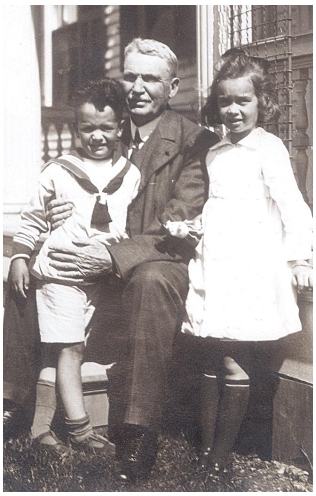

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: *Lilias as a young mother, seen here in 1920 with daughter Ethel in the garden; Lilias and Harry take time out to flirt during a trip to western Canada; Lilias Ahearn married Harry Southam, shown here, in 1909. Daughter Janet still lives in Ottawa; Ethel Southam, shown with her Nanny, on board a cruise. When the opportunity arose, the family looked forward to their odysseys abroad; Lilias' father, Thomas Ahearn, poses with grandchildren Robert and Janet Southam at the Southams' summer house in St. Andrews, New Brunswick; the whole family—Robert, Lilias, Ethel, Janet, Harry, and Gordon Southam*

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A QUIET, PRIVATE LIGHT

Lilias Ahearn Southam, 1888-1962

LILIAS SOUTHAM—DAUGHTER OF INVENTOR THOMAS AHEARN AND WIFE OF NEWSPAPER MAGNATE HARRY SOUTHAM—LIVED A LIFE OF PRIVILEGE. IT WAS ALSO A LIFE OF QUIET BENEVOLENCE

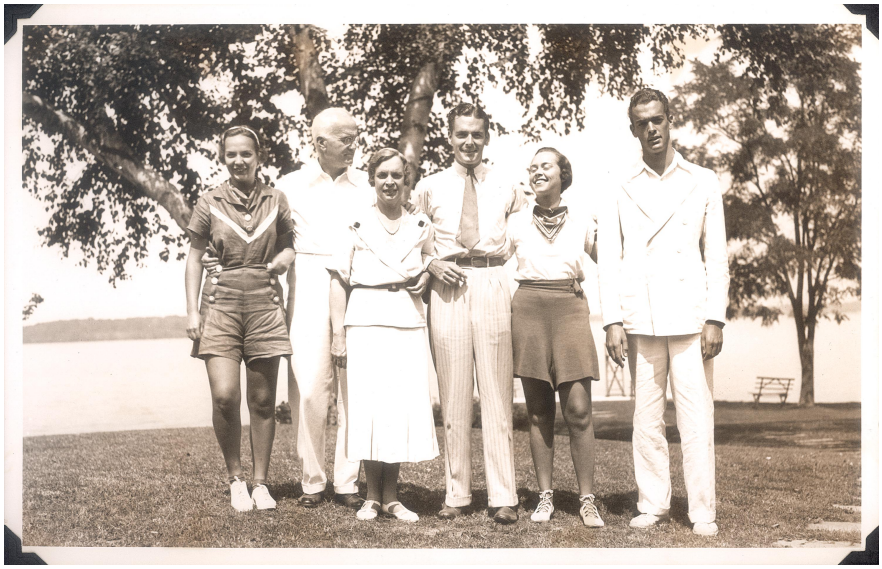
By Janet Uren

IN 1888, THE YEAR THAT LILIAS AHEARN WAS BORN, OTTAWA WAS young and tough and feeling its oats. With a population that had nearly doubled in the past decade and was approaching 44,000, the town was sprawling outwards and gobbling up smaller townships around it. A few streets had been paved by that time, and electric lights had just arrived, thanks to the ingenuity of Lilias' father, Thomas Ahearn. He and a partner were working that year on plans for electric streetcars—soon to replace the city's horse-drawn trams—and on delivering power to private houses. People in Ottawa were gearing up for a new century, and Thomas Ahearn was helping to change their world.

Ahearn's only daughter, Lilias, was born into that young and energetic city. Wealthy from the day of her birth, she was adored and indulged by her father, was cosseted by governesses and chauffeurs in childhood, and married young into the Southam newspaper family. In turn-of-the-century Ottawa, where talent and creativity counted for more than pedigree, she was a first-generation aristocrat. Far from being spoiled, Lilias grew into a woman of dignity and iron self-discipline who found ways to match privilege with responsibility.

LILIAS' FATHER CAME FROM LESS THAN MODEST BEGINNINGS. BORN on LeBreton Flats to an Irish-born blacksmith, he grew up without a single advantage except his own intellect. "His father didn't have two cents to his name," says Ahearn's granddaughter, Janet (Southam) Ritchie. Born in 1855, young Thomas found work as a telegraph operator at the age

ABOVE: *Lilias, shown here in the gardens at Casa Loma in Rockcliffe Park Village, was a woman of dignity and iron self-discipline who found ways to match privilege with responsibility. Among her many projects, she was a co-owner and major benefactor of Elmwood School*



The Southam family relaxes at their Portland cottage.
FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: *Ethel, Harry, Lilias, Gordon, Janet, and Robert Southam*

of fourteen. At twenty-three, he built a telephone from cigar boxes, wires, and magnets and made Ottawa's first long-distance telephone call. He went on to found a pioneer telephone exchange. In 1881, his power company at the Chaudière Falls was the first in Canada to use a hydraulic generator to produce electricity. By the time he was a grandfather, Ahearn was a legend in Ottawa, our own Edison.

In a big house at the end of Laurier Street looking down over LeBreton Flats, Lilias grew up with her brother Franklin. As a child, she lived a charmed and protected life. She did not attend school, studying at home with a governess and travelling to Europe to learn about art and music. One winter her parents took her to California—to fashionable Coronado Beach—and there, tiny Lilias (little more than five feet in height) ran into a tall, handsome Ottawan. Lilias Ahearn married Harry Southam in 1909. He was thirty-three and she, a mere twenty. It was a happy union.

Harry Southam and his brother Wilson were newspapermen, born and bred. Their father, owner of the *Hamilton Spectator*, bought the *Ottawa Citizen* in 1896 and sent two of his sons to Ottawa to run it. The Southam brothers—partners in business for most of their lives—were neighbours, as well. In 1910, the two families decided simultaneously to move to Rockcliffe Park, in the country outside Ottawa. There, the brothers built side-by-side houses and established themselves as pioneers in the sparsely settled Rockcliffe of their day. Besides Ashbury College, which also moved from downtown in 1910, there were fewer than sixty houses in the area, most of them clustered along a few roads. "My grandfather was upset," Janet Ritchie recalls. "His little girl was moving out to the woods."

Over the next few years, Lilias Southam bore four children—Gordon, Janet, Robert, and Ethel—at the red brick mansion on Crescent Road. Initially, the young mother hired a governess (the fabled Miss D. Tipple, whom "Nanny hated on sight"). Lilias had little choice, for with the exception of Ashbury College, which accepted boys at the age of eleven, there were no schools in Rockcliffe. "Miss Tipple was our governess for four years," Janet Ritchie recalls. "I learned the violin from her, and it was painful." Lilias, who loved music, winced and said it was time to give up the violin and try piano with Professor Puddicombe. "I screamed with delight," says Janet.

The decision to look beyond Miss Tipple's modest resources was linked to Lilias' firm intention, once the boys were old enough, to send them to Ashbury. With Miss Tipple and Nanny waging relentless war, she must also have thought wistfully about sending the girls to school.

Lilias had her chance in 1915 when Theodora Philpot, wife of an Ashbury teacher, founded Rockcliffe Preparatory School (later renamed Elmwood) on Buena Vista Road. Six-year-old Janet enrolled in 1919, followed by her little sister Ethel some six years later. Lilias also took thought for the fate of the now redundant Miss Tipple.

In 1925, the former governess was installed as music teacher and matron of Elmwood's new boarding school, and there she stayed for the rest of her life.

In 1930, young Margaret Dyet came down the street in the other direction when she left Elmwood to work for the Southams. The nineteen-year-old girl had immigrated from Scotland a year earlier and found work as a maid at Elmwood. When Margaret went to work for Mrs. Southam, she found herself the target of vigorous encouragement. For the next few years, with Mrs. Southam's active support, she studied in her spare time, eventually qualifying for work and a career in the public service. Margaret never forgot the help that Mrs. Southam gave her.

Indeed, with numerous staff to direct and supervise, Lilias Southam was more like the manager of a small business than a housewife—and she was a good manager. "People who worked for us didn't often leave," Janet Ritchie recalls. A friend of Ethel's and a frequent visitor to the Southams' summer house on Big Rideau Lake noticed that no guest was ever indulged at the expense of the employees. "You were expected to behave, to come to meals at the right time or go without. Mrs. Southam always said that the staff needed their time off as much as we did."

By the time her daughters enrolled at what is now Elmwood School, Lilias was more than a concerned parent. She was co-owner and a major benefactor. With a student body that grew from four students in 1915 to forty the following year, the founder's modest resources were strained to the breaking point. When the Keefer farm went up for sale in 1919, Theodora Philpot could not afford to buy it.

Mrs. Philpot turned to the parents of her students for help, and on February 26, 1919, Harry and Lilias Southam and another parent, Ethel Fauquier, purchased the Keefer farm. Three years later, they renamed the school "Elmwood" and transformed it into an educational trust. "Very considerable improvements were made," the second headmistress recalled, "after which the whole of the property was handed over for the use of the school free of all charges." No longer an owner, Lilias Southam continued to invest in the school's development and remained, as a member of the board of governors, actively interested in Elmwood for the rest of her life. In 1925, for example, she financed the replacement of the old farmhouse with a new building. "Mother really

cracked the whip," Janet Ritchie comments. "School closed in May, and we all went home. By the end of September, the new building was ready." Edith Buck, headmistress from 1920 to 1951, spoke to Mrs. Southam almost daily by telephone throughout those years and allegedly made no decision without consulting her strong-minded patron. Elmwood grew under Mrs. Southam's active stewardship and is now one of Canada's leading schools for girls.

IN 1940, ELMWOOD GAVE LILIAS Southam another opportunity for philanthropy. On July 4, twenty-four young refugees arrived in Ottawa. Britain was at war and expected to be invaded any day, and these children had been evacuated to Canada. The three accompanying teachers had intended to transfer funds and set up a school in exile. In fact, while the children were still at sea, the British government prohibited the export of currency. The evacuees arrived virtually destitute.

The British children stayed in the empty boarding school at Elmwood throughout the summer of 1940, but the future looked bleak. Officials from the Children's Aid were already circling with menacing offers of farm labour for the boys and talk of orphanages when Lilias Southam—away at the lake for the summer—heard the news. Leonora Williams, one of the English teachers, later recalled meeting Lilias Southam:

> She phoned me up and said she was at their house in Rockcliffe, could I go over and see her? she said: "It will be all under dust sheets and everything. I'm only just staying here one night." So she told me where to go, and I trotted off there in the evening. . . . We sat there among the dust sheets, and she said: "We can't have this going on. We can't have you come to Canada and not have some way of support."

Lilias Southam may well have invented the concept of sponsorship. Her plan to help the evacuees involved assembling a group of interested persons, each willing to support one or two children for as long as needed. She and her family led the way. She arranged for the older British girls to attend Elmwood as guests of the school and also agreed—very unusually for her, with her lifelong dislike of ostentatious charity—to head a committee to manage the British school in exile. She also bought them a house to live in on Buena Vista Road.

Even the most privileged life is not free of catastrophe. One of the evacuees who attended Elmwood—Joanna Rowlatt—was

billeted in a house that overlooked Crescent Road. Joanna remembers watching from the window in 1944 as the Southams' house burned. She later wrote home:

> The fire chief came and the smoke grew thicker. Then they began to take the valuable paintings, rugs, clothes, etc. out of the building. . . . Later on the smoke came through the roof of the house and flames shot up. After lasting several hours the fire was quenched.

Janet, who had married Duncan MacTavish by that time, remembers that day. It was a Saturday afternoon, an hour that Lilias always reserved for listening to the New York Philharmonic on the radio. "Mum phoned and said, 'Is Duncan there?' and I answered, 'He's at the office.' Then Mum said very calmly, 'I think the house is on fire.' I thought it was a joke!"

Much was saved, the house was rebuilt, and the fire barely ruffled the even tenor of Lilias Southam's life. Perhaps she did not experience real, profound sadness until 1952, when Harry Southam—Lilias' tall, kind husband—died. She, herself, died in 1962, not soon enough to escape the horror of losing two grandchildren—Judy and Margot Toller, aged twenty and sixteen, respectively—in an automobile accident caused by a drunken driver on the road from Montreal. Her daughter, Ethel Toller, later took her own life.

Janet Ritchie remembers that night of unbearable tension after the car accident, as she and her mother waited while her brother and brother-in-law went to Montreal. "My mother did not drink, ever, and certainly none of her children ever had a drink in front of her. We were sitting there waiting, and she looked at me so kindly and said, 'If you'd like a drink, Janet, go ahead.' Of course, I didn't."

Less than a year later, Lilias peacefully laid down her own life. For seventy-four years, she had lived in a world that has now largely disappeared—a world lived on a larger scale than seems possible today. From the day of her birth in 1888, she was the child of privilege. But Lilias Southam, like many women in her world, paid her dues. Though there was nothing showy about her benevolence, she had an eye for need and a matching capacity for action. She used her wealth to support homeless children. She used her energy to encourage talent. She used her intelligence to lay the foundations of a notable school. In the 1880s, Thomas Ahearn literally illuminated the streets of Ottawa. His daughter's light—though quieter and more private—had its own radiance. **W**