

Elizabeth David

Summary

Elizabeth David (26.12.1913 – 22.5.1992) is well-known as an influential cookery writer. Born into an upper-class family, she was rebellious and restless. She defied conventions and in 1939 travelled across Europe with a married lover. As World War 2 broke out, they had to flee the advancing German army. After the war and back in England, she started publishing magazine articles and books. These introduced readers to a world of food and eating so different to that experienced during the recent wartime austerity.

Early life and education

Elizabeth David was born Elizabeth Gwynne at Wootton Manor, near Polegate and christened at St Peter's, Folkington. Her father Rupert Gwynne was Conservative MP for Eastbourne (1911 – 1924) and her mother Stella Ridley was the daughter of Viscount Ridley. Initially, Elizabeth and her three sisters were educated at home, but when their father died suddenly in 1924, the two oldest (Priscilla and Elizabeth) were sent away to boarding school although both possibly spent a short time in Eastbourne schools¹. A younger sister went to Moira House. At 16, Elizabeth's mother arranged for her to live in Paris with a French family and to study French language, literature and history at the Sorbonne.² After eighteen months in Paris, Elizabeth's mother sent her to Munich to learn German and to continue painting studies, living with an aristocratic German family.³

Personal History 1932 - 1946

Elizabeth returned to England and started to teach herself to cook. Until then she had always lived in houses with servants but now was fending for herself while trying to become an actress.⁴ She joined the Oxford Repertory Company and later the Regents Park Open Air Theatre and had small parts in a number of productions. She met Charles Gibson Cowan, a married actor, writer,⁵ former beggar and pickpocket⁶, and together they bought a boat and set sail in July 1939 heading for Greece. They were in Marseilles when war broke out and had to spend that winter in Antibes on the French Riviera. There, Elizabeth met Norman Douglas, a writer and traveller. He was much older than Elizabeth

¹ Chaney p42

² Ibid. p43

³ Ibid. p48

⁴ Ibid. p54

⁵ Ibid. p72

⁶ Ibid. p76

but they became unlikely friends and he greatly influenced her subsequent career as a writer.⁷

In May 1940, as the Germans were invading Holland and Belgium, Elizabeth and Cowan secretly left France to continue their journey east. However the war caught up with them while they were passing Sicily through the Straits of Messina.⁸ Italy had declared war and Elizabeth and Cowan were interned for a while, their boat impounded and they lost most of their possessions. Eventually, they were released and made their way by train to Athens. They were penniless and Elizabeth hated Athens. They moved to the Greek island of Syros where they lived in a dilapidated house with few amenities. Elizabeth learnt to cook using the simple basic foods of the Mediterranean.⁹ Yet again, the pair had to flee as Germany invaded Greece: a dangerous trip by sea, first to Crete, which was bombed, and then to Cairo. Elizabeth and Cowan agreed that their romance was over¹⁰. Elizabeth spent the rest of the war in Egypt, working from 1942 to 1945 in the library at the Ministry of Information.

In August 1944, Elizabeth married Lieutenant-Colonel Anthony David, an officer in the Indian army.¹¹ After the war, she reluctantly moved to New Delhi with her husband.¹² She did not like India and was bored, and when she fell ill, returned at last to England in August 1946.

Post war

Post war Britain was a shock for Elizabeth. Rationing was still in place and meals were monotonous and uninspiring, even ‘disgusting’.¹³ In Europe, Elizabeth had been cooking simple but flavoursome meals using the basic Mediterranean foodstuffs and had made notes of recipes wherever she went. She now tried to re-create the dishes she had enjoyed on her travels.¹⁴ When her husband returned from India in 1947, they moved to a house in Chelsea in which Elizabeth lived for the rest of her life.¹⁵

⁷ Ibid. p113

⁸ Ibid. p128

⁹ Cooper

¹⁰ Chaney p156

¹¹ Cooper

¹² Chaney p193

¹³ Ibid., p210 (Gowrie)

¹⁴ Ibid. p212

¹⁵ Ibid. p226

Elizabeth was introduced by a friend to the editor of *Harper's Bazaar*, a quality magazine comparable to *Vogue*, and was asked to contribute an article.¹⁶ The first piece of 1000 words was published in March 1949, entitled 'Rice again'. It was a success and she continued as the cookery columnist for six years. Her articles showed her experience and knowledge of the Mediterranean foods she was describing. There were historical and literary references too. She had definite opinions about how to cook and serve the meals. However there was still rationing and shortages , and many of the ingredients she described - courgettes, green and red peppers, aubergines, olive oil, olives, anchovies, fresh pasta, pitta, almonds, raisins and garlic - were unobtainable in post-war Britain.¹⁷

Elizabeth hung on to the copyrights to her articles and so was able to incorporate them into *A Book of Mediterranean Food* published in 1950. This book was different from other cookery books: each chapter begins with an appropriate literary passage from contemporary writers including Lawrence Durrell, Norman Douglas, Compton Mackenzie, and D H Lawrence. This first book was well-reviewed and a success.

Elizabeth was commissioned to write about French cooking and published *French Country Cooking* in 1951. She went on an extensive research trip to Italy before completing *Italian Food* in 1954. *Summer Cooking* in 1955 included recipes from a wider geographical area including Britain, followed by *French Provincial Cooking* in 1960. She continued to write for magazines and newspapers including *Vogue*, *Sunday Times* and *The Spectator*.

1960s

Elizabeth's professional career was at its height with her books reprinted in paperback, but privately she was unhappy.¹⁸ She had had a long-standing affair with 'PH' which ended when he married some else.¹⁹ Elizabeth and her husband divorced in 1960. She suffered a cerebral haemorrhage in 1963, probably the result of overwork, alcohol and sleeping pills.²⁰ She recovered but her sense of taste was affected for a while and her confidence shaken.

In 1964 Terence Conran opened his ground-breaking Habitat store in London's Fulham Road. It sold furniture and housewares which were functional and

¹⁶ Chaney p237

¹⁷ Ibid, p240

¹⁸ Cooper

¹⁹ Chaney p354

²⁰ Cooper

affordable. Conran was greatly influenced by Elizabeth David and, like her, was inspired by France, and sold French kitchenware in his shop.²¹ At about the same time, Elizabeth was planning to open a kitchen shop and in preparation travelled across France to find exactly the right sort of products. In partnership with four others, Elizabeth David Ltd was created and her shop near Sloane square was opened in November 1965. Its aim was to sell traditional French and English cooking utensils and tableware: about 40% was imported from France. The shop took up most of her time over the next 7 years, but she managed to produce four booklets especially for sale in the shop:

Dried Herbs, Aromatics and Condiments (1967)

*English Potted Meats and Fish Pastes (1968)*²²

The Baking of an English Loaf (1969)

*Syllabubs and Fruit Fools (1969)*²³

1970s

Elizabeth turned her attention to English cooking and in 1970 *Spices, Salt and Aromatics in the English Kitchen* appeared. She intended this to be the first in a series of books covering aspects of English food and cooking. She believed that it was important to 'go back to the recipes of more than a century ago, to the early and mid nineteenth century, when an authentic and still strong English cooking tradition flourished amid the ravages of the Industrial Revolution'.²⁴

Elizabeth was not a good businessman – she did not have the managerial skills to run the shop which was never profitable. Friends commented on how generous she was with gifts from the shop.²⁵ She disagreed with her partners on how to continue with the business which resulted in an acrimonious split in 1973 and a severing of friendships. Despite repeated attempts, Elizabeth could not stop the company using her name and she remained angry about this for the rest of her life.²⁶

Elizabeth continued researching and preparing for further volumes in her English cooking project. She suffered ill-health and progress was slow. Eventually, after five years of writing, *English Bread and Yeast Cookery* was published in the autumn of 1977. It is a large, detailed and scholarly book of 547 pages, covering the whole history of bread and bread-making, the

²¹ Chaney p374-5

²² David (2009) p216

²³ Chaney p229

²⁴ Chaney p389

²⁵ Chaney p382

²⁶ Ibid p404

ingredients and the recipes for various forms of baking. It was hailed as a masterpiece of scholarship²⁷ and won the prestigious Glenfiddich Award for 1978.

In 1977, Elizabeth was badly injured in a car crash from which she never really recovered.²⁸

1980s and last years

Elizabeth published a collection of her journalism, *An Omelette and a Glass of Wine* in 1984 and continued her research into ices and ice-creams. During this decade, she visited California for the first time and returned several times.

However she was increasingly ill and hospitalised after falls. Elizabeth had shared her house with her sister Felicité for 30 years and was distraught when she died in 1986. In 1992 Elizabeth suffered a severe stroke and died at home on 22 May 1992. She was buried at St Peter's, Folkington and a memorial service was held at St Martin-in-the-Fields.

Elizabeth's last book about ices was unfinished at her death but was completed by her editor and published as *Harvest of the Cold Months: the social history of ice and ices* in 1994. There have also been several other books published posthumously by her editor.

What sort of person was she?

Elizabeth's biographer describes her 'Tall and well-built, with a long neck and slanting black eyes, [her] feline grace was accentuated by the severe, well-cut suits she wore with crisp white shirts in her professional life'.²⁹ A partner of her cookshop said she was 'frightening, because she was both intelligent and intellectual'.³⁰ Others who knew her well said she was 'was very erudite on Shakespeare, poetry', 'a perfectionist', 'had very high standards', 'so amusing, and very unforgiving', 'very generous'.³¹ She was opinionated and could be insensitive and abrasive.³²

²⁷ Cooper

²⁸ Chaney p430

²⁹ Cooper

³⁰ Chaney p354

³¹ Chaney p381

³² Chaney pxxi

Clarissa Dickson Wright relates in her autobiography the first time she spoke to Elizabeth on the phone:

I was so stunned I dropped the phone. When Elizabeth asked me what was wrong I said for someone of my generation it was rather like answering the phone to God. She thought this very funny and when she rang in future would say, 'God calling.'³³

Awards and Legacy

In addition to the Glenfiddich Award for food and drink journalism in 1978, Elizabeth was made a Chevalier de l'Ordre du Mérite Agricole by the French the same year. She was given honorary doctorates by the Universities of Essex and Bristol. In 1976 she was awarded an OBE and in 1986 a CBE. She was most proud of being made a fellow of the Royal Society of Literature in 1982 which recognised her skills as a writer³⁴.

There have been many instances where Elizabeth's legacy has been celebrated. A few examples follow:

In 2013, Elizabeth's portrait appeared as one of a set of first class stamps issued to celebrate the anniversaries of 10 notable Britons.³⁵

Elizabeth is the only cookery writer to have been honoured with an English Heritage blue plaque. It was erected in 2016 at 24 Halsey Street, Chelsea, her home for 45 years.³⁶

In 2010, the Observer Food Monthly's list 'The 50 best cookbooks' placed *French Provincial Cooking* in 2nd place.³⁷

Recently, Robert McCrum compiled a list of the 100 best non-fiction books of all time and included *A Book of Mediterranean Food*.³⁸

In 2013, there were a number of newspaper articles celebrating the 100th anniversary of Elizabeth's birth with headlines such as 'The enduring legacy of Elizabeth David, Britain's first lady of food'³⁹ and 'Elizabeth David: The writer who transformed British life'.⁴⁰

³³ Dickson Wright p203

³⁴ Wikipedia: Elizabeth David

³⁵ Royal Mail First Day Cover 2013

³⁶ English Heritage

³⁷ Observer Food Monthly

³⁸ McCrum, R

³⁹ Cooke, R

⁴⁰ McDonagh, M

Researcher's views and conclusions

Elizabeth is widely credited as one of the greatest post-war writers of food and cookery, influencing both contemporaries and later generations of chefs and cooks. She occupies a place somewhere between the gastronomic literature of earlier professional chefs and the cookbooks designed for domestic use.

Professional chefs were generally male, such as Alexis Soyer who was a French celebrity chef in Victorian England.⁴¹ The books for domestic use, such as Mrs Beeton, were usually written by women. I hazard the opinion that this gender difference between professional and domestic cooking often persists today.

Initially Elizabeth was writing for an upper class audience, but as time went on and she became, in effect, a professional journalist writing for newspapers which reached a much wider and diverse audience. She felt constrained by the format imposed by the cookery columns placed within the women's section of newspapers where the emphasis was on the recipes. When she eventually wrote for the Spectator in 1961, a publication with a pronounced male readership, she was able to write about her particular interests of culinary history⁴² - 'It was the Spectator's editors who liberated me from the straitjacket of the conventional cookery article as decreed by custom'.⁴³

Elizabeth herself was influenced in a number of ways. She grew up in an upper class family and was able to travel and experience life abroad. She met a wide range of literary and influential figures. She was particularly inspired by Norman Douglas, who taught her so much about food and wine. In the acknowledgements to *A Book of Mediterranean Food*, she writes 'Above all I have a debt of gratitude to the late Norman Douglas, whose great knowledge and enchanting talk taught me so much about the Mediterranean.'⁴⁴ She, like Douglas, always prized simplicity and authenticity and valued good quality food rather than the second-rate so often available.

Although Elizabeth did not have a particularly robust education, she read widely, not only cookery books but all types of literature, and this is reflected

⁴¹ Wikipedia: Alexis Soyer

⁴² Jones and Taylor

⁴³ David 2009 p9

⁴⁴ David 1950 p11

in her writing. One of her first books, *The Gentle Art of Cookery* by Hilda Leyel, published in 1925, was given to her by her mother when she was 21 and inspired her to start cooking⁴⁵. Elizabeth praised Eliza Acton's *Modern Cookery* '...for twenty years the book has been my beloved companion' in her introduction to the 1968 edition⁴⁶.

Many chefs and cooks credit her for inspiring them in their profession. In particular, her contemporary Jane Grigson (1928-1990), a Cambridge graduate, was strongly influenced by Elizabeth David. Jane, like Elizabeth, had travelled and lived in France and had a similar scholarly style combining historical and literary references with her recipes: her first book was very favourably reviewed by Elizabeth.⁴⁷ Jane acknowledged 'a wider, more general debt to Elizabeth David which can never be repaid'.⁴⁸

There were other contemporaries of Elizabeth who were exploring Europe and its culinary traditions, collecting recipes and introducing them to the British public. Patience Gray (1917-2005) is one such, another woman with a bohemian lifestyle and who could write across a wide range of subjects, but who is little-known today.^{49 50}

In contrast to Elizabeth, her contemporary Robert Carrier (1923-2006), who had also travelled in Europe and had a passion for good food, was an extrovert and entrepreneur. He also wrote for Harper's Bazaar, Vogue and Sunday Times. He was a celebrity chef with Michelin starred restaurants and television shows.⁵¹

Many present day chefs have acknowledged that Elizabeth has influenced them in their profession. For example, Simon Hopkinson, a well-known food writer and chef, writes 'Elizabeth David has inspired me, and countless others, more than any other cookery writer. She had a style of prose that is a joy to read and, at times, the description of a dish or a situation experienced is so evocative that it transports the reader from page to place'. He credits her publications as 'the finest works of food journalism ever written'.⁵²

⁴⁵ Chaney p68

⁴⁶ Acton xxviii

⁴⁷ Chaney p409

⁴⁸ Grigson 1979 p11

⁴⁹ The Guardian 18.3.2005

⁵⁰ The Sunday Times 11.6.2017

⁵¹ Wikipedia:Robert Carrier

⁵² Hopkinson p19

For those chefs who met Elizabeth and who cooked for her, it could be an intimidating experience. Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall recounts the time he cooked for Elizabeth when she visited the River Café. He frequently used her chocolate cake recipe (from *French Provincial Cooking*) as a dessert, but over time had increased the amount of chocolate to nearly double the original quantity. This, he felt, made it more suitable as a pudding. Of course Elizabeth chose this as her dessert, and ate it all. Fearnley-Whittingstall thought she hadn't noticed the change in her original recipe and he'd got away with it. But she had noticed and he was called over to her table. 'My legs turned to jelly and.....my mouth went peanut-butter dry.' He tried to explain. 'She let me ramble on, reddening, for a few seconds, then stopped me with a slight but firm raising of her scant eyebrows. 'Well,' she said, 'whatever you've done to it, it's good.' I have never received a more thrilling compliment for anything I have ever cooked. And I never will.'⁵³

I have tried to find out if Elizabeth has influenced today's cooks and asked my family, friends and acquaintances if they knew of her and her recipes. Some had never heard of her. Others, including some retired domestic science teachers, knew her name, but did not have her books or knowingly use her recipes. My late mother taught domestic science during the 1960s – 1970s and again did not have any Elizabeth David books, but she did have a couple of Robert Carrier's. Another relative, a keen cook, has a well-used paperback edition of *Summer Cooking*, which falls open at the jam chapter.

I wonder if Elizabeth has had more effect on the professional rather than the domestic kitchen, the latter benefiting rather more indirectly. Interestingly, in an interview the food writer and restaurant critic, Jay Rayner, was asked for his opinion of Elizabeth David's influence. He acknowledged the work she did gathering recipes but he considered that she was writing for an exclusive group – 'a cultured, educated and moneyed class'. He mentions other contemporary writers, his favourite being Robert Carrier.⁵⁴

Elizabeth was not a restaurateur, did not appear on television in cookery shows and was interviewed only occasionally. Her fame rests almost totally with her books and journalism. Although Elizabeth David's name may not be particularly well known these days, I have found her name crops up quite frequently in recipe books and in magazines. For instance, a recipe for *Ricotta*

⁵³ Telegraph 1.10.2010

⁵⁴ Rayner, Jay

a/ caffè, slightly adapted from that in *Italian Food*, appeared in the Sunday Times recently.⁵⁵

It is also interesting to compare Elizabeth's legacy with that of her aunt, Violet Gordon Woodhouse. Both had privileged backgrounds, led unconventional lives and were very talented in their own fields. Violet was a famous harpsichordist but who remained within her own social circle and had no desire to promote herself to a wider audience. Elizabeth was able to bridge that gap and is now appreciated by many while Violet is relatively unknown.⁵⁶

Elizabeth David's books are still readily available and have been updated and reissued over the years. Her editor and executor, Jill Norman, had published several collections of her journalism and collections of recipes, and a new hardback edition of a collection of recipes was published in 2010 to mark the 60th anniversary of her first book: this book for the first time included photographs (and was on sale in Waterstones in October 2017).⁵⁷

In conclusion, Elizabeth David is widely regarded as one of the most important and influential post war cookery writers, who introduced the joys and flavours of the Mediterranean to a jaded British public still suffering from rationing. She went beyond the purely domestic cookbook, written by women for women, and produced literary works, previously the preserve of professional male chefs. She praised simplicity and the quality of ingredients, and emphasised the use of seasonal foods. She was ahead of her time when she turned her attention to cookery at home and showed that there was an important English tradition to be rediscovered.

Whilst Elizabeth's name may not be as well known today as those of celebrity chefs and cooks, with their popular TV programmes and multitudes of cookery books, her own books are still worth reading and are an inspiration for good eating. Recalling the 1950s, Jane Grigson wrote

Basil was no more than the name of bachelor uncles, courgette was printed in italics as an alien word, and few of us knew how to eat spaghetti or pick a globe artichoke to pieces... Then came Elizabeth David like sunshine, writing with brief elegance about good food, that is, about food well contrived, well cooked. She made us understand that we could do better with what we had.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ The Sunday Times 'The Dish' March 2017

⁵⁶ Chaney p346

⁵⁷ David (2010)

⁵⁸ Wikipedia: Elizabeth David