

Eleanor, the Firebrand Queen



Helen Rayson-Hill

Glass House Books
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Helen Rayson-Hill trained as an infant teacher, and taught in country Victoria, Melbourne and the UK. Later, she became a drama teacher following a long interest in the theatre.

After a family transfer to Brisbane, she was appointed Queensland Manager of the Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust. For two years she co-ordinated National Arts Week in Brisbane working closely with the Queensland Government's Ministry of the Arts and Brisbane City Council.

On returning to Melbourne, Helen held a position at the Victorian Arts Centre in the Membership and Fundraising and Development Department. For two years she was an adjudicator for the Victorian Drama League.

Helen has also performed both on the stage in Melbourne and Brisbane and on television in *Neighbours* on Channel 10 and *Something's in the Air* on the Australian ABC network.

Writing has always been an interest of Helen's and she is a member of the Writers' Circle at Melbourne's Lyceum Club. She has written plays for her drama students as well as sketches for amateur theatre. Also an artist specialising in oils, Helen has held several successful exhibitions at several Victorian galleries.

Helen's short stories and memoir pieces have been published in anthologies, and she has written a children's book, *Kid Detectives*. The story was inspired by her grandson who wanted to know how children entertained themselves before electronic devices filled their lives.

Helen has long been interested in Medieval history, especially in the life of Eleanor of Aquitaine. After many years of research, inspired originally by the play *The Lion in Winter* by James Goldman, Helen was motivated to write about Eleanor's amazing life. Consequently, *Eleanor, the Firebrand Queen* became the first in a planned series of historical novels about this Medieval feminist.





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For my family,
Glyn Rayson-Hill
Tristan, Ingra, Jojo and Pippa
Freya and Jovan
Jonathan, Simone, Charlie and Madeleine

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I am grateful to my friend Jocelyn Paterson for introducing me to Eleanor of Aquitaine through a production of the play *The Lion in Winter* by James Goldman. Wanting to get into the head of this powerful Medieval queen, I started reading historical biographies about her, including *Eleanor and the Four Kings* by Amy Kelly, *Eleanor by the Wrath of God, Queen of England* by Alison Wier, and biographies by Ralph V Turner and Marion Meade, whose books kept my interest firing.

For years Eleanor ran round my head till I was given a mighty prod by author Toni Jordan, whom I thank for getting me started. The Lyceum Club of Melbourne's Writers' Circle listened patiently to my readings of the early drafts, encouraged me, and gave me the conviction that Eleanor the Firebrand Queen could be published. Susan Pierotti, who knocked the early manuscript into shape, I thank for her keen eye and discerning judgement. Thanks to Jennifer Bryce who urged me to send the manuscript to Irina Dunn whose diligence found me David Reiter of IP, who has faith in my work and is sending my book on its way.

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Lastly, my love and thanks to my husband Glyn Rayson-Hill, my computer guru, who calmed my fits of despair with his sense of humour, through corrupted USB sticks, my general lack of computer knowledge and horrors when the screen went black or when some other minor glitch occurred.

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Chapter 1. Inheriting the Duchy of Aquitaine

Petronilla was gazing out the door of the old school room in our palace at L'Ombriere as Papa recited a chapter from the multitude of laws of our Duchy of Aquitaine. A well-thumbed copy of Cicero lay on the table. The aroma of freshly threshed hay drifted in from nearby fields mixed with the scent of the blossoms from the garden.

Papa's voice broke into my reverie, 'Eleanor! Are you listening? Nilla, why do you not run off and play? You are daydreaming.'

'That is not fair! Nilla is always allowed to miss lessons.'

'Elea, it is you who is destined to be Duchess of Aquitaine, not your little sister.'

'But Papa, I already know them off by heart. I feel like a talking parrot, over and over, law after law, till my eyes cross.'

Papa chided me for being rude but at times my heart is heavy with the responsibility I know will be mine one day. I hung my head and stared at the gold, bejewelled girdle round my waist, fiddling with a loose pearl. I must ask Renée to restitch it before it falls off. Papa gave me the girdle for my twelfth birthday.

Although I have been encouraged to question everything from Latin verbs to discourses by Aristotle, it was no use arguing with Papa. No, I was stuck in the schoolroom while Nilla and my friends, Clotilde and Jerome, played in the gardens, breathing fresh air instead of ink and parchment, practising, practising, practising, a never-ending education. Papa's voice rang in my ears, 'Do your duty, Eleanor'.

The wealth of the Aquitaine surrounds me. The opulence of our palaces and estates I take for granted as I do my education, music, poetry and the love in which I am enveloped. But the weight of my future duty hangs over me. I hope Papa lives forever.

We played many games around the old Roman walls. Renée was always darning our hose and kissing better scraped knees. I remember trying to learn the names of all the herbs in the Herbarium one summer. Everything grows so well here in the gardens, flowers as well as fruits and vegetables. The vines produce the most delicious wine. There are olive trees, too, some so old and twisted our gardeners say they were planted by the Romans. L'Ombriere has always been a favourite palace, but now it is carved on my heart as the place where the Archbishop broke the news that Papa had died.

Archbishop Geoffrey told me I was special in the eyes of God. If I was so special to God, why has He taken away all whom I love? He took my *Maman* before I knew her or can remember what she looked like, and my little brother also. He was only a baby named William after Papa. Everyone was crying. Renée came to look after Nilla and me because *Maman* died with William.

And now God has taken my beloved Papa. The Archbishop said Papa was in the bosom of St James in his shrine at Compostela and therefore mightily favoured by God. If I were not so bereaved this would be funny. Papa only went on this pilgrimage because the Pope had excommunicated him again. Maybe His Grace was trying to be kind. That I am now Duchess of Aquitaine is too fearful to comprehend. I think I am too young.

In this old school room Papa told us many stories about our Roman ancestors. It was here he read *The Aeneid* to Petronilla and me. He said I was Juno and Nilla was Dido. I love Aeneas' adventures. Whatever fate awaits us, I must keep *The Aeneid*. I know Nilla will not want it. I will find some special trinkets for her.

Archbishop Geoffrey told me King Louis of France was to be my guardian. It was Papa's wish to keep me safe. I find this most odd. Papa had no liking for the French. He said they were pious and dirty and spent more time praying

than bathing. There was little I could do. I must obey Papa's wishes. Renée said Papa would never have made this decision if it was not for a good purpose. I have heard King Louis is grossly fat.

Renée is calling me to get some fresh air. She grumbles if I stay at my journal too long, and worries I am becoming melancholy which is not my usual disposition.

But my head is whirling with the abrupt changes in my life when all around me life seems normal. Birds are tweeting, Petronilla's pet monkey Simian, has stolen the laundry maids' freshly washed linens and has dragged them though the dirt. The maids are furious. Nilla tried to catch the naughty monkey. He is now in a tree.

I was summoned back to the Archbishop's palace. I was nervous, fearful of his tidings. He had a most official looking missive in front of him, with grand looking crests and seals from King Louis VI of France. He read the Latin screed to me that requested my hand in marriage to his son Prince Louis. Surely, it was a jest. I do not want to live in Paris. It was not fair!

When I returned from Archbishop Geoffrey's palace, I ran to the ruins of the Aphrodite temple. I had a long hard cry. Why must I marry? I am barely thirteen years old. Renée found me, dried my eyes and encouraged me to talk to her. She listened with patience to my ranting as I cursed my fate. She tried to comfort me by telling me what she knew about Prince Louis. He is fifteen years old, supposed to be quiet with a pleasant disposition. When his brother Phillip was killed, he became heir to the throne. Before his ascension he lived in a monastery.

Nothing Renée said helped. I hitched up my gown and ran.

Our head groom found me in the stables with my horse. I had put on her bridle, but I could not manage the heavy saddle.

'Lady Eleanor, what are you doing?'

I could not think of an answer. I did not know. Next, Jerome arrived. He looked like I felt, miserable. Since he was six years old, he has lived with us because he is an orphan. Like me, his happy life has been upended. He must go to the Benedictines.

I dropped the saddle and bolted. Jerome ran after me and caught me. I said I was going to run away.

'Where Elly?'

'You can come, too!'

'Come on, Wild Child, you know we cannot. Your fate is determined, like mine. We have to obey your Papa's wishes.'

I stamped my feet and swore in dialect. Papa would have been disgusted, but I got some of my frustration off my chest. I just wish I could be as carefree as Nilla's monkey.

I saw the courier arrive. I have since been informed Prince Louis is two days away. The French are travelling by night to avoid the heat of the day. Are they afraid of the sun? It is not that hot: where is their fortitude?

My maids laid out many gowns for me to choose to wear for my introduction to Prince Louis. At least this was exciting. I like wearing pretty gowns. Every seamstress within the palace has been weaving, embroidering and stitching for my trousseau. The lace on the chemises was made by the nuns at the abbey. It is so fine, so beautifully finished. My lacemaking attempts always look clumsy because I get the bobbins tangled; also, I do not practise. Nilla likes this sort of occupation and is more adroit than I am.

I chose a yellow gown embroidered with many brightly coloured flowers. It was also stitched with precious gems and pearls that will sparkle like stars when I move. The chemise was made of the finest linen, with lace at the neck, sleeves and hem. The girdle for my waist was woven in gold thread. Renée said I will be a marvel for all to see.

I was bathed and scrubbed (no more inky fingers), and my hair washed and rinsed in lemon juice to highlight the

colour. Finally, my tangled tresses were brushed and brushed till my scalp tingled. My body was scented in a specially prepared perfume made from an essence of lily of the valley. My cheeks were given a hint of rouge; my eyes rimmed in kohl. It took hours to get me dressed in the beautiful gown with all its intricate lacings and long train. I think the bells rang more than thrice before I was finally on my way to the audience chamber which was especially hung with new tapestries and laid with carpets from Byzantium for my first meeting with Prince Louis.

My maids, Renée and the pages escorted me to my throne. Everyone was fussing around arranging my train, making sure the crown of Aquitaine sat straight on my head. It was altered to fit me. It is heavier than any coronet I have worn before. I felt like an ornament on display. Everyone stepped back as the doors opened and there stood my betrothed. Prince Louis looked as ill at ease as I felt. There was a deathly silence, no fanfares. Prince Louis was surrounded by attendants who looked like priests and nuns at a wake; all were darkly robed. They reminded me of the black *cafard* that scurry in dark corners. The Prince wore a plain cream tunic. He looked like a monk.

Archbishop Geoffrey entered the chamber with a dour-faced French cleric, the Abbé Suger, who made me feel uneasy. They escorted Prince Louis to stand in front of me. He gave a little nod as we were introduced, then sat next to me. After the introductions were over, as quickly as they had flurried in, they flurried out, a blur of faces and strange voices speaking in Langue d'Oeil. Papa had not taught us the language of the French, saying it was barbaric. My entourage followed the French.

Prince Louis and I sat aloof from one another. A long silence ensued. I am sometimes considered garrulous, but I could think of nothing to say. I glanced at Prince Louis out of the corner of my eye, he was staring at the floor his hands clasped in what could have been prayer. I wondered if I was that frightening.

I got a little braver and managed to look at him more carefully. His hair was fair and curly. He seemed to be slight in build. He was pale, his nose a little prominent, but mine is a bit aquiline too. I could not see his eyes.

I was about to ask him if he would like some wine when a piercing twitter caught our attention. My heart sank. Simian was capering across the top of the tapestries on the opposite wall. Prince Louis let out a cry. Even in Langued'Occitan I understood the word *Satan*. As Simian is small and black with a long tail, I suppose he does look like a little devil. Prince Louis stared in horror and made the sign of the cross. He looked so funny, I had difficulty keeping my face expressionless. In Latin (I presumed he spoke it), I explained it was not the devil, but a pet monkey. I had to disentangle my train from my throne to move across to the tapestries where I tried to coax Simian down from high above my head. But no, he was having a great game as he chattered and scampered from one side of the tapestries to the other. Simian would have to be bribed. I excused myself from my terrified betrothed, dragged my burdensome train to the door, and alerted the guards outside to fetch my recalcitrant sister to collect her wretched monkey.

Petronilla sidled into the chamber with half the palace guard grinning like gargoyles behind her. I had to kick her in the ankle to get her to concentrate on Simian and not the Prince who stood as far from the tapestries as possible. Simian will do anything for a few almonds and dried apricots. With excited squeaks, he leapt down the exquisite faces of knights and unicorns to land on Petronilla's shoulder who swung her eleven-year old hips towards poor Prince Louis to introduce him to Simian. I hissed at her to get her revolting little pet and herself out of the chamber or Simian would not see the light of day, followed by a few choice epithets for good measure. She did not bat an eyelid. Hampered by my train there was little I could do. I would have loved to have boxed her ears as she simpered past Prince Louis with doe eyes.

At least the atmosphere had thawed. I took the opportunity to pour us both a goblet of wine. Prince Louis took a hasty gulp. I apologised for Simian and my saucy sister. He said he did not notice my sister. (I could not wait to tell her that!) He wanted to know about Simian and where he came from. I told him Papa brought the monkey from Morocco as a pet for Petronilla and me. We were supposed to share him, but he soon became my sister's most favoured playmate because I was not so enamoured after he destroyed one of my necklaces.

We fell into silence again. I broke it by asking him if he liked to read. He nodded. I asked him if he had a favourite book. He lisped, *The Confessions of Saint Augustine*. I said I had many favourite books; *The Aeneid*, *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, and that Greek was my favourite language. Prince Louis looked at me in a most peculiar manner. I wondered if something had gone awry with my gown.

'Can you read?'

'Of course, I can read.'

How foolish, I thought, are the French.

When he said he thought learning in one of my sex and status was unwomanly, my face flushed! I took a deep breath to control my ire. I informed Prince Louis that not only could I read I could also write, and I was fluent in three languages along with a smattering of Basque. Furthermore, if it was not for my fluency in Latin, we would not be able to converse because His Lordship did not speak my dialect and I had yet to learn his unless he thought it too unwomanly for me to do so. He did not answer, but I noticed his ears had turned pink.

I swallowed my wine in haste and stood as gracefully as my heavy gown would allow. If my eyes were basilisks, he would have been a pile of ash. I announced I would take my leave. I stormed to my quarters. The crown hit the bed as I entered and bounced on the floor at Renée's feet. As I tore at the lacings, I announced I never wished to see this gown again to be reminded of what was before me.

I ran to Papa's library. The diamond patterns were darkening on the floor as the last rays of sun filtered through the tall glass windows. I have recorded what took place. I yearn for my Papa. I need his help and advice. My life is a catastrophe. Furthermore, I have broken two quills and blotted my journal. Renée called, so I let her in. She was saddened when I related what happened. I was still fuming,

'How can I marry such a pious-looking fool? Does he expect me to unlearn all that I know? Prince Louis is an ignorant barbarian. He cannot string two words together or even recognise a monkey when he sees one!'

Renée reminded me of tonight's banquet. Ink and quills bounced as my fist hit the desk. I yelled at her,

'I do not want to go!'

I went. I decided to show those oafs of Frenchmen how we do things in the Aquitaine, to display our learning and sophistication. I wore a lighter gown so I could dance. Before the evening proceeded, I instructed the minstrels to play at their best to produce their finest songs of chivalry and courtly love as well as *Chansons de Geste*. I brought my lute so I could join in their music, to display to that bumpkin Prince more of my abilities. I cared not what my betrothed thought of me. He cannot change who I am. I am everything I have been trained to be since I was declared Papa's heir. I am proud my father spent his lifetime educating me, inspiring me to learn. Moreover, I will never stop learning.

His Lordship made no attempt to engage me in conversation though I was seated next to him. His mouth flapped open like a gasping fish as he took in the opulence of his surroundings. His courtiers wavered between shock and amazement at what there was to behold in food, wine and entertainment. Not a sou was spared on the lavish banquet. The treasury Prince Louis had brought to impress my people made him look like a beggar.

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