

THE ENDEAVOUR OF ELSIE MACKAY

By Flora Johnston

The Paris Peacemakers
The Endeavour of Elsie Mackay



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ELSIE MACKAY**

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In memory of Elsie Mackay.

*And dedicated to Jane, Catriona and Sandy, who also heard her
story from the original storyteller.*



13th March, 1928

Cranwell Aerodrome, Lincolnshire

Afterwards, even those who were present couldn't be sure what had taken place in the eerie grey morning light.

'There were two of them in flying suits. You couldn't make out who they were.'

'No, there were definitely three. One was much smaller; that would be her.'

'Ah, but I saw the woman driven away by a chauffeur in that flashy monogrammed car. I'll swear she didn't get in the plane.'

'They're only going to Dublin anyway. They've been ordered to move the machine to Baldonnell Airfield.'

'Don't be a fool. Did you see the weight of that aeroplane? Could barely get off the ground. She's loaded for a much longer journey than Ireland.'

'That's because they're headed for India; the captain's chasing the long-distance air record.'

'There's a fortune on offer for the first aviator to fly west across the Atlantic and reach Philadelphia. If anyone can do it he can.'

'Not in weather like this.'

‘It will be the woman’s fault. Women have no business in aeroplanes.’

‘I tell you, I saw her drive away in the car. She’s a financial backer, that’s all.’

‘More money than sense, then.’

‘If she is on that plane she’ll be the first woman to fly the Atlantic. And good luck to her I say.’

They slipped out of their Grantham hotel in darkness, unobserved. The cars took different routes, for one had an important detour to make. Snow had fallen heavily all week, adding to the ethereal atmosphere as the first light of morning spread over the still, silent airfield. Bundled in their flying suits, the pilots – two or three – wheeled *Endeavour* from her hangar. Sleek black and gold against the white snow, she was a thing of beauty right enough. Her gold-painted wings had reflected the sun’s brilliant glory on hour after hour of test flight over Lincolnshire; now they glowed with quiet, steady warmth, softening the monochrome chill.

Those few people who knew what was going on huddled together, going over charts, their breath rising in clouds up into the air that would soon carry all their dreams. Such long months of planning, such careful weeks of preparation, such difficult days of frustration when it had seemed all their efforts might come to nothing.

It was now or never.

Flight fever was everywhere in 1928. Barely a week went by without another hopeful record attempt. Cinema newsreels showed smiling adventurers taking to the skies; newspapers printed column after column about the lives and families and dreams of these modern pioneers, glorying in each rare triumph, picking apart each all-too-common disaster. Trailblazers or reckless fools? No one could quite decide.

There were no cameras at Cranwell today. No newspaper men, no sponsors, no families brimful of pride and fear. It was all so low-key, so *unlikely* in this weather, that most of those present believed the machine was simply being moved to its new location in Ireland. Any greater purpose was shrouded in secrecy as thick as that blanket of snow.

But for those who cared to notice, there was a tension in the air. A sense of significance in those final tightly clasped handshakes. They climbed into the machine, and out, and in again, until no one was quite sure whether two or three remained on board as she throbbled into life and slowly began to churn up the snow-covered runway.

It was said to be the longest runway in the country and *Endeavour* made full use of it, trundling along at first, faster and faster and faster, straining every strut and bolt as she gathered speed, tossing up a blizzard behind her. Far away, so very far away, nearly a mile along that runway she rose slowly, sweetly into the air and soared towards those heavy, snow-laden clouds. The group of mechanics waited as the roar faded, as she disappeared westwards, then stamped their numb feet and hurried towards the shed, eager for the warmth of the brazier and a much-needed cup of tea.

Endeavour circled, dipped a wing and was gone, carrying the mysterious aviators westwards to their destiny.

Now or never.



PART ONE

Ambition



April to August 1927

I have been long of opinion that, instead of the tardy conveyance of ships and chariots, man might use the swifter migration of wings, that the fields of air are open to knowledge, and that only ignorance and idleness need crawl upon the ground.

The History of Rasselas, Prince of Abissinia, Samuel Johnson, 1759



Chapter One

Glasgow, April 1927

In the steamy warmth of the Garnethill kitchen, Alison could hear the low hum of voices that meant her son-in-law Rob was with a patient in his little consulting room. She glanced at the clock on the mantelpiece above the gleaming black range. Stella would be home with the children soon, and their return was always boisterous. She'd have to intercept them and usher them quickly into the kitchen.

She pushed aside the P&O brochure that had been spread open before her on the table and turned to place the kettle on the range to heat. Stretching up, she checked that the washing on the pulley was dry, then removed the items, folding them and laying them on the kitchen bed for now. They'd have to be cleared from there before the boys went to bed, mind you. Bread and jam, a pot of tea, and she was just collecting the crock of butter from the little scullery off the kitchen when she heard a door opening and a woman's voice followed by Rob's tones. Good, his patient was leaving. They could have their tea in peace, and maybe he would even manage to join them.

She laid the butter on the table, but just as she did so she heard

the outer door bang and footsteps running through the close. Too late! Most of Rob's patients were indulgent of his small family but he did have the odd crusty customer who wouldn't take kindly to being barged aside by Duncan and Jacky. Alison hurried into the shadowy hallway, ready to scoop up her grandsons. Amid a flurry of noise and movement she was aware of Stella's delighted exclamation, of a woman in fur coat and chic hat, an embrace and an urging to stay for tea, before Duncan barrelled into her and threw his arms around her waist with all his five-year-old energy. 'Gran, Gran, Gran, we saw the monkey man, we saw the monkey man.'

And then the visitor was gone and Rob retreated to his consulting room, promising the boys he would join them in a few minutes. Stella hung up her coat and hat and sent the boys to wash their hands as she fetched beakers for their milk. Alison poured the tea, and both women sat down at the table. 'That was Elsie, wasn't it?' Alison asked.

'It was. She's had trouble with a persistent sore throat and their own doctor has been no use so I suggested she see Rob next time she was in Glasgow.' The boys reappeared and for a moment or two Stella was busy settling them with their bread and jam. Then she glanced across at her mother. 'She's exactly the sort of contact Rob needs, you know. She might help him find some wealthier patients.'

Alison was silent. She had heard her daughter on this topic before. It was hard not to, sharing a house as they did here in Garnethill, on the north-western edge of the city centre. It had seemed perfect when they moved in together soon after Jacky's birth, pooling their resources to afford a property with a much-prized private bathroom and enough space for them all. It was on the ground floor of the tenement building, ideal both for Rob's patients and for Stella manoeuvring the heavy pram. The children slept in the closet bed in the kitchen, and Alison had her own room with enough space for the few items of furniture she had

saved from their family home in Thurso. The other small room was fitted out for Rob's consultations. This left only the parlour, but as in many Glasgow tenements another double bed was hidden in the wall there, behind painted wooden shutters, and that would do for Rob and Stella. 'We mostly live in the kitchen anyway,' Stella had laughed, 'and when we do want to use the parlour we close the shutters and no one even knows the bed is there.'

Rob had trained as a surgeon before the war, but the toll of those years at the front had left him with unsteady hands, occasional blinding headaches and an impatience with the establishment. He had thrown himself into helping recovering soldiers and sailors at the Princess Louise hospital for amputees at Erskine, but when his work there came to an end he decided to set up a private medical practice in Garnethill. Stella polished the plate he had screwed into the doorway, rubbing her cloth carefully over the letters Dr R. CAMPBELL M.B. Ch.B., and saw her hope and pride reflecting back at her in its blurry brass surface.

Three years later, however, Alison watched as her daughter became increasingly discontented. Garnethill hadn't provided the influx of wealthy patients she had hoped for, and Stella was now beginning to speak about moving further out of the city into one of the new bungalows being built in leafy villages like Bearsden.

'The boys will need a room of their own one day,' she reminded Rob at regular intervals. 'It would be nice to have *both* a parlour and a bedroom, don't you think? That's not such an unreasonable thing to wish for.'

Alison would have moved out to give the young family more space, but Stella didn't want that either, relying on her help with the children and the housework. It would be interesting to see how they all got on if Alison took up her sister's suggestion of a few weeks at sea!

Rob entered the room, pulling her back into the moment. 'Tea?

Yes thanks, I'm gasping.' He dropped down beside his sons, who had long since finished eating and were playing with toy cars on the floor. Alison watched him as Stella buttered him a scone. He looked peaky again, she decided, as he ruffled Duncan's fair hair and took his place at the table. Those dark shadows under his eyes usually meant the headaches he had endured since the war were bothering him. But he carried on, just as they all did, and if his patients noticed the slight shake in his hands or the strain in his voice, they were reassured by the warmth and empathy in his manner.

'How did you get on with Elsie?' Stella asked as she passed him his tea.

'Fine.'

'Fine? Is that all?'

'Stella, I can't discuss a patient's business, even if she is your friend. *Especially* if she is your friend, in fact.'

'Don't be absurd, I'm not looking for medical details. What I mean is – was she happy? Do you think she will see you again?'

Rob passed his hand over his eyes. 'How should I know? I always aim to leave my patients happy.'

'Oh, don't be so stuffy. Will she recommend you to her friends? You do need to find some wealthier patients, you know.'

Here she goes again. Alison felt the familiar surge of irritation and clattered the children's dishes together, taking them through to the scullery. Really, Stella was being impossible at the moment, but it would only make matters worse if she were to wade into the discussion herself, as she was tempted to do. As she ran the plates under the tap, Alison thought again about the elegant woman in the fur coat and smart hat. The Honourable Miss Elsie Mackay. She wondered how much the friendship had to do with Stella's current discontent – but on the other hand, she had to acknowledge that her daughter, worn down by the monotony of housekeeping and child-raising as many young women were, was rarely as full of life

and sparkle as when she spent time with Elsie.

The strangest coincidence had brought them back together. Stella had often spoken of meeting Elsie in those far-off days in Paris in 1919, back when she was a typist with the peace conference and Elsie was a rising film star using the pseudonym Poppy Wyndham, darling of the newspapers because of her beauty, her charm and the romantic story of her elopement and disinheritance. Alison herself remembered seeing Poppy Wyndham in several pictures, including *A Son of David* where she played alongside Ronald Colman. Stella had treasured the crumpled card the actress had given her, and repeated her words: *I feel sure we shall meet again*. And five years later they had.

By that time Poppy Wyndham was no more. Elsie's marriage was over and she had returned to her maiden name and the forgiving embrace of her father, who just happened to be one of the richest and most powerful men in British industry. James Mackay, Viscount Inchcape, was chairman of P&O, the biggest shipping company in the world, and divided his time between a grand townhouse in fashionable London and the seclusion of Glenapp Castle in Ayrshire.

Elsie turned her back on acting and found a new passion for interior design, taking responsibility for the creation and maintenance of the living quarters across her father's extensive fleet. She had been in Glasgow for the launch of one of these ships on the Clyde when she and Stella encountered one another again. Alison was in Aberdeen with her sister Maggie, but remembered the letter she had received from her daughter.

I would never have gone out at all if I'd realised the crowds were so thick and the day so hot, but I thought it would amuse Duncan to see the ship being launched. As it was he had a tantrum and I had to carry him, and my morning sickness was

worse than ever. I really thought I would faint, and I fought through the crowds to the side of the road where I had to sit down on the kerb or I'd have collapsed. Well, wasn't this sleek silver Rolls-Royce driving past just at that time. The woman inside ordered her chauffeur to stop and jumped out to see if I was all right. She took us into her car – that cheered Duncan up – and once her chauffeur had dropped her beside her father she ordered him to drive us home. I knew who she was, of course, but she didn't recognise me so I didn't say anything. Later in the day she called round to see how we were, so I explained then and invited her in for a cup of tea!

From that day an unlikely but, as far as Alison could see, genuine friendship had flourished between them. Every few months when Elsie was in Glasgow, Stella left the children with her mother and met her friend for a stroll in the botanics or tea in the Willow Tea Rooms in Sauchiehall Street, while magnificent presents arrived for the boys at Christmas and on their birthdays.

With tea finished, the boys ran outside to play in the back green with the other children from the surrounding tenements. That was another gripe of Stella's; she wanted to be able to open her back door and let her children out into their own private garden. Alison came back to the table, where Rob and Stella had both lit up cigarettes and Rob was reading the newspaper. Stella picked up the discarded P&O brochure and looked at the colourful picture on the front of elegantly dressed men and women playing tennis on a ship's deck in front of two gleaming funnels. 'What's this?'

'Maggie sent it to me. She has suggested we take a pleasure cruise in September.'

'Goodness! Will you?'

'I think I might. It's a while since we had a holiday together.'

Stella turned the pages. 'Looks lovely. Is it this one?'

'The *Ranchi* – to the Mediterranean.'

'How funny. I believe that's one of Elsie's ships.' She looked up. 'Can you afford it?'

Alison tried not to sound defensive. 'I can. We don't need a *cabin-de-luxe*. You know I've been careful with the Thurso money, and it was always my plan to use some of it to travel. And besides, it will give you young ones some time without me under your feet.'

'What, to go dancing?' Stella threw a glance at her husband but his face remained buried in his newspaper. 'Hardly. And besides, I certainly don't feel young any more. Not at thirty-two.'

The grand old age of thirty-two. Perhaps it wasn't Alison who needed a holiday, perhaps it was Stella. 'Will you manage a holiday this year?' she asked. 'Rob?'

Rob looked up. 'What's that? A holiday? Oh, I dare say we'll take the boys to Rothesay for a week or two. What do you think, Stella?'

'We always go to Rothesay. Last year we went during Glasgow Fair and the steamers were packed and the guesthouses so busy, it was hard to keep track of the boys on the beach. I'd like to go somewhere different. If we wait until August it will be quieter and perhaps Corran would join us. It's a few years since she's done that.'

Corran, Alison's eldest daughter, far away in Oxford with her books and her secrets.

'That's a good idea,' Alison said. 'And I have another one. If I do decide to take this cruise in September, how about the two of you take off for a few days yourselves before that and I look after the boys?'

'Would you really? I mean, would you manage on your own?'

I managed to raise four of you with a husband away at sea and I already do the lion's share of housework in this place. Not that you notice. 'I'm sure I'll manage, dear, and if not I can ask Luisa to come over and help.'

‘Well, if you’re sure – that would be rather nice, wouldn’t it, Rob? We could go to a hotel.’

Rob looked dubious. ‘I’m not sure we can afford that.’

‘We’ll just have to afford it.’

Perhaps wisely, Rob said nothing. Instead he folded up his newspaper and got to his feet. ‘I promised to take some books over to Alex for young Danny Aitken – you know, the lad whose father I helped a few weeks ago. Do either of you want to join me?’

‘You go,’ Stella said to her mother. ‘I’ll stay with the boys and put them to bed. I’ve walked far enough today and my feet are killing me.’

Alison hesitated. It might be good for Stella and Rob to have an hour or two together; on the other hand, the mood Stella was in they would probably just bicker. She herself had been busy in the house all day and would welcome both the walk and the chance to see her son and daughter-in-law Alex and Luisa. ‘Thank you. I’d love to come.’

As she crossed the hallway to her bedroom to get ready, Alison marvelled again that she could visit Alex, her eldest son – her only surviving son – whenever she wanted. He had gone to sea as a boy of sixteen, and she had become accustomed to a relationship of long absences and occasional stilted letters (*The grub is not too bad. China is hot. In Gibraltar and the Rock is fine*), broken by precious spells of leave. But four years ago Alex had shocked them all, returning from a spell in the Mediterranean with a young Italian bride, Luisa. He continued in the navy at first, but Luisa was desperately unhappy without him. Alison had deep misgivings when her sea-loving son resigned from the navy and found himself work with the great shipbuilding firm of Alexander Stephen and Co. at Linthouse, overseeing the sea worthiness and sea trials of the vast liners and cargo vessels that they launched into the waters of the Clyde. How could Alex, with saltwater coursing through his veins, possibly

relinquish a life of wide horizons and exotic ports for the crowded streets and noisy factories of Scotland's biggest city? And yet, despite his mother's scepticism, he did. 'I've had enough of that life,' he told her. 'I'm ready to settle down with a home and a family now.'

As Alison pulled on her gloves she reflected that although the longed-for family had not yet arrived, Alex and Luisa appeared to be happy, with the rich cloak of their good-humoured love protecting them from the challenges of their mixed marriage. Luisa's English, already serviceable, had improved greatly and she had many friends among the vibrant Italian community in Glasgow. Alison was very fond of her daughter-in-law, and it was with pleasurable anticipation that she walked down the hill into the city centre beside Rob to catch a tram out to Partick, where Alex and Luisa lived in a lovely two-bedroomed tenement, always beautifully kept.

The city was at last emerging from the gloom of winter, and hazy low sunlight glinted between tall buildings, softening their black sootiness. The sharp April wind blew the smoke and the odours through the streets, even if it didn't quite disperse them. Alison had grown up on the shores of Loch Linnhe and then lived her married life in Thurso, breathing fresh sea air. Glasgow was full of people like her. As she walked through the city she liked to identify the different accents: Highland voices, Gaelic voices, Galloway voices, and that's before you listened to the Irishwoman leaning out the window and calling for her bairns or the Italian couple chatting away behind the counter in their own language. All these people from their own vast landscapes, thrown together in these narrow closes and trying to survive in the smog.

She missed the open skies and she missed her garden, but Glasgow had some fine green spaces and she had her family about her. Still, perhaps it was time for a break. She had slipped the P&O brochure into her bag to show to Alex and Luisa. Would she go?

She rather thought she would.