

# WRITING GREAT TOM

T. S. Eliot & the Keepers of the Flame

*By*  
**T. S. MATTHEWS**

Foreword By Sara Fitzgerald

Karen Christensen, Editor

**BERKSHIRE** PUBLISHING GROUP  
Great Barrington, Massachusetts

# CONTENTS

---

<i>Foreword</i> .....	<i>vii</i>
<i>Editor's Note</i> .....	<i>xix</i>
Introduction: Living a Detective Story .....	3
Meetings with TSE.....	15
1970.....	25
1971.....	53
1972.....	177
<i>Afterword by Karen Christensen</i> .....	217
<i>About the Author</i> .....	223
<i>Foreword Author</i> .....	225
<i>Index</i> .....	227

# FOREWORD

---

*By Sara Fitzgerald*

The year was 1970—and five years after his death, the poet T. S. Eliot was still an international literary phenomenon. As friends and colleagues considered whether to capture their memories and sell them, an enterprising editor at Harper & Row in New York approached a close friend of hers about writing a book.

“I have had a SIGN,” Frances Lindley<sup>1</sup> wrote T. S. Matthews on January 9, the sort of thing, she observed, “that Eliot’s magi needed so desperately.” Would Matthews drop everything he was doing and write “the biography of Tom Eliot which no one else is equipped to do. . . the non-graduate school, non-Marxist, non-Freudian book which only an American poet out of the American Middle West into the Eastern cultural cooker over to England, etc., etc. could do.”<sup>2</sup>

---

1 Frances to “Dearest Tom,” January 9, 1970, T. S. Matthews Papers, Series 3: Correspondence 1931–1990, Lindley, Frances, Box 27, Folder 7. By the time of her death, Lindley was a legendary editor, credited for nurturing such diverse best-sellers as Erich Segal’s *Love Story* and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s *Gulag Archipelago*.

2 Unless otherwise specified, quotations from Matthews come from this manuscript, *Writing Great Tom*, or the foreword and acknowledgements of *Great Tom*.

Matthews had interviewed Eliot and met him on various occasions, and admired the late Nobel laureate. They had more in common than just their names and initials. Matthews too came from a socially prominent family, had gone to an Ivy League college and then Oxford. After resigning his post as editor of *TIME* magazine over its coverage of the 1952 presidential campaign of his Princeton classmate, Adlai Stevenson, he moved to England and tried to start a British version of the magazine. After the project fell apart, he remained in England for the rest of his life.

Lindley stressed to Matthews that she was serious and added, “PLEASE, PLEASE, PLEASE. TAKE THREE YEARS, FOUR YEARS. PLEASE.”

Matthews was intrigued by the offer. But from the outset, he was concerned about whether Valerie Eliot, the poet’s widow, would cooperate. (Valerie Fletcher had been thirty years old when, after eight years as his secretary, she married the sixty-eight-year-old Eliot in 1957.) Winthrop Knowlton, executive vice president of Harper & Row, quickly stepped in and broached the question on Matthews’s behalf.

Mrs. Eliot was quick to respond. On January 29, 1970, she sent a terse reply on Faber and Faber letterhead: “I cannot give you the slightest encouragement or help with your proposed biography of my husband, because he forbade one in a memorandum with his Will. In time, of course, such a book must be written, but in accordance with my husband’s wishes I cannot assist such a project.”<sup>3</sup>

But Matthews decided to proceed anyway. He signed a contract, promising to deliver a manuscript in three years. He received an advance against royalties of \$2,750—or about \$22,000 in today’s dollars—and another \$3,000 to cover his expenses.<sup>4</sup>

---

3 Valerie Eliot to Winthrop Knowlton, January 29, 1970, Lindley Correspondence.

4 T. S. Matthews to John Jay Iselin, May 31, 1970, Lindley Correspondence. In this letter, Matthews explained the arrangements he had made with his executors for handling these advances if his ill health prevented him from delivering the manuscript.

After Matthews sent out letters to publications such as the Harvard alumni magazine, seeking persons with memories of Eliot, he was approached by eleven other publishers who were interested in his book. His editor hoped that the Book of the Month Club might adopt it as a main selection.

Matthews began by submerging himself in Eliot's life, reading all or part of about eighty books on the poet and 216 items in Donald Gallup's bibliography of Eliot's work. By the end of the first year, he had collected twenty-three folders of notes and a correspondence file with several hundred letters. Like most of *TIME*'s male journalists, he relied on women researchers to do most of his legwork. Some of his interviews turned into social engagements, accompanied by his wife. This enabled him, when he eventually began to write the book, to sprinkle his narrative with anecdotes from unnamed sources, but no footnotes—except for the citations of published materials that Harper & Row's lawyers demanded.

But at the age seventy, Matthews was also challenged by health problems and a reluctance to travel back to the States, where most of the details of Eliot's early life were hidden. More importantly, he was frustrated by Mrs. Eliot's continued opposition, her instructions to friends and family members not to cooperate with him, and the control she exercised over Eliot-related materials housed at major research libraries. He was constantly worried about getting "scooped" by other Eliot memoirists or by a biography authorized by Mrs. Eliot.

Midway through the project, he reflected, "I can say that I'm getting used to Eliot's poems, though I can't honestly say I understand them. And what are the prospects? Well, (1) to write Eliot's life, based on the scraps I can scavenge from the garbage pails in the area-ways, and to finish it no later than a year from now, to make sure that I'm not beaten to the draw by Valerie and Fabers' change of mind, and their appointing an official biographer: 2) to write it without being allowed to quote one line

of Eliot's poetry or a phrase of his critical writing: or 3) to cut the losses. . . ." (That sentence drops off, tantalizingly, on a page-break of Matthews's somewhat disorganized journal.)

Early on, Matthews interviewed Frank Morley, Eliot's close friend and colleague and the Eliot confidante Matthews said he most wanted to meet. Afterwards, Morley demonstrated his skills as an editor by observing that Matthews really didn't know what kind of book he wanted to write: "Is it a detached study of this particular man as a kind of phenomenon and of the rise and decline and (who knows?) resurgence from time to time of Eliot cults? Is it a personal essay, how you got interested in Eliot (same initials, some similarity of situation as one American who lives in England writing of another) and why you set yourself to puzzle him out and what estimate you have come to as to the man and his work? . . . What sort of catalog description has Harper got in mind? What public have you in mind?"

Matthews quickly confessed that he wished he knew the answers to those questions. "A detached study? Hmm. Well, semi-detached—thanks to Mrs. Eliot. A personal essay? Ah, now you may be getting warmer. But I can't answer your questions without largely making up the answers as I go along, for I simply don't know."<sup>5</sup>

Matthews later wrote that the "one interesting piece of information" that Morley had, perhaps inadvertently, supplied was that Eliot's feeling about his first marriage "was one of more than remorse, it was one of guilt, and what looked like exaggerated guilt." Matthews concluded that Eliot had sought to block the publication of a biography because he wanted to keep the circumstances surrounding his first marriage private.

During the period covered by this journal, 1970–72, Valerie Eliot published her facsimile edition of *The Waste Land* and

---

5 The Matthews-Morley correspondence is found in the Matthews Papers, Series 3: Correspondence 1931–1990, Morley Frank, Box 30, Folder 21.

Robert Sencourt's much-maligned *T. S. Eliot: A Memoir* also came out. Matthews details his extensive correspondence about both books. In January 1971, the BBC released *Omnibus Presents: The Mysterious Mr Eliot* with this description: "[T. S. Eliot] received more honours in his lifetime than any other writer, but to most people almost nothing is known of his life and personality; he seems a mystery."

At times, Matthews feared he would never be able to complete his project. As an outlet, he began to keep a journal detailing his progress and the challenges he encountered, interleaved with letters and notes. If he never published the book, perhaps he could still recount the story of trying to write it. But ultimately Matthews delivered his biography, *Great Tom: Notes Towards the Definition of T. S. Eliot*, in 1973. He said he chose the subtitle to acknowledge "that this will not be the last word on the subject."

And indeed it wasn't. In the half century since then, Eliot's poems, prose and letters have been compiled and published in multiple volumes, and the poet has been the subject of several more biographies, including those written by Peter Ackroyd, Lyndall Gordon and Robert Crawford.

Matthews died in 1991 at the age of 90. In 2008, his literary executors donated his papers to Princeton University, where Matthews and his son had been undergraduates. When Princeton announced the acquisition in January 2009, Don Skemer, then curator of manuscripts for the Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, said, "The library is particularly pleased to have the Matthews Papers because they complement our excellent holdings on modern literature and publishing history, but also contain some interesting files pertaining to American politics during the Cold War."<sup>6</sup>

---

6 "Library Acquires Papers of Former *TIME* Editor," <https://www.princeton.edu/news/2009/01/13/library-acquires-papers-former-time-editor> (retrieved February 8, 2022).

Two boxes related specifically to Matthews's research on his book, in addition to folders of correspondence with Eliot's contemporaries, archivists, and publishers.<sup>7</sup> But in Eliot scholarly circles, the papers went unnoticed. This book, *Writing Great Tom*, is a draft manuscript, which I found in one of the folders. It is reprinted with permission of Matthews's executors.

In the Acknowledgements in *Great Tom*, Matthews thanked Mrs. Eliot for at least answering his letters when others did not. But privately, he used this journal as an outlet for all the anger and frustration he was experiencing. He concluded, "I found that not every man's hand was against me—or woman's either. The list of those who were helpful to me took up several printed pages in my book. But in general the Eliot family and close friends, and what I might call the Eliot Establishment, closed ranks and would have nothing to do with me."

Matthews thought he made two important discoveries in the course of his research. He was the first biographer to access the papers of Eliot's first wife, Vivien Haigh-Wood,<sup>8</sup> at the Bodleian Library. He also learned about Emily Hale.

In June 1972, a year before his contractual deadline, he reported to another archivist that Valerie Eliot remained "adamant" about restricting his access to her husband's papers, but recorded that he would be able to review Vivien's: "It took me two years to get access to those papers of Vivien Eliot's at the Bodleian. I tried everything I could think of—short of burglary." The archivists at the Bodleian Library had told him they were "of no interest." Matthews later observed that the librarians had not given the papers "the time nor the careful reading that I did," for

---

7 Finding Aid, T. S. Matthews Papers, 1910–1971 (mostly 1940–1991), Princeton University Library <https://findingaids.princeton.edu/catalog/C1131>, retrieved February 7, 2022.

8 In the foreword, this author has followed the style of *The Letters of T. S. Eliot* in spelling Vivien's name.



he ultimately turned up something that was of interest: “Vivien’s neurotic but moving description of her final meeting with TSE” and “some tantalizing photographs. . . .”

He had a number of meetings with Maurice Haigh-Wood, Vivien’s brother, gathering details about Vivien herself as well as about Eliot’s first marriage, which had ended decades earlier.

As for Hale, Matthews seemed to ignore several early tips he received about the letters she had donated to Princeton. Five months after Princeton Archivist William Dix mentioned the number of embargoed letters, Matthews wrote back: “Do you really mean 1,000—or was that a slip of the typewriter for 100?” The archivist assured him it was no typo.<sup>9</sup>

As he worked on the book, Matthews created two handwritten lists of “awkward questions” about Eliot that his book would have to address. The poet’s relationship with Hale was one of them. After he published his biography, Matthews wrote that in Hale’s case, “I had to rely entirely on the evidence and hearsay of her friends, so the picture I gradually formed of her could not be very satisfactory—to me or to them either.”

In his Acknowledgements, Matthews did not name all of the people who helped him, presumably because they, too, were navigating their own relationships with Valerie Eliot.

One was Mary Trevelyan. Biographer Christopher Sykes informed Matthews that Trevelyan was “a lady who had been much disappointed by Eliot’s marriage to Valerie.” When Matthews finally met Trevelyan, he wrote in his notes, “I was a little startled by her appearance; she might have been Michael Hordern<sup>10</sup> in women’s clothes. Very hearty, firm handshake, bonhomme or faux bonhomme. She reminded me of a line of

---

9 The Matthews-Dix correspondence is found in the Matthews Papers, Series 3: Correspondence 1931–1990, Dix, William S., Box 19, Folder 17. Matthews’s Boston-based financial advisers served as the executors of Hale’s estate, and told him about her gift in 1970.

10 Hordern (1911–1995) was a well-known British actor.

Eliot's—or rather one he lifted—'I would meet you upon this honestly.'”

After a meeting with Trevelyan, Matthews wrote a memo for himself, noting that his wife thought Trevelyan was “wacky,” and that he was “reasonably sure she is a most unreliable witness,” because she reported that John Hayward never said “one word against Eliot after being cruelly abandoned.” But away from “unpleasant facts,” Matthews thought she was more credible. “I think TSE was a very sensitive and complicated person whose ‘friends’ were less complicated—and less fundamentally tough,” he observed in his notes.<sup>11</sup>

Trevelyan shared whiskies with Matthews, and in the process, they grew closer. Matthews recalled that she spoke of Eliot “with great fondness, said that they were very good friends for twenty years, and that ‘he often sat in that chair where you’re sitting.’”

Trevelyan told Matthews that she had written a memoir about her relationship with Eliot, and that it was now in the hands of Dame Helen Gardner, the Eliot scholar, “whose orders I’m taking.” The journal, Matthews later noted, contained more than 100 letters from Eliot, “long and funny, some of them.” Trevelyan said she had shown the document to Mrs. Eliot, “who, after much thought and even praying about it,” told her “she was against any more books on TSE ‘just at present’; that a certain amount of time should pass to let nasty rumors (about TSE being a homo and a hypochondriac) die down.” Trevelyan strongly disputed insinuations that Eliot was a homosexual, but said he was, in fact, “a hypochondriacal old gentleman.”

Late in his research Matthews persuaded Trevelyan to let him read her memoir, promising not to quote from it. In notes he captured afterwards, he wrote, “I am sure, however, that Mary

---

11 “Notes of a Conversation with Mary Trevelyan at Cavendish Hall, September 2, 1972,” Matthews Papers, Series 5a, Subject Files, Subject Files Fo-W, 1934–74, Box 43, Folder 7, Other Women Folder.

should stick to her guns and refuse to let Valerie cannibalize her Journal to piece out TSE's selection of letters. . . . The Journal should be brought out by itself—but I can't see Valerie ever giving her permission to publish; so I fear Mary's only recourse is to do as she has threatened, and consign the whole thing to the archives of the Oxford Press, to be exhumed after we are all in the grave."<sup>12</sup>

After reading the letters Eliot had written to Trevelyan, Matthews observed that they had made Eliot seem “roundly human.” The journal provided “the only evidence I've seen that this side of him existed—and was a constant side of him. The letters to her prattle: they're also clever and funny and easy.”<sup>13</sup>

When Matthews later asked Trevelyan if he could use an anecdote about Eliot's childhood from one of the letters, she said no, explaining that she still did not have permission to use them. Matthews and Trevelyan continued to commiserate about what they referred to as “Topic A,” namely Valerie's control over Eliot's letters.<sup>14</sup>

Trevelyan told Matthews that she thought she and Hayward were “perhaps the only real friends” Eliot had had. Although she had twice proposed marriage to Eliot, she told the biographer that “‘he was unmarriageable’ (after he became ‘grand’): selfish, hypochondriacal (‘and death—well, that's all through his poems’); couldn't take criticism.” After capturing Trevelyan's words, Matthews wrote to himself: “For one who was as fond of him as she says she was, this is pretty strong stuff.”<sup>15</sup>

---

12 “After reading Mary Trevelyan's Journal, Nov. 28, 1972,” Other Women Folder. Trevelyan's memoir, *The Pope of Russell Square*, was eventually published in 2022, incorporated into *Mary and Mr. Eliot: A Sort of Love Story*, co-authored by Erica Wagner.

13 “After reading Mary Trevelyan's Journal, Nov. 28, 1972,” Other Women Folder.

14 The Trevelyan correspondence is found in the Matthews Papers, Series 3: Correspondence 1931–1990, Trevelyan, Mary, 1971–1974, Box 37, Folder 9.

15 “After reading Mary Trevelyan's Journal, Nov. 28, 1972.”

Trevelyan told Matthews that she knew about Emily Hale, and that Eliot “dreaded his last meeting with her.” But she was surprised to learn from him that Hale had “stashed” more than one thousand letters in the Princeton Library.

In his Acknowledgements, Matthews also did not credit Barbie Sturtevant, an old friend who was Eleanor Hinkley’s niece and Eliot’s second cousin. Matthews wrote her in June 1970, asking if she would share her memories of her relative. Sturtevant responded with what Matthews told her was a “marvellous, more-than-hoped-for, couldn’t-be-more-helpful letter.” She recalled visiting Eliot and Vivien in London in 1922 when she was twelve, and that Vivien had seemed fragile and mysterious, and somewhat scary to a child of that age. Sturtevant also wrote about later meetings with Eliot when he was visiting Cambridge, or traveling there with Valerie in his final years.

Matthews hoped to be able to interview Eleanor Hinkley, who was still living in the Cambridge home where Eliot and Hale had performed together nearly sixty years before. But by then, Valerie Eliot had told Matthews she was going to instruct Eliot’s family members not to cooperate with him. (Hinkley, along with other family members and Valerie herself, did appear in the BBC documentary.) Matthews advised Sturtevant about Valerie’s decree even as he struggled over whether he could ethically use the information she had already provided. Sturtevant later worried that Valerie might have learned that she had spoken with Matthews, but he assured Sturtevant that he had protected her.

Behind his polite letters, Matthews’s narrative and his correspondence with his editor provide a franker view of the challenges he faced and his true feelings about those he was trying to interview.

One person Matthews did acknowledge was Dorothy Elsmith, a longtime confidante of Hale’s who provided Hale and Eliot with a private place to meet when Eliot came to the States. But Matthews connected with Elsmith late in his research, and much

of the information she provided ended up in his files but not in his book. That included the eulogy delivered at Hale's funeral in October 1969, just a few months before Matthews began his work. The minister recalled that Hale had attended church the week before she died, and had been expected to attend the morning of her death. Hale also performed in *My Fair Lady* in the spring of 1968 and took a cruise to South America later that summer, all facts that seem to contradict the cited memories of Sally Foss, a Hale student who recounted, at age ninety-six, that Hale had been bedridden at the Colonial Inn in Concord for the final two years of her life and didn't travel.<sup>16</sup>

Matthews wrote that not long after Eliot died, Mrs. Eliot visited Hale, but he provided no further details to back up that story. When the Eliot Estate published Eliot's letters to Hale online in January 2023, it included two letters that Hale sent Valerie in 1966 and 1968, confirming that Hale reached out to her in November 1966 at Hinkley's urging: "There is no question that Emily has changed and has now a real fear of what the literary hounds would do if they caught the scent! I suggested that she write to you. And at least start a conventional acquaintance and perhaps get to know each other. Not to know her is in itself a kind of provocation to curiosity, for those who are perpetually on the watch for gossip. But, my dear, I am not trying to force you into anything that is alien to you. I am only suggesting that the time is ripe for it and that there could be practical advantages to it."

They later met in person, presumably in 1968 when Valerie made a trip to the United States to inspect the original manuscript of *The Waste Land* at the New York Public Library.<sup>17</sup>

---

16 Susan Stewart and Joshua Kotin, "A Conversation with Sally Foss about Emily Hale," *Time Present: The Newsletter of the International T. S. Eliot Society*, Spring 2020, Number 100, 23. Robert Crawford cites the Foss interview in his biography *Eliot After The Waste Land* (London: Penguin Random House, 2022), 484.

17 Emily Hale to Valerie, November 6, 1966 and November [?], 1968, The Eliot-Hale Letters, [www.tseliot.com](http://www.tseliot.com).

The Princeton archives show that when Matthews interviewed Elsmith, he captured notes that read: “E.H. is a very clever mimic—marvellous sense of humor (after meeting Valerie gave Mrs. Elsmith an uproarious imitation—which she won’t describe).”<sup>18</sup>

The editor in Matthews could not resist sending letters to Mrs. Eliot, Faber and Faber executive Peter du Sautoy and biographer Peter Ackroyd, pointing out typographical and other errors in the books they had written, edited or published. But once again those polite letters masked Matthews’s anger, particularly after Valerie published the facsimile edition of *The Waste Land*, detailed editing changes that others had made to the work. Matthews believed her publication flouted even more explicit instructions that Eliot had left behind regarding future publication.<sup>19</sup>

Thus the Matthews papers provide new details about Eliot’s life and, at a minimum, the sources of some stories and anecdotes recounted in his book. And this, Matthews’s engaging story about writing *Great Tom*, chronicles his side of his battles with Mrs. Eliot, his candid views of persons he interviewed, his battles with archivists at Harvard, the University of Texas, and Oxford, and the dilemmas he faced as a journalist/biographer.

*Great Tom* was an imperfect and incomplete book, as its author, some reviewers, and later scholars have acknowledged. But fifty years later, the Matthews papers still offer, perhaps surprisingly, new nuggets of information about Eliot’s story and the stories of key people in his life. They also provide some broader lessons for all who wrestle with the challenges of contemporary biography.

---

18 Matthews Papers, Elsmith Correspondence Folder.

19 These letters are found in the Matthews Correspondence series, the folders for Valerie Eliot, Peter Du Sautoy, and Peter Ackroyd.