

Fletcher, (Minna) Inglis ^[1]

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by Richard Walser, 1986

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Inglis Fletcher, circa 1953-1957, winner of the Sir Walter Raleigh Award for Fiction for Outstanding Literary Achievement in 1953. Image from the North Carolina Museum of History.

^[2](Minna) Inglis Fletcher, novelist, was born in Alton, Ill., of English ancestry, the daughter of Maurice William and Flora Deane Chapman Clark. Her great-grandfather was Joseph Chapman of Tyrrell County ^[3], N.C. From public schools in Edwardsville, Ill., she attended the School of Fine Arts of Washington University in St. Louis, Mo., intending to become a sculptor. After her marriage to John George Fletcher, a mining engineer from Colorado, she went with him to sparsely settled areas in Alaska, the state of Washington, and California, where, during one five-year period when he was "experting mines" in the Shasta country, she moved twenty-one times in five years. His often sudden departures explain the title of her autobiography; the wife of an engineer was left behind to "pay, pack, and follow" ^[4]." The Fletchers' first "permanent" homes were in Spokane, Wash., where they spent about eight years, and then in San Francisco where they lived for thirteen years (1925–38).

In San Francisco Mrs. Fletcher operated a lecture bureau, presenting such celebrities as the writers John Erskine and Will Durant and the explorers Lowell Thomas and Vilhjalmur Stefansson, the last of whom she had known in Spokane. One of her first attempts at serious writing was a novel about the freeholder in Alaska, but she destroyed the manuscript when the publisher returned it for revision. She then contemplated a book on witchcraft and resolved to go to Africa for first-hand investigation. At the invitation of Rodney Wood, a Nyasaland game warden whom she had met in Spokane, Mrs. Fletcher set forth in 1928 on a seven-month trip to British Central Africa. During her stay, Wood organized a *ulendo* (hunting expedition) for her into the primitive bush country. Back in San Francisco, she put aside the poems and notes written in Africa and allotted herself three years to complete a novel. *The White Leopard* ^[5] (1931), a Junior Literary Guild selection for older boys, was based on the adventurous life of Rodney Wood. This was followed by *Red Jasmine* ^[6] (1932), an adult novel with autobiographical overtones set in a colonial African town similar to Blantyre.

At this point, while on a casual genealogical search for her Tyrrell County forebears, she came upon some tantalizing passages in the *Colonial Records of North Carolina*. A North Carolina story, she decided, would be her next effort. More reading among the old wills, inventories, and court records sidetracked her first plan for a novel on Lord Cornwallis. After two trips to North Carolina in 1934 and 1937, four long-hand drafts, and six years of helpful advice and cooperation from her scholarly editor D. Laurance Chambers of Bobbs-Merrill, she published *Raleigh's Eden* ^[7] (1940), a brightly panoramic historical novel of heroic North Carolinians from 1765 to 1782, centering on the plantation families of the Albemarle as they faced head-on the events of revolution. Famous names from history mingled among the fictional characters. This first publication of a novel since Thomas Wolfe ^[8]'s *Look Homeward, Angel* eleven years earlier produced much excitement

among readers in the state, who alternately praised Mrs. Fletcher for finally awarding North Carolina what they considered its significant, rightful role in the American Revolution and condemned her for "errors" in history. To placate the latter, she participated in a public meeting and countered each accusation with documentary quotations.

The writing of *Raleigh's Eden* was completed at Balboa Beach, Calif., where the Fletchers had moved after leaving San Francisco. A lengthy stay at the Joseph Hewes Hotel in Edenton ^[9] was spent proofreading. Rarely thereafter was Inglis Fletcher not employed in planning and writing the next book of her twelve-volume Carolina Series about early North Carolina. Her schedule was one year of research and one year of writing. During 1941–42 she and her husband, at the invitation of Mrs. George Wood of Greenfield in Chowan County ^[10], lived at an abandoned fishery on Albemarle Sound. In 1943, when Fletcher was with the wartime shipyards in Wilmington, they rented Clarendon, a river house on historic land on the lower Cape Fear, where she determinedly pursued her research and writing. In December 1944 the Fletchers purchased Bandon, a plantation mansion on the Chowan River thirteen miles northwest of Edenton. The house, which was badly in need of repairs, dated from 1800. Among the many smaller buildings on the grounds was a schoolhouse from an earlier period.

During the next decades the Fletchers were proud and active Tar Heels, participating in the annual Valentine's Day hunt at Nags Head and serving on the Governor's Highway Safety Committee. In 1949 Inglis Fletcher was awarded a Litt.D. degree by the Womans College of The University of North Carolina ^[11]. She promoted interest in establishing the Elizabethan Gardens ^[12] on Roanoke Island ^[13], and she was named to the Tryon Palace ^[14] Commission and the Richard Caswell Memorial Commission. In 1964 she was one of the first citizens to receive the prestigious North Carolina Award. Her citation read that because of her "no longer can it be said that our colonial and Revolutionary heroes are unknown; for, within the pages of her books, they have found a new life and a new grandeur." During these years, she and her husband were certain to be present at almost every meeting of a literary or historical group in the state.

The death of John Fletcher on 25 June 1960, and the burning of Bandon on 6 Oct. 1963, altered the pattern of Inglis Fletcher's life. From time to time she lived with her sister, Jean (Mrs. Lloyd Chenoweth), in Perquimans County ^[15]; with her son, John Stuart Fletcher, a graduate of Annapolis and retired commander of the U.S. Navy, in Charleston, S.C.; and with her grandson, J. S. Fletcher, in Chapel Hill and Greenville.

The Carolina Series, with one title or another translated into seven languages, and with millions of hardbound and paperback copies sold in the United States, had a common theme. According to the author, they attempted to show—over a period of two hundred years—the joint struggle of the common man and the gentle born to establish sound government in a wilderness. The time span is from 1585 to the ratification of the Constitution in 1789. *Raleigh's Eden*, which focused on the causes and events of the Revolution, was followed by *Men of Albemarle* ^[16], (1942), on the evolution of law and order in the colony during the Queen Anne period (1710–12); *Lusty Wind for Carolina* ^[17] (1944), on the expansion of trade and the elimination of pirates from the coastal waters (1718–25); *Toil of the Brave* ^[18] (1946), on the critical contests of the Revolution and the climactic battle of Kings Mountain (1778–80); *Roanoke Hundred* ^[19] (1948), on Sir Walter Raleigh ^[20]'s first unsuccessful attempt to plant an English colony in the New World (1585–86); *Bennett's Welcome* ^[21] (1950), on the migration of permanent settlers to North Carolina down from the James River settlements (1651–52); *Queen's Gift* ^[22] (1952), on the struggle for constitutional liberties following the Revolutionary War (1783–89); *The Scotswoman* ^[23] (1955), on the Whig patriots' fight with the Scottish loyalists under Flora MacDonald ^[24] (1774–76); *The Wind in the Forest* ^[25] (1957), on defining individual liberty as symbolized by the confrontation between Governor William Tryon ^[26] and the backwoods Regulators (1770–71); *Cormorant's Brood* ^[27] (1959), on the formation of responsible government in the Albemarle (1725–31); *Wicked Lady* ^[28] (1962), on the last years of the war along the Albemarle (1781–82); and *Rogue's Harbor* ^[29] (1964), on the initial protest of settlers against the irresponsible agents of British officials (1677–89). Within the accepted traditions of historical fiction, these twelve novels aptly blended intricate plots and love stories with actual personages and events of the past. Some of Mrs. Fletcher's favorite characters appeared from book to book, and a leading figure in *Toil of the Brave* was the grandfather of a heroine in *Raleigh's Eden*. In the best sense, the books were "popular" historical novels.

Mrs. Fletcher was a Democrat and an Episcopalian. In 1964 she donated her oil portrait by the North Carolina artist William C. Fields to Fletcher Hall at East Carolina University ^[30] on the occasion of the dedication of a new woman's dormitory named for her. She died in Edenton. She and her husband were buried in the National Cemetery, Wilmington.

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