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Lady Fiona Elworthy & her Bees



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Lady Fiona Elworthy – Keeper of the Bees

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FIONA, LADY ELWORTHY, OF Maungati on the outskirts of Timaru would love to see someone mount a dramatic musical production based on *The Life of the Bee* written in 1901 by the Belgian playwright Maurice Maeterlinck. She has a beautiful edition of the book, bound in white leather with a gold bee embossed on the front cover.

A recipient of the Nobel Prize for Literature, Maeterlinck created a work of art in describing the drama that is the life of a bee colony. Some of the chapter headings act as an intriguing synopsis of what could be a fabulous theatrical event: On the Threshold of the Hive; the Swarm; the Foundation of the City; the Young Queens; the Nuptial Flight; the Massacre of the Males; the Progress of the Race. Then, perhaps, something that Maeterlinck never dreamed of – the threat of extinction and the efforts to prevent that.

While the book is a lyrical description of a bee colony and not a bee-keeper's manual, it is a favourite among many people who are concerned about the death and disease among bee colonies throughout the world.

"Bee-keeping and the plight of bees is something central to people who love nature and who wish to be a positive force in the planet," says Fiona. "I only wish people could learn from bees. One of the beautiful things is the way that the colony is organised for the good of the whole."

OPPOSITE: Getting the smoker ready.
Above: Processing the honey off the comb.
Below: A bee on a Hebe flower.



It might be called *Buzz* or *The Swarm* or, in the spirit of Andrew Lloyd Webber's feline smash hit, it could become world-famous as *Bees*.





Above: A bee looking for pollen on a Crocus flower.
Below: Lovely flowers at Cleveland Farm.



But, she says, all round the world the number of healthy bees has been plummeting. There is sound scientific evidence to prove that the phenomenon known as colony collapse is due in part to the neonicotinoids used as seed coatings and that remain in the plant to be expressed through the flowers. Fiona's husband, Sir Peter Elworthy, who died in 2004 at the age of 68, was knighted in 1988 for his services to New Zealand agriculture. Towards the end of his life both Peter and Fiona were staunch in seeking out the systematic use of fewer chemicals and pesticides, fungicides and insecticides on farming land.

"We came from different angles," says Fiona. "I could be described as an environmentalist but Peter was a farmer and a businessman and a responsible landowner. It was only towards the latter part of his life that he really came to the conclusion that for high-quality produce, New Zealanders had to be able to prove that their food was safe and one way of proving that is to have it either organic or at least spray-free. So he became a founder-president of the Sustainability Council of New Zealand when the debate on the moratorium on genetic modification of food was raging. His angle was, why not apply the precautionary principle on Genetically Modified Organisms in food until such time as it is absolutely proved that genetic engineering is safe?"

"I went to university for one year and got married the following year. My husband-to-be Peter and I had met at a wedding before I started at university. We only met for about an hour and we fell in love immediately. He was beginning to manage Craigmore, the family farm here in South Canterbury so I enrolled at the University of Canterbury in Christchurch and he came up frequently to court me. I didn't get a degree and I got married when I was just 21. So the rest of my life was having four children and marrying into this big Elworthy family and taking on life in the homestead in this big old rambling house with a housekeeper who was already in situ when I got there. She had three children, I had four and we all lived together. She stayed until she was 85, so I was looking after her at the end. Wonderful woman. Mrs Dixon. Like an extra grandmother for my children. I always called her Mrs D. Never by her first name."

Two years before Peter died, he and Fiona bought an organic property, Cleveland Farm, at Maungati, on the edge of Timaru while their son Forbes took over the larger property, Craigmore.

However, despite raising her family of four children and decades of organising successful fundraising arts festivals in South Canterbury, until she became a bee-keeper at the age of 73 Fiona felt she had not been trained for anything in her life.

Above: Bees on the hive.
Below: Testing a honey sample.



The keeping of bees is part of Fiona's commitment to preserving the natural world. And she still holds onto the notion of being involved with a stage production based on Maeterlinck's book.

"Because my mother refused to let me be a nurse or a Karitane nurse and I married Peter after doing only one year at university, I had no formal qualifications, so I was thrilled when I was accepted to go on the one-year Agribusiness Training course in bee-keeping. I was 72 and far older than anybody else there."

In addition to learning about the care and maintenance of beehives Fiona learnt how to control the Varroa mite and to inspect hives for American Foulbrood.

Fiona has four hives and has arranged for more to be located on Craigmore under the care of her daughter-in-law, Bridget, and a professional bee-keeper.

There are about 50,000 bees in each hive. And fresh raw honey that has not been heated, not been creamed, has so many enzymes in it."

It is important to know what you are doing when managing beehives. Fiona says she hasn't been badly stung but she did have

one bad fright when she was working with the hives one evening. "It started to get dark so I carried on with what I was doing and by the time I'd finished it had got really dark. I shut the hives and the bees didn't go back into the hive; they all came onto my white suit – about 2000 of them. I walked around the garden, trying to get rid of them, and they go to the warm places in your arm pits and between your legs. Finally after about 45 minutes I got into my back door and left my suit outside. The next morning there were still about 500 bees on the suit and they'd all died of the cold and the whole suit was covered in bee stings. But I didn't get stung because the bee suits are so well constructed but it was quite frightening."

The keeping of bees is part of Fiona's commitment to preserving the natural world. And she still holds onto the notion of being involved with a stage production based on Maeterlinck's book, having recently had a conversation with several people who are also keen to see it happen. Watch this space. ■

Above: Lady Elworthy relaxing in her home at Cleveland Farm.

