

Thomas Stearns Eliot (1888-1965), Poet and Anglo-Catholic

Thomas Stearns Eliot was born in St. Louis, Missouri to Henry Ware Eliot, president of the Hydraulic-Press Brick Company and Charlotte Champe Stearns¹ on September 26, 1888. The family were staunch Unitarians of Boston Brahmin stock. Their ancestor Andrew Eliot came to America from East Coker, Somerset, England in the 1660's. Mrs. Eliot was a teacher, social worker and amateur poet. ~Young Tom studied at Smith Academy, St. Louis in 1898, moving on to Milton Academy in Massachusetts in 1905. He earned his Bachelor's and Master's degree at Harvard between 1910 and 1911 and then spent a year at the Sorbonne in Paris where he studied under Henri Bergson, a major French philosopher and read poetry with Alain Fournier. He later wrote: "The kind of poetry I needed to teach me the use of my own voice did not exist in English at all; it was only to be found in French."¹ In 1911 he was back at Harvard, but by 1914 he returned to England.

Troubled Marriage

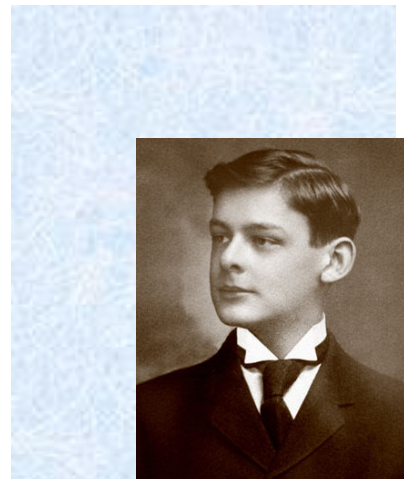
Eliot's marriage to Vivien Haigh Wood, on June 26, 1915, as opposed by his family who were aware of Vivien's physical and emotional difficulties, became an exercise in mutual misery. His personal physical concerns only exacerbated his wife's physical and mental deterioration. The couple shared a flat with Bertrand Russell² for three years. Much speculation has been written about this *ménage à trois*. It would seem that the Eliots could not continue long in their painful relationship, but it lasted until Eliot accepted the Charles Eliot Norton Professorship for the academic year 1932-1933 at Harvard. When T. S. returned to England he arranged a formal separation—he refused to divorce. Later Vivien was committed to Northumberland House for the mentally ill, where she died in 1947. Both the book and subsequent play "Tom and Viv"³ depict Eliot as callous and unfeeling, something even Lord Russell denied.



St. Stephens, London

Inspirations

Through it all, Eliot's spiritual life developed. When he was a child Annie Dunne, his Irish nurse, would take him to Catholic Mass. This was his first exposure to a liturgical church. While in Europe before his conversion Eliot, who loved religious paintings and ecclesiastical architecture, visited churches and cathedrals, and attended high Mass in Catholic churches. In England he continued the practice, eventually finding the Anglo-Catholic St. Stephen's Gloucester Road, Kensington, London. That was to be his spiritual home for the rest of his life, and where he was warden for 27 years. Eliot said that he had "a Catholic cast of mind, a Calvinistic heritage and a Puritanical temperament."⁴ He was baptized June 29th, 1927 and that December he became a British citizen. *Left: St. Stephens Gloucester Road, London.*



Top: Young Eliot; below: Highgate School quadrangle where Eliot taught.

Just Making a Living

Marriage required a steady income. From 1916-1917, Eliot taught at several schools including the Highgate Junior School⁵ where he taught Latin and French, the Royal Grammer School at High Wycombe, and lectured. From 1917-1925 he worked as a clerk in the Colonial and Foreign Department of Lloyd's Bank⁶, 25 Gresham Street, London. When novelist Aldous Huxley visited Eliot at the bank he found him in "a sub-sub basement at a desk which was in a row of desks with other bank clerks." He was so good at his job that one bank officer opined: "If he had remained he might have become a branch manager." Eliot suffered a period of exhaustion in 1921⁷ and it was during a three-month recovery period that "The Waste Land" was completed and published in 1922. A volume of "Poems 1909-1925" followed in 1925 the same year that Eliot left the bank to join the publishing house of Faber & Gwyer, later Faber and Faber (Right), where he later became a director and remained until his death. At Faber and Faber he was responsible for discovering new and promising poets.



Anglicans and Anglo-Catholics

Anglicans are members of the established church of England and represent a broad spectrum of views pertaining to doctrine and ritual, such as Low, High, Broad and Anglo-Catholics. Anglo-Catholics in the United States, tend to belong to the "continuing churches", those that reject the changes in doctrine and practice of the Episcopal Church in America.

Anglo-Catholics both here and abroad accept:

All Seven Sacraments.

The Mass as an "unbloody" Sacrifice (although not recreating the past).

Extra liturgical worship of Christ in the reserved Sacrament,

Veneration (but not worship) of Mary

Auricular confession as needed.¹⁰

Prayers for the Dead

New English Bible

"If the Church rewrites its Bible and its liturgies to conform with every successive stage of deterioration of the English language the prospect is gloomy." *New Translation of the Bible in Theology*, September 1949

His Anglo-Catholicity

Anglo-Catholicism flourished primarily in the cities, and London had a number of Anglo-Catholic churches. It also produced some remarkable clergy, the famous "slum priests", such as Alexander Mackonmick, who combined their faith and high liturgical practice with a "Gospel of the poor", working with the disadvantaged, especially in the East End. Eliot was fortunate to have joined the church at this moment in time. By the end of World War II, many parishioners moved away from their neighborhoods that had been destroyed by the bombings.

Eliot practiced a routine of daily prayer, attended daily Mass, High Mass on Sundays, observed Holy Days of obligation, made an auricular confession three times a year and went on an annual retreat usually to the Society of St. John the Evangelist, an Anglican religious order for men, (founded 1866) at Cowley, Oxford or to the Anglican Benedictine Nashdom Abbey in Buckinghamshire. Eliot was a life member of the Society of King Charles the Martyr, a group founded in 1894 devoted to intercessory prayer, and promotion of a wider observance of the feast day of "St. Charles" on January 30. He was also a supporter of the Anglican Shrine of Our Lady of Walsingham.⁸ Eliot prayed the rosary using one given to him by Pope Pius XII. "I can get through a whole section of the Rosary in the Underground going home, especially if the train stops long at Leicester Square." (Letter to Mary Trevelyan⁹) Eliot studied the works of English mystics: Walter Hinton, Julian of Norwich and the Anglo-Catholic Evelyn Underhill.

When Poets Meet Eliot met Ezra Pound the American poet in 1914 when he returned to England. Pound declared him “worth watching.” They became close friends. C. S. Lewis was a severe critic of Eliot’ poetry and ridiculed his religious conversion believing that T. S. was attempting to make Christianity itself more “high brow.” Nevertheless, by 1959, they acknowledged a kind of friendship. James Joyce, whom Eliot met in Paris in 1914, thought Eliot “arrogant”, but in time he, too, achieved an amiable attitude.



Second Marriage On January 10, 1957 Eliot married his former secretary Esmé Valerie Fletcher, who became, after his death, his editor and literary executor. They had a short but happy marriage. Eliot died of emphysema on January 4, 1965.

Recognitions and Memorials

For Sherlockjans.

In his play, *Murder in the Cathedral*, Eliot paraphrases the words of the Musgrave Ritual. For a time it was believed that Eliot and Conan Doyle had used the same source, until in a letter to Nathan L. Bergis, Eliot explained: “My use of the Musgrave Ritual was deliberate and wholly conscious.” (Quoted in the *Times Literary Supplement*, London, September 28, 1951.)

During his lifetime Eliot received many awards including Order of Merit awarded by King George VI (1948), Nobel Prize in Literature (1948), Hanseatic Goethe Prize (Hamburg, 1955), Dante Medal (Florence, 1959). Three Tony awards: one for *The Cocktail Party* (1950) and two for the poems from his “*Old Possum’s Book of Practical Cats*”¹¹ used in the musical “*Cats*” (1983) and numerous honorary degrees. Eliot College at the University of Kent, England was named for him. ~ Eliot’s ashes were interred below a memorial plaque on Easter Sunday 1965 in the parish Church of St. Michael, East Coker, Somerset, England, the home of his ancestors. His widow unveiled a memorial stone in the Poet’s corner of Westminster Abbey on January 3, 1967.

Notes:

1. *On Poetry and Poets*, 1948.
 2. Bertrand Russell, 3rd Lord Russell. Mathematician, philosopher, writer.
 3. *Play*, 1984, film 1994. Author of both: Michael Hastings.
 4. “*On Poetry and Poets*”, 1957
 5. Highgate school received its charter from Queen Elizabeth in 1565.
 6. Not to be confused with Lloyds of London.
 7. In 1921 Eliot suffered a complete nervous breakdown
 8. Established by an Anglican priest. There is also a Catholic Shrine.
 9. Mary Trevelyan, CBE, worked tirelessly to assist international students. A longtime friend and prolific correspondent, she broke with Eliot when he married a second time.
 10. A practice found in the Visitation of the Sick in the Book of Common Prayer, and best expressed in the first exhortation for Holy Communion in the 1662 BCP.
 11. “*Old Possum*” was Ezra Pound’s nickname for Eliot.
- For works see: Donald Gallup, *T. S. Eliot: A Bibliography* (1947; rev. ed., 1969). For Eliot’s Anglo-Catholicism: Barr Spurr, *Anglo-Catholic in Religion: T. S. Eliot and Christianity*, Lutterworth, 2013. Author is professor of poetry and poetics at the University of Sydney, Australia.

