

Global Woman Elizabeth Shakespear Nel (née Layton)

by Devon L. Muhlert

It is delightful to be able to hear Elizabeth Nel's own confident voice on a recording. She is giving a talk in front of an unnamed group, and in her crisp Queen's English she sounds happy to be reliving her remarkable career during the second world war. She insists on being addressed informally as Elizabeth, not in the formal address of the time as Mrs. Nel.

Elizabeth seems to have led a charmed life. As Winston Churchill's personal secretary, she was well acquainted with his moods and impatience, which she cheerfully took in stride. Elizabeth Layton's middle name was Shakespear (without the final e), so perhaps it was inevitable that she returned to life in England.

Born in Bury St-Edmunds, Suffolk, on June 14, 1917, she came to Canada because her father, a first world war veteran, had contracted tuberculosis. For healthier air, he was advised to move to B.C. or Australia. He chose B.C., and the family settled in Vernon in 1924. Elizabeth was seven. She was educated at St. Michael's School and then Vernon High School. One of her teachers on the above-mentioned recording commented, "She was a brilliant student. Later I didn't worry about the war because I knew Elizabeth was there."

The Layton family eventually sold their home to the Mackie family. The house today is known as the heritage Mackie Lake House.

When Elizabeth was 19, she returned to England and attended Mrs. Hoster's College in London. After graduating, she returned to Vernon, becoming secretary of the Red Cross Corps under Mrs. R. McGusty. She had also trained as a volunteer air warden.

In 1939, it seems that women needed permission from Ottawa to cross the ocean for England, and Elizabeth's hadn't arrived. She decided to challenge this and traveled to Ottawa to demand permission. Eventually they stamped her passport and dismissed her, mumbling, "It's your death-wish!"

A cousin of hers was a Navy Commander who helped her with references to become one of two secretaries to 10 Downing Street. Her own spunk and determination helped her when she was almost fired on her first day as Winston Churchill's personal secretary. All the typewriters in the room were set to double-spacing so that Churchill could correct or rewrite in the empty line. Unfortunately, Elizabeth sat at the only typewriter that was on single-spacing, which she had no time to reset due to his dictation speed.

A demanding and meticulous employer, he barked at her that she should find a colleague who *would* be able to do the job.

She refused to be daunted, and forgave his lapses of politeness and consideration. They often worked till 2:00 a.m., or 4:00 a.m, occasionally even 6 a.m. With the busy schedule, two part-time girls had been hired to help because whenever Churchill worked his long hours, he required a secretary. They had every second weekend off. Elizabeth talks about how that was a

good time to catch up on laundry and banking and such things. She and her colleagues often groused that they had no time for boyfriends. They worried about being ‘left on the shelf’.

Churchill sometimes dictated lying on his bed, and thought nothing of keeping his staff to his hours. Elizabeth commented that his wife Clementine was a great woman in her own right, who stood behind him and was “part of everything he did in the war”. She probably helped to make Churchill the great man he was. On the whole, she felt that women’s contributions to the war effort were not adequately acknowledged, though leaders many times depended upon women to see things through.

She loved his sense of humour. Reminiscing about an occasion at Buckingham Palace, standing around chatting with Prince Philip and Lord Mountbatten, she recalled Churchill asking Jane, one of his secretaries, for a pencil. The young woman reached into the front of her dress for the inside pocket to produce a pencil. “Ah, a kangaroo!” he said, to laughter. Somewhat later he requested another pencil. The same action followed by Jane, and a pencil was handed over the second time. “And it’s a fertile kangaroo!”

On one occasion, he was working on his report to Parliament on the state of the war, and Elizabeth was faithfully taking dictation while her boss smoked incessantly. When he asked, at 4:30 a.m., how many words she’d recorded, she replied, 10,000. Churchill in response became felicitous. “Don’t make the good copy until after you get a few hours of sleep”.

In a 1996 interview, when she was 79, she mentioned that Churchill, while not overflowing with compliments, always treated her with respect. She said she always felt like a colleague in his presence, not a servant.

She was often the only staff to accompany him on his many trips. A popular figure, he was given adulation everywhere, especially in Canada with Mackenzie King and the U.S. with Franklin D. Roosevelt. Sometimes, she could barely write on the plane because her fingers were numb with cold. The heating on the plane reserved for the Prime Minister, which he’d named Commando, was often inoperational. It was a converted U.S. Liberator II long-range bomber.

Elizabeth held state secrets. She talked of the Quebec conference where she was tasked with writing about the alloys that were on the agenda. “I knew that those alloys could split the atom,” so she was aware of the power of those secrets. She also knew the dates planned for invasions, and the dates ships sailed, but said it was not hard to keep secrets. For one thing, everyone she came into contact with knew she couldn’t talk about her job and were compliant.. As she put it, “We were all in it, heart and soul.”

In 1944, Layton had flown to Athens with her boss, and when they landed at Naples, they were subjected to gun and shell fire. On more pleasant occasions she met many world leaders. She attended conferences from Quebec to Cairo, and overcame many obstacles while making life easier for her famous boss..

The charm held for her to meet her future husband. A friend said that South African prisoners-of-war were to arrive at Brighton, and a cousin of the friend was from South Africa too. Would Elizabeth like to meet some of the POW's?

Yes, she would, but then she had to work. A week later, she was able meet them. Right away she noticed one man because he was "so good-looking and so nice".

Over his Boer family's vehement objections, Lieutenant Izaak Francois Nel had joined the military. Later, he'd been taken prisoner in Tobruk and had been first in Italian, then German custody. Most lately he was in camp in the U.S., which was now flying them to a British camp.

Elizabeth stayed with Churchill on his post-war campaign trail, but when he was voted out, she committed to her handsome man and married him in Pretoria, South Africa. In her own words, Elizabeth said that they lived happily ever after, at that time already for 44 years, with three grown children and their offspring.

In 1958 Elizabeth Nel wrote her memoir about the man she so admired, called Winston Churchill by his Personal Secretary. She had, after all, been with him through years of WW II, 1941-1945. Originally, he fiercely denounced having Nel write about him, but it seems that he softened later. She lived a long, productive life, and at 90, died peacefully in her sleep.

Elizabeth Nel's story has become part of Mackie Lake House Foundation's lore. A movie was made in 2017, called Darkest Hour, featuring actor Lily James, by ©Focus Features LLC. A book series exists (fictional) with a heroine of a different name. Those, of course, are historically inaccurate.

Proud to be part of this global woman's backstory, Vernon acknowledges such an impressive lady who defied many female stereotypes.

End-notes

1. Recording 117a/b at the Vernon and District Museum and Archives ; possibly recorded at the Vernon Friends of History (noted in an article by the Vernon Daily News) when she was 72, which would make the year 1989.
2. Newspaper clippings, Vernon and District Museum and Archives
3. Interview, 1996, Werner Vogt, writing in German for the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, (New Zurich Newspaper), No. 218, p.9, now on-line, translation by Figure of Speech, ©FoS 2018
4. Photos courtesy of Vernon & District Museum & Archives
 - Paddy Mackie and Elizabeth Nel, 72 by Vernon Daily News
 - A young Elizabeth Layton, also in Vernon Daily News
 - colour photo of Elizabeth Nel and Lady Williams, formerly Jane Portal, 2006 (no cut-line attribution)

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