

# Eric Liddell's Canadian Family

By GINA DAVIDSON

On 11th July 2012, 88 years to the day since Eric Liddell won his Olympic gold medal, a new exhibition opened in Edinburgh celebrating his life, from his early years in China and his fantastic Gold Medal victory at the 1924 Paris Olympics to his missionary work in China.

At the event was Eric's eldest daughter Patricia Liddell Russell, who talked about her father -- the inspiration behind the movie *Chariots of Fire*.

Back at a university track in Toronto, a young woman is running laps, clocking her time as she goes. Those coaching, others watching, are only interested in whether she's good enough for the next athletics meeting. They are unlikely to know her background -- that she is the great-granddaughter of an Olympic legend and that, linked to her inherited talent, is a story which can bring people close to tears.

"She's fast," says her grandmother Patricia Russell in a soft Canadian accent. "She's got a scholarship because of her ability and is in her fourth year studying radiography, but we'll see if she takes the running any further. We were all swift when we were young, you know, but we didn't really go into athletics properly, girls weren't really pushed then. And we don't use the Liddell name, we don't boast, even if my grandmother always said 'remember who you are!'"

Patricia laughs and settles back into the sofa in her cousin Joan Nicol's Edinburgh home. The eldest daughter of Eric Liddell, the athlete and missionary, she's just arrived



Eric Liddell at the 1924 Paris Olympics

in Edinburgh on a whirlwind visit to open the newly-refurbished cafe, reception and disabled ramp at the Eric Liddell Centre in Morningside as well as launch a sports scholarship in his name at Edinburgh University, where his medals are held. Then she and her husband will head south to his alma mater Eltham College in London for its sports day and 100th anniversary celebrations.

There can be few in Edinburgh or in the UK who don't know the story of the deeply religious Liddell, especially as it was captured, if a little fictionalized, in the Oscar-winning film *Chariots of Fire*. That movie, now 31 years old, has been digitally remastered and is being re-released, and so the tale of how the young Scottish sprinter refused to run the 100m on a Sunday but instead won gold in the 400m in the 1924 Paris Olympics will affect a whole new generation.

The story has also recently made it to the stages of London's West End, where Liddell is portrayed by Scottish actor Jack Loudon. "Oh it's marvelous," says Patricia. "We went to see it and I met the young man who plays my father and he is wonderful. He hardly knew the story really, especially what happened after the Olympics, so I've promised to send him a book."

Of course the Eric Liddell story is making waves again thanks to the London 2012 Olympics, and Patricia admits that her phone rings with enquiries from the media every four years about just what her father, the man the world knew as the athlete who refused to run on a Sunday, would make of the modern-day Olympics with all its drugs controversies and big money.

"I think he would be quite appalled really," says the 77-year-old. "Of course I've no real idea what he would say, but going by what my mother has told us and how we were raised, I believe he wouldn't have been very impressed at all by modern athletics. Those that use drugs to win, he would ask 'have you really won? Were you really the best on the day if you did?'"

"I also think he wouldn't like such a focus on gold all the time. Just to get there, to compete in the Olympics, all those athletes have to be wonderful. I think he would just be glad if they did their utmost without compromising themselves, and if they didn't win, then at least they were still winners from doing their best."

Being the daughter of a man with such high ideals, and of world renown, seems as though it could have been a burden. After all, not only did he win Olympic gold - and bronze in the 200m -- but he went on to win the hearts and minds of thousands of Chinese people as a missionary, ultimately dying of a brain hemorrhage in a Japanese prisoner-of-



Patricia Liddell Russell with a picture of her father's graduation

war camp. It's a story, which has so many heroic moments that living up to the Liddell name seems a strain.

"You know sometimes I think it's as well we grew up in Canada," she says. "I think if we'd been in Scotland rather than Canada, where my mother was from, our lives would have been very different. He went to the Olympics and did well, and that was nice, but it was just a small part of his life and he then went on to do what he thought was important. He very seldom spoke about the Olympics and he wouldn't have wanted us to sit around and bask in his glory. That would be no life."

"He would hate the idea that he was idolized in any way. To me he was daddy. Always daddy, as I was just six when I last saw him so wasn't old enough to grow out of using that word. Canada doesn't make a huge fuss about him and our family, so we got to grow up doing our own thing and being ourselves."

She adds: "The Eric Liddell Centre though is something which I think he would be very pleased with. He would have been proud of the work it does. It's the same with the scholarship at Edinburgh University. They are useful and can really change a person's life. I think he would be embarrassed by some of the fuss made about what he did, but if it can create something wonderful, then that's good."

Liddell was born in Tianjin, China to Scottish parents, and after boarding at Eltham College came to Edinburgh to study. He was a Scottish rugby internationalist as well as an athlete, and it was during his time as a student that he took part in the Olympics. In 1925, he went back to Tianjin and worked as a middle school teacher. He was detained in the concentration camp built by the Japanese for foreign residents in Weifang until 1945 when he died there.

"He had a wicked sense of humour," she says. "He liked making jokes and was very light-hearted with a dazzling smile. And even though he didn't want to run on a Sunday he never tried to stop other people from doing so, he just wouldn't give up his principles for a medal."



*The Liddell Family in 1920.  
Back Row: Eric, Rob  
Front Row: Jenny, Ernest, Mrs Liddell*

"But he was a liberal really. I was told a story that when he was in the POW camp he helped a prostitute put up some shelves in her room and she told him it was the first time a man had done something for her without asking for anything in return. But to him she was a person, a human being in need of a helping hand. He was never judgmental; in fact he was ahead of his time.

"I'm not sure that really comes across in the film, even though it was a wonderful film. My aunt Jenny [cousin Joan's mother] was also different to the way she comes across in the film. In fact she was in China when daddy was in the Olympics, so her part is totally made up, and she wasn't happy as she felt it made her appear priggish, when she was anything but -- they all really supported his running."

She adds: "I remember being devastated that I couldn't come to Edinburgh for the premiere as mother was ill. She'd been over to the UK before and had seen some of the rushes and met Ian Charleson who played daddy. But for the premiere my sisters Heather and Maureen came instead -- and for Maureen it was wonderful as she'd never met daddy."

When Liddell was interred during the Second World War, he sent his family back to his wife Florence's native country of Canada. "I think if it had just been Heather and I we would have stayed with him," says Patricia. "But my mother was pregnant so we were sent away. We kept thinking he would soon be coming to join us, but we never saw him again. I was ten when we were told that he had died.

"It's hard to remember much about him, but what I do recall is a summer spent just outside Edinburgh with family. It was glorious. It was 1940 and he was on furlough back to Scotland and we'd sailed

here from China. We had a wonderful time with all the cousins and grandparents and just being with mummy and daddy.

"Then I remember when we were sailing back across the Atlantic, and the war was on so it was dangerous. We were in a convoy of ships and some of them were torpedoed. We saw ships going down. We were actually hit as well but the torpedo didn't detonate. To this day I can hear the motor of that ship going as fast as it could go to get out of there.

"It became very dangerous in China as well and people were told to leave. My father though felt he had responsibilities. So we went and he stayed."

Part of the Liddell legend goes that he was later offered a place on a ship out of China, but turned it down so it could be given to a pregnant lady. Patricia is unsure of the truth of the story, but says it sounds like the actions of her dad. "But he always said to my mother that there were many remarkable people in China doing amazing things."

It has been 88 years since Eric Liddell breached the tape and took gold in the 400 metres at the Paris Olympics, but for the last 32 of them his name has lived on in Edinburgh, his home from home, at the eponymous centre at Holy Corner.

The athlete and missionary, who had once lived close by and attended the building when it was the Morningside North Parish Church, is celebrated inside with a gallery of photos.

However, Patricia believes it is the work done at the Eric Liddell Centre since 1980, when it became a place where the elderly and vulnerable could seek support, which would most please her father.

"He would hate to think he was idolized because of the Olympics. Daddy had a strong



*Tracy Ferguson is pictured here with Hugh Robertson, the UK government minister responsible for the London Olympics, at a Diamond Jubilee gala evening in Toronto last May*

belief in service to his local community and was always doing things for other people," she says. "He would have been proud of this place. It's great to see it go from strength to strength as a living memorial to his life and work."

Last June, the centre opened a new reception and cafe, as well as a new ramp for the disabled, as part of a £248,000 appeal to transform the facilities which deal with hundreds of people every week, in particular offering support to those with dementia.

The tartan ribbon was cut by Patricia, who later attended the launch of a new sports scholarship in her father's name at Edinburgh University.

### *The Scots determination of Paralympic Champion Tracey Ferguson*

**T**racey Ferguson knows what it takes to reach the podium. She has been a member of five Paralympic teams, helping Canada win gold medals in 1992, 1996 and 2000 and a bronze in 2004. She also was a member of the team that won a silver medal at the 2011 Parapan American Games in Guadalajara, Mexico. Ferguson won World Championships in 1994, 1998, 2002, and bronze in 2010.

Unashamedly proud of her Scots ancestry, Ferguson grew up playing street hockey and dreamed of one day representing Canada on the Olympic podium. As a child she aspired to be an Olympic swimmer, but surgery to correct a spinal problem left her paralyzed from the chest down.

When she was 12 years old she tried out for a wheelchair basketball team. She was the only female and the smallest player at the tryouts, and didn't make the team, but her positive attitude, willingness to work hard, and refusal to quit earned her an invitation to practice with the team, and by the time she was 21 she was recruited to the National team.

Tracey competed in track events in the Beijing Olympics in 2008 and came close to a third place finish before crashing, breaking several ribs and injuring her shoulder.

Her message to young athletes? -- "The true measure and true test of ourselves, is that we pick ourselves back up".

Tracey hails from Holland Landing, Ontario and is a member of FitSpirit, which promotes active, healthy and balanced lifestyles for young women. A four-time recipient of the Ontario Wheelchair Sports Association's Female Athlete of the Year award, Ferguson also has been honoured by the YMCA's Young Women of Distinction Award and the Terry Fox Humanitarian Award.