

PAST MASTERS

I have often wondered what former Guild Masters were really like. The official records give a sense of a man, but they're no substitute for intimate, personal knowledge. An unusual source presents itself in the case of Hugh Charles Fairfax-Cholmeley (1864-1940) Master of the Guild from 1925 to 1934. He was the squire of Brandsby Hall, Yorkshire, in fact the last in a line of keen yeoman-farmers that stretched back to the sixteenth century. In 2005, his 90-year-old son-in-law, the naturalised Chinese journalist and Communist Party member, Israel Epstein (1915-2005) who was born in Warsaw when it was under Russian control, set down some of the memories of Elsie (d. 1984), his late wife, in *My China Eye: Memoirs of a Jew and a Journalist* (Long River Press). As a writer, Epstein was well-placed to absorb and articulate the memories of those members of the Cholmeley family he personally knew, but the point from which he observed them, given that in his own words he and Elsie were 'so different in origin' (p. 6), makes him all the more fascinating to read.

Epstein's parents grew up under Russian-rule in modern-day Lithuania. As Jewish Socialists involved in the failed Russian Revolution of 1905, they had been exiled briefly to Siberia. A bookkeeper, Epstein's father moved briefly to Japan, then back to post-Tsarist Petrograd and eventually to China. Epstein was educated in a series of foreign schools, adopting English from childhood as the common language with which he felt most comfortable and he used it throughout his professional career. His political convictions were formed in the prevailing culture of anti-Fascism in the 1930s. For 25 years he was editor of the monthly magazine he helped to found, *China Reconstructs* (now called *China Today*) which promoted the People's Republic in a positive light.

Elsie, on the other side of the globe, was similarly moulded by her albeit very different circumstances. She studied at Reading Agricultural College and farmed with her family in Yorkshire, but sought new work when the 1930s depression brought bankruptcy. She trained for, and found, a clerical job in London, which she then lost. Joining the ranks of the unemployed, she was able not merely to sympathise with but to share the plight of many of London's poor, joining protest marches as she became increasingly radical. 'Experience,' Epstein tells us, 'combined with earlier ideas drawn from her father, a liberal inclined to the radical views of William Morris, drew her to the Left. As a feminist she could have gone to the U.S. or U.S.S.R., different as they were, not because her political views were as yet well defined. But because the status of women there seemed better than in contemporary England.' (p. 7)

Elsie found work with the Institute of Pacific Relations, a job she obtained by 'chance and family connections' (p. 9). She worked in their New York office, but toured the world, visiting Hong Kong in 1939 where she met Epstein. They escaped from Japanese occupation together in 1941. 'With Elsie we chose not only each other but the same road-map through life. We were married in 1943.' (p. 9) Epstein takes up the story (my notes in square brackets):

Of Elsie's background, there are some facts, from what she told me at various times, and from experience before our fates brought us together.

Her father ... inherited several farms but later in life had to sell most of them. For English country gentry, the family was not typical. As Roman Catholics they had for three centuries been barred from the civil and military careers that made their class in society a pillar of Britain's conservative establishment. [Hugh's father, Thomas Charles (1825-1890), who adopted the prefix Fairfax, was a Royal Naval Captain. Consequently, Hugh was born in Naples.]

Though Hugh Cholmeley broke with Catholicism, to which the rest of the family continued to adhere, it was not to conform more to the prevailing social conventions, but to stray further. From his university days [he matriculated at Christ Church in 1884] he tended toward radical views, often proclaiming them with a bright red necktie to shocking (sic) the prim and proper. A family story tells how a stuffy aunt ordered her doorman, if her nephew came so attired, not to let him in by the front entrance but to hint that he hop over the hedge and enter through the backyard. She was willing to see the young reprobate, but not to face neighbours' comments.

The young man himself, starting from volunteering at Toynbee Hall, which philanthropically helped London's poor, began to lean toward Socialist ideas. He came to admire William Morris and frequented circles that included, among others, Bernard Shaw.

Unconventional, too, in setting up his own household, he remained single until around forty, then [in London in 1903] married his gardener's daughter, Alice [Jane] Moverley (1885-1953), who was to become Elsie's mother. [In fact, Alfred Moverley had first been employed as gardener by Hugh's father and his Paris-born mother, as evidenced in the 1881 census.] But first he supervised her education, *à la* Pygmalion. Prior to the wedding he sent her family out of the village to London where he (sic) bought them a home in the then still-rural suburb of Hampstead. So his freedom from conventions had limits.

As a squire, he was a paternalist reformer. He equipped his village with water taps and a public telephone, angering nearby landlords who feared that their tenants would want the same. To widen the mental horizons of his tenants, he built a small red-brick auditorium, "Cholmeley Hall," where they were expected to gather each Sunday afternoon to hear him read from that mouthpiece of Liberal views, *The Manchester Guardian*. This was far less popular than the running water, as Elsie would amusingly recollect. After church in the mornings they would prefer to do something else. But to her father the cultural infusions might well have seemed a desirable antidote to a sermon. Though his ethics were Christian, he was not pious.

After renouncing Catholicism, Hugh Cholmeley himself attended Anglican Sunday services — it was the done thing. But he disliked the local parson, and so boycotted Brandsby

church. Each week he drove past in his pony trap with a loud jangling of bells on the way to the church in the next village.

This English eccentric, part Tolstoyan, part rebel, was artistic and musical. He had a good baritone voice and a repertoire of English and Italian folk songs, self-accompanied on the guitar. Music was part of his heritage to his daughters. Elsie learned the cello and her youngest sister Rosamond ... the violin — both performing with quartets of fair quality ...

Another thing for which Elsie thanked her father was his determination that his daughters, as well as his sons, should be educated. At that time, socially comparable young women were mostly rounded off for marriage at finishing schools. But he wanted them prepared to earn a living. (pp. 20-21)

‘Elsie’s father’s (sic),’ Epstein tells us, ‘continued to influence her after she joined the working world’ (p. 22). His values are eloquently expressed in a letter he wrote her when she was in her twenties:

You are right about not being able to write unless you have something you want to say. All other writing is worthless even if people attain the art of writing about nothing ...

Which is one reason why you should read, cultivate ideas about topics of world interest and ... interest yourself in important affairs, in human nature ...

With all great artists and writers, the higher they are in the scale the wider their interests ... You will find poets like

Shelley and Byron deeply & seriously interested in reform movements and even politics of their day; even painters like Michelangelo, Raphael etc. had unsuspected intellectual & practical interests. William Blake, of all people, the mystical idealist, was deeply versed in political and social questions. And you can’t get ideas worth having unless you take the trouble to go into questions thoroughly & not merely superficially, but the moment you begin to do that the ideas come fast enough ...

Then if you have the faculty of expressing them it is easy. (qtd. p. 23)

Cholmeley did possess such a faculty — in writing, but perhaps more importantly in practice. He does not invoke Ruskin directly in his letter, but his affinity with Ruskin’s own thinking is plain enough.

This charming pen-portrait, from such an apparently unlikely source,* helps to ‘flesh out’, in a very real sense, the Guild’s story. Epstein’s own remarkable life is woven into the fabric of world history. Imprisoned for five years from 1968 during the Cultural Revolution, much of it spent in solitary confinement, he never lost faith in his Communist ideals. By the time he died, he was an honoured member of Chinese society. His memoirs are the culmination of a remarkable seventy-five-year career as an author.

Stuart Eagles

**It might usefully be noted, however, that a ‘Chinese’ translation of *Sesame and Lilies* was published in 2009.*