



Lilla's Feast: One Woman's True Story of Love and War in the Orient

Frances Osborne

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At the end of her life, Frances Osborne's one-hundred-year-old great-grandmother Lilla was as elegant as ever—all fitted black lace and sparkling-white diamonds. To her great-grandchildren, Lilla was both an ally and a mysterious wonder. Her bedroom was filled with treasures from every exotic corner of the world. But she rarely mentioned the Japanese prison camps in which she spent much of World War II, or the elaborate cookbook she wrote to help her survive behind the barbed wire.

Beneath its polished surface, Lilla's life had been anything but effortless. Born in 1882 to English parents in the beautiful North China port city of Chefoo, Lilla was an identical twin. Growing up, she knew both great privilege and deprivation, love and its absence. But the one constant was a deep appreciation for the power of food and place. From the noodles of Shanghai to the chutney of British India and the roasts of England, good food and sensuous surroundings, Lilla was raised to believe, could carry one a long way toward happiness. Her story is brimming with the stuff of good fiction: distant locales, an improvident marriage, an evil mother-in-law, a dramatic suicide, and two world wars.

Lilla's remarkable cookbook, which she composed while on the brink of starvation, makes no mention of wartime rations, of rotten vegetables and donkey meat. In the world this magical food journal, now housed in the Imperial War Museum in London, everyone is warm and safe in their homes, and the pages are filled with cream puffs, butterscotch, and comforting soup. In its writing, Lilla was able to transform the darkest moments into scrumptious escape.

Lilla's Feast is a rich evocation of a bygone world, the inspiring story of an ordinary woman who tackled the challenges life threw in her path with an extraordinary determination.

From the Hardcover edition.

Lilla's Feast: One Woman's True Story of Love and War in the Orient Details

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From Reader Review Lilla's Feast: One Woman's True Story of Love and War in the Orient for online ebook

Polly says

Written by a great niece, this book attempts to reconstruct the story of Lilla, an identical twin girl, who was born to British treaty port residents in China in the late 1800s. It tells of her marriage to a military man and her time in Calcutta and in northern India, her times in England and her return to the port in China that felt like home to her. It takes her through times of plenty and times of poverty and the occupation of China by Japan during World War II. She and her elderly second husband along with most non-Chinese residents of their town are imprisoned for around three years by the Japanese. During this time she writes a cookbook/hostess book recalling her times of plenty. Interesting perspective on a conflictual time in history - two world wars from perspective of ex-pats in China at a time the British empire was shrinking and changing. At times Frances Osborne's flowery musings about what Lilla was thinking or doing were a bit over the top and annoying. But interesting.

Marg says

In the Imperial War Museum in London there is an item that is described as "The house wife's dictionary and suggestions". It is a recipe book that was typed up on any scrap of paper that the author could get hold of and works through a variety of different chapters from soups to curries to roasts, tips for entertaining, desserts and cakes and so much more. Really what makes this item fascinating though is where it was written and who it was written by.

The where it was written is from within a Japanese internment camp during World War II. As a consequence, the sheets of paper may be a carefully preserved piece of rice paper that has a recipe for ice cream on it or it could be paper provided by the Red Cross. Regardless of the type of paper, the contents of the book do not reflect the daily privations being experienced by the author: the loss of property and freedom; the lack of privacy; the lack of food; the lack of information about the fate of friends and family as a war raged in both Europe and the Pacific and in so many other ways.

The who it was written by is a little more complicated to tell. The cookbook was written by Frances Osborne's great grandmother and in telling Lilla's story, Osborne brings to life not only a life filled with what might seem to us now great adventure and more than a little heartache but also a picture of a very different type of life that is now very much of the past - that of British colonial life in countries like China and India.

To read more of my thoughts on this book head to

<http://www.theintrepidreader.com/2013...>

Kiwiflora says

The author was 13 when her great grandmother, Lilla, died in 1982 at the age of 100. Anyone who lives to this age has a story or two to tell, and Lilla had many. Born in China at the height of the might of the British Empire, Lilla's life mirrors the upheavals that change the fortunes of Britain forever. Her life experiences would not necessarily be unique for a woman of her class and background, but regardless, they still make a great story and deserve to be recorded. The thing about Lilla, is that in many ways she was typical of her time and class and upbringing. But she also had incredible spirit, enormous personal dignity and a steely determination to survive no matter what.

Lilla's eventful life was shaped entirely both by being born in China and being of British extraction. And like many of the thousands whose families worked for the colonial governments and business enterprises, such British people were never really considered fully British. Aside from a short period of time in England and India, virtually all her life was spent in China. She married twice, had children, and devoted herself to the art of homemaking, thus ensuring the happiness and comfort of the men in her life, as she had been taught to by her mother. Not at all unusual for the times. The crises and tragedies were many, culminating in Lilla aged 60 and her husband in his mid-70s being incarcerated during WWII in a Japanese internment camp for three years where they almost starved to death. There, she finished compiling, amidst great deprivation, her cookbook which for a period of time was displayed prominently in the Imperial War Museum in London. This cook book was not, as one would expect, a wartime cook book, but one that was full of recipes from a time of plenty. And all put down entirely from memory. It is said that the memory becomes more acute in times of suffering, and I guess it is understandable that when starving, thoughts turn to food and one's memories of that food.

Lilla was undoubtedly a survivor. Wouldn't we all love to have a great grandma of such courage and determination. And what a legacy to leave your descendants. A really good life story, of a time not so far in the distant past, told with admiration, love and plenty of spirit

Z says

I found this story of a woman's life in China and India from the turn of the century through to the middle of the 1980's absolutely fascinating.

Some have criticised the title as the recipe book only really features in the second half of Lilla's life, but this was the hook which made me pick the book up in the first place. I admit that I read the second half of the book first, with the privation of her internment in the prisoner of war camp which caused her to write down recipes that comforted her. By then I was so fascinated that I had to know more about this intriguing woman and her background.

I wasn't disappointed. Born the second twin whose good fortune was, according to her Chinese amah "stolen" by her older sister, Lilla's trials and tribulations are fascinating. There are tales of love lost and regained, stories of living sometimes in near poverty and then in riches, fighting to equal or better her twin, keep husbands, win over in-laws and maintain social position in colonial China and India.

There have also been criticisms of the author's voice in imagining Lilla's feelings throughout the book, but I didn't want to read just a history book. The rendering of Lilla's emotions is perhaps subjective but is so necessary in colouring the picture of her richly experienced life, and I think the author did an amazing job, not only in researching and documenting Lilla's story but in bringing it to life.

Leah says

For a first book, Lilla's Feast is a pretty exceptional achievement.

Osborne said that she originally intended the story of her great-grandmother to be the basis for a novel, but that it was so exceptional that she felt it couldn't be written any other way.

The result is a chatty, readable story of a woman's life, with all the *accoutrement* of tragedy, family, photographs and secrets that one would expect in a hundred-year life, played out heart-wrenchingly against the backdrop of the tumultuous first half of the twentieth century.

Osborne does not hide her own partiality, frequently writing of how she felt as a girl going to see Lilla and how the events described affected her emotionally. This can occasionally grate on the reader, who doesn't particularly want to know how the author is feeling when they are following Lilla's journey themselves. In this way the book sometimes reads a little too like a genealogy story written by family, for family. But mostly the asides add to the chatty style of storytelling: it is as though we are sitting across the table from Osborne, listening to her tell the story of her great-grandmother's fascinating life. One of the best things about the story is that many of us probably have similar stories in our own family trees. This is a biography and a history written out of interest and love, not because the author was related to an important figure in history (although her next book *The Bolter* is something a little more like this). Possibly the most interesting way of telling history is to show the reader how it affected those who were there at the time.

I occasionally got tired of the flowery food descriptions inserted into Lilla's story at strategic moments. Osborne certainly uses her imagination to full effect to give Lilla a voice where she has none anymore, winding her own impressions of Lilla's feelings with descriptions of the way Lilla used cooking and homemaking to solve problems and sort out her life. This got tiresome at times, to the point where it was obvious padding of the story. The same goes for using her cookbook as a focus point for the story - a book begun just before her internment in the Japanese concentration camp in China and written throughout her three years there. Osborne uses it as a device to guess Lilla's feelings and to reason out her actions. Ultimately, she is revealing the problem of every biographer in that, how can we possibly know what was going through Lilla's mind as she wrote it, as she hid it in a suitcase, as she donated it to a museum? On reflection, the device is a little obvious, but it still works fairly well.

Lilla's story is well developed, her life outlined and filled in but not nicely resolved, as Lilla's life was not resolved. She reached one hundred years old amidst the question of whether or not she was a British subject at all. Unable to return to China, the country of her birth and the place she considered her home, she ended her life in England, surrounded by family but still feeling like a foreigner. Lilla's life, like that of much of her family and so many other ex-Empire citizens, petered out in a place that no longer had any room for them, in a pale finality without any of the glory of the Empire of her youth. In the final pages of Lilla's life, Osborne brings home the painful feelings of being adrift in a world that was totally unlike the one into which Lilla had been born.

Overall, a flawed but extremely enjoyable book that draws the reader into the old world of Lilla's youth and plucks at their heart when that world crumbles away.

W. says

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W.

Lyn Elliott says

It took me a while to work out what I wanted to say here about this book, which was discussed by my book group a couple of weeks ago.

We all enjoyed it - a fascinating set of stories about life for foreigners in China's Treaty ports in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; attitudes and customs of the English rulers of India during the British raj and their connections back in the home country. Lilla herself proved herself to be remarkably resilient through the various disasters that beset her, including her awful first marriage and internment in a Japanese concentration camp in China during World War II.

We all admired the way she had been able to reinvent herself over and over again to overcome the many obstacles she confronted during her very long life.

And then someone commented on the tone of the authorial voice and the absence of any of the colonised peoples from this narrative, only the colonisers, both at home and abroad. In fact the book is imbued with the spirit of the Empire and attitudes from the colonial eras and reveals the closed world views that permeated the expatriate enclaves in China in particular.

The author has done a great deal of hypothesising and interpreting what Lilla must have thought and what she would have felt and so on. In fact, while the book is presented as biography, it crosses the line with fiction. As a group, we are mostly Australian born but several are from the UK and two of us have forebears who lived and worked in India during the Imperial years. We had a very lively discussion about the nature of the English class system, racial intolerance and bigotry, the ruthlessness of colonial enterprises and the vast difference there now is between Australia and England as cultures. And how much we love our climate!

Philippa says

Review published in the New Zealand Herald, 16 October 2004

Lilla's Feast
Frances Osborne
(Random House, \$59.95)

Reviewed by Philippa Jamieson

Imagine spending three years in a prison camp in China, held by the Japanese during World War II, with

freezing winters, blazing summers and torrential rainy seasons, dwindling food rations, cramped conditions and appalling hygiene. As the starving prisoners dreamed of food, one woman in the camp typed out recipes on tissue-thin ricepaper, which were gathered into a book that is now held in London's Imperial War Museum.

That woman was Lilla Eckford, born in 1882 in Chefoo, one of the 'treaty ports' of northern China, in a community of traders and missionaries, expatriate Westerners from various countries who were free from the restraints of Chinese law. Lilla and her twin Ada grew up in a prosperous business family in a world with servants, sumptuous banquets and balls. They went to a finishing school in Europe, and from their mother they learnt all the tips and tricks of cooking and entertaining.

When Lilla married, fate took a turn for the worse, and her cooking skills came in handy both to appease her husband and to cope on a greatly diminished budget. The story follows her to India, and back and forth between England and China, chronicling the ups and downs of her life, her marriages, childbirth and financial fortunes.

Frances Osborne has written a moving account of her spirited and determined great-grandmother. Initially I was irritated by the author's conjectures ('she must have felt' or 'she would have known'), but this feeling faded as those very speculations brought the book to life, inviting the reader to imagine the very different worlds Lilla inhabited in her 100-year life span.

It did puzzle me that, although Lilla's recipes are at the heart of this memoir, only four of them are printed here, reproduced as facsimiles of the originals. But the author writes evocatively about food throughout: 'vermicelli that slithered down her throat like snakes', 'pastries... which dissolved into a featherweight crumbling crunch at first bite', or in the prison camp, 'SOS' – same old stew.

Osborne has a particularly good sense of place, and has done an admirable job of placing Lilla's story in the wider context of history: the Boxer Uprising, the Japanese invasion of China, and the Communist takeover. She also gives just enough of a glimpse into herself that we can see some of her journey in writing the book and discovering her family history.

Heather says

This is a fascinating recounting of the life of an ordinary British woman who lived through life in the China treaty ports, both World Wars, and many other important historical events across the globe. It is a story "of what large-scale history does to the small-scale people caught up in its events." Lilla became a strong and determined woman who wanted the best for her family. We get to see what her life was like as a British colonial, who ultimately felt more at home in China than in Britain.

My biggest issue with the book is how the author (the title subject's great-granddaughter) supposes to know how Lilla acted and felt in certain moments. So many sentences mention when Lilla "would have" been thinking/feeling. Osborne seems to take this type of dramatic license many times in the book, when it would have been enough to stick to the facts.

Pamela says

This is the story of an ordinary woman who lived through some extraordinary times--100 years of them! Written by her great-granddaughter, her life encompasses three countries, two world wars, three husbands (or maybe it was just two and a fiancée) and an internment camp.

There are things I liked about this book and things I didn't. First the bad news: I found the author

overdrawing her conclusions about how her great-grandmother might have felt at times. She was also over dramatic about it. I found myself wondering "How would she know how she felt?" The foreshadowing I felt was also overdone.

A semi-negative is the view of imperialism--the actual culture of the countries Britain, America, Germany, and others occupied and the people who lived there are a back drop to the lives of the imperialists themselves. They are a footnote of little import. However, in reading Ms. Osborne's epilogue, she gave more of a nod to this and made me feel better. Perhaps she wrote the book this way to coincide with the general thinking (of the imperialist countries) of the time. Including, most probably, Lilla's.

On the positive side, I did enjoy the book overall in spite of the shortcomings mentioned above. Ms. Osborne does not always paint Lilla with a favorable brush--she really is just an ordinary woman who doesn't always make the wisest decisions. But she did have an interesting life and survived some very hard times. And since I read a great deal about China, this was a very different viewpoint than I am used to.

Cathy Gillespie says

Another one of Frances Osborne's fascinating relatives living an amazing life in China. Recommended as a great read.

Perlie says

A lovingly written, vivid description of an amazing life. Lilla, the author's grandmother, was seemingly 'cursed' to live in interesting times. This century plus life was packed with luxury and poverty, exotic locales and internment camps. The changes in society, life roles, and world powers that took place over these years are epic. Worth reading.

Leong Chin Yee says

I was introduced to this book a few years back but never got down to reading it then cos I thought it was just a book of recipes and maybe Lilla's experiences. Anyway, finally got to this book and enjoyed the historical setting and the journey through Lilla's life from China to India to UK and especially during her internment. I enjoyed it perhaps it talks about the India I love and imagined what she went through then. It was painful to see her loss and even though she was born of English parents was more at home in China because she was born there and how she and many others like her was left without a place that they felt at home when the war ended and they had to leave China when the communists came. I didn't think I would cry but I did and at the most unexpected place. It is a book that rediscovers a woman's courage to love and resilience to rise above her circumstances to live!

Vivien says

I read this because Lilla was married to my great uncle Ernie Howell. A bit of a shit really as he married her for her money and then discovered she didn't have any! Consequently he was not very nice to her for quite a

while. Anyway they lived in India for a while and then after he died she travelled the world ending up in China (where she was born) in the 1930s. She was imprisoned by the Japanese during the war and had a pretty awful time. So her story is interesting but Frances Osborne's style leaves a lot to be desired - a bit gushing. The book is full of 'I can see her now....', 'I can just imagine her.....', 'she must have felt....' - very irritating. I shan't read another one by her.

Bruce says

Frances Osborne relates the story of her great-grandmother's life as a British citizen raised in China caught my interest for all of its similarities to my own mother's story. Both of them grew up in China during the European imperialist era and were in Japanese internment camps during WW II. Lilla Jennings grew up in Chefoo, the town my aunt's boarding school was in so I was also interested to see her description of it.

I enjoyed the book and found it an interesting read, well written and engaging. It gave an insight into some of the challenges and problems associated with colonial life both from the British and Chinese points-of-view. Osborne's portrayal of her various relatives made it easy to make a personal connection to them and her description of life in China, India and England at the time helped me to get a better sense of those places.

There were a few minor points that bothered me. In some places in the book it was a little too obvious that she was filling in what Lilla was probably thinking and feeling based on her own idea about life and how she would react in a particular circumstance. I found some of those instances jarring and they tended to pull me out of the story for a bit.

I wish that she had included more of the recipe book that inspired her to write this book (written by Lilla during the Japanese occupation of China and her internment in camp). A few of the recipes are included and a few of the illustrations which is nice but there are too few recipes and all of them are included as typeset text. I would have liked to see more of them and to see a facsimile of the actual pages as they originally appeared, some typed on pages from a receipt book and some on thin rice paper. I know that more were probably not included for lack of space but finding room for even 4 or 5 more pages of them would have been nice. I wonder if there is anywhere online that I can see scans of them.

I attribute most of the shortcomings to the fact that this was her first book and really they are not too egregious. All-in-all I think it was a good book and worth reading for anyone with an interest in British life in China in the 19th and 20th centuries.
