



# Edna Eguchi Read

## Arts champion at the heart of a wartime mystery

Edna Eguchi Read was an influential arts administrator who championed art for the citizens of her local town of Milton Keynes. She also had an extraordinary childhood that harboured an intriguing mystery she managed to solve only in her mid-sixties.

Read was born in London in 1929 to a Japanese father, Takayuki Eguchi, and an English mother, Winifred, nee Thompson. Shortly after her eleventh birthday, on July 14, 1940, 17 months before Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor, her father was arrested and imprisoned under articles of the Aliens Order 1920. Edna never saw him again. He was to remain in detention for almost six years and went to his grave without ever being told why.

Takayuki Eguchi, an Anglophile, had arrived in London in 1914 and enrolled as a student at the London School of Economics. He led a playboy lifestyle and mixed with the well-to-do of London society. He fell in love with Winifred after a friend had given him a picture of her dressed in a kimono. In her book, *The Girl in the Kimono*, privately published, Edna described, how her mother's shyness and initial dependency on him corresponded with the model of a dutiful Japanese wife. Takayuki went into banking but also wrote speeches for Japanese diplomats and became a member of the Foreign Press Association.

Japan's brutal expansionist policies became unpopular in Britain in the 1930s and it was in this climate that Takayuki was arrested. He was shunted from one prison to another and subjected to intensive and humiliating interrogations. In the meantime, his wife was left to cope alone with her two children, Edna and her younger brother Ian. In Brixton Prison Takayuki found himself housed with several British Fascists, including Oswald Mosley, and Winifred could only speculate that his previous association with this group might have been behind his detention.

Takayuki's physical and mental decline was evident from the increasingly chaotic entries in a diary he kept, written in English on sheets of Bronco lavatory paper. After spells in camps in the Isle of Man and India, in 1946 he was finally repatriated to a Japan that he barely knew. Unable to return to Britain, and Winifred unwilling to live in Japan, the couple were divorced.

Edna Read had felt alienated from her father. Yet in 1962 she decided to write to him, a decision that thrilled her father who sent an avalanche of letters in return full of information about his life. He also enclosed the Bronco sheets containing his prison diaries that are now housed in the Imperial War-Museum. Takayuki Eguchi died in 1967 still ignorant of the reason for his incarceration.

Edna's mother died in 1994, also never having found out. The following year, Edna gained access to all the relevant Home Office and Foreign Office documents relating to her father's case that are held in the National Archives. Papers show that in January 1940 the Japanese had arrested a British businessman, Vincent Peters, on espionage charges. He was tried, convicted and sentenced to eight years in prison. The British were anxious to get him back and a directive was sent out to arrest a prominent Japanese as a bargaining ploy to secure a swap. As a well-connected man of non-diplomatic status, Eguchi fitted the bill perfectly. However, the Japanese were not prepared to exchange a convicted spy for him.

After her father's death, Read travelled to Japan and became acquainted with his family. *The Girl in the Kimono* was translated this year into Japanese and has become a bestseller. Read discovered that she had much in common with her paternal grandfather who had been an art collector. Read had won a scholarship to Worthing Art School in 1948 and had worked in arts administration. In 1964, when her husband took a job in Newport Pagnell, she founded her City Gallery that operated from a white van. It collected contemporary works borrowed from London galleries including the Royal Academy that she

## *“She commissioned works of art to fill the town's public spaces”*

exhibited in factories, canteens and other venues where ordinary citizens could view them. It eventually received Arts Council funding and trust status.

Read was resourceful, ambitious and driven, and when the New Town of Milton Keynes was being planned she was instrumental in persuading the Development Corporation to include an art provision in its budget. As a result, she was able to commission work by such leading sculptors as Bernard Schottlander, Philip Jackson, Colin Figue, Nicolas Moreton and Elisabeth Frink to fill the town's public spaces and parks. Thanks largely to her dynamism, Milton Keynes achieved an international reputation for excellence in its public art provision. She helped to establish too the Art in Milton Keynes gallery (AIM), now renamed the MK9 Gallery, which provides a platform for local artists to exhibit their work.

An artist in her own right, in 2007 Read completed her installation entitled *After Pompeii, After Hiroshima, After, After...* which included household objects covered in ash. It was exhibited in Britain and Japan. It expressed her pacifist beliefs and her empathy with families whose men would be taken from them as suspected terrorists and her fear that their innocent children would suffer as she and her brother had done.

**Edna Eguchi Read, artist, arts administrator and author, was born on May 22, 1929. She died as a result of a car accident on 24<sup>th</sup> October 2012, aged 83.**

*Obituary written By Bob Chaundy for the Times - Nov 2012.*