

Escape to Provence

by Maureen Emerson

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Sun and Shadows in Provence

by Vivian Thomas

Long before Peter Mayle extolled the pleasures and pitfalls of settling in Provence, another British expat wrote her own bestseller on the subject. Winifred Fortescue, or the Honourable Lady Fortescue, as the title page reads, published *Perfume from Provence*, a lively account of setting up house with her husband near Grasse in a friendly but foreign land, in 1935. With witty line drawings by E.H. Shepard, best known for illustrating *Winnie the Pooh*, the book was a huge hit. Like Mayle's, it also launched a spate of sequels, some of which, along with *Perfume from Provence*, were reissued in the 1990s.

Despite a quaint *Upstairs, Downstairs* outlook ("To begin with we would start with a *bonne*, preferably Italian, because Italians have

more heart, and I do like my servants to be kind to me."), Fortescue's book still reads well, full of insights into a far more rustic Provence than today's traveler will see.

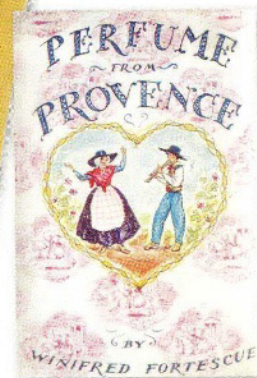
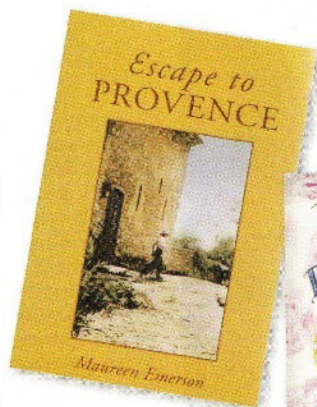
While Peggy, as she was known, draws humorous portraits of the locals surrounding her, she also pokes plenty of fun at herself, especially for her initial *bêtises*. "In the autumn we had laboriously planted thousands of bulbs imported, expensively, from Holland...under the scornful eye of Hilaire [the gardener]. When spring burst upon us, I found the grassy terraces under the olive trees one sheet of tiny blue Roman hyacinths, miniature scarlet tulips, mauve and scarlet anemones, and yellow jonquils." She commented to Hilaire that their predecessor had also lavishly planted bulbs, but "he gave it one contemptuous glance and said, 'Ah ça!—sont sauvages, Madame.' Wild tulips, hyacinths, anemones and jonquils! ... Little wonder that Hilaire had watched our bulb-planting with pitying eyes!"

Perfume from Provence paints a vivid picture of the life that "Madame" and her husband, Sir John Fortescue, a historian, carved out for themselves. Now a new book provides an even more intimate glimpse into that life.

Maureen Emerson's *Escape to Provence* is a joint biography of Peggy and the American who became her close friend, Elisabeth Parrish Starr.

Born in Philadelphia, Elisabeth was estranged from her family as a young woman and, after a tragic love affair, sailed to France during World War I to take part in the U.S. voluntary aid program to Europe. Remaining after the war, she purchased an ancient hill-top house, the Castello, surrounded by olive groves, farm fields and vineyards near the village of Opio in the hills above Cannes.

While Emerson's book recounts the complete life stories of both women, Peggy and Elisabeth only met after the death of Peggy's husband. Lonely and worried about money, Peggy sold the house that was too full of her



"beloved ghost" and bought a stone cottage close to the Castello, staying with Elisabeth for two years while both women worked on the renovations.

Houseguests came and went, English friends renovated a third house on the hill, and locals dubbed the place the *Colline des Anglais*. Only occasionally visiting the glitzier coastal towns, the women lived simply and happily on their quiet hillside, Elisabeth painting, Peggy writing her books and articles, both of them participating in village life and contributing generously to the community.


Their idyll was shattered in 1939 by France's declaration of war on Germany and general mobilization. The impact of the war on their lives makes for some of the book's most compelling reading. The author, who grew up in London but lived for 22 years in the Alpes-Maritimes, has thoroughly researched her subject, and her book paints vivid portraits not just of a beguiling place and a tumultuous era, but of two plucky and unusual women whose friendship and whose love of Provence changed the course of their lives.

Taken together, Fortescue's lighthearted romp and Emerson's factual account provide a fascinating look at the sun-and-shadows world of yesterday's Provence. ■

Perfume from Provence by Winifred Fortescue (Blackwood, 1935; Transworld, 1992). Out of print; used copies available online.

Escape from Provence by Maureen Emerson (Chapter and Verse, 2008) Order from www.perfumefromprovence.com/escapetoprovence.htm

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