

Dame Ethel Smyth – Literary Works

Compiled by Lewis Orchard

Ethel Smyth wrote ten books. Eight of them are autobiographical and/or polemical and they include descriptions of and comments on her friends and acquaintances together with diatribes on the lack of serious musical interest in England and the difficulties of gaining a hearing there for compositions by English and women composers. Additionally, one of them is an appreciation of Maurice Baring and another is a collection of pen portraits of her series of dogs. Finally there are three chapters in manuscript of a further book entitled *A Fresh Start* held in the University of Michigan, USA which is briefly described here. There are also articles and a large number of letters written by her, many of which are now located in various places/institutions around the world, notably in Germany and the USA as well as the UK.

There have been many articles about her and her views in the musical press and elsewhere. In addition to the first biography of Ethel Smyth by Christopher St. John, there is a rather more romantic one by Louise Collis but a definitive and comprehensive biography of this remarkable composer, author and sportswoman probably still remains to be written.

Notes on her books

All of Ethel Smyth's books are now out of print. There is an excellent anthology of her memoirs by Robert Crichton 'The Memoirs of Ethel Smyth', Viking 1987, also now out of print, which includes a comprehensive catalogue of Smyth's music by Jory Bennett. The following notes attempt to offer very brief summaries of her books for initial reference purposes but it is of course essential to read the originals to appreciate their essence and detail.

'Impressions that Remained' Vols 1 and 2, Longmans/Green, 1919.

The new edition of 1923 omitted the illustrations included in the first edition.

Volume 1, sub-titled 'The Smyth Family Robinson', includes pen portraits of her father and mother, references to her siblings, a certain amount of family history, the awakening of her interest in music and early determination to study it in Germany. It covers the period up to her departure for Leipzig in 1877 and her initial experiences and friendships there, notably with the von Herzogenbergs and the Wachs in the period up to 1880. It covers her close relationship with Lisl von Herzogenberg who nursed her during an illness and referred to Ethel as 'her child'.

Volume 2 sub-titled 'Germany and Two Winters in Italy' covers the period 1880 to 1891. Further details of her relationship with the von Herzogenberg family are given (she studied composition with Heinrich who was a rather dry composer of fugues, canons etc., after she had discovered that the teaching at the Leipzig Conservatorium was, in her view, inadequate having deteriorated since the death of its founder Felix Mendelssohn). It includes the devastating break in 1885 with Lisl von Herzogenberg, which occurred as a result of Ethel's growing relationship with Henry Brewster, Lisl's brother-in-law. This part also covers, in a fair amount of detail, her musical education and experiences in Germany and the commencement of

many more friendships including the wife and family of the then Archbishop of Canterbury (Bensons), the Trevelyans (Pauline dedicatee of the Mass in D), Lady Ponsonby (wife of Queen Victoria's private secretary) and many others both in Germany and England. It ends with the deaths of her father and of Lisl von Herzogenberg and several other friends in Germany.

'Streaks of Life', Longmans/Green, 1921.

Contains a pen portrait of, and many anecdotes about, the exiled Empress Eugénie of France, an important patroness of Ethel's music. Also there are 'Two glimpses of Queen Victoria'; an account of the winter six months of 1901-2 spent in Berlin describing both social experiences and efforts to get her music performed in Germany; polemical chapters on the difficulties of promoting opera in England; a perceived lack of musical enthusiasm in England 'There is no respect for music in this country, no awe, no mystery'; and the barriers facing women in the musical profession.

'A Three-Legged Tour in Greece', Heinemann, 1927.

Covers the period from 24 March to 4 May 1925 when Ethel, together with her great-niece Elizabeth Williamson, made an extended visit to Greece. It comments on both the antiquities and the countryside together with the author's idiosyncratic comments on all and sundry.

'A Final Burning of Boats, Etc', Longmans, Green, 1928.

This volume continues her memoirs covering the period 1889 to 1927. The first chapter 'A final burning of boats' gives the book its title except for the addition of the 'Etc.' which encompasses the other chapters. In it Ethel continues to recount her experiences, both musical and social, over that period together with much salty comment in Ethel's inimitable style. The Etc. portion contains, amongst other writings, pen portraits of Henry Wood and the composer Augusta Holmés, more polemic on the subject of opera, especially noting that (at that time and still the case today) '...no facilities exist in England for the regular production of Light Opera'. The book ends with the full libretti of Ethel's fourth and sixth operas, both comic, 'The Boatswain's Mate' and 'Entente Cordiale'.

'Female Pippings in Eden', Peter Davies, 1933.

In addition to much writing on Smyth's preoccupation on the difficulties besetting women composers, notably in the first chapter but also elsewhere, there are biographical/anecdotal chapters on Johannes Brahms, Henry Brewster, Lilian Bayliss and Emmeline Pankhurst. There is a disparaging view of music critics and also, rather out of context, there are included some letters written by Robert, Ethel's brother, on his experiences at the battle of Omdurman in Sudan in 1898 and his first meeting with Winston Churchill who was attached to his troop.

'Beecham and Pharaoh', Chapman & Hall, 1935.

This volume is in two parts. The first deals with Sir Thomas Beecham and is a wide ranging selection of anecdotes, opinions and biographical notes all rendered in Smyth's inimitable style. It reproduces two letters to Smyth from Frederick Delius and an irate letter from Beecham, published in the Daily Telegraph of 19 January 1935, occasioned by his strong disapproval of the 'adaption and truncation' of Humperdink's opera 'Hansel and Gretel' as broadcast by the BBC.

The second part entitled 'Egypt before England's Exodus' is autobiographical largely covering the period of the winter of 1913/14 and described by Smyth as 'the last normal Egyptian winter under the old dispensation'. Regarded by her as her 'Flight into Egypt' after her whole-hearted support of the WSPU movement inspired by Emmeline Pankhurst and during which time she composed little or no music other than the famous 'March of the Women', she retired to the Hotel Tewfik Palace Hotel at Helouan, not far from Cairo. During this time she composed most of 'The Boatswain's Mate'. There are several quotations of letters from Smyth to Emmeline Pankhurst from Helouan and a large amount of anecdotal material ranging over several periods of her life. It ends with the immediate aftermath of her Egyptian sojourn when she travelled to France, initially staying in Paris and then moving to the north coast in July 1914 where she met with Mrs Pankhurst who, after her tenth hunger-and-thirst strike in prison, had been smuggled out of England to recuperate.

'A Time Went On', Longmans/Green, 1936.

This book, whilst autobiographical revisiting the years from 1877 to 1894, also contains many passages on friends and acquaintances, notably the Bensons and Henry Brewster. It revisits her relationships with the Herzogenbergs and the Brewsters and there are passages about her siblings. There is a chapter on Ethel's great friend Lady Ponsonby (wife of Queen Victoria's Private Secretary) and her family and the main part of the book concludes with a passage on her father's illness and death in 1894. There is an epilogue which covers later events including the performance of her last large scale work 'The Prison' in the 1930s and, inevitably, a section berating the British public in general and the BBC in particular for their apparent lack of the reverence for and support of music compared with Germany. There are also four 'Letter Sections' in which correspondence between Smyth and her friends including Lady Ponsonby, Mrs Benson, and Henry Brewster are quoted.

'Inordinate (?) Affection', Cresset Press, 1936.

This is a series of 'portraits' by Ethel of her dogs which were an important and continuous part of her life after the estrangement from the Herzogenbergs in the 1880s. The first, Marco, which she acquired when living in Leipzig, was followed by a succession of Old English sheepdogs all of which she named Pan, ranging from Pan I given to her in 1899 after the death of Marco to Pan V the new puppy which arrived in 1936. Photographs and/or pen sketches of the various hounds are included.

'Maurice Baring', Heinemann, 1938.

A biographical appreciation of Ethel's long-term friend. A diplomat and author born in 1874 he was indirectly related to the famous banking family but did not follow a career in finance. Ethel says she had known him since 1893. Part 1 of the book gives a biographical outline up to 1914. Parts 2 and 3 review his literary output in considerable detail: two selections of letters are reproduced included covering correspondence not only between Baring and Smyth but also between him and others known to Smyth e.g. Henry Brewster and Vernon Lee.

'What Happened Next', Longmans/Green, 1940.

The last of her books published, it covers her experiences during the period from 1894 to 1908, starting with her move to the cottage 'One Oak' (the family home 'Frimhurst' having been sold on her father's death in 1894). Largely it deals with Ethel's attempts to get her works performed, notably her operas, in Germany. Other passages deal with her relationships with her many friends and acquaintances, especially with Brewster whom she resolutely refused to marry. From 1903 onward the fortunes of her opera 'The Wreckers' up to a concert version given in London in May 1908 are covered and the book ends with a description of the death of Henry Brewster at his daughter Clotilde's house in Surrey.

'A Fresh Start', draft memoir of only three chapters, c.1941-1944, original manuscript held by the University of Michigan, Ethel Smyth collection, 1910-1962, Box 2 <https://search.lib.umich.edu/catalog/record/004055092>. The University kindly gave Surrey History Centre a research copy of the memoirs which can be viewed at SHC ref Z/711).

The draft of the first three chapters of a further book which remained unfinished at her death in 1944 cover the period 1908 to 1914. It commences with Ethel's reflections on the aftermath of Henry Brewster's death in 1908 and a passage on her stay in Venice arranged immediately afterwards by her sister Mary who had friends who owned a palazzo on the Grand Canal in which they stayed.. There follows a section on the beginning of Ethel's friendship with the well-known harpsichordist Violet Gordon Woodhouse and also the beginning of her long friendship with Sir Thomas Beecham. She describes the benevolence of her patroness Mary Dodge not only in financial support for the performance of her works, but also in the provision of funds to purchase the land and building her house in Hook Heath, Woking- there is also an amusing sequence on Ethel's arguments with her architect. The third draft chapter deals mainly with her meeting with Mrs Pankhurst and subsequent suffragette matters up to 1914 and the outbreak of war. A copy of the handwritten draft has kindly been provided to the Surrey History Society by the University of Michigan where the original is held. As this material has never been published, the following edited version of Ethel's draft is offered.

Edited version of the three chapters drafted by Ethel Smyth for a proposed further book to be entitled 'A Fresh Start'. c.1941 (unfinished on her death in 1944).

1908

Chapter 1

"One must be prepared" said a wise friend of Vernon Lee's "to begin life over again an unlimited number of times – to the very end". Queen Victoria was not, I imagine, one of those who, when reeling under the most terrible blow that Destiny can deal to a devoted wife, realise that to be saddled with a duty one dare not neglect is a thing to be thankful for, since therein lies one's sole hope of ultimate healing....In my own case it was not difficult to say where the blessed "must" lay: that "must" without which, as I have always felt, a human being is a rudderless ship.

I cannot exactly remember “what happened next” after Harry Brewster’s death...but I know that it was that summer that my sister, Mary Hunter, carried me off with her to Italy....

Mrs. Curtiss, (was) owner of beautiful Palazzo Barbaro on the Grand Canal. The Curtisses were wealthy and highly cultivated Americans, related to John Sargent, the painter, who had long since brought them and Mary together. Not in Venice just now, they had put Palazzo Barbero at her disposal, reserving their own rooms and promising to turn up later on. On the other side of the Grand Canal were installed Madame Bulteau, and two ladies who lived with her in Paris – Madame Vacquez, her old governess, and Madame de la Baume, a budding authoress of a certain age. Well within reach were two young men of talent – painters and poets – who belonged to Touche Bulteau’s Parisian Court, and whose platonic affection, slightly tinged with the usual more exciting element (for though plain, Touche was exceedingly attractive) pleasantly mitigated what would otherwise have been an atmosphere of undiluted elderly femininity..... There was a fine string quartet in Venice just then and Mary gave a musical party at which a quartet of mine, and I think one or two of the Chamber Songs, were played, after which I went back to England.

That summer and autumn a friendship which I knew was going to be one of the chief joys of my life took deep root. The Gordon Woodhouses, when not in London, inhabited a very beautiful stone-mullioned Elizabethan house not far from Stratford-on-Avon (*Nether Lypiatt Manor, Gloucestershire*). I stayed with them for three or four weeks and once more... knew the bliss of a close loving alliance with one of my own breed. The artistic instinct of Violet Woodhouse,...though most conspicuous of course in music, is equally potent and infallible on most other fields, and there surely was never a more ideal companion for an artist. I think I overtaxed her good nature at first filling my sitting room with music paper, ink bottles, and paste pots.....a good deal of piano-thumping went on in my apartment.

At the time of *The Wreckers* concert Violet and I had heard a good deal of Thomas Beecham but had never met him. Now, at last, there was time to attend some of the concerts that eccentric genius was giving, the programmes of which were composed solely of the works of totally unknown composers. In vain did his agent implore for some classical decoy-duck here and there or at least some modern work accepted everywhere but in England.....He administered them to the British public as a matter of principle – a sort of Beecham’s Pills, one might say, for sluggish musical digestions, and the patients were not grateful.....

That autumn I was in Paris for a day or two, and Winnie Polignac (*Princesse de Polignac, aka Winnaretta Singer*) who knew Delius -- the one living composer of whom Beecham had an exalted opinion, and was considered an Englishman – drove me out to Grez-sur-Loing, near Fontainebleau, where the Deliuses lived. It was a thousand pities, Delius said, the father and son were at daggers drawn, for it was in Thomas’s power to do marvels for English music, and if he were only a little more amenable to reason, the father would certainly not be averse to backing him.

Now Mary Dodge had been impressed by *The Wreckers* concert at the Queen’s Hall, and one day she asked me about the possibilities of giving a *Wreckers Week* in some West End theatre. Could my wonderful Beecham be roped into such a

scheme, and did I think £1000 would cover the damage? (*there follows a long passage about the performances and the trials and tribulations associated with them and with Beecham's antipathy towards singers*).

I cannot help saying that just before my ears became unusable – that is some five or six years ago, about 1937, Beecham carefully studied with me and performed at Manchester, in flawless perfection, what is one of four compositions of mine to which I can listen (or could) with almost unalloyed pleasure. It is a sort of vocal Symphony the words of which are put together from Harry Brewster's metaphysical work, *The Prison*....And to Beecham I therefore owe one of the few happy moments of my musical life...He is by way of liking *The Prison*, and said he agreed with the estimate of it pronounced by Neville Cardus that it is the most "important" choral work that has appeared in his lifetime. But...he will never perform it again! Why? Because he is like that. But to speak of *The Prison* is to leap forward 20 years for it was in 1908 that I left England to find refuge from the turmoil of the Suffrage fight which was incompatible with artistic creation.

1909

Chapter 2

During the winter of 1909 I had been reminded by the owner of One Oak (*Bagshot Road, Frimley*) that my lease would be up in the following year, and as she intended to add a couple of rooms and do some modernising she feared, if I wished to stay on, that she must raise the rent, unless I cared to pay for the improvements myself. Now I was not an exacting tenant, and though the cottage suited me admirably I doubt if anyone else would have been willing to pay the rent I had meekly handed to her every quarter...

About the date we have now reached I went to stay with Mary Dodge in Ashdown Forest, and there my problem whether to stay at One Oak or not resolved itself, in that Mary said she thought I ought to have a house of my own, that I was to look out for one near enough to London to suit me, and close to a good golf course; that my old friend Muñie Delawarr (in the old days Muñie Brassey, Captain of the White Heather Cricket Club (*a ladies cricket club for whom Ethel had played*))...would help me to find the right thing. Eventually, as we could find nothing suitable, I was to buy a bit of ground and build for myself; for the cost of which Mary would provide. Muñie, the kindest and most efficient of mortals, instantly found exactly what I wanted – a derelict corner of Hook Heath, too small for the requirements of rich businessmen who build humble-looking yet sumptuous villas round suburban golf links. And the one I had always belonged to – the Woking Golf Course – is on Hook Heath!

To go back to my cottage. Connected with it is a tragedy which I am certain would not have happened had my architect been a woman! But the day of female architects had not yet dawned, and my choice fell on a Woking man I knew and liked – Arthur Messer by name - who had built a lot of houses in the neighbourhood. The moment for starting the cottage, which, owing to its place on the map, was already christened "Coign", was favourable, for Bruno Walter was conducting two big choruses of mine in Vienna...so I settled to go there....Before leaving England I had drawn a map to scale of my property. It consisted of an oblong which lay on the side of the Hook Heath road size about 150 by 20 or 30 yards...beyond the south boundary fence was a big field full of cows (not mine)_ , and beyond that the lovely

valley of the Wey. I pointed out that the house should be slewed round a bit and not be flush with the road (E and W). “But why?” objected Messer, “it’s so much more natural for it to be square with the road..... Mr. Messer was so pressing in assuring me I need not come till the walls were up (like the conductors who always try to keep me away from rehearsals till it is too late to correct the tempi they prefer to yours)...and hoped he had grasped that my will must be done. Need I say that when I reappeared at Woking – a week or two before the day I had proposed – it was to find that very deep foundations of the house had been laid square to the road.....Seldom have I been so furious. The walls of the upper storey were rent down (some by my own hands) and a curt note sent to Mr. Messer.....Had I been rich the foundations would have been relaid!

In a few months I was deep in what became for a few years my chief human preoccupation - the fight for woman’s suffrage! I had just got a letter from a friend of Maggie Ponsonby’s, Lady Constance Lytton, one of Mrs. Pankhurst’s most valiant followers whom I knew slightly, asking me...what my views were on militancy. Bahr’s comment (*Bahr was an Austrian friend of Ethel’s*) was that he could not imagine how a woman like myself had not joined long ago, adding that whereas he thought the House of Commons on a lower debating level than any legislative body he had ever known, he had not heard one feeble speech from any of the militants.....That movement is the most alive thing in England today. (*Ethel replied to Lady Constance’s letter having destroyed her original ‘rather frivolous’ draft*), explaining that being so little in England nowadays, and so very busy, I had never gone deeply into the question of Women’s Suffrage, but that in a month or two I should be home again and hoped to make up for lost time.

Múníe (*Mrs Delawarr, see above*) and Mary Dodge were ardent militants, though I did not know how generously Mary had supported them financially; and the first thing I did was to attend, chaperoned by Múníe, one of Mrs. Pankhurst’s meetings. If I thought I should be a welcome recruit, I was to be disappointed. Mrs. Pankhurst, to whom Múníe introduced me, received me with marked coolness, as one who ought long ago to have joined them; and Christabel was still more aloof. But the personality and style of her mother swept me off my feet at once... The difficulty about music was brushed aside by Christabel with a touch of scorn, but her mother...at once understood how the land lay. Eventually I decided to give up two years to what I knew was wholly incompatible with artistic creation – the Suffrage fight – and then go back firmly to my own job.

1911

Chapter 3

Had I not given myself up for two years to the Suffrage, it would have meant feeling like a shirker, and a traitor, for the rest of my life. Who knew better than I the spiritual vested interest that in those days barred the way to women who mean business and it seemed to me my first duty to signify I was one of the fighters – to show by adhering to the militants in what spirit that long struggle for the vote was carried on. (*There follows a transcript of a letter Ethel wrote to her sister Alice explaining her position in regard to militancy*).

When I “did my bit” (as it was called) by making one of the 109 – I think that was our number – to each of whom was allotted a window in the house of the politician she

particularly disliked I was anything but well, and unfortunately when I got to Holloway (the conviction of each of us being similar, two months in the second division) I found it next door to impossible to digest prison fare, so vilely was it prepared. I spoke about it to the Governor.....and when he said, about the waste of good food caused by the atrocious cooking, "I'm not a cook" he gave me a good opening for saying "that's why there should be a female governor here!". I had always, as Alice knew, thought all the world of women – but now I saw (and have never forgotten it) that they are bigger, more wonderful, than I had ever dreamed; that there were untapped reservoirs of faith and heroism, of depth in short, that surprised even me. Nearly all were humble working women, yet not one seemed to give a thought to the price they would probably pay for their action – but lived, like the early Christians, for an ideal, and were perfectly happy in so doing.

When my two months were over, being really ill, I went....to an amazing Massage Klinik in Wales where the doctor diagnosed "shortage of nerve force" and accumulation of "deposits" at base of spine....His cure was exactly what Murri had prescribed years ago in Italy – dead silence and repose "in the mountains" – but you can't get that sort of thing in England in winter! so lying flat on my bed all day was the only alternative!

When I had "the cure" behind me an unpleasant surprise occurred shortly after my return home. Two policemen announced themselves one day at breakfast and said it was their painful duty to take me at once to the Woking Police Court, whence I was to be conveyed to Oxford to be tried on a charge of having burned down a house at Abingdon, in which were two children!

Now Major Eastwood, Nellie's husband, had a remount job in Berkshire and with them I had recently stayed two nights in succession, one being the night on which I was accused of arson! I said that I could ring up Major Eastwood and prove my alibi in a few minutes, but the men of the law said they were forbidden to allow a prisoner to talk to anyone.....Anything more foolish than the arrest cannot be imagined. One of the guilty women was, it is true, a Miss Smyth, but the prime piece of evidence was that in the boat they had paddled down to their objective in, was found on of the "March of the Women" cards, which of course most militants possessed, and which bore my printed name! I had communicated with Nelly (*Eastwood*) I was touched to see her at the Court at Oxford and when she told me that her husband had been rung up before several privates at his office, his orderly transmitting the message, which was "the Public Prosecutor wishes to know whether the woman Ethel Smyth slept with you on the night of the 10th"...she was distinctly hurt by my shouts of laughter. Of course the charge was dismissed owing to "failure to identify" but not a word was said about the alibi! To the public prosecutor I had the pleasure of remarking that if one of our women had arrested anyone on such evidence she would have been dismissed for incompetence.

When my two years of political life were over, I was as decided as ever to go back to my own work, but found that to do this, if I stayed in England, was not humanly possible. I had got deeply fond of Mrs Pankhurst and admired her more than anyone I had ever met. Such horrors as some of the militants had already endured were obviously nothing compared with what was coming. She, an ingrained optimist, believed "now" the Government had understood that nothing but a serious bill, and a

fair discussion of it by the Government, would ever arrest militancy, but the “torpedoing” of the so-called Conciliation Bill put an end to any such hopes, and it was evident that things would go from bad to worse. So I determined to go to Vienna, where I had good friends and the feeling that here if nowhere else, art was still alive, and a civic necessity. I did my best to settle down, but it was uphill work, for apart from every newspaper bringing news of the proceedings in London, I found that concentration was difficult. Also Woman Suffrage seemed to be a leading topic. Newspaper editors perpetually asked me to write little articles; getters-up of meetings implored me to address their audiences, in fact all that drove me from England was beginning here.....in fact do all the things I had left England to avoid. And, of course, I knew what our besotted Government never took in, that even a diabolic measure like the “Cat and Mouse” Act would fail to kill militancy. And if they contrived, by using sheer force, to forcibly feed Mrs. Pankhurst, it would surely kill her. How then could I refrain from rushing back to London? Ronald Storrs, who was at Cairo, being Oriental Secretary, or something of the sort to Lord Kitchener, had foreseen that I should not get away from the Suffrage in Vienna, and advised me in that case to send him a wire, to pack up my trunk, and depart for Egypt. Which I did directly after Christmas.

1914

...But Egypt was getting hotter and hotter, and one’s tennis-acquaintance shorter and shorter in temper, and as soon as I had finished The Boatswain’s Mate I started for Paris there to await Mrs. Pankhurst’s escape from England. She had had a terrible series of strikes (which included “water” strikes) and I guessed the authorities would be only too glad to look the other way when she should be sufficiently well to “escape” from dear Miss Pine’s nursing home. And so it turned out. I heard of a charming cliff golf course on the sea near S. Malo – S. Briac – and thither I went to receive Mrs. Pankhurst as soon as she should be fit to travel: and in about a week I was joined there by a ghost – what remained of the militant leader.

During my short stay in Paris the murder of the Austrian Crown Prince and his wife took place – but no one seemed to think it a portentous event likely to lead to war, and Mrs. Pankhurst said it was the same in England. Of course the so-called “leaders” will have known in both countries, but not the public.....as Christabel’s flat was still at her disposal, she and her mother decided to go to Paris and discuss the future. For my part I made for home, via Havre as quickly as I could, in spite of the loss of time and money involved in this apparently simple decision. Mrs. Pankhurst and her daughter followed later. Mrs. Pankhurst determined that the W.S.P.U. should at once be disbanded and all put the question of woman’s suffrage out of their heads and work for the survival of an Empire to vote in!

Ethel’s draft ends at this point. She died at her home in Woking on 9 May 1944.