

Eleanor Beatrice Katherine (Kitty) Gregorson ARCM MBE

Born Edinburgh 9th July 1903, Died Edinburgh 24th June 2004

The Edinburgh musical establishment let out a collective sigh when Kitty Gregorson died on 24th June, only 2 weeks short of her 101st birthday. Everyone knew that this was the end of an era.

Kitty was the elder daughter of Angus Gregorson, an Edinburgh solicitor and Town Councillor, and Beatrice Boswell, an accomplished pianist who also played violin and viola. She was born in 1903 in Donaldson House, on the family's Wardie estate in north Edinburgh. The family was distantly connected to Rob Roy McGregor – something of which Kitty was quietly very proud, and from which she undoubtedly inherited the indomitable spirit which was to characterise her life.

Kitty spent much of her childhood in Colinton, Edinburgh, except when the family were evacuated to Perthshire during WW1, but she also had many holidays in the West Highlands where she had strong family connections.

She showed musical promise from an early age and began 'cello lessons with Ruth Waddell in the Waddell School, of which she was later to become a partner and where she taught several generations of her "cello babies" for 64 years.

Her mother's "rather odd ideas" about education meant Kitty's formal schooling was patchy, though she did attend St. George's School for Girls for a couple of years after the war and took some music classes at The University of Edinburgh. Yet these limitations never restricted an articulate and intelligent woman who throughout her life maintained an avid interest in all manner of subjects from wildlife to politics.

In 1922 she went to the Royal College of Music, where she studied 'cello with Ivor James, a major influence on her playing, and came into contact with many of the famous musicians of the time, including Vaughan Williams and Frank Bridge. She later described this as the happiest 3 ½ years of her life.

This period came to an abrupt end in December 1925 when her mother became terminally ill and she returned to Edinburgh to look after her father and younger sister. It would never have occurred to her to anything else, even though this destroyed all prospects of a promising career as a concert 'cellist. Her loss was to be the enormous gain of generations of musicians in Edinburgh.

She continued to perform, notably with the Reid Orchestra under Professors Donald Tovey and Sidney Newman and (often, she recalled, wearing multiple layers against the freezing temperatures of the Glasgow studio) with the BBC Scottish Orchestra. During WW2 she gave concerts for soldiers and munitions workers, sometimes from the back of a bus when no other venue was available.

Although also a fine oboist, it was 'cello teaching which was to become Kitty life's work. She joined the Waddell School in 1926, but also taught privately and in many Edinburgh schools. A number of her pupils have gone on to pursue careers in music, most notably Moray Welsh with the LSO. She was involved in the Edinburgh Youth Orchestra from the outset, later becoming Honorary Vice President. She was also offered honorary life membership of the annual Edinburgh Competition Festival, in recognition of her commitment to it.

Her pupils remember her with respect as a dedicated and outstanding teacher, and also with enormous affection for her kindness, generosity, and her legendary baking - even during rationing and well into her 90's by which time she was completely blind. Her hospitality was extended not only to family, friends and pupils, but to many famous musicians performing at the Edinburgh Festival - Rostropovich, Brendel and others - who found their way up the 99 stairs to her flat behind the Usher Hall in search of somewhere to practise.

Awarded an MBE in the 1985 Birthday Honours for services to music, Kitty protested with typical modesty that she was accepting it on behalf of all Edinburgh 'cellists, as she didn't feel she had done any more than anyone else. The Edinburgh music establishment of course knew differently.

Kitty never seemed to grow old in mind or spirit. She was often heard to remark that someone many years her junior was "getting on a bit", a phrase she would never have dreamt of applying to herself. She remained in her top floor tenement flat until 1991 when her sight was failing, but even then

continued to lead an active and independent life, teaching, concert-going, entertaining, in her sheltered housing flat.

Kitty never married – she once commented that all the eligible young men had died in the Great War. She had no children of her own, but her 4 generations of nephews and nieces as well as many friends and former pupils became her “family”. The Thanksgiving Service held in Edinburgh on 9th October – a musical celebration of which Kitty would have been proud - may have seemed initially like the final chapter of an extraordinary life. But of course it wasn't. Kitty, and her legacy, lives on through the performers on that day and her many other friends and pupils, who continue to play, teach or simply derive great pleasure from the music she taught them all to love.

Barbara Badger 9th November 2004