

OBITUARY

Elizabeth Harris Aitken obituary

Socialite who chronicled her turbulent marriages to two film stars before settling down with a disgraced former cabinet minister

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Obituaries



In London for her divorce proceedings from the actor Rex Harrison in 1975

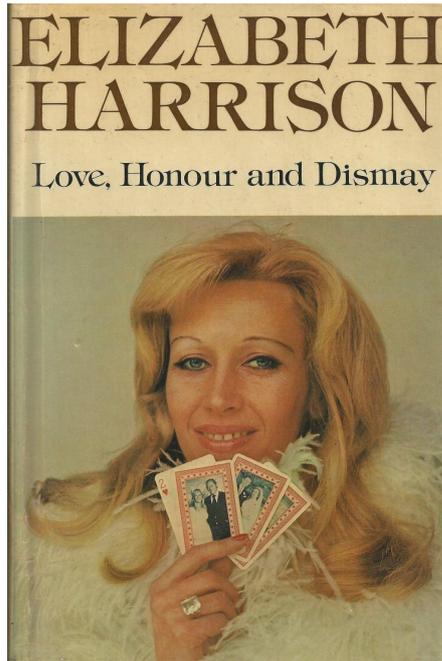
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It was a highlight of the wedding of Elizabeth Harris to Jonathan Aitken at St Matthew's Westminster in 2003 that when Father Philip Chester asked "Who gives this woman in marriage?" her three sons, Damian, Jared and Jamie, shouted in robust unity: "We do."

Nuptials figured prominently in the narrative of the bride's life, and this wedding was her fourth. It opened with John Greenleaf Whittier's poignant hymn "Dear Lord and Father of mankind/ Forgive our foolish ways".

When she wrote her memoirs at the age of 40, under the title *Love, Honour and Dismay* and the surname Harrison, she dedicated her book with ironical ambivalence “to RH”, the initials shared by both of her movie-star husbands, Richard Harris and Rex Harrison. On the dust-jacket, the blonde author in white feather boa displayed a full-lipped smile as she clutched playing cards with pictures of her first two weddings.



Her memoirs of two marriages were published in 1976

Excesses of fame and fortune, and the ravages of alcohol, rendered hers “a story of tenderness, treachery, madness, adultery, drink, ambition and suicide”. Her first two marriages proved “impossible”. In the 1980s she married, briefly and bitterly, Peter Aitken, cousin of the more famous Jonathan — with whom she had also enjoyed a passionate two-year affair in the 1970s.

Then in 2001 there was a chance re-encounter between Harris and Jonathan Aitken. By this time he was a former cabinet minister recently out of prison having served a sentence for perjury. While inside he had reconstructed himself as a devout Christian, a student of theology, dedicated to prayer and to prison reform. One summer evening his nephew, the actor Jack Davenport, was appearing in a short, grim arthouse film called *Subterrain*. It was a tale of suicidal depression, glue-

sniffing and a tramp's death in a London Tube station. Davenport invited his uncle Jonathan along. The glue-sniffer was played by Jamie Harris, third son of Elizabeth Harris by her first husband, Richard. She too was in the audience.

This reunion in the cinema, decades after their affair, led to further meetings — deftly engineered by Aitken's sister, Maria, and their mother, “Pempe”, Lady Aitken, (obituary, February 9, 2005) who both thought Aitken's holy new life was too lonely and that he needed a girlfriend. Aitken was impelled to tell Elizabeth, over a candlelit Chelsea dinner, “Do you understand that God now comes first in my life?” She replied that she had never asked to come first in anyone's life ahead of God. He became her fourth husband, she Aitken's second wife. It was to be happy ever after for both, even if it seemed curious to think of Elizabeth Harris, partygoer par excellence, as a chaplain's wife, which she became in 2018 when Aitken took holy orders to be a chaplain in Pentonville prison.



Her first marriage was to the actor Richard Harris in 1957
JOHN TWINE/DAILY MAIL/SHUTTERSTOCK/REX FEATURES

The contrast with her earlier marriages was striking. The name of Richard Harris, a first-rate actor, was invariably tagged with the word “hell-raiser”. Then came Harrison, who behind the suave charm and gentlemanly manners proved a ruthless and cruel husband. Peter Aitken, a Canadian investment banker, was so untrustworthy she called him “the unmentionable” for ever more. His cousin Jonathan, penitent and prayerful, was a safe haven: hence the cry of delight from her three boys.

Born Elizabeth Rees-Williams in 1936 in Glamorgan, she was the middle child of David Rees-Williams, Labour MP for Croydon and a minister in Clement Attlee’s cabinet who crossed over to the Liberals and was elevated in 1950 to become Baron Ogmore. He carried the coronet at Charles’s investiture in 1969. Her matriarchal grandmother was a pillar of local politics. Her childhood was “full of the fear of God and Hell”. Her earliest memories, apart from the bombing of Cardiff, were of a Christmas party at Chequers where Attlee dressed up as Father Christmas.



The Harrises and their three sons in 1964

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After convent school in Switzerland she was one of the last debutantes to be presented to the Queen at Court in 1954. Parties and dancing till dawn in country houses were entirely to her liking. “I was lumbered with joie de vivre,” she wrote.

At 20 she went to Rada, a contemporary of Peter O’Toole, Alan Bates and Albert Finney, but was advised by the principal that her future as an actress was limited. The ambitious young Irish actor who caught her eye was Richard Harris, an alumnus of Lamda, already known for pugnacious behaviour. He auditioned her for Clifford Odets’s *Winter Journey* in the tiny Irving Theatre off Leicester Square.

Their wedding reception was at the House of Lords; their marital home was a one-bedroom flat in Paddington. She was still getting jobs in weekly rep, and haggling at pawn shops. When they gave a party for the end of the shooting of *This Sporting Life*, Rex Harrison turned up to keep an eye on his bibulous wife Rachel Roberts, and Elizabeth noted what an elegant, assured figure he cut compared with her own shambling husband. She had first seen Harrison as Professor Higgins on stage in *My Fair Lady*, her 21st birthday treat.



With Rex Harrison

ALAMY

Harris would spend whatever he earned. “A certain wildness” characterised their lives, and the marriage, which resulted in three sons, foundered on the scenes caused by his violent alcoholic rages. Elizabeth recalled that in Hawaii, where he was filming in 1965, he would run out into the traffic and beat his fists on cars until his knuckles bled. Once, when he was making *Camelot*, Harris held a huge Hollywood party — 100 for dinner, 250 more for the drinking and dancing — and Rex Harrison arrived. “Who’s he trying to impress?” asked Harrison. “This is Old Hollywood, and Old Hollywood is dead.” Elizabeth knew he was right. She turned for solace not to Harrison but first to the playwright Robin Douglas-Home and then to the actor Christopher Plummer. Meanwhile, Harrison’s marriage to Roberts became a nightmare.



In 1972 when she was married to Rex Harrison

EVENING STANDARD/HULTON ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES

Dramatic episodes ensued, familiar in their gossip-column world of chartered jets and yachts. When she married Harrison in 1971, he was 62 and encumbered with the ghosts of four former wives. Although he affected to enjoy family life, Harrison was as absent-minded about Elizabeth’s sons as he had been about his own. In their first summer, there were 11 boisterous children at the villa in Portofino, where Elizabeth organised home movie-making contests with an 8mm camera, and Harrison took the children out to sea in his boat, Henry. He was willing to pose for photographs playing the family man, but as his biographer Alexander Walker noted, this pose was about as convincing as Professor Higgins’s claim, “I’m an ordinary man”.

The Harrisons bought an Edwardian house on Cap Ferrat, once a shooting lodge for the king of the Belgians, where Rex could drive about in his Rolls-Royce, purchased in the name of Henry Higgins Enterprises. The Harris boys were sent away to strictly disciplined Catholic schools such as Downside, while their mother occupied herself with pampering Harrison's ego as his moods became silent, dark and dismissive. His butler once rebuked her for eating some fruit from the bowl on the table, saying it was "Mr Harrison's".

"I've never met a more unhappy woman in my life," one of Harrison's friends commented. "Oh, haven't you?" he shot back. "I have. All my other wives." In his memoirs he thanked Elizabeth for being "brave" enough to share his life. She once found a cache of letters to all his former wives, containing the same phrases and apologies.



She married Jonathan Aitken at Saint Matthews Westminster in 2003

STEVE FINN/GETTY IMAGES

After her next marriage, to Peter Aitken, had also failed, Elizabeth considered herself an expert in the stormy dynamics of matrimony. Father Philip Chester, officiating at her last wedding, to Jonathan Aitken, called it “a love rooted in the reality of life”. In the congregation were Tory ministers, actors, bishops, the bride and groom’s seven adult children and Aitken’s ex-wife.

On their honeymoon Aitken worked on his book, *Psalms for People Under Pressure*. “The first time I took her into a prison,” he wrote, “she was understandably nervous. But before the end of the chapel service, no fewer than three inmates of Wormwood Scrubs had told her, ‘I was a mate of your ex-husband Richard Harris’.” Ex-offenders with names like Les the Big Face were guests at their home in Earls Court, where her old friends, from Marlon Brando to Rupert Everett, might also be found.

Ten years into their marriage, aged 77, she suffered a near-fatal brain haemorrhage. After her recovery her husband wrote in praise of the NHS brain surgeons who had saved her life. In subsequent years she suffered a second stroke, heart failure and two tumours.

Family life remained her priority. She was a matriarch to Damian, a film director; Jared, a Bafta-winning actor who played George VI in *The Crown* and the scientist Valery Legasov in *Chernobyl*; and Jamie, also an actor. During lockdown she held court on Zoom with three generations of HARRISES, down to the latest, her great-grandson Marlon Harris, aged four months.

Yesterday, Easter Sunday, Aitken took the service at Pentonville, as his wife had insisted.

Elizabeth Harris Aitken, socialite, was born on May 1, 1936. She died after a long illness on April 15, 2022, aged 85