

**Notes on Elliott McKane Major
and Eliza Euphemia (Elizabeth, Greta) née McChesney**

(Parents of John, Peter, Margaret, Randle and David Major)

Elliott Major born: 10 November 1910, Wanganui East.

Eliza McChesney born: 7 January 1913, Goulburn, NSW, Australia.

Married: 29 December 1937, Wellington.

Children: John Elliott, born 10 January 1939, Marton.

Peter Elliott, born 2 April 1940, Wellington.

Margaret Evangel, born 21 September 1942, Auckland.

Elliott James Randle, born 5 March 1944, Auckland.

David Elliott, born 13 February 1946, Auckland.

Elliott McKane Major died: 11 August 1981, Christchurch.

Eliza Euphemia Major née McChesney died: 8 July 2008, Wellington.

Elliott Major's birth and early years

Elliott McKane Major, born on 10 November 1910, was the fifth child of George Major [*see separate essay*] and Sarah Esther née Wallace. At the time Elliott was born George and Sarah were living in Wilkie Street, Wanganui East – a working class suburb over the river from Wanganui's central business district, and close to railway marshalling yards. George was a farm labourer, taking seasonal work as a shearer and bush-feller up the Whanganui River.

This fifth son was named 'McKane' in honour of Sarah's pioneering grandfather John Alexander McKane Wallace (whose Northern Irish mother had been a McKane/Kane), but the provenance of 'Elliott' is unknown.

In August 1914 George Major took up employment on a farm in Taranaki, and the family moved from Wanganui to lower Denbigh Road, just out of Midhirst, near Stratford.

Rawhitiroa

However, in July 1917 George leased a farm at Rawhitiroa, seven or so kilometres east of Eltham, and the family shifted into a small cottage on the property, where the Majors were to remain for the next nine years. As the children grew up and sleeping accommodation became cramped the boys were moved into a 'whare' situated behind the house. This whare appears to have been unheated, and certainly would not have been insulated, so must have been very cold in winter and always damp from the drained peat swamp that the farm consisted of.

However, outdoor life, good food and plenty of physical activity kept Elliott strong, and the only major health issue of his childhood and early maturity was a case of appendicitis, for which he underwent surgery in 1920.

Schooling

Elliott, aged five, began his formal education at the small Midhirst School on 2 February 1916. At Rawhitiroa the farm cottage where the family lived was just around the corner from the local school, and here Elliott completed his primary schooling. The records of the Rawhitiroa School were destroyed in a fire in 1945, however other evidence suggests that Elliott continued there until the end of 1925.

Elliott took an active part in the extra-mural life of the school. It is known that Mrs Rose McNeil, an inspirational teacher, strongly encouraged her pupils to join the local Boys' and Girls' Agricultural Clubs. Elliott was an enthusiastic member, doing well in the annual district root-growing and calf-rearing competitions beginning in July 1922.

In the competition for that year he was placed third out of 18 in the mangold-growing event with a yield of more than 80 tons, and received a special prize for coming first equal in the South Taranaki Division for 'the best kept plot'. (A report in the *Hawera & Normanby Star* of 11 May 1923 claims that it was for 'the best kept plot **in New Zealand!**) In 1923 Elliott's success was with a yearling calf. In 1924 at the root-growing prize-giving 'special praise was given to Master Major's crop of mangolds', and at the calf-rearing prize-giving in December both Elliott and his sister Maude figured prominently, each being awarded three prizes. In 1925 Elliott gained 2nd prize in the champion calf section of the competition, and was awarded an engraved cup now in the possession of his daughter Margaret.

But Elliott's talents were not only agricultural. The *Star* of 29 October 1924 reports that at a concert held as part of the agricultural clubs' prize-giving 'a capital duet was sung by Miss McDonald and E. Major, [and] a most amusing character duet by Dick Silver and E. Major.... The accompaniments were well played by Mr W. Major'. Then we learn that at the December prize-giving that year

Peggy O'Connor (piano) with Elliott Major and Jack Sheehy (violins) played tunefully and correctly, receiving an encore, and the same two boys, with Maud Major at the piano, played a pretty variation of "The Bluebells of Scotland," also receiving an encore.... At the interval Dick Silver played a sparkling overture before the curtain rose for the cantata "Soot and the Fairies".... The two chief characters were the Fairy Queen (Lorna McDonald) and Captain Soot (Elliott Major), and these two acquitted themselves particularly well.

Elliott also held his own academically: at the end of the 1924 school year he was adjudged 3rd in the Standard V class. He must also have done well the next year, in Standard VI, as on 8 February 1926 Elliott, now 15 years old, was enrolled as a pupil of Stratford High School. The only other relevant information contained in the high school's admissions register is that, on an unspecified date, Elliott left the school 'to work on a farm'.

This simple statement masks a disastrous turn of events for the Major family: in mid-1926, owing to severe and long-standing financial problems, George had to give up the Rawhitiroa property. Elliott moved with the family, and this marked the end of his formal education after no more than five months' of secondary schooling.

The family on the move

George now found labouring work on a farm in upper Waingongoro Road, Cardiff, near Stratford, but here the work lasted only a matter of months. This and further

family moves are indicated by the school admissions record for the youngest Major child, Maude:

from Rawhitiroa School;
to Waingongoro School, Stratford District, 13 July 1926 – 26 November 1926;
to Rataipiko School, Inglewood District, 1 February 1927 – 6 May 1927;
to Toko.

The next episode in the family saga is marked by an entry in the 1928 Stratford electoral roll: 'Major, George, Bird Rd, Stratford, share milker'. John Major, Elliott's son, explains that George found work on a farm owned by a Mr F. Hunger, off Bird Road, south-east of Stratford. This move probably took place in May 1927, going by Maude's school record, the Hunger farm being just across the Patea River from the tiny settlement of Toko.

Elliott Major's employment

It is likely that Elliott, after leaving high school by July 1926, worked full-time with his father on the various farms where George was able to find employment. Certainly, Elliott was still living at home with his parents in 1927, as Maude has recounted how she and he used to cross the Patea River by the swing bridge and walk along the railway line to Toko to attend Bible class at the Presbyterian church, and dances in the village.

As the Great Depression hit the NZ economy after 1929, the Major family learnt to survive on eels caught in the river and blackberries gathered on its banks, as well as by maintaining a large and productive vegetable garden. It may have been during an eel-trapping expedition that Wallace, Elliott's eldest brother, slipped into the swollen Patea and was only rescued through the efforts of Elliott and a friend. For this the two were awarded certificates from the Royal Humane Society in which they were 'highly commended for humane and praiseworthy conduct in saving life on 13 January 1929'.

But Mr Hunger, no doubt feeling the pinch himself, decided 'to take over his holding again, and consequently', as John records, 'the Major family had to move on'. So by December 1931 George and Essie Major were living along Hastie Rd, in a farming area west of Stratford. Luckily, by this time only Maude was still living at home, and she was in paid employment.

Elliott, on leaving the Hunger farm where he had worked with his father, found employment as a labourer on the farm of Mr J.B. Cresswell, the Stratford dentist. The documentary evidence shows that his postal address at this time was c/o E.J. Hunt, Pembroke Road, a rural area west of Stratford, presumably Hunt being Mr Cresswell's farm manager. This was Elliott's last situation before he departed for Wellington in 1934.

Elliott's conversion and the Salvation Army connection

The date of Elliott Major's conversion is recorded on his Salvation Army officer service record as 7 March 1929, at which time he would have been 18 years old and living with his parents on the Hunger farm, Toko. In the account of his personal spiritual experience that he provides to accompany his application for training as a Salvation Army officer, Elliott writes:

It was on March 7th 1929 after hearing an inspiring adress [sic] by the Rev. John Bissett in the Presbyterian Church Toko that I yielded my life to Jesus Christ as I found I was going headlong to destruction.

From the day I was converted Jesus came so very real to me..., and I heard the call from my heavenly Father to go out into the world to preach the Gospel.

I then began to attend Bible class and to take a Sunday school class though I did not receive the joy and the peace which I knew Jesus did give.

About this, Elliott's wife Greta later commented that the Presbyterian minister, Mr McGregor, had been urging Elliott to apply for the ministry.

Elliott then goes on in his account to describe his introduction to the Salvation Army and his sense of calling to officership:

One day I was asked by a comrade to come to a mission in the Salvation Army conducted by Ensign Taylor that very night I felt that the Army was the place where God was calling me to serve him. I tried to drive the idea out of my head, but no God had laid his hands upon me although I fought against his calling for two months which meant a great deal of sadness and misery I at last came to the place and said Father Thy will be done.

I then told the minister of my church how the Holy Spirit was leading me, and he said to go the way in which God does bid you....

It is now my deepest desire that I should work for my master in his vineyard and it is in the Salvation Army where that work is to be done.

Greta provided the information that the 'comrade' who invited Elliott to the Army meeting in Stratford was one Bill Armstrong; this could not have happened before 1930, as the Armstrong parents, who were Salvation Army officers, were appointed to the Stratford Corps only from 9 January of that year, their son coming with them. As Bill remained in Stratford after his parents moved elsewhere at the end of that year, his invitation to Elliott could have been given at any time during the next few years, however, Ensign David Taylor was appointed commanding officer of the Stratford Corps in January 1933, which narrows down the time frame to that year.

Whatever the exact date of Elliott's introduction to the Salvation Army, his continued attendance at Army meetings led, as we have seen, to a crisis of vocation which was eventually resolved in what he came to call his 'tree-stump experience'. Greta described it like this: 'On the evening of 8 March Elliott knelt at a tree stump on Cresswell's farm and gave his life to the Lord for service as an officer'. This crucial event must have taken place in 1933.

In the Salvation Army training college

Elliott's decision was not greeted with any enthusiasm by his parents, but he was determined. He signed his Articles of War [*which set out the Salvation Army doctrines and lifestyle*] on 21 July 1933, so becoming a senior soldier of the Army, and the very next day filled in his preliminary application for officership. This was counter-signed by Ensign Taylor, who spoke of Elliott as 'a very fine stamp of young man, in every way suitable'. On 6 October 1933 Elliott was accepted for training – despite having been a soldier for not much more than two months, and never having held a local officer position in his home corps – and in March 1934, with tears, rode his bicycle to the Stratford railway station en route to an unknown future in an unknown city with an organisation almost equally unknown. He was 23 years old.

Elliott's children remember him saying more than once that while at the 'garrison' he was constantly afraid that he would be sent home as not being suitable for

officership, but he need not have feared. The redoubtable Albert Orsborn, the training principal, reported on Elliott at the end of the course as follows:

Has grown up in a religious atmosphere and well disciplined in Church life and methods. His religion is good and deepening while in character he is sound, reliable and earnest.

Educationally he does fairly good work. Not clever but a very willing worker.

Appearance is good and in his favour, and will open many doors and make him many friends.

Leadership not highly developed but shows promise. He readily responds to instruction.

His health is excellent.

Indeed, Elliott Major was well enough thought of by his training officers to be selected as one of the few cadets to be sent into the field after a shortened cadetship. His seven months of training in the 'Believers' session ended on 30 October 1934 with his appointment as a probationary-lieutenant to assist at the Salvation Army corps in Upper Hutt.

Elliott's female interest

Also training in the 1934 'Believers' session was Cadet Eliza Euphemia McChesney, called 'Elizabeth' in official Salvation Army records but known to all as 'Greta'. Male and female cadets in the garrison were strictly segregated and any communication between them without official permission was prohibited. However, a brigade of lad cadets passing a lassies' brigade in the Mt Victoria tunnel provided the opportunity for Cadet Major to show his interest in Cadet McChesney with a pointed 'Good morning, cadet'. Could anything *good* come of this?! [*For Eliza McChesney's birth and early life see Notes on Children of Sarah Jane Randle.*]

First appointments

But 'the Work' must come first. Eliza McChesney received the full 10 months' training before being appointed on 14 January 1935 as a probationary-lieutenant to assist at the Pahiatua Corps. After a year, and with the commissioned rank of lieutenant, she was sent to assist Adjutant Daisy Laskey at Waipukurau, where she remained until her marriage almost two years later.

Elliott Major spent eight months assisting at Upper Hutt, then seven months at Dannevirke/Waipukurau, just exiting from there as Eliza arrived to take up her second appointment. With the rank of lieutenant, Elliott then assisted Captain Robert Maddison at Karori from 16 January 1936, nine months later being appointed in charge of that corps, soon after with promotion to captain. It was from Karori that he was married.

Marriage and children

Could anything good come of this? It could, and it did – eventually. In 1936 territorial headquarters agreed that there could be an 'understanding' between lieutenants Major and McChesney, then on 8 February 1937 that an engagement could be entered into – the question was popped while the couple were on a visit to Elliott's parents in Stratford – and finally that they could marry. The form completed by the relevant divisional commanders re the proposed marriage, upon the basis of which the territorial commander would give his yea or nay, contained the following evaluations of the two:

[Elliott:] Is efficient & successful, likely to succeed as a married officer. In good health....

[Greta:] Is loyal & devoted, efficient & successful, health not likely to interfere with her as an Officer's wife. Likely to prove a suitable helpmeet to an Officer.

And so the wedding of Captain Elliott Major and Lieutenant 'Elizabeth' McChesney was conducted by Major Allan Montgomery in the Salvation Army Citadel, Vivian Street, Wellington on 29 December 1937.

Two weeks later the newly-weds took charge of their first command together – the Marton Corps. And soon children began to appear:

- **John Elliott**, born 10 January 1939, Marton; married Ethel Rae Richards, 12 January 1963, Auckland; served as leading Salvation Army officers in New Zealand (as Territorial Secretary for Programme, etc), Australia (as a divisional commander) and International HQ, London (as Secretary for External International Relations), and after retirement as ordained Anglican priests in Palmerston North, Christchurch and Akaroa.
- **Peter Elliott**, born 2 April 1940, Wellington; married Judith Averil Walker, 22 September 1962, Christchurch; a leading Salvation Army soldier (as a corps sergeant-major, territorial youth envoy and member of the Advisory Council of SA Laypeople); Peter's whole working life was with State Insurance in Wellington and Tauranga, ending as a managing director.
- **Margaret Evangel**, born 21 September 1942, Auckland; married Laurence Osborne Hay, 2 January 1965, Christchurch; served as Salvation Army officers in Zambia, New Zealand (as Training Principal, etc), Hong Kong (Training Principal), the UK Territory (prison chaplaincy, etc) and International HQ, London (Principal, International College for Officers, etc); was awarded '*The Times* Preacher of the Year' in 2000. In retirement Margaret did voluntary work as a chaplain in Dunedin Hospital.
- **Elliott James Randle**, born 5 March 1944, Auckland; married Carol Joy Stanton, 12 September 1964, Havelock North; highly successful managing director of Acme (Office) Supplies, Havelock North, and for many years an innovative leading elder of Riverbend Bible Community Church.
- **David Elliott**, born 13 February 1946, Auckland; married Carol Jocelyn Kendrew, 4 January 1969, Christchurch; served as leading Salvation Army officers in Papua New Guinea, New Zealand (as Territorial Youth Secretary, etc), Fiji (Regional Commander), Russia (as a regional commander) and Belarus (pioneer officers). Then as CEO of the NZ National Party, Wellington City councillor, political adviser to NZ First party leader Winston Peters, and CEO of the Prison Chaplaincy Service of Aotearoa NZ. In retirement, David was ordained as an Anglican priest serving in Martinborough, Wairarapa, and also was appointed as a member of the Alcohol Regulatory and Licensing Authority.

It is interesting to note that Elliott's children are the first generation of his Major line not to have been farm labourers – even Elliott spent his boyhood and first 8 years or so of paid employment in agricultural work. George Major, Elliott's father, tried heroically to make the upward leap to land ownership, but failed irretrievably and fell back into the socio-economic class into which he and his forebears for generations beyond count had been born.

Life as Salvation Army officers. Phase 1: January 1938 – December 1944