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Tuesday, 17th March 2009

Monthly columns

Courageous women's lives

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TWO remarkable women who carved new lives for themselves in Provence before the Second World War are the subject of a fascinating book by Cuckfield author Maureen Emerson.

'Escape to Provence' is the true story of courageous American Elisabeth Parrish Starr, who left the comfort of her Philadelphia home after a great personal tragedy to carry out selfless work transporting injured and dying soldiers to dressing stations on the Somme in the Great War.

She stayed on in France and settled in Opio in the hills above Cannes where she met English writer Winifred Fortescue.



Cuckfield author Maureen Emerson photographed by Guy Stockton.

Winifred, who had settled in Provence with her husband Sir John Fortescue to find "an elegance of life they could neither aspire to nor afford in England" became a widow in the early 1930s and wrote about her experiences in France in 'Perfume from Provence', which became a best seller.

Maureen Emerson, who lives in Church Street, Cuckfield, became interested in Winifred and Elisabeth during the 22 years she spent in France in a neighbouring village to Opio where they had both lived.

Maureen settled back in England eight years ago to be closer to her family but Winifred and Elisabeth were never far from her mind and she has just completed her fascinating book on their lives after eight years of research.

Maureen told the Middy: "Two very resolute and unusual women were behind me all the way and I was never allowed to slacken off for long. "This is not only the story of two expatriate women who were drawn to Provence in the first part of the twentieth century, it is also about the friends they gathered around them on the hillside, and the fate of those who touched their lives."

Elisabeth Parrish Starr remained in France in the difficult years of Hitler's occupation in the Second World War but sadly died in 1943 before the liberation. Winifred, known as Peggy to her friends, chose to settle for part of the war in 'Many Waters', an idyllic cottage near Wakehurst Place, Ardingly.

While in Sussex she befriended a badly burned Spitfire pilot called Richard Hillary, one of Archibald McIndoe's 'guinea pigs'. Winifred's popular book 'Perfume in Provence' inspired him to write about his experiences as a fighter pilot in 'The last Enemy', which became a best seller in 1942. After many skin grafts to his hands and face, Hillary was drawn back to the camaraderie of the RAF and died on active service aged 23.

During her time in England, Winifred also befriended Grace Kimmins, who founded Chailey Heritage Craft School. Winifred visited the school frequently and helped Grace receive Queen Elizabeth and her two young princesses during a royal visit in June 1945.

Winifred invited General Sicé of the French Red Cross to the ceremony and she and Grace helped him to set up his own 'Chailey Heritage' near Paris for children injured during the war. After the defeat of Hitler, Winifred returned to the thyme-scented terraces and olive groves of Opio and died there in 1951.

'Escape to Provence' by Maureen Emerson is priced £9.99 and published by Chapter and Verse, King's House, 8, Church Street, Cuckfield. For more details contact: chapterandversebooks@tiscali.co.uk
Dianne Jones

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