

Why would a sixty-eight year old intellectual American choose to marry a thirty year old strawberry-blonde Yorkshirewoman with no university education? Was it something akin to Miller and Monroe? How did her upbringing fit her to become the guardian of his legacy? She: a mere amateur amongst academic professionals? Or, was she - as John Hayward bitterly dubbed her - 'The flower of the Yorkshire marshes.'

In a monograph of George Herbert first published in 1962, written during his second marriage, Eliot said; "The family background of a man of genius is always of interest." A little paradoxical, perhaps, since previously, Eliot insisted upon distinguishing artists from their work, through his theory of the value of impersonality of literature.

Every family has its customs, traditions and legends, often based more upon grudge or gratitude, vengefulness or vanity, than any empirical reality. As individuals we present an edited version of ourselves to one another, with progressively less redaction the more intimate our relationship with the person to whom we reveal our story. The myths spun within families affect the self-images of generations; their ambitions, inhibitions, expectations and assumptions. Every family is its own micro-culture.

When we speak of anyone's character, we can do so only to the extent to which they have revealed themselves to us, over whatever period of their lives we had contact with them. The integrity of most individuals means our portrait might be recognisable to others who knew them, but there may be surprising aspects revealed through one, rather than another, view. It's impossible to obtain a full picture of anybody looking from a single perspective, whether from the sole view of a family member, an intimate or a professional colleague. And we must acknowledge that people change throughout their lives. A portrait made at any particular time ought not to be thought accurate for any person's entire life. Other versions of the truth are available.

With these caveats, this is a nephew's view of Valerie Eliot, her effect upon Tom, which says something about his on her. It is a nephew's view of Valerie's characteristics in her relationship with me.

Whatever nature, nurture, and parental influence prepared Thomas Stearns Eliot and Esmé Valerie Fletcher to be, they continued to become who they were, and ultimately fulfilled one another. Valerie wrote a happy ending for the life Tom Eliot once likened to 'a bad Russian novel'.

Esmé Valerie Fletcher (Valerie or Val) was born on August the 17th 1926, two years after the birth of her brother, James Bruce Fletcher, in Leeds,

Yorkshire. Their parents were James Fletcher, a manager with The State Assurance Company, and Esmé May Fletcher, née Bruce.

Val's mother and father both had parents who'd risen to prominence in Leeds society. Her father was the second generation of his family to prosper in insurance management; her grandfather, Walter James Fletcher, had been manager of the Leeds branch of The Liverpool Victoria Insurance Company, and became a senior Freemason in Leeds.

Valerie knew him only by report: Walter died in 1927. He'd been married to Priscilla Newman, one of the daughters of – family legend said – a Newman family who'd come to England as tailors from somewhere near Mainz in Germany several generations before and, in response to anti-semitism, Anglicised their Ashkenazi Jewish Surname: Neumann. Priscilla survived Walter by ten years, dying early in 1937 when Valerie was ten.

Valerie's mother, Esme May Bruce, was the daughter of a family who claimed descent from Robert de Brus, the fourteenth century king of Scotland.

The Bruces left Scotland during the nineteenth century, and eventually settled in Yorkshire, where the maxim: "Hear all, see all and say nowt; eat all, drink all and pay nowt, and if ever tha does owt for nowt, do it for thisen!" characterises the people of the county. Combining the heritage of the Bruces, the Fletchers and the Neumanns, a family joke evolved - we claim to be reluctant to spend money - 'with long deep pockets and short arms', on the grounds that we are Scottish Yorkshire Jews.

Walter's father, Val's paternal great grandfather, had been a boilermaker, who died from injuries he sustained in an explosion at Fowler's Traction Engine factory in Leeds when Walter was still a young man. Walter was an exemplar of the type who, from disadvantaged beginnings, pulled themselves up by their bootstraps, and he eventually became a director of the Liverpool Victoria insurance company.

Walter gave his son, James Fletcher, an upbringing of middle-class respectability. James was commissioned in the Royal Engineers during the First World War, afterwards - emulating his father's career - becoming an Insurance Manager, a knowledgeable collector of antique furniture, paintings, porcelain and books, and a philanthropic member of the Board of the Leeds Subscription Library, the earliest established in provincial England.

Valerie Fletcher's mother, Esmé, was the daughter of James Bruce, born in 1860 in Stockton on Tees, where Val's maternal great grandfather, James Bruce Senior, was Innkeeper at the Leeds Hotel before moving south to the city of Leeds, becoming increasingly impoverished until his death in 1896.

In 1895 his thirty-five year old son, James Bruce Junior, became a Director of The Joppa Tannery in Leeds, a position he held for fifty years, until his death. In common with Val's paternal grandfather he became a prominent Leeds Freemason. James Bruce was President of Leeds Chamber of Commerce in 1924-5. He died early in 1945, aged 84, having survived his wife, Mary, by seven years.

Val's mother, Esmé, was well-educated: well-read, elegant and charming, with a taste for expensive clothes and an unlimited capacity for Gin and French Vermouth, which she absorbed without ever losing her poise. She affected an air of dispossessed aristocracy, insisting the Bruce family were direct descendants of Robert de Bruys, obliquely related to Lord Elgin, the renowned marble collector. This family myth may have some substance, as the family entered England from Clackmannanshire where many generations of Scottish Bruces had made their home.

Consequently, any family weakness of resolve would always be challenged by Val's mother insisting upon a peculiar form of 'noblesse oblige', requiring stiffening of the upper lip, and an exhortation to imitate our 'ancestor' Robert the Bruce: whenever encountering failure, follow the spider's example and try, try again! Val too embodied this perseverance, and there was no hypocrisy in her encouraging others to pursue their objectives single-mindedly.

Val's mother was generous but tended to substitute food for physical affection. Lapses into spoiling children with affection would be swiftly corrected by Val's father, who'd encourage children's laughter but invariably meet their tears with anger. Consequently, distressed children would be overfed Kunzle Cakes by Val's mother until they vomited. Val too placed great stress on the nurturing power of good food, served in portions fit for Yorkshiremen.

Val was nonetheless demonstratively physically affectionate towards Uncle Tom, both privately and in public. His appreciation of her physicality is clear from both his private poetry written for her eyes only, and his obvious enjoyment of dancing with her, seen in many photographs of them together.

Val's father, James Fletcher, combined the dignified bearing of an officer and a manager – if not quite a member of the landed gentry – with a mischievous sense of humour and a love of practical jokes. He was nicknamed 'Sunny-Jim' after the character depicted leaping a five bar gate on the Force Wheat Flakes packets of the day. His sense of humour may have been inherited from his father, Walter, who'd greet James Bruce Senior on the streets of Leeds with ludicrous gestures, possibly pastiching the 'secret signs' of Freemasonry, to which they bore no resemblance whatever.

'Sunny Jim' was an incorrigible practical joker. When I was about three, before a Sunday lunch in Leeds, he handed me a very small tinplate pop-gun with a cork on a string, and invited me to join him, to "hunt for lunch". By a circuitous route he led me around the front garden, then to the rear of the house where an iron grating covered the light-well to the laundry-room in the cellar. He encouraged me to sneak up and peer into the void. He'd previously placed a large yellow melon on the stone and attack us". I duly shot it, he raised the grating; seized the melon in mock triumph, then ordered me to 'march' up the kitchen steps and present my hunting trophy to my grandmother.

Silly episodes such as this must have been part of Val's early childhood too; Val loved silliness. A trait TSE shared, as his close Faber colleagues could attest.

Val's father could however be a stern disciplinarian – chiefly towards Val's brother, James Bruce Fletcher, known as Bruce to distinguish him from his father, James, or 'Jim' at home. On one occasion, accusing Bruce of being 'insubordinate', (Then in his early twenties, having served as a Major in both the Royal Artillery and, seconded to an Intelligence and Counter Insurgency role with the Military Police, in the 1946 garrison of Berlin.) Jim physically fought with his six foot son, twenty-nine years his junior, in the drawing room of the Fletchers' Leeds home, much to the alarm of Bruce's first wife, my mother, who told me of the incident.

That James Fletcher had a violent temper and wouldn't be defied was beyond doubt, but he apparently believed women should be treated gently. Such were the mores of the time! By today's standards a rather sexist view; shouldn't men be treated gently too? Jim told me not to be a cissy when, five, I burst into tears over a broken toy. He passed many adages and attitudes to Val's brother, including the old chestnuts: 'little boys should be seen and not heard' and 'spare the rod and spoil the child'. I'm not sure of his views concerning little girls.

It's unlikely he ever indulged in domestic violence towards Val or Esmé, her mother, who'd never have thought of challenging his authority. Val was a *qualified* believer in male authority, and lived up to her mother's example in the principle of obeying her husband, so far as was good for him. Throughout her marriage, Val committed herself single-mindedly to serve her husband's interests, and continued to do so after he died. It's a poignant confirmation of the inscription featured on Valerie and Tom Eliot's joint bookplate, which cites; 'the certainty of love unchanging' from The Elder Statesman. Val and Tom shared a marriage in which neither assumed authority over, nor ceded it to, the other.

Val and her brother were brought up in middle class comfort, educated privately, and cared for by 'Graingie', a woman employed by her parents

to perform the functions of nanny, lady's maid and cook. Graingie lived elsewhere, but attended daily, remaining in employment until Val's father's death in 1958. Afterwards she was a regular guest at family gatherings until her own death in the nineteen sixties. Graingie breakfasted on prunes and All-Bran, and strongly resembled Esma Cannon, the comedy actress. She appears with Bruce and Valerie in photographs of their childhood charabanc trips to Scarborough.

Val was a keen sportswoman and animal lover. She took every opportunity for horseriding, and, in her teenage years, owned a Scottie-dog named Rags. She spoke often of Rags to the end of her life, although Eliot fans might be dismayed to learn... she disliked cats. As a child, she had a stuffed toy cat in a wicker basket, but left it at her mother's home when setting out for London to begin her career. She certainly had no sentimental attachment to it, and was mildly amused when I decided to name it 'Macavity' because Val had embroidered it to look as though it was pretending to be asleep, with one eye slightly, and rather shiftily, open. It remained in Leeds, along with Val's splendid Noah's Ark, (she had 'put away childish things') until Val's mother died and the house was cleared and sold.

Approaching their teenage years, Val was sent as a boarder to Queen Anne's School, Caversham, and her elder brother, Bruce, despatched to Repton. Perhaps their parents found it a convenient means of gaining extra freedom to enjoy a busy social diary.

Val took readily to life as a boarder, and seems to have enjoyed success academically, socially and on the sports field. She claimed never to have been homesick. The sporting ethos of the school is clear from the fact that Betjeman's Joan Hunter Dunn had been head-girl about a decade before Val was sent there, and Val developed a robust and fearless attitude to life. She displayed rather more of the 'jolly hockeysticks' attitude than any hint of chippy provincial Yorkshire aspiration: she felt neither inferior nor superior to anyone. The Fletcher family had considerable respect for people who'd 'pulled themselves up by their bootstraps'. In this, she and Tom Eliot, the son of the owner of a brick factory, shared no basis for snobbery.

During the war, she and a group of other girls were strafed in the school grounds by a German aircraft. As the others dived for cover, Val claims to have remained defiantly upright, since she 'didn't want to risk spoiling her scarlet school cape'. She took pride in maintaining her appearance. Throughout her life, Val – as did her mother – conspicuously maintained a striking dress-sense, and would never allow her elegance and dignity to be compromised. She was determined never to be a dowdy, shrinking violet. This wasn't vanity, and neither about fashion, nor a jingoistic assertion of establishment unassailability. It was merely typical of her determination never to accept self-delusion, and to eschew mediocrity –

characteristics which TSE valued highly and, incidentally, for which he admired Nietzsche. Years later Val similarly refused to be daunted by the experience of being mugged when visiting Cambridge, Massachusetts in the course of working at Harvard library on the Waste Land facsimile transcript. She was indomitable, but could also be shy.

At Repton, her brother, Bruce, was less happy. In later years he spoke of having been victimised by the senior boys, amongst whom Roald Dahl had been one of the most feared. He also claimed that Val, two years his junior, was in the habit of 'beating him up' during school holidays. Val, when asked about this, always laughed, winked and denied the accusation, but there may well have been some truth in it. When I suffered bullying, years later, she advised; "If they hit you, dear, you must hit them back, twice as hard!" She'd have made a better bully than a victim.

Bruce eventually settled at Repton, partly through competence at sports and a talent for shooting – he became a Bisley marksman. He told the story of having shot down a Heinkel 111 as it flew low over Repton, using a Bren Gun on a bipod sited in Repton's quad, perhaps an attempt to top Val's strafing tale – and he left school in 1942 to be commissioned into the Royal Artillery. His war experiences embittered him and led to a divergence of his values from those he'd previously shared with Val and his family.

During Advent in 1941, aged fifteen, Val became gripped by her desire to meet Uncle Tom, prompted by hearing, at school, John Gielgud's recording of *The Journey of the Magi*. A lot of nonsense has been spouted about Val having become 'obsessive', and that this constituted some kind of family 'in-joke'. Val's father and mother weren't inclined to tease anybody about their aesthetic interests, and both had a committed interest in literature, even if their tastes hadn't quite caught up with modernism.

Some have joked that the Yorkshire lass in Val responded to the ruggedness of the poem: the tale of a hard journey, the camel men causing 'trouble at t'mill'. She was fond of her Yorkshire roots. There's an oft-recounted tale of Val singing; "On Ilkley Moor Baht' at" with Ted Hughes. Val laughed in recognition of the characters in the 'At Last – The 1948 Show' sketch about four Yorkshiremen boasting of having lived 'in t'cardboard box in't middle of t'road'. Neither TSE nor she matched the popular image of 'po-faced' intellectual seriousness. It's not the subsequently somewhat parodied aspect of the poem which appealed to Valerie.

Valerie's admiration focused on the principle of following one's quest without being diverted by criticism: even though one couldn't be certain of the precise nature of one's objective. She had a profound desire to

offer nurture and comfort to the man who'd deliberately chosen so heroic a pursuit of enlightenment. To choose a course without foreseeing the outcome is an act of faith: to explore the unknown, with no expectation of the fruit of one's action.

She didn't aim to find illumination through faith herself, but wanted to accompany such a seeker on his journey, and alleviate his regret for 'the silken girls bringing sherbet'. Valerie was Sancho Panza to Tom's Don Quixote: they had lots of fun on their adventures together. Her teenage desire was to find a kindred spirit who saw beyond the superficial, material mundanities of life. TS Eliot seemed to her to be the archetype.

Some people examine life in search of their personal pathway; they are philosophers, metaphysicians and poets: TSE was such a man. Others take action according to principle; they're the 'doers of deeds' and rather than practise introspection, follow pathways signposted by those they respect. Val was this latter type. They complement one another. If the family dog is sick on the carpet, the philosopher wonders why it vomited, and the 'doer' cleans up the mess.

At the end of the war Val was keen to start her career in the literary world, and has since unashamedly admitted she wanted to 'get to Tom'. After a short while working at the Brotherton Library of Leeds University, and gaining the skills required for employment in a secretarial capacity, she set off to work in London, becoming private secretary - first to Paul Capon, and then Charles Morgan, a suitably serious and respected figure in London literary circles. To be considered for employment with so eminent a publishing house as Faber, candidates are nowadays required to earn a first class degree from Oxford or Cambridge, but she secured a position in the secretarial 'pool' at Faber in 1949 - not, as often stated, as Eliot's personal secretary - determined, with single-minded purpose, to shine in all aspects of her work. She succeeded. She got to Tom.

When I first met Val, I was sick down her back. That was, at 26, her first memory of me. I had an excuse - I was her brother's new-born son, and she was on a rare visit to Leeds to see her parents and inspect the new addition to the family.

My first memories of her were as an attractive, lively, rather mischievous young woman who incited me to be the agent of her practical jokes. She was tremendous fun. When I was able, aged about two, to crawl up the stairs at the house in Leeds, where my grandparents lived on the ground-floor, a tenant (a Mr Pearson and his daughter, Margaret) on the first floor, and my parents on the upper floor, she suggested I steal the milk from the Pearsons' doorstep. It was, I think, the first time I saw her characteristic wink, and heard the soon to become familiar hiccupping laugh. I'm pretty sure she gave the stolen booty back, but she persisted in daring me to carry out naughty errands for years afterwards.

When I was about three, my father was to become a partner in a firm of Chartered Accountants, and we moved to Hull. We'd drive back to Leeds whenever Val came up from London for the weekend, and if not eating meat (delivered by Alan Bennett on his bicycle!) cooked by my grandmother, we'd go out to a restaurant with my grandparents.

Val relished unscrewing the tops of pepper and salt pots at nearby tables, then watching the consequences when unsuspecting diners shook them over their meal. She'd giggle in delighted anticipation as they reached for the cruet.

A favourite venue was the Chanticleer Buttery in the basement of the Queens Hotel in Leeds. The restaurant was considered stylish in the nineteen-fifties, served the Cordon-Bleu dishes of the time, and was decorated with hand-painted pastel panels featuring Chinese-style designs. I'd habitually order mock turtle soup, prawn omelette with spinach puree and chips followed by knickerbocker glory. In later years I'd have the same, but add Mateus Rosé, much to my father's embarrassment.

Once, on arrival at the Chanticleer, Val spotted a service-tray with Tabasco and Worcestershire Sauce, and, as we waited for a table, unscrewed the tops of the bottles, dropping the caps into her handbag.

Eventually she was rewarded when a businessman at a nearby table ordered tomato-juice. The waiter also delivered Worcestershire Sauce. The customer began to shake the bottle vigorously, and brown streaks appeared on the pastel panel behind him. Val dissolved into fits of giggles as the staff rushed to try to save the painting.

When I was four, Val and her mother took me to see a pantomime at the Grand Theatre in Leeds. During the interval, Val gave me some money to buy a tub of ice-cream, and pointed out a man seated near the end of the row in front of us:

"Do you see that man, dear?" she asked. "I think he's wearing a wig. Do you think you could 'accidentally on purpose' knock it off on your way to buy your ice-cream, dear?"

I failed in the attempt, but Val was still convulsed with giggles when I resumed my seat between my Aunt and Grandmother.

When I was about ten, I walked with Val and Uncle Tom from their Kensington flat to attend the Sunday morning service at St Stephen's, Gloucester Road. In a reprise of her prank in Leeds, she tried to persuade me to steal a bottle of milk from the doorstep of one of the rather genteel

houses we were passing. On that occasion Uncle Tom saved me by suggesting she ought not to get a small boy into trouble.

Even in more recent years, Val would casually empty bowls of sugar cubes from the table at Fortnum's or Simpson's into her handbag. I suspect she revelled in these minor crimes far more when it prompted protests from her companions.

Practical jokes were a passion Uncle Tom shared. He'd take me by taxi to Alan Alan's Magic Spot in Southampton Row, where he'd buy all sorts of props with which to play pranks on people. Once we stink-bombed the foyer of the Bedford Hotel, and Uncle Tom made surprising speed, twirling his stick like Chaplin, as we ran away laughing. Those who thought Tom Eliot had become boring as a consequence of his second marriage were perhaps unaware of the childlike delight he found in pure naughtiness. But Val was markedly less amused on the receiving end, such as when Uncle Tom and I played a 'broken glass' trick in the kitchen at the Kensington flat.

Val's sillinesses were a necessary relief from the discretion she maintained so diligently when, as was usually the case, occasions demanded. TSE was a shy, private man, determined his work should stand for itself, but beyond the limelight he'd have found a home life of unremitting intellectual profundity intolerable.

I first met Uncle Tom late in 1956, before they were married, when they paid a visit to enable Tom to meet my grandparents in Leeds. As I was only four, his age seemed unremarkable to me, nor did I think it at all odd that my young auntie was marrying someone seven years older than her father. (Who died, aged sixty-three in 1958, the year after their wedding.) I found Uncle Tom far less severe, and hence apparently more youthful than any other adults I'd met. He was uncondescendingly interested in me: impressed that my mother had taught me to read, write, do basic arithmetic and draw pictures before being sent to school. I was reciprocally impressed that he wrote amusing poems about cats, complete with little drawings, despite the Fletchers being 'dog people' rather than 'cat people'.

As the years went by, my uncle and aunt would join us for family gatherings when possible. Auntie Val and Uncle Tom would bring me books. I was thus enabled to read widely. I needed little encouragement, taking a torch to bed and reading avidly beneath the covers. My father warned me I'd become myopic through too much after-hours reading, and I was fitted with spectacles by the time I was five. Had Harry Potter been popular in the fifties, I might have escaped being called 'speccy-four eyes' at school.

Edward Lear, Lewis Carroll, Charles Kingsley, AA Milne, Andersen and Grimm, Rudyard Kipling, Walter de la Mare and CS Lewis, amongst others, featured at birthdays and Christmases, along with many of the latest toys and amusements. Val and Uncle Tom enjoyed taking me to Hamleys whenever I visited London, and I suspect they had just as much fun going there together, without me in tow as an alibi.

When I was seven, my parents separated and I was sent to prep school. I became miserably homesick, principally because I missed my mother. When exets coincided with visits to Leeds by Uncle Tom and Auntie Val, Uncle Tom became my sole comforter. Both Val and my father would tell me not to be 'a wet little mummy's boy', my grandmother would remain silent and feed me Kunzle cakes, but Uncle Tom argued that I was a 'sensitive boy' and offered an understanding ear, encouraging me to endure my schooldays by throwing myself more keenly into reading, writing and studying, to explore and inhabit my own world. He often interceded on my behalf with Val who'd privately take me aside and say such things as; "Be brave, dear, and don't let the other boys see you're upset." following his prompting.

As a boy, Uncle Tom had suffered from a congenital hernia, and was more inclined to bookishness than to more machismo boys' pursuits. His close relationship with his mother meant he empathised with my reluctance to play the tough guy, and my desire for female companionship. Far from being misogynist, Uncle Tom impressed upon me, from a very early age, the value of the love of a good woman, 'for her price is far above rubies'. He viewed Val as the paragon of womanhood. He'd been amused when, on their marriage, Asprey's made no charge for altering the monograms on my aunt's belongings from EVF to EVE, as it simply meant adding a single stroke, and made it look as if the first woman of creation had married Tom Eliot.

Val was physically as well as emotionally strong. She used her strength to coax, carry, cajole and coddle my uncle to fresh efforts whenever age and emphysema made his life difficult. She had the generosity to create opportunities for me to spend private time with him, despite undoubtedly having reservations about the discussions we had in his study and elsewhere. I think she saw us as a pair of naughty boys, but only slightly jealously resented our having 'male' conversations in which she couldn't share. Much as, I suspect, we all regret being unable to share the different facets of themselves our partners present to other people in our absence.

Touring the USA in 1958, my uncle was made Honorary Deputy Sheriff of Dallas County in Texas. I wrote and asked him if I could have his 'six guns' and silver star, to which he replied that all they'd given him was 'a rather boring certificate', and sent me a carved 'Red Indian' and a colourful fringed towel, featuring a cowboy on horseback wielding a lasso.

Ironically the towel gave me nightmares. Too much imagination. On the same trip, Uncle Tom bought a Ten Gallon hat to amuse Val with impressions of Tom Mix.

We shared a brief holiday in Scarborough one year, and she encouraged my uncle to have as much fun as possible with me, perhaps because she was happy to indulge the small boy in Uncle Tom.

It seemed rather exotic that my aunt and uncle could take holidays in places like Nassau, and Val solicitously tried to conceal my uncle's failing health – the real reason for the holidays. Perhaps she felt she could fill him with her own strength, to recover and enjoy life.

As late as 1964, when he gave me a splendid remote controlled James Bond Aston Martin toy, with which he played with great enthusiasm, he seemed to me intensely full of life. Even in our brief telephone conversation that Christmas I believed my aunt and he would go on forever together. He certainly sounded as if he had plans for the future. And yet he died soon after the New Year, only a couple of days after we had spoken in an even shorter 'phone call.

After Uncle Tom's death, Val asserted her own authority. She'd take advice only from the acknowledged 'best' in their field, and would often ask, of people mentioned in conversation; "Is he a good man, dear?" by which she clearly meant they should have recognised expert standing, rather than being morally unimpeachable. She advised me that in every circumstance, one should always seek the reputed best - of professional expertise, consumer goods, clothes, food, art or literature. She invested some of the earnings from 'Cats' in a wisely chosen collection of art which was sold, on her instructions, further to endow Old Possum's Practical Trust. She chose the best investments to support her husband's legacy.

She'd confidently and dogmatically issue advice from a distinct position of informed authority. Only on the rare occasions when she felt another viewpoint would improve her accuracy did she seek opinions, exclusively from trusted sources. She had an unshakeable belief in the rectitude of her own view, confident in her unsurpassed understanding of Uncle Tom.

In this attitude she appeared to be far more elitist than Uncle Tom had ever even remotely been. She warned against the 'second rate' with disdain bordering upon contempt. Uncle Tom never expressed contempt, preferring to urge improvement wherever his critical aesthetic concluded the best was not being attained. He was generous with both his time and patience, and, despite having found schoolteaching emotionally draining, often encouraged children to appreciate and create literature which sought penetrating examination of all aspects of life. Very little has been said about his later visits to schools, to which he dedicated the same

diligent and unpatronising attention as his lectures to eminent intellectual assemblies.

Val felt it her duty to continue to promote the understanding of TSE's legacy, and possibly considered she oughtn't to waste time on minor audiences or popular irrelevancies. Considering me a dilettante, because I saw merits in a more diverse approach, she repeatedly urged me to choose a single purpose and pursue it doggedly, otherwise I'd remain a ne'er-do-well.

She often spoke of the ceaseless correspondence she received from the academic 'Eliot Industry'. She clearly found much of it frustrating, especially when she suspected the originators of seeking to serve an agenda concerned more with their own reputation than Uncle Tom's. She'd accuse them of wanting her to do their work for them. She was also profoundly mindful of Uncle Tom's own distaste for academia.

Accusations of her engineering a sanitised version of 'incriminating evidence', or of being 'uncooperative', especially in granting copyright release, are more attributable to her diligence in wishing to maintain the kind of balance Uncle Tom sought, and honouring his wishes, rather than indulge in selective production of proof to refute particular accusations.

Attempts to persuade my aunt to take a holiday and visit us in the North of England, as well as proposals to spend time with her in London, were invariably met with agreement in principle but obstructions in practice. Only when she took short holidays with her mother in Scarborough, staying at the Holbeck Hall Hotel – which eventually tumbled over the eroded clifftop – were we able to see her in the North, otherwise her time was devoted entirely to Tom.

She cited the difficulty of assembling material for the letters (in particular a lack of cooperation on the part of Ezra Pound's executors, whom she considered hostile) and prior engagements with friends and academics she considered essential to the continual pursuit of her work 'for' Uncle Tom. Her refusals were often given as; "I'd love to, dear, but I simply can't leave Tom."

It should also be remembered that as an executive Director of Faber and Faber, Val was – as Uncle Tom had been – a business person, with day to day involvement in running a leading publishing house through times of difficulty, including the impact of the crisis in bookselling which saw both Dillon's and Ottakar's, amongst others, run up sizeable debts to Faber.

She had a habit of asking people to whom she was introduced; "Did (or, occasionally, even 'do') you know Tom?" Her determination to carry on as though Uncle Tom was still alive was not the classic denial found in

bereavement. She was determined that her friends should be Tom's friends too. This question seemed to have a dual purpose.

Firstly, if answered affirmatively, she'd seek to glean whatever reminiscences she could, both to renew her own memories of her husband, and to glean further insights; to know him better.

Secondly the question had something of a rhetorical challenge about it, and served as a warning not to express controversial opinions lest she attacked them on the grounds that she knew him better.

Perhaps she drew on the example of her own mother, Esmé, who got on with life after Jim Fletcher's death in 1958 with such élan that I rather tactlessly dubbed Esmé 'The Merry Widow'. Val sublimated her grief into hard work.

She was punctilious in her discretion. Only very occasionally would she resort to expressing a negative opinion, even when it was clear she was annoyed because someone had upset her – mostly when people made pejorative remarks about Uncle Tom, or when a short-term private secretary sold her story to the Guardian betraying Val's trust. Nonetheless, when her cuttings agency picked up on an unflattering reference to Uncle Tom in *Private Eye*, she became a subscriber because she found the *Eye* amusing. She preferred to ignore rather than litigate. Copyright infringements, however, would never be ignored.

Immediately after Uncle Tom died, Val made it clear she disapproved of my ambition to pursue a career in the arts, and made me promise not to attempt to create anything under my own name which might, by association with Uncle Tom, lead to unfavourable inferences about his influence upon me, or to accusations that I'd benefited from nepotism on her part. My father was eager that I should enter a profession, such as Accountancy or Law, once I left school and University. Val urged me to obey him.

Uncle Tom had been a far more admirable role-model than my father, whose views I considered Philistine, materialistic and cynical, and who, to my discomfiture, dismissed my uncle as 'arty-farty'.

Uncle Tom only once showed disapproval of my father, when Bruce made a racist remark over dinner. In our private conversations, if I expressed disagreement with my father, Uncle Tom would remind me of the biblical commandment to 'honour thy father and mother'.

My father disowned me when I went up to Durham in 1970 to study English and Drama instead of taking up a short-service commission in the Parachute Regiment; something I'd agreed to do partly to appease him and mainly to enjoy flying about the world at Her Majesty's expense. I'd

already spoiled his plans for me by setting fire to my prep school, resulting in my being sent to a school other than Repton (where the buildings had never been subjected to arson attempts over many centuries, and they weren't keen to take the risk of admitting me) and by gaining only mediocre grades in my science-based A levels. He hoped I might serve in the Army then take up articles in accountancy or law. My ambition to be an 'arty-farty' was the final betrayal. Valerie and her mother Esmé were now the only immediate members of the Fletcher family with whom I could have any contact, and my mother's house near Cirencester, designed by her father, the Architect, Lt Col Eric Cole became my home base.

I visited Val several times during my student years, in the early seventies, and invariably, when I sought news about my father, I was rewarded with a stern and dutiful pep-talk about filial obedience, followed by consolation trips to Foyles or Harrods book department to stock up on the kind of reading material of which Val approved. Accepting with some distaste that I was reading Roger McGough, Brian Patten and Adrian Henri, she despatched me with George Herbert, Yeats, and Dylan Thomas to redress the balance. Significantly, she never recommended Pound.

Seeing my bare feet (I wore no shoes from May to November in my student years) she despatched me with a pair of my Uncle's shoes, and to counter my interest in popular music, bought me classical LPs, including my first ever recording of Fauré's Requiem, a shared favourite.

She never offered to let me stay the night, nor ever pressed cash into my hand. That she was prepared to admit me at all was something of a miracle, as I was in the habit of wearing my hair to an untidy shoulder length, had a scruffy beard and wore a red-lined gold bishop's cope, floral shirts and lime-green crushed-velvet flared trousers.

Dressed thus, visiting the Courtauld Institute, I was physically attacked by an elderly woman brandishing an umbrella, on the grounds that my appearance outraged taste and decency and was a blasphemous abuse of clerical vestments. Val was indulgently tolerant, with a tendency to choose flamboyant clothes herself.

Val listened patiently whenever I extolled the qualities of my latest aesthetic discoveries, and promptly countered by redirecting my attention to the acknowledged masters, who, she was convinced, would outlast those modern poets whom Faber chose not to publish. She made one or two private remarks that weren't entirely positive about several poets who were Faber authors.

She wasn't usually inclined to negativity of any kind, but preferred recounting anecdotes about people with whom she had close relationships known to the public for their eminence rather than their quirks. Tales of

Ralph Richardson in his motorcycling leathers would supplement reminiscences about dinners with Auden and being assigned to – for want of any better term – chaperone Dylan Thomas in making a broadcast for the Third Programme.

The BBC contract required Dylan Thomas not to drink any alcohol for the twenty four hours preceding the broadcast, to take place live, before a studio audience at Portland Place, and to adhere to a programme pre-printed in the Radio Times.

Val said - having prevented his access to alcohol all day - she slept across the threshold of his bedroom door, and maintained her vigilance until they boarded the taxi to take them to the BBC. Unfortunately their route took them past the Cafe Royal on Regent Street, where Dylan Thomas stopped the cab, leapt out, and rushed into the bar, returning with a full bottle of whisky he'd bought at bar price! Despite Val's attempts to snatch it, she said, he drank the entire bottle by the time they arrived at Portland Place. He entered the studio, declaimed several poems – none of which tallied with the published programme, some themselves unpublished – to great applause, and was leaving the building when he collapsed insensible in the doorway. Val reached down and seized him by the collar, remarking to the producer who was seeing them out;

"Such a gentleman, Dylan: opening the door for a lady."

She then carried him to the waiting taxi. She was indeed strong.

Years later she gave me her and Uncle Tom's copy of Thomas' Collected Poems. She admired him. I dare say she could have beaten him in a drinking contest, as she shared her mother's capacity for gin.

During 1975 and 1976 I worked as an actor and musician in the North-East; mainly to attempt to learn about writing plays, and Val once more made it clear she disapproved of my having ambitions towards writing. When, to her relief, I became a salesman late in 1976, she became less guarded whenever I dialled Western 0909, and we spoke on the telephone.

In 1978, Val asked me about Andrew Lloyd-Webber, and spoke of her reluctance to allow a 'pop' star (as she then viewed him) access to Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats, which he'd apparently already started to set to music. Knowing my aunt believed one should always seek out the 'best' of artists – indeed any expert in any given field – I argued that Melvyn Bragg had given his approval to Lloyd-Webber's Variations on a theme by Paganini and used it for the South Bank Show. We took a cab to Harrods where Val bought the cassette recording and returned to the flat to play it on the Dynatron. Unfortunately the cassette was faulty, and I had to make strenuous efforts to urge Val to speak to Melvyn Bragg or his

producers, stressing that Lloyd-Webber's father was the respected Principal of the London College of Music, and his brother a classical cellist.

In 1979, I lived in London for a short while, starting a career in medical sales and marketing. She seemed happier now that I seemed to be building a career which had nothing to do with the arts, but still expressed her disappointment that I hadn't set out to become the best in a professional field, saying I ought to have become a surgeon instead of entering trade.

When I pointed out that Uncle Tom had worked for Lloyd's Bank before he gained recognition for his work, I was again rebuked for being a dilettante and warned I shouldn't seek to compare myself to a genius. The rebuke was only marginally softened by the fact that Auntie Val always addressed me as 'dear'.

It was salutary that the genius himself never condescended towards me, and had encouraged me to write, but that cut no mustard with my aunt. Single-mindedness can sometimes tend towards the appearance of arrogance. She saw me as lazy and felt I'd let Tom down.

Whenever I enquired about progress towards Lloyd-Webber's setting of Old Possum's cats, Val was discreet. She remained largely unconvinced until Trevor Nunn joined the project, but she still told me only a little about progress, possibly on the grounds that she thought I might ask her to introduce me to anyone who might help me make a 'comeback' to my earlier brief career as an actor.

Then, surprisingly, she telephoned quite some time later, at the start of the eighties, and asked if I thought it would be safe to invest some money in the production. I made enquiries (my mother had remarried, to the brother of a business partner of Bill Kenwright), learned that Cameron Mackintosh wasn't accustomed to failure, so suggested she'd be likely to make a small profit at the very least, if she chose to become a production 'angel'.

Ever since Cats was launched, she repeatedly suggested we should go and see the show together, but it's something we never managed. Always her time was committed 'working for Tom', or on prior engagements.

For some time in the early eighties we spoke mainly at birthdays and Christmas. After her marriage to Uncle Tom, and after his death, Val was rarely demonstratively emotional towards any other member of the family, but proved a loyal, loving and dedicated daughter when her mother developed dementia and needed specialist care at the Goldsborough Nursing Home near Leeds before her death in 1987.

At my grandmother, Esmé's funeral in 1987 the presence of Val's grand-nephew, my son, Clifford Bruce, re-cemented the family ties between us, especially now Val saw at first hand how my father, her brother, goaded by my stepmother into a rather distorted view of family connections, began to accuse Valerie of denying him some portion of his inheritance.

I have copies of the correspondence between them, which I acquired after my father's death. Without going into any detail, I can assure you; Val's forbearance was exemplary in the face of her brother's rather ludicrous vituperative accusations, especially as he also was in the habit of abusing Frances Leigh, her private secretary, over the telephone. Nevertheless, it's subsequently become clear, Val gave her brother financial help he didn't really need.

Val was, Frances told me recently, delighted with the news of the birth in 1989 of her grand niece, Esmé, and pleased her mother's name had continued to a third generation. Val never told me!

Early in the nineties I foolishly resigned from an established position in corporate senior management, hoping to indulge my creative ambitions with an independent TV production company, taking a consequent drop in income. Faced with the prospect of being unable to pay our mortgage, my wife wrote to Val and asked if she could help. The first I knew of it was a telephone call from Val, asking how much we owed. I was ashamed to admit my dilettantism had led to self-inflicted career disaster.

She immediately told me it was my persuasion almost twenty years previously that had led to her eventual acceptance both of the proposals to create 'Cats' and her subsequent investment in the production. She said she'd be happy to pay off our mortgage, saying it was my advice which had swayed her. She did so immediately, taking care to assure me I could pay her back, without interest, when I was able to do so comfortably. I'm sure she said this principally to allow me the dignity of accepting the money as a loan rather than a gift, and not to feel totally undeserving of her generosity. She never took a penny of it back.

A short while later she was driven across to my mother's home in the Cotswolds and spent the day meeting our children and – to her evident pleasure – our dogs. Dressed in her customary bright clothes, she played a surreal version of Badminton with the children, and enjoyed the experience of being a great aunt in her seventies. Val had a driving licence of her own, but her regular driver Mr Taylor, she proudly told us, had driven The Beatles, and his Daimler Jaguar boasted a well-stocked cocktail cabinet.

By 2002, attending her brother's funeral, principally to support me, and remaining silent about his ungracious behaviour over the years, she was already in need of staff to assure her own physical wellbeing, but was still

concerned more for my health than her own. I was bald through chemotherapy for cancer, I'm sure she thought I looked moribund, and she assured me she'd do whatever she could to secure her great nephew and niece's future if I didn't survive.

Some years earlier she'd also rediscovered her own uncle's widow – over ten years her senior – living in London, and joyfully set out to provide her too with family support. Ultimately, in 2012, at 86, Val's health failed first, and her aunt, aged ninety-eight, attended her niece's funeral.

She was exceptional in continuing Uncle Tom's work. Protestations that she was taking a long time to edit the letters show a limited understanding of the fact that the closer one gets to a mountain, the harder it is to see the summit. She was also eager to fulfil her role as a Director at Faber, and concerned about the challenges facing publishing as booksellers' debts spiralled ever higher and the potential of the internet threatened traditional print media.

Miss Esmé Valerie Fletcher was undeniably a Yorkshirewoman, although John Hayward, who'd described her as 'the flower of the Yorkshire marshes' clearly intended it as a denigratory remark. She was fully aware of the contrast between the industrial North and the London intellectual milieu she chose to inhabit as Mrs Eliot. She understood pain and despair, and would alleviate them wherever she found them, if it was in her power to do so.

She sought beauty, and strove to enable others to find it by seeing through the phenomena they perceive as ugly. She worked hard to nurture my Uncle's hope, and after his death, to show others that TS Eliot primarily sought to illuminate the best in humanity, not merely to mirror the despairing, loveless mundanity of civilised delusion and mediocrity.

She stopped travelling by tube after a young woman standing beside her at Kensington High Street underground station threw herself under the train, spattering Valerie with viscera. This was neither denial nor squeamishness. When she spoke of the event, she appeared to feel she ought somehow to have prevented it. She understood that, like most of us, she could be insensitive, and strove to offer help and friendship to all she met. Like her mother, she remained gracious, elegant, charming, loyal, friendly and generous all her life.

Val had many friends, both in the literary world and beyond. Her closest friends in latter years included Natasha Spender, Stephen Spender's widow, Dame Elizabeth Esteve-Coll, and – of course – Craig Raine, who delivered addresses, both at Valerie's funeral and the interment of her ashes.

Val's Anglo Catholicism wasn't the product of her upbringing, but became part of her quest in reaching Uncle Tom. Nowadays she'd possibly have fallen foul of accusations of stalking! But her love was requited; they shared the search for the sacramental quality of marriage: a numinous experience in contrast to the 'coupling of beasts' so often cited, mistakenly, as evidence of an alleged misogynist sexual disgust. Uncle Tom was discovering new understanding of Tantrism, and approaching Nirvana. In Valerie he found someone with whom he shared respect for the physical and non-verbal aspects of human love, and a unity with the *love divine, all loves excelling* of which Charles Wesley wrote.

In some years time, the weekly pillow letters TSE wrote to Val will be published. Not only will they provide fodder for scholars to attempt to decrypt private codes, but they'll also offer many young lovers the inspiration that only a mature poet, equipped with wit, wisdom and a sharp precision of expression, can bring to the exposure of human relationships which are no less keen when found late in life.

Uncle Tom didn't understand Val. Nor she, him. Complete understanding is neither an essential, nor even a desirable factor in love or marriage. Mutual trust, respect and appreciation render superfluous that mistaken version of 'understanding' which is predictive and based upon total accord. It's not a matter of having similar views – nor even of thinking the same thoughts or babbling the same speech. The love they shared couldn't be damaged by a difference of opinion. Wisdom can be lost in information. A shared journey of exploration: of becoming.

She used the wealth resulting from the success of the musical 'Cats' to found Old Possum's Practical Trust. Her generosity has funded projects for the promotion of literature: the TS Eliot Poetry Prize, which will continue; schemes enabling young people involved in the theatre to travel to the USA; the provision of £2.5m to establish the TS Eliot wing of the London Library; and she contributed to the purchase of the 1709 Viotti-ex Bruce Stradivarius Violin (I'm not sure if the John LF Bruce, from whose Estate it was secured in lieu of death duties, was a distant relation) which was played at a drinks party held in her memory at the London Library on May 1st 2013.

She was – with the Faber family – a major shareholder of the publishing house, and Stephen Page, Faber's current Chairman, has stressed how her legacy has been, and will continue to be, vital to Faber's role as a major international force in literary publishing. Some people have observed that Val resembled Baroness Thatcher, not only in appearance, but also in diction. Valerie was superficially politically Conservative, but she certainly couldn't be accused of imitation. The reverse might have been more the case: Valerie was, in single minded determination, like Margaret Thatcher before Margaret Roberts was like Margaret Thatcher. But, in common with TSE, Val had profoundly socialist instincts.

Ultimately she restored TSE's faith in himself. Perhaps she deprived him of his 'divine discontent', so he felt less of a drive to explore life through writing, if only because he was exploring it through living. In every way. Because he loved my aunt, I was lucky to have gained an uncle who wholeheartedly became part of our family. Who died still intent upon living and loving. A man resolved, reconciled and redeemed. He still had plenty of fresh things to say for future generations.

Uncle Tom would have loved to have had children, but deliberately chose not to. They never opened the door to the passage to that particular rose garden. I was the closest they got, and hope I gave them both more joy than pain. A thornless rose garden.

In recent years, Val suffered increasing health problems, so I decided to emerge from the woodwork a little, to continue to bear witness, as Val can no longer do so. I considered she was unlikely to notice, never mind object. Having known the man Uncle Tom became through their marriage, rather than the myth, I feel it's important.

Regardless of accusations that she was wilfully obstructive or determined to 'spin' my Uncle's reputation; whether you consider her single-mindedness to have been positive or negative, she remains the woman whose love cherished TS Eliot and renewed his passion for life. That has value. She sought no personal recognition or honours, though many have said she should have had them conferred because of her contribution to English Literature, publishing and the work of Old Possum's Practical Trust.

There's no justification for speculating why Tom Eliot did not, after Vivienne's death, marry Emily Hale, nor, subsequently, Mary Trevelyan. He'd have found each of them far too earnest. Neither of them were silly enough, and where's the fun in that? Val wasn't an academic intellectual's intellectual, and displayed far too much common sense to attempt to insinuate herself as Uncle Tom's intellectual muse. Nor was she particularly inclined to unmitigated metaphysical mysticism. This was probably a great relief to Uncle Tom. After scrabble, cheese and alcoholic libations, there was relaxed intimacy in his second marriage. You should have seen her wink and heard her laughter. Val remarked that he had needed a happy marriage, and refused to die before he'd experienced it.

Miss Esmé Valerie Fletcher of Yorkshire became, single-mindedly, Mrs Eliot of East Coker where her ashes were interred with TSE's on April 28th 2013.