

Jeremy Goulding, in collaboration with John Page, Hugh Craig and Geordie Fergusson, *The Last of the Mullicans: the story of Elsie Nash*, privately published, 2025, 260 pp., £25, available from the author jwr.goulding@gmail.com.

This is the biography of one of Oxford's legendary landladies, who catered for student members of the University at No. 9, Longwall Street, a house owned by New College. Two of the ex-lodgers were Jeremy Goulding and Hugh Craig who have put together this fascinating study of a remarkable woman, who 'never hit the headlines'. As Jeremy Goulding explains in his foreword, the study of Elsie all began when a small box of her possessions came into his hands after her death in February 1977, Elsie not having surviving close family. Unsure what to do with the contents which included letters, photographs, postcards, memos and notes and a collection of her 'sayings' the box followed him during his various house moves. Then in 2023 he met up with another ex-lodger Hugh Craig in London, together they discussed Elsie, both having fond memories of her and No. 9. From there it was decided to work on a memoir and invite other ex-lodgers of Elsie, many who are now famous individuals, to contribute.

Before we look more fully at the memoir, the title *The Last of the Mullicans* must be explained. Elsie must have been a nightmare to the assistants in the Covered Market and was not backward in demanding a particular fruit – usually a grapefruit – which if removed from the stand would cause a cascade of other grapefruit all over the market floor. One day Elsie announced she had got 'The last of Mullicans'. Pages 163 – 185 of this work list many of the delightful sayings of Elsie. Among them 'The price of bacon's exhaustible'; 'I'm parking myself to bed now'; (after heavy rain) 'You'd have drowned today crossing Radcliffe Square...if you hadn't hurried'; (on a cold foggy morning) 'It's very naughty of the weather to be like this'. And two of my favourites: 'To buy Heinz (soups) you have to be nearly a millionaire these days' and concerning the teapot 'When I get five minutes round the corner of life I'll clean it'. What a wonderful picture this gives us of Elsie, and these have survived because her lodgers carefully wrote them down in a notebook now in the box.

Elsie was the daughter of Frederick William Nash, a gardener, and his wife Harriet, who died two days after giving birth to Elsie at the age of 32. A family tree is included to help us sort out the interconnecting families. Sixteen months later her father remarried. The consequence of this was that Elsie moved in 1904 to live with her Aunt Ellen and Uncle Wilson Bateman (an organ builder), then living at 9 Longwall Street. There is a lovely photograph of Elsie holding the hand of Uncle Wilson in the doorway, possibly taken immediately after her arrival in the house, which was to be her home for over seventy years until her death.

For years before her arrival, the house, in common with many other houses in the city, had been a college lodging house, helping fulfil a need for accommodation that the colleges then could not then provide. In 1921 New College took over ownership of the property from Oxford City Council, at a time when No. 9 and the adjoining buildings, all of which possibly dated from the late seventeenth century, were in a state of disrepair. The then tenants catering for lodgers were Uncle Wilson, who later died in March 1943 aged 78 and Aunt Ellen, who died March 1948 aged 85. After Aunt Ellen's death, Elsie wrote to the bursar of New College asking to take over the tenancy in her own name. After consideration the bursar proposed that No. 9 should be furnished to provide student lodgings and Elsie live there free of rates and rent in return for managing the property. The house had no mains water supply, Elsie refused New College's offer to install a bathroom as this would mean one less lodger. The lodgers filled ewer jugs from the supply in the kitchen and took it to their rooms. On visiting No. 9

recently Jeremy discovered Elsie's bedroom was now a kitchen and the front room a bathroom. Somehow this seems to have broken the magic of the house.

To her lucky lodgers Elsie made No. 9 a place of welcome. She spent much time daily purchasing food from Bonners the grocers in the Covered Market, and then cooking a huge meal. Another favourite shop was Bernard's the Butchers. She was very insistent she got the best vegetables, fruit and meat. On many occasions the lodgers tried to get her to increase their rent but this she refused to do, although when she finally did agree to an increase, she promptly spent it all on food for them. Elsie certainly had a generous spirited attitude to life and to the care of her lodgers; their meals were cooked on her Baby Belling and are mouthwatering to the reader. Elsie's own meal seemed to consist daily of boiled potatoes with an egg on top. This was always eaten in the kitchen and when the weather was fine the back door would be open so she could listen to the birds. What a lovely, calm picture this conjures up for the reader.

Elsie apparently hated being away from No. 9, but at least twice a year she went to Elstead, Surrey, to stay with her two half-sisters, taking it in turns to stay in one of their houses. Once there she would immediately want to come home. But these visits generated many letters to Oxford, most of which seem to have survived. Not only did she miss her lodgers, who were taking the opportunity of her absence to do repairs in the house and planting the window boxes; but she also missed her glass of Guinness and glass of port at the Eastgate Hotel. She had a special seat at the bar and if someone was on it when she arrived, she instantly moved them off. In the end the landlord put up a notice saying that this was 'Elsie's seat'. From the Eastgate on many an occasion she would return slightly worse for wear and have to be helped to No. 9 by any lodger around at the time. It is wonderful to hear that the landlord of the Eastgate went to her funeral. Elsie found the university vacations lonely when her lodgers went home, so it was always a delight when someone like John Page, a Rhodes Scholar who spent the whole year in Oxford, remained with her during those periods.

There are four appendices. Appendix One has already been discussed and covers her sayings; Appendix Two has occasional notes from her; Three has letters (not being technical I found the QR links to her letters to Tony Seddon, John Page and Hugh Craig in this section beyond my level of expertise); Four has lodgers' recollections; and Five has a lodgers' timeline and epilogue. The lodgers approached to give their recollections responded with enthusiasm. The lack of running water; the toilet at the end of the garden; the huge meals Elsie cooked for them, were a common theme in their emails. Tim Young, later a water project consultant (ironically in Iran with no running water), said that Elsie was 'quite proud of the mushrooms growing in the ceiling of the top bedroom'. Barry Hammett, later a chaplain, tells us that Elsie was afraid of thunder and loved Penguin biscuits.

It is sad to read that her health started to fail at the end of 1976, although she was still able to cook a Christmas dinner for Alastair Saunders and his parents. And sad to read that on 4th February she was taken to the Churchill Hospital; how she must have hated leaving her home. She died three days later, and by her instructions the funeral was at the Oxford Crematorium, but it was painful for her friends to hear the minister call her Lily throughout the service. In 2024 Jeremy and his wife tried to find the grave at the Crematorium. After a prolonged search they found under brambles the grave markers for Ellen and Wilson Bateman. Elsie had directed she wished to be buried with them, but there was no marker for Elsie. Hopefully Ellen's and Wilson's markers will be replaced and one put for Elsie.

This is a beautifully produced book, with a strong binding that allows it to be opened flat. The front jacket cover has a portrait of Elsie by ex-lodger Nicholas Thorne, who also painted the back cover of Longwall Street and No. 9. Her smile, and twinkling eyes in the portrait radiate warmth and a welcome. This is an excellent study of a lovely lady; as someone who used to work around the corner from No. 9, I wonder if I ever walked past her. And what of the box and its contents? It is now in New College archives where it can viewed by anyone interested in the social history of Oxford University and college life at the end of the twentieth century; and in the important role played by the Oxford landladies. I wonder whether a blue plaque has been considered.

Norma Aubertin-Potter, Archivist, All Souls College, July 2026