

Gerald Henry Elliot
24 December 1923 – 28 January 2018

Sir Gerald Elliot FRSE. Former chairman of Christian Salvesen, philanthropist and patron of the arts in Scotland, Born December 24, 1923; died January 28, 2018

In the course of a long and creative life, Gerald Elliot had two separate careers -- as businessman, and as devoted supporter of the arts in Scotland. Both were linked, since the success of the Salvesen shipping company, which he led, allowed him to set up a charitable fund -- the Binks Trust -- which became the source of invaluable cultural funding, while the energy and enterprise he showed in his business career was later transferred to the many organisations with which he became involved – including the Scottish Arts Council, Scottish Opera, and the Edinburgh International Festival. Music was his first love, but he also took a keen interest in Scottish politics and public life; as an active fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh, he became its vice president, encouraging the involvement of young people in the sciences; he helped transform the fortunes of Edinburgh University by restructuring its financial management; with Professor Sir Alan Peacock, he founded the David Hume Institute, a think tank which continues to challenge received thinking on a wide range of Scottish issues. It was his firm belief that Scotland could, and should, be a better nation.

To those who met him and his wife Margaret, perhaps at one of the many receptions they held in their spacious house overlooking the Botanical Gardens in Edinburgh, Elliot came across as an intellectual – spare of frame, quizzical in manner, keen to engage in debate.

It was, however, as a man of action and adventure that he began his early career, serving as a captain in the Indian Army during the war, before joining the family shipping and whaling company, Christian Salvesen, as a management trainee, working up to become managing director and chairman. He spent four seasons whaling in the Antarctic seas, was familiar with the inhospitable territory of South Georgia – whose whaling station would later feature in the origins of the Falklands war – and spent much time in South America, where he formed a strong attachment to the people and country of Peru.

He oversaw the transition of Salvesens from a whaling company to a modern industrial enterprise, and would later reflect that he had witnessed the end of an era in the South Atlantic. As he wrote in the introduction to his memoir *A Whaling Enterprise*: “This is the chronicle of the grandeur, decline, and eventual extinction of the Antarctic whaling industry. It is linked with the fortunes of the Norwegian-Scottish company Christian Salvesen, for half a century one of the leading venturers in Antarctic whaling and closely concerned in the international struggles, eventually fruitless, to preserve the Antarctic whale stock, and save the industry.”

He was never interested in business as an end in itself; simply enriching shareholders was, he considered, a bloodless activity. What was important was the provision of decent jobs, the creation of employment, the contribution that a successful company could make to the wider economy of the nation. He encouraged his staff to become shareholders; set up save-as-you-earn share option schemes; and when, later on, a bid was mounted to demerge parts of the Salvesen company, for the short term benefit of institutional shareholders, he mounted a campaign – ultimately unsuccessful – to prevent it happening.

Gerald Henry Elliot was born in Edinburgh and brought up in St Andrews, the son of Captain J.S. Elliot, a naval doctor, and Magda Salvesen, eldest daughter of the ship owner Theodore Salvesen, whose firm Elliot would later join. He was educated at Cargilfield prep school, and Marlborough College, from where, in 1942, he signed on for the Indian Army. There was a strong Indian connection in his family -- two of his uncles had seen service in India and an aunt was a Church of Scotland missionary there. He trained Indian recruits to be soldiers at the regimental centre in Abbottabad, now in Pakistan; and in 1946, shortly before being demobbed, he qualified as an interpreter in Urdu.

His education was resumed at New College, Oxford, where he read PPE and met his future wife, Margaret Whale, daughter of a prominent theologian. Despite her maiden name, her family had no connection with whaling. Elliot once explained: “Margaret comes from a Cornwall family and there

aren't many whales in Cornwall." She was his intellectual equal, and their marriage was a long and happy one.

An outstanding student, he graduated two years later and accepted an invitation from his uncle Harold Salvesen to join the family shipping and whaling firm Christian Salvesen. Salvesen inducted him into the industry, and Elliot was to stay with the firm for 40 years, becoming managing director in 1973 and chairman in 1981, until his retirement in 1988. Much of his time in the early years was spent in Norway, where the company ran its whaling fleet, and he learnt to speak Norwegian fluently. But he began as an apprentice in Liverpool, meeting ships as they came into port, and signing the crews on and off.

The centre of Salvesen's operations in the Antarctic seas was Leith Harbour in South Georgia, equipped with tin buildings that, in the inter-war years, housed not only living quarters for hundreds of whalers and captains, but also the cooking plants that produced oil from the meat and blubber, as well as bone meal and whale meat extract, all to be shipped home.

Elliot sensed that he was presiding over the dying days of the whaling industry, but the Second World War had revived the trade, and Salvesen continued to export whale products throughout the 1950s, using advanced ships, new technology and detection methods to make the industry more efficient. Gradually, however, a combination of over-fishing, the invention of rival products and, later, the growing campaign against whale-hunting brought it to an end.

On 12 January 1959, a defiant Elliot stood up in the cinema at Leith Harbour, and gave a speech to his employees, which concluded "... with the hope that whaling can be continued in the south for fifty years in the future as it has for fifty years in the past". By then, however, it was clear that the industry was on the wane. In only a few years, Salvesen would sell its factory ships to their Japanese competitors, and shut down Leith Harbour.

Elliot had long been interested in diversifying. On one occasion he brought ashore a giant whale testicle that weighed 80lbs, in the hope that it might be the source of some pharmaceutical products. That idea came to nothing, but by the time whaling ended in 1963 the firm had started to move into cold storage as well as fishing and conventional shipping, and it continued to thrive.

There was an intriguing connection between Salvesen and the Falklands conflict of 1982. That year Elliot sold two disused whaling stations to an Argentinian scrap dealer, who arrived at Leith Harbour on board a transport ship, and raised the Argentine flag. The scrap workers had been infiltrated by Argentine marines posing as civilian scientists. Two weeks later their troops seized the Falklands. "We had done the whole thing completely openly with the blessing of the British Government," Elliot later recalled. "There were, of course, sensitivities about the Argentines being anywhere in the area."

As the company grew, it diversified into trawlers and bought a cold store in Grimsby at the start of the refrigeration revolution. Over the years Salvesen became a powerhouse in the Scottish economy, with interests in cold storage, refrigerated transport, fishing, shipping, housebuilding and oil services before focusing into logistics. Elliot was in the vanguard of many of these pioneering changes and played an important role in modernising the firm's corporate structure, which included taking it to a stock market listing.

It was after his retirement as chairman in 1988, that the second phase of his career began. Scotland at the time was politically dominated by the Labour Party, and deeply resentful about the Thatcherite revolution, to which it did not warm. The poll tax, inflicted on Scotland first, was seen as a symbol of Westminster arrogance. In this climate, most of the media leant left, in the general direction of Labour, and Elliot felt there was a need for some radical thinking to challenge the general drift of public commentary. He threw himself into public service and the fresh thinking on policy it required. He had chaired the Scottish branch of the Royal Institute for International Affairs and now chaired the Forth Ports Authority. He supported his old Salvesen colleague Barry Sealey in setting up a business angel syndicate called Archangels to invest in emerging technological companies in Scotland. He was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh, and, with his friend Professor Alan Peacock, co-founded the David Hume Institute, which began to issue papers on such things as reviving the Scottish economy. He never stood for election himself, but back in the 1960s he did campaign for Conservative candidates, and established the

Scottish branch of the Bow Group as well as chairing the Leith Conservatives. His conservatism was of the thoughtful, pragmatic sort that wanted society run justly and competently, but was wary of fancy theories and intoxicating ideologies.

He became Chairman of the Scottish Arts Council, and then took on the chairmanship of Scottish Opera at a difficult time in its development, and it thrives to this day. Opera was probably his greatest passion, and his son Jo recalls his “ecstatic moment of anticipation in the first few bars of the Magic Flute, or at the opening of another new production by Scottish Opera.” Other organisations, such as the Scottish Chamber Orchestra, the Royal Scottish National Orchestra, Dunedin Consort and the Edinburgh International Festival, all benefited from his generosity through the Binks Trust. He contributed to the new organ for Greyfriars Church in Edinburgh, and aided the publication of the Lorimer Bible – a remarkable work by the Greek scholar William Lorimer, who translated each gospel into a different form of Scots to match the different forms of Greek used by the various apostles and scribes.

The patronage that Elliot and his wife gave to the arts in Scotland, was recognised when they were awarded the Prince of Wales Medal for Arts Philanthropy, personally presented by Prince Charles. The citation concluded: “What stands out about the Elliots is not just the gratitude they’ve generated, but the affection.” The principal of the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland, John Wallace added, “We hold the Elliots dear, as both donors and long-standing friends.”

The admiration for Elliot’s support for the arts in Scotland was widespread. The Edinburgh Festival’s director, Fergus Linehan, said that “Sir Gerald was passionately enthusiastic about the arts and made a substantial contribution to Scotland’s cultural life. He and Lady Elliot supported both established and emerging artists through The Binks Trust and generously opened up their home to welcome visitors to the Festival.”

Elliot was a performer as well as a patron. He was a keen amateur violinist, and practised regularly. His son Jo recalls that the rule in the house when he and his sister Katie and brother Henry were growing up was “music practice before breakfast. When we left home that pre-breakfast slot fell vacant and he used it for his own daily practice. He tackled sometimes quite difficult music with mixed success, and kind friends came and encouraged him and accompanied him on the piano.”

He was keen too on outdoor sports – ice hockey, in the years when winters were cold enough, and later sailing, surfing, fishing, archery, clay pigeon shooting, golf, and even playing the bagpipes. As Jo recalled: “He readily acknowledged his own incompetence in all these pursuits while encouraging us children and later grandchildren to have a go.”

Skiing was one skill which led to a serious accident in the early 1980’s when he lost his left eye after falling on his skis on Murrayfield golf course. “Taking out the glass eye and washing it was not something to be done in public, and Mother said that as far as she was concerned, she was public,” said Jo. “But small grand-children were a different matter and were keen observers of this rather macabre bit of personal hygiene first thing in the morning.”

A keen linguist, he had studied Latin and Greek at school, and during the war in the Indian army he learnt Urdu to interpreter standard. Norwegian was the working language of the whaling expeditions, and he later acquired Spanish when the company developed fish meal operations in Peru. He was well into retirement when he started taking lessons in Persian, and then Arabic.

He made a public return to business matters in 1997 when the Salvesen board announced plans to break up the company and demerge Aggreko, a generator hire business. Elliot mounted a campaign to oppose the move, despite the short term benefit to shareholders. He announced an alternative management scheme and recruited some of Scotland’s top lawyers and banks to support his proposal. In the end he did not succeed, however, and ironically, as an independent company, Aggreko has gone on to become one of Scotland’s most successful businesses.

Ten years ago he suffered a stroke, from which he made an almost entire recovery. However, his family noticed that he had lost the capacity to understand jokes and metaphors -- the classic right brain functions. He had also lost a sense of direction, though, as Jo commented: “It was never clear to me whether this was the effect of the stroke or a congenital disability determined by his gender.”

Just a few weeks before his death, bent almost double, and leaning heavily on a stick, he nevertheless turned up at the RSE for one of its Fellows' dinners. He joined in the discussions, and gave every appearance of having enjoyed himself to the full.

He leaves his wife Margaret, his son Jo, who is in corporate finance; his daughter Katie, a textile artist; their brother Henry, who is an independent businessman in Cambridge; eight grandchildren and six great grandchildren.

As Richard Holloway said at his memorial service: "Contemplating the list of Gerald's activities and achievements can easily make the less energetic amongst us long to lie down in a dark room to recover from the effort of thinking about it. But he himself evinced no sense of strain. He wasn't so much a man in a hurry as a man so fascinated by life and its possibilities that he wanted to experience as many of them as possible."

Magnus Linklater

Gerald Henry Elliot, MA(Oxon), HonLLD(Aberd), Drhc(Edin), AICS. Born 24 December 1923. Elected FRSE 1977. Died 28 January 2018.