

THE EUROPEAN CORNER

LAUNCESTON ELLIOT

DAVE WEBSTER

Launceston Elliot (1874-1930) came from a well known and noble Scottish family and his name is to be found in *Debrett's Illustrated Peerage*, showing his direct relationship to the Earl of Minto. His daughter, Nancy Maud, told me he also had some Australian blood and his granddaughter, Ann, who was my house-guest earlier this year, related some fascinating tales of his adventures 'down under'.

Elliot was conceived in Launceston, Tasmania, hence his rather unusual name, and he was born on the ninth of June, 1874, in India, where his father was a magistrate. Father Elliot was married twice, his first wife having fallen or thrown herself off a balcony while in Australia. Mr. Elliot went back to marry the receptionist of the hotel where they were staying and Launceston was a product of this second marriage. By the time his family returned to the U.K. to farm in Essex, Launceston was already a very hefty and strong thirteen year old, a pupil of Eugen Sandow.

The world's first proper national weightlifting championship was held in January 1891, in the International Hall of the Cafe Monica, Piccadilly, London, and amongst the twenty entrants and twelve starters was Launceston Elliot, now aged 16. He performed with

credit and three years later he won a similar National Championships at the Royal Aquarium, Westminster. This event was more on the lines of weightlifting today, decided on aggregate poundage—although there were eight lifts instead of the two we have now.

On this occasion the twenty year old was well ahead of his rivals, being the best in the vast majority of lifts.¹ He grew rapidly in stature and in reputation, culminating in his Olympic victory, when he won for Britain the first Olympic gold medal for weightlifting. The scene was Athens, Greece in April 1896 when Baron Pierre de Coubertin revived the Olympic Games. Weightlifting was supervised by Crown Prince George of Greece and Elliot did a one hand lift of 71 kilos (156 1/2 pounds) to win that event. An official report proclaimed "This young gentleman attracted universal attention by his uncommon type of beauty. He was of imposing stature, tall, well proportioned, his hair and complexion of surprising fairness." Elsewhere he was proclaimed as "the finest man of English birth," completely ignoring his true heritage. The popular press of the day revealed that his handsome figure had procured for him an offer of marriage from a highly placed lady admirer.

Young Elliot had wide-ranging athletic tastes: discus throwing



Launceston Elliot shortly before his death in 1930 at age 56. This reception, organized by the Australian Weightlifting Association, proved to be Elliot's last public appearance. He is shown shaking hands with Clarence Weber. *Photo donated by Vic Boff.*

at track and field meets, participating in Greco-Roman and other types of wrestling matches, bodybuilding competitions, etc.; and correspondence with his family tells of him practicing the traditional Scottish Highland Games activities, including tossing the caber with his friends Roland and Algernon Spencer.

In 1898 Elliot won what was the first major physique contest, run in conjunction with the national weightlifting championships of that year. In his prime Launceston Elliot stood six feet two inches and weighed 224 pounds. He had a 50-54 inch chest and 18 1/2 inch arms, good even by today's standards. His forearms were 15 1/2 inches, thighs 28 inches and waist 36 inches.

Launceston also performed as a professional strongman in later years. His presentation started with a popular posing routine, interpreting well known classical statues. Having demonstrated his muscles he then went on to show his strength. His wife, Rose Amelia, went everywhere with him and often they were accompanied by their three daughters, including Nancy Maud, who became my pen-friend from the 1960s until the 1980s. In one of her many letters (26th January, 1981) she told me that "Uncle Roland Spencer...tied to persuade the family to put me into training." The feat best remembered by her was the Spinning Cyclists. She wrote to me about this, even doing a little drawing to clarify the description. The strong man supported a yoke across his shoulders and from this wires were attached to two cyclists who would ride in a circle around him as he revolved at a similar pace. As they accelerated Elliot would spin rapidly until with a short squat he would heave them off the ground as they still, for effect, continued to pedal furiously. The faster he spun the wider they swung until they were almost horizontal. "I would cover my eyes for fear that there would be an accident," said Nancy Maud, who herself became quite an actress. The orchestra pit would seem perilously close on such occasions, "the bikes literally went over the orchestra who were pounding away on drums!" As centrifugal force did its work and the cyclists rose level with his shoulders the strong man would use another heave of his legs to drive them aloft. It was a splendid finale which invariably got a great reception from audiences. He did quite a lot human lifting in the act rather than using iron weights.

Launceston Elliot was greatly encouraged by his father, a small, pale but highly intelligent and energetic man. He was intensely interested in weightlifting and strength, greatly assisting his son throughout Launceston's amateur and professional career. When Launceston was younger and lifting in competition his father always attended and would frequently rebuke anybody making a sound while his son was concentrating prior to lifting.

The Olympic medalist matured into a merry character but had a quick and fiery temper, although he was careful not to use his fists. He was extremely light of foot, as could be seen in Cumberland and Westmoreland wrestling, Greco Roman and Catch-as-Catch-Can. He practiced all these styles but hated professional all-in wrestling.

This great strongman toured Britain and the continent for more than a decade, being a particular hit in Paris and at Berlin's Winter Garden in 1912, at this time employing twelve pretty girls as assis-

tants. Nancy Maud wrote that he retired from the stage after this but his grand-daughter Ann Elliot-Smith told me he did shows afterwards, even in the early 1920s, and also appeared in South America.

Women as well as men flocked to see him and the ladies were forever inviting him for cocktails, etc. He broke many British weightlifting records but he was not a specialist. He loved all kinds of strength athletics so people were not surprised when in 1901 he decided to become a professional strongman—but there was more to it than that. Nancy Maud told me the real reason her father took up his professional status. When Elliot married he got a stud farm, "Teddingtonbury" in Herts, as a wedding present from his father. Old man Elliot, however, never passed on the deeds to his son and three or four years later he told them that the farm would have to be sold as since retiring he had been gambling on the Stock Exchange and lost heavily. He told Launceston that he could bring his family to Highfield, Nottingham, Kent, and all live together there. Launceston told him what he could do with that idea and instead took his wife to her own father, a vicar in Lee, Kent, and called in old Bill Klein, who had coached him to victory in Athens, to help devise an act.

In this first presentation he lifted his wife as the Statue of Liberty, and was partnered by his old pal Montague Spencer, one of four weightlifting brothers. Soon Mrs. Elliot became pregnant and Nancy Maud said, "As soon as I began to show my mark my mother had to retire." To contrast with his own very fair complexion Elliot used three or four superbly built black men as well as three or four white men. The whites dressed in white Roman togas and the black men wore leopard skins. This mixed troupe was a permanent part of the act and traveled with him, but he also hired eight other people at each town. The local eight were dressed in sailor outfits and as one of the main stunts Launceston Elliot would, with the refined aplomb of a born aristocrat in all his movements, lift and support all 16 men at the same time.

As soon as the act became a success, old man Elliot came back on the scene and persuaded Launceston to move to Highfield in Nottingham and leave the children there during the strongman's overseas tours. Launceston was always top of the bill and sometimes the youngsters would be taken by their grandmother to Germany, Holland, etc., visiting their parents during extended seasons.

When Elliot's professional career was over, he became a gentleman farmer and in 1923 he moved to Melbourne, Australia. Launceston Elliot's weight increased to 22 stone (308 pounds) and he died in Sydney on August 8, 1930 as a result of a cancerous growth in the spine. He is interred in New South Wales. Elliot's daughter told me that his best medals and much of their memorabilia were taken by Malcolm Halsey, who married into the family and later left. The Melbourne police were actually put to work on this but without result. I believe Halsey was Nancy Maud's brother-in-law, married to her sister Kathleen.

Looking very much like Sandow, although much larger, Launceston Elliot was one of the most respected figures in the world of strength at the turn of the century when this form of entertainment was at its height.

¹ David Webster, *The Iron Game* (Irvine: by the author, 1976), 24-5.