

Pierre Elliot

by Hugh Elliot

Pierre Anthony Hugh Elliot was born on November 26, 1914, in London, England. He was raised by his mother who was widowed as a result of the great influenza epidemic that swept across Europe at the end of the First World War. Pierre grew up mostly in Paris, where his mother lived and worked as an opera singer.

Pierre recalled sheltering in the basement in 1918, at the age of four, with his mother. The German Imperial Army was raining artillery down on Paris, in a last- gasp effort before the Armistice was signed.

Work connection

Pierre's aunt, his mother's sister Winifred Beaumont, introduced him to the Work and ideas of G.I. Gurdjieff and P.D. Ouspensky. She was married to the scientist and philosopher, J.G. Bennett. Pierre was a frequent guest of the Ouspenskys in the 1930s.

World War II

Pierre's higher education and professional training were interrupted by the onset of the Second World War, which began in September 1939. Like millions of others, he enlisted in the British army. His native fluency in the French language and his familiarity with many areas of France meant that the wartime authorities were likely to involve him in intelligence gathering directed at Occupied France, rather than military service. That is all I know about it as he said, "When I signed up, I was told that the work I was involved in was secret. It was secret then. It is secret now."

For most of World War II, Pierre was a part of the community of scientists and intellectuals gathered around J.G. Bennett at his center, Coombe Springs, an estate southwest of London. The British government gave Bennett a contract to study the use of coal as a fuel, rather than oil which was needed for the war effort. This community was protected from the horrors of the war because the group around Bennett—all the while practicing Gurdjieff Movements and inner work exercises—were undertaking this vital research for the war effort.

Working with Gurdjieff

Pierre married his first wife Barbara in 1944. In 1947 P.D. Ouspensky's wife revealed that Gurdjieff, (from whom her husband had broken off contact since the early 1920's) was still alive and living in Paris, having survived the Occupation. Margaret Anderson, the American writer was one of the first of Gurdjieff's students to be able to return to postwar Paris to be reunited with Gurdjieff. Pierre, like many others, made frequent pilgrimages to Paris 1948-49 to study and work with Gurdjieff. Those events and teachings are well documented in the many published accounts and recollections of life with Gurdjieff.

With Gurdjieff's death in 1949, Pierre stayed in close contact with J.G. Bennett. When Bennett later took up the spiritual practice known as Subud, brought to the West by the Indonesian teacher Pak

Subuh, Pierre became deeply involved in initiating large numbers of people who were attracted to Subud and the Latihan exercise.

Pierre's marriage to his wife Barbara ended in divorce in 1952. He married my mother, Vivien Healey, in 1953. Tragically, Barbara died in 1956 and her two daughters came to live with us. I was born in 1954.

From the time of my birth until 1971, Pierre devoted his energies to various professional and entrepreneurial activities. He maintained a family home, sent his children to school and lived a largely 'normal' suburban life. However, his lifestyle and household still reflected his inner passions. Persian carpets and Indian friezes adorned the Elliot family home and friends and visitors were more than likely associated with Gurdjieff, Bennett, or the Subud organization. Every summer, Pierre took his family on madcap journeys to exotic far-flung corners of Europe, still untrammelled by mass tourism.

Sherborne House

In 1971, Bennett asked Pierre to help him with a new five-year experiment teaching methods of inner transformation to the rebellious sixties' generation. Instruction was based largely on the ideas of Gurdjieff as well as Sufi practices. An International Academy was started at Sherborne House in Gloucestershire, England offering residential ten-month courses. Pierre was named Assistant Director.

The First Course was oversubscribed, much to Bennett's surprise. Three courses out of the planned five were completed but a couple of months into the Fourth Basic Course J.G. Bennett died, on December 13, 1974. He had just signed an agreement to purchase a property called Claymont Court in West Virginia, in the United States.

Director of Claymont

Bennett was convinced that "psychokinetic" communities needed to be established. The senior people around him, including Pierre, Elizabeth Bennett, and John Wilkinson took up his legacy and vision. The task of directing "Sherborne style" courses at Claymont fell upon Pierre's shoulders.

For more than ten years, Pierre continued the work of his teachers and also broadened the scope of influences, inviting many elders from other traditions to come and share their wisdom at Claymont. Such luminaries included M R Bawa Muhaiyaddeen, Reshad Feild, Sheikh Muzaffer Ozak, and Sheikh Suleyman Loras of the Mevlevi dervish tradition as well as the Cambodian Buddhist monk, Bhante Dharmawara. Suleyman Loras, from Konya, Turkey, the final resting place of Jelalludin "Mevlana" Rumi, was also a visitor. In 1977 he conferred the title of Mevlevi Sheikh upon Pierre.

In spite of his grueling schedule of duties at Claymont, Pierre still managed to find time to travel the world, sharing the spirit and work of Claymont with diverse groups of interested people. He was frequently invited to speak about his work by former Claymont students. His travels took him all over the continental United States, to Alaska, Hawaii, Canada,

the Caribbean and often back to Europe. In 1986, He and Vivien made an around-the-world journey, visiting friends, communities, and seekers in Europe, India, Nepal, Indonesia, Australia and New Zealand.

Pierre—like a rock

The name 'Pierre' means rock or stone in French. Pierre's way of leading the community at Claymont had such strength. He seemed to be everywhere at once and no mundane task nor major decision was shirked. He loved plants and rock gardens, birds and flowers. He was a keen collector of stamps and an avid photographer. He never for a moment considered himself a teacher of the caliber of predecessors like Gurdjieff and Bennett. His demeanor was always that of a loyal lieutenant; a practiced steward of the Work.

In 1987 Pierre retired from Claymont and retreated to Rivauguier, a small vineyard in the South of France, to begin his own teaching experiment. With his own land, freed from the constraining influences of his illustrious predecessors and their ways of teaching, he said to me, "Now, let's see if I have anything of my own to offer."

Individuals and small groups were invited to come and work at Rivauguier. During this time Pierre, as always, made contact with like-minded people in the region. He found personal solace and special nourishment in his friendship with Father Virgil, a French Orthodox-trained abbot who ran a nearby monastery. Once, after a Sunday morning service at the monastery, seeing Pierre, Father Virgil threw down his walking stick and said: "Vous etes mon Maitre." (You are my Master.)

Many who have known Pierre for any length of time have commented on the subtlety and sweetness of their experience at Rivauguier. Like a good wine, Pierre's contribution to the Work improved with age.

Pierre died on January 1, 2005. My mother Vivien, who was half American, passed on Thanksgiving Day, 2011. They are at rest together in the churchyard of the small English village of Minstead. Their headstone is quite unusual, with some coded inscriptions carved into the stone.