Obituary: Peter Elstob Essay, Research Paper

Peter ElstobThe writer, military historian, entrepreneur and former general secretary of International PEN Peter Elstob, who has died aged 86, was one of those people born in the wrong century. With his charm and audacity, his passion for travel, and his love of risk-taking and financial gambles, he would have been more at home in the reign of Elizabeth I. Elstob had joined the English centre of International PEN, the worldwide association of writers, in 1962, quickly gaining a place on the executive committee and becoming press officer to International PEN. In 1967, he went to Lagos to seek the release of Wole Soyinka during the Biafran civil war. On the unexpected death of Elstob’s predecessor David Carver in May 1974, PEN was found to be in grave financial difficulties and – with the ending of a lease – about to be homeless. Elstob courageously took up what most members viewed as a poisoned chalice, and was formally elected at the Jerusalem congress later that year. As he struggled with the inherited debts, the overdraft and a move to shared premises, he announced that the only way to deal with the disaster was to hold an international congress in London; this was duly done, and PEN gradually returned to solvency. Unpaid, caring for his invalid wife Barbara and neglecting his own writing, Elstob served International PEN for seven years, working closely with three presidents: VS Pritchett, Mario Vargas Llosa and Per Wastberg. Then, in 1981, finding a worthy successor in Alexandre Blokh, he retired to the New Forest. Distance made him a rare visitor at his clubs, the Garrick and the Savage, but, having been elected an international vice-president, he continued to attend International PEN congresses. Born in London, Elstob was staunchly English despite his cosmopolitan childhood. His father, Frederick Elstob, was a chartered accountant, whose work took him to Calcutta and the United States, where life was hard until he gained local qualifications. Peter was educated in New York and New Jersey, graduating from Summit high school in 1934. Then, for no particular reason – except, perhaps, his life-long antagonism to authority – he ran away from home and signed on as a ship’s bellboy. In Rio de Janeiro, he jumped ship, found a job and got engaged to the boss’s daughter. His father tracked him down and persuaded him to go to the University of Michigan, but Elstob failed his freshman’s year and got into trouble with the police. He was then sent to England with instructions to join the army. A letter of introduction to a friend of his father’s led to a short service commission in the RAF. But Elstob’s flying career lasted for only five months before he was dismissed, apparently for buzzing the Queen Mary on her maiden voyage (he knew an American girl on board). A variety of odd jobs followed, and it was while selling typewriters and trying to write in Glasgow that he met Arnold Eiloart, who was to become his partner in entrepreneurial adventures throughout his life. An Eiloart relation offered him a rent-free hut in Hampshire, and it was there that he met Medora Leigh-Smith, the youthful secretary of the local Labour party, who initiated him politically. In 1936, Elstob volunteered as a pilot on the republican side in the Spanish civil war. He was bussed in from France with a group of fellow volunteers but, during a delay at El Castillo de San Fernando, he unwisely began writing descriptions of people and places and drawing sketch maps in a notebook. This aroused suspicion, and he was arrested as a spy and incarcerated in Montjuich prison, Barcelona, in appalling conditions. Fortunately, the doughty Leigh-Smith had bluffed her way into Barcelona and, after a month of badgering the British consul and the Spanish authorities, managed to secure Elstob’s release. They were expelled to France, where, finding that Medora was pregnant, they married; on her part with some misgiving, for he was only 21 and she was eight years older. Elstob’s first novel, The Spanish Prisoner, based on his experiences, was published in 1939 and, on the declaration of the second world war, he attempted to rejoin the RAF. After a long delay he was turned down and then enlisted as a trooper in the Third Royal Tanks. He always believed that the RAF rejection and his failure to be offered an army commission were due to his supposed communist sympathies. After serving in the Middle East, his regiment landed in France 10 days after D-Day and took part in the battle for Caen, before fighting their way through Belgium and Holland to Germany. He was promoted to sergeant and mentioned in dispatches. During the war, Eiloart had managed Yeastpac, the company he and Elstob had set up to market a yeast and kaolin beauty mask; it had been unexpectedly successful and supported both their families, as well as enabling them to buy the Arts Theatre Club in 1941. Once demobilised, Elstob took over the management of the club for two years and became director of MEEC Productions (1946-54). In 1951, also with Eiloart, he founded the Peter Arnold Studios, a writers’ and artists’ colony in Mexico, and, while there, met a painter, Barbara Morton Zacheisz. He and Medora now had five children, but in 1953 they divorced, and Peter married Barbara. In 1958, Elstob managed, and Eiloart captained, an attempted balloon crossing of the Atlantic. It failed, but inspired another book, The Flight Of The Small World (1959). Two more novels followed: Warriors For The Working Day (1960), an account of tank combat in the second world war, and The Armed Rehearsal (1964). Over the next few years, he wrote four works of military history and became managing director of the Archive Press. Elstob’s last novel, Scoundrel, was published in 1986, the year he had a major heart attack. Barbara’s death in 1992 was a great sadness, but his last years were cheered by his large family and the friendship of Elizabeth Paterson, a PEN colleague of many years’ standing. He is survived by three sons and a daughter from his first marriage (a second daughter predeceased him), and by a son and a daughter from his second marriage. · Peter Frederick Egerton Elstob, writer and entrepreneur, born December 22 1915; died July 21 2002