road. It was here that Elizabeth would settle in the sitting room to write, encouraged by her mentor, Julia Neilson-Terry, Phyllis's mother, who Elizabeth greatly loved and admired. Elizabeth's visits began in the late summer of 1938, a couple of months after her fiancé, John Ramsay-Fairfax, broke off their engagement. No doubt this traumatic experience was the spur Elizabeth needed to launch her writing career. Julia must have sensed that she had a budding

playwright on her hands as she arranged for Elizabeth to meet the Principal of The Neilson-Terry Guild of Dramatic Art, Miss Louise Regnis. Louise Regnis (this was her stage name) was an actress and playwright; she had appeared in plays such as *'The Rivals'*, *'Woman to Woman'* and *'Joseph and His Brethren'*, and had written her own comedy play *'Arising out of the Minutes'* in 1935.

Elizabeth enrolled as a student at the Guild, and either re-wrote or made changes to her one-act play about Mary Queen of Scots, *'Royal Interlude'*, which she was probably writing at the Neilson-Terry house. By the spring 1939 rehearsals were well underway for Somerset Maugham's *'The Bread-Winner'* and *'Royal Interlude'*, and a charity performance of both plays took place at the Scala Theatre on 17<sup>th</sup> May 1939. It was at the Neilson-Terry Guild that Elizabeth met Kirsten Forssmann, a Swedish actress, who was to become a key figure in her life. They became friends, and when the outbreak of the Second World War saw the closure of the drama school, it was Kirsten who was privy to Elizabeth's plans to form a concert party.

The FitzRoy Players, as they were known, gave performances to service personnel and civilians, touring camps, canteens, searchlight batteries and military hospitals - including the Connaught and the Cambridge - evacuee centres, old people's homes, clubs and convalescent homes. They were welcomed at Rooksdown House, the private wing of Park Prewett, which became the plastic surgery unit under Sir Harold Gillies, and gave performances for the terribly injured servicemen and civilians there. Gillies was known as the father of modern plastic surgery as the result of his pioneering work during the First World War, and the Players were privileged to meet the great man. Their shows included sketches, music and dancing, and as the Company grew in confidence and ability they received a glowing review in the *Times*.

By 1942 the FitzRoy Players had reached their peak. Elizabeth decided to call a halt as she wanted to go out 'on the crest of a wave', although wartime pressures also had a factor in the decision to disband. The Company went their separate ways. Cyril FitzRoy had died in the summer of 1939 and so Elizabeth made her way to Hartley Wintney where her mother had made a home for them both since the outbreak of war. She took up nursing at Reading hospital, but later wrote a memoir of her experiences of running a wartime concert party entitled *'We Happy Few'*, although it was never published.

In the following year, 1943, an event happened that was to change the course of Elizabeth's life. Kirsten Forssmann who had met a Scottish-Canadian film producer called Maxwell, fell pregnant. She was living with Maxwell, who had volunteered to fly planes from Canada to Britain for the RAF, in his flat in London.

He and Kirsten had intended to marry at the end of the war, but in early 1943 tragedy struck when he failed to return from a flight from Canada and was posted missing over Alaska by the Air Ministry. Kirsten turned to Elizabeth for help. On the 20<sup>th</sup> July 1943, Michael was born at the FitzRoy's house, delivered by Elizabeth's mother and the midwife. Michael was formally adopted by Elizabeth in 1949; although she had the full support of her mother, other members of the family were more reticent. Elizabeth on the other hand, had no doubts she was doing the right thing. She wrote: "There was never any doubt in Michael's mind or mine that the bond between us was that of mother and son, and as he grew, our unique relationship was accepted and respected by our many hundreds of friends all over the country". What made the adoption even more remarkable was that Michael had Down's Syndrome, not diagnosed until he was five years old.

It was Elizabeth's struggle for the rights of children with learning disabilities like Michael, which led to the foundation of the Catholic Handicapped Children's Fellowship in 1956. The CHCF was a support network for parents in an era when bringing up a child with learning disabilities at home was fraught with difficulties and prejudice, the only real alternative being to consign the child to the prison-like environment of a psychiatric hospital. It was apparent that the best care was to be found in a loving, family home, but Elizabeth was well aware that it was not always possible to achieve this, regardless of how much a child was loved. Elizabeth, together with other members of the CHCF realised there *was* an alternative - to provide small, family homes with a small 'h'. The opportunity to fulfil this wish arose in 1962 when Donec, a small children's home at Grayshott, on the Hampshire-Surrey border, came up for sale.

Donec had been an 'approved' home for handicapped children since it was established in 1930 by Miss Binney, a pioneer in the training of staff working with learning disability children. It was taken over by Miss Burke, probably in the late 1930s, and it was Miss Burke who decided to sell up at the age of 90 when she expressed a wish to retire to a convent. Elizabeth and some CHCF colleagues managed to raise the funds to buy Donec, lock stock and barrel. Included in the 'package' were two resident staff members, Mr and Mrs O'Shea who were on a joint salary of £10 per week. Cissie O'Shea had been working at Donec since 1932, aged 14!

The purchase of Donec led to the formation of a new trust – it was called The Elizabeth FitzRoy Homes for the Handicapped Trust (now Elizabeth FitzRoy Support) and was initially under the umbrella of the CHFC until it became independent in 1965. There was always a demand for places at Donec and it was soon apparent that one home could never satisfy that demand. The Elizabeth

FitzRoy Homes for the Handicapped Trust began to expand its operations and over the next 10 years, three more homes were purchased – Meadow Cottage in Norfolk, Whitegates in Hampshire and Dalvington in Worcestershire.

A staunch Roman Catholic, Elizabeth was honoured by the Pope and awarded the Papal Cross, Pro Ecclesia et Pontifice, in 1970. In 1977, her dedication and hard work in the field of learning disability was rewarded with an MBE, although the fight for the rights of people with learning disabilities was far from over. Sadly Elizabeth was involved with her own private battle with cancer, a battle she had been fighting for many years, although not many people were aware of it. In 1981 she received a serious blow, when Michael, her constant companion, died aged 38 at Meadow Cottage. Despite the comfort she gained from her deeply held religious beliefs, the shock of Michael's death must have seriously hindered her own recovery from ill-health. Less than a year later, she died aged 69 at her beloved Donec – the first Elizabeth FitzRoy home.

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