

ELDRIDGE, MILDRED ELSIE (ELSI) (1909 - 1991), artist

Name: Mildred Elsie Eldridge
Date of birth: 1909
Date of death: 1991
Gender: Female
Occupation: artist
Area of activity: Art and Architecture
Author: Tony Brown

Mildred Eldridge was born at 35 Dunmore Road, Wimbledon, London, on 1 August 1909, the daughter of Frederick Charles Eldridge (1874-1960), a jeweller, and his wife Mildred Mary (née Chevalier, 1871-1961). Her one brother, Frederick (1906-1980), had a career in insurance. In 1925 the family moved to 3 Bridge Street, Leatherhead, where they lived in accommodation over her father's jewellery shop.

Known to her family as 'Elsie', after her move to Wales and her marriage she tended to use the Welsh form 'Elsi'; professionally she used the forms 'Mildred E. Eldridge' (as a book illustrator, mainly for Faber) and 'M. E. Eldridge' (on her paintings).

Eldridge received her education (1916-28) at Wimbledon Hill School (later Wimbledon High School). Having gained national awards from the Royal Drawing Society in 1927 and 1928, she entered Wimbledon School of Art from which she won a Free Studentship to the Royal College of Art (1930); there she studied in the School of Painting where her tutors included Eric Ravilious, Edward Bawden and Gilbert Spencer. She was awarded her A.R.C.A. in 1933. The award of a Travelling Scholarship from the R.C.A. enabled her to travel in Italy (March-July 1934), drawing and painting in Rome, Naples, Capri, Assisi, Ravenna, Venice and, especially, at Poggio Gherardo, a villa near Florence, where she stayed with the artist Aubrey Waterfield and his wife, leading figures in the Anglo-Florentine community, and visited the art connoisseur and collector Bernard Berenson at nearby I Tatti.

On her return, she was involved with two former R.C.A. friends (Evelyn Dunbar and Violet Martin), under the guidance of her former tutor Cyril Mahoney, in the painting of a series of murals at Brockley County School (now Prendergast School), which still exist; Eldridge's contribution, *The Birdcatcher* and the *Skylark* is an early expression of her concern with human persecution of the animal world. From 1934 Eldridge was also exhibiting at the Royal Academy and continued to do so into the 1950s. She visited Wales in the 1930s, painting and drawing in Montgomeryshire, and in 1939 was commissioned to design the stained glass in the east widow at Llanpumsaint Church, Carmarthenshire. In 1937 she held a one-woman show at the Beaux Arts Gallery in Bond Street, London, which was sufficiently successful to allow her to buy a large Bentley convertible.

However, for reasons which are unclear, she had by this point left London for Oswestry, where she taught at the High School for Girls, and then Chirk, where she taught at Moreton Hall School. It was here in 1937 that she met the local curate, Rev. R. S. Thomas, and they were married in Bala in 1940. She had had far more experience of the world than her new husband-she had travelled in France as well as Italy - and was also much better read in English literature. Her effect on his poetry - up to this point pale, derivative Georgian ruralism, and unpublished - is evident. She initiated his reading of W. B. Yeats and her keen observation of the natural world, the result of her artistic training and evident in her own work, is apparent in the new precision with which he himself portrayed the Welsh countryside in the poetry in his first collection *The Stones of the Field*, 1942 (the jacket of which was drawn by Eldridge).

After two years (1940-42) at Tallarn Green (in what was then Flintshire), where R. S. Thomas was curate-in-charge at St Mary Magdalene's Church, the couple moved to Manafon in Montgomeryshire, where Thomas became rector at St Michael's. Their only child, Gwydion Andreas (1945-2016) was born there. Eldridge supplemented the family income by teaching art classes for the Extra-mural Department of University College of Wales, Aberystwyth, and illustrating numerous books for Faber, including a series of books for children by Dorothy Richardson (1945-48), herbals by C. F. Leyer (1946-52) and some striking supernatural images for an edition of Henry Williamson's *The Star Born* (1948). During the War years Eldridge participated in the 'Recording Britain' project, initiated by Sir Kenneth Clark, in which artists were commissioned to make 'sympathetic records' of vulnerable buildings, landscapes and lifestyles. Twenty of Eldridge's pictures for this project - buildings and rural activities in mid and north Wales - are housed in the Recording Britain Archive at the Victoria and Albert Museum.

In 1951 Eldridge was commissioned to paint what was to be the centrepiece of her artistic career, a mural for the nurses' dining room at the Robert Jones and Agnes Hunt Orthopaedic Hospital in Gobowen: a remarkable work, painted not directly onto the walls but onto a series of six panels, five feet in height and totalling some 120 feet in width. Entitled *The Dance of Life*, the work draws on themes and images which Eldridge had been painting since the thirties and portrays humanity's loss of harmony with the natural world, human beings' alienation in a world of mass media, cities and warfare. Underlying it, as in much of her later work, is a concern at human exploitation of the natural environment, anticipating by some decades popular concern for such issues. In the mural, the natural world, including birds and animals, as well as the children who remain in harmony with the pastoral world, are painted with remarkable precision, especially given the sheer scale of the work. The work, one of the most significant achievements in mural painting since the war, is, after some years in storage, now on display at Oriel Sycarth, Glyndwr University, Wrexham.

During the period in which Eldridge was painting the mural (1951-6, her husband became vicar of St. Michael's, Eglwys fach, Cardiganshire. Eldridge left the vicarage and garden at Manafon with great regret, taking with her the rolled up canvas of the panel she was working on: panels five and six were completed at Eglwys fach. There she became friends with the art collectors Louis and Mary Behrend, who had in the late 1920s commissioned Stanley Spencer to paint the murals at Sandham Memorial Chapel, Hampshire; they had settled after the War at Llanwrin and through her friendship with them Eldridge became acquainted with Spencer who wrote her a fulsome letter of admiration when he saw the mural at Gobowen in 1958.

In the years at Eglwys fach (1954-1967) Eldridge, as well as continuing her extra-mural teaching, devoted much time to the detailed watercolour paintings of birds, plants and insects for which she was best known in her later years. She sold many dozens of such studies, painted with great skill and precise observation, through the Royal Watercolour Society and through Spink, the London dealers, and further enhanced the family income by selling many of these pictures to Medici for reproduction on greetings cards.

In 1967 Eldridge and Thomas moved to Aberdaron, at the tip of the Llŷn peninsula, when Thomas became vicar at Eglwys Hywyn Sant; when he retired in 1978, they moved to an old stone cottage at Sarn y Plas, Rhiw, leased to them by the Keating sisters of Blas yn Rhiw. There she continued to paint, selling successfully in London through Abbott and Holder as well as the R.W.S., though she sometimes complained that, while the paintings of birds and plants always sold, what she felt to be more interesting, more abstract paintings, in the style of the striking abstract self portrait of 1970, did not.

After the move to Sarn she became increasingly withdrawn socially and experienced several bouts of ill health, including in her last decade problems with cataracts. However, as well as painting and drawing, she remained an active and knowledgeable gardener and plantswoman. In her letters and her journals, written in the 1980s, she was outspoken about the number of tourists who every summer invaded the Llŷn peninsula, and more generally about contemporary society's lack of concern for the natural world. She died on 10 March 1991 and is buried in the churchyard of St. Maelrhys' church, Llanfaelrhys near Aberdaron.

Author

Tony Brown

Sources

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Personal knowledge

Further reading

Wikipedia Article: [Mildred Eldridge](#)

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