



Eleanor Robson Belmont
1878-1979

Founder of the
Eleanor Robson Belmont Fund in
The New York Community Trust
909 Third Avenue
New York, NY 10022

*"I belong to that group of people who
move the piano themselves."*

— Eleanor Robson Belmont

She was an English-born girl, transplanted to America. She was an actress of international acclaim. She became the wife, then widow, of a man whose name became synonymous with wealth. She was a dynamic worker for charities and the arts. And she was a writer. Her talents were praised by Presidents and playwrights and honored with medals and degrees.

Her life spanned 100 years, and at its three-quarter mark, Eleanor Robson Belmont observed that it seemed

*... not one existence with a continuous
flow... but a life periodically divided into
entirely separate compartments. Change of
surroundings, interests, pursuits have made
it seem more like different incarnations.*

Each incarnation, though, was woven to the next by a common thread: an ability to inspire others, combined with a determination to get things done.

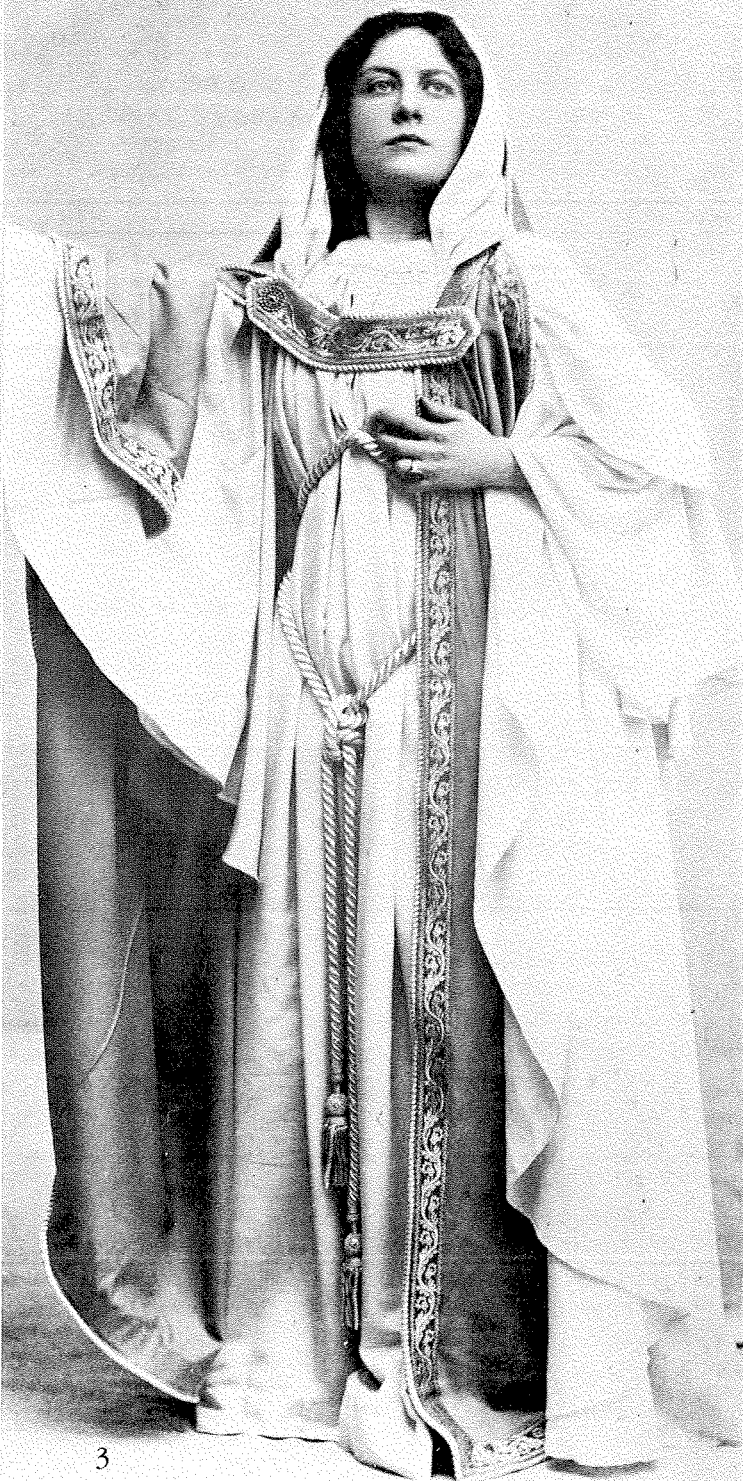
Eleanor Elise Robson was born December 13, 1878 in Lancashire, England, into a theatrical family. Both her grandmother and mother were actresses; her father, who died during her infancy, was an orchestra conductor; and the man who became her step-father while she was still young was an actor. His name was Augustus Cook, and Eleanor's mother performed as Madge Carr Cook.

When Eleanor was six, the Cooks ventured from England to pursue their careers on American stages. It took them only one year to decide to remain in the States, and in 1886, at the age of seven, Eleanor left England to join them. While her parents toured the country in stock theatre companies, Eleanor received her education in a Staten Island convent school. Immediately upon her graduation in 1896, she set off to meet her mother in San Francisco.

Something else awaited Eleanor in San Francisco: a job. Madge Carr Cook, whose claim to critical and popular success was soon to come in the title role of a play called *Mrs. Wiggs of the Cabbage Patch*, had persuaded the owner of the stock theatrical company for which she worked to hire her 17-year-old, fledgling-actress daughter. That Daniel Frawley did, for \$15 a week.

But one month later a series of events transpired that was to catapult Eleanor to center stage: first the company's leading ingenue resigned unexpectedly, and then her replacement became seriously ill. By that time, the entire company was in Hawaii, engaged to perform a repertory of 13 plays. The ingenue roles fell to Eleanor, and that meant learning parts in eleven of those plays in no time flat. Eleanor rose to the occasion, Daniel Frawley rewarded her with a \$20-a-week raise, and Eleanor traveled with the company to its next destination, Milwaukee. Two years later, she joined a Chicago-based company whose top-flight cast included Lionel Barrymore.

By the time Eleanor made her New York debut in 1900 (she was in her 22nd year, and commanded a salary of \$150 a week), she had cut



*In Romeo And Juliet, 1903.
At 24, Eleanor Robson was the youngest
American actress to play Juliet.*

her teeth in a variety of roles — as a Civil War rebel in *Held by Night*; as Jane Eyre; as Bonita in *Arizona*. In New York, she added Shakespeare's Juliet to her credits. Eleanor's style contrasted sharply with the tradition of exaggerated gesture and stylized delivery that had come to be immortalized by Sarah Bernhardt. "Blood and thunder" held no appeal for Eleanor Robson. Her presence was more natural, and her ideal was the Italian actress Eleanora Duse, who had created a sensation by appearing on stage sans makeup.

In 1903, the respected British playwright, Israel Zangwill, asked Eleanor to portray the lead character in *Merey Mary Ann*, a play he was adapting from a story he had written. Eleanor consented eagerly, and her performance as the servant girl Mary Ann captivated audiences in America and Britain. One new fan was George Bernard Shaw, who wrote to Eleanor,

*I have just seen Mary Anne and I am
forever yours devotedly. I take no interest in
mere females; but I love all artists. They
belong to me in the most sacred way; and
you are an artist.*

Shaw wrote *Major Barbara* for Eleanor, but contractual obligations prevented her from performing in it. Their mutual admiration, however, continued and they remained life-long correspondents.

By the summer of 1908, when she was 29, Eleanor Robson's career was in full blossom, but she found herself "worried, depressed, (and) ir-resolute" about her future. She had met a widower 26 years her senior, a multimillionaire named August Belmont, Jr., who had proposed marriage. To marry Belmont would mean abandoning her career. To pursue her career would mean losing him. Those were her choices. For Eleanor, "... either route involved a serious sacrifice. This to be or not to be was not of easy solution."

Her ardent suitor was one of society's most eligible bachelors. He had grown children; he owned race horses, yachts, and a railroad car staffed



Eleanor Robson in The Girl Who Has Everything,



1906. Clyde Fitch wrote the play especially for her.

with a French chef. His father had established a banking house, August Belmont & Company, which represented the House of Rothschild in America, and when August Belmont, Jr., finished his studies at Harvard, he joined the bank. Upon his father's death in 1890, he became head of the company. August Belmont, Jr.'s, interests extended far beyond the world of banking; he founded the company that constructed the Interborough Rapid Transit Subway in New York City, he built the Cape Cod Canal, and he helped finance the crucial development of stabilizers for aircraft. He had an enormous sense of civic duty, and one of his many endeavors in that realm was to help secure the passage of the Workmen's Compensation bill in New York State. Politically, he was a staunch Democrat, though many of his close friends — including Theodore Roosevelt — were not. His cultural interests ranged from the Metropolitan Opera (he served on its Board of Directors) to the New Theatre (he was a founder). And he was an avid sportsman. His father had established the Belmont

Race Track at the Jerome Park Race Course, and August Belmont, Jr., carried on the tradition, founding the American Jockey Club as well as hunting and polo clubs.

For two years Eleanor wrestled with her dilemma. She thought about those who had invested much in her career: her mother, her business manager, a writer at work on a play for her. And she contemplated her own future happiness. At last she reached her decision.

In February 1910, on a Brooklyn stage, Eleanor Robson gave her final performance as a Cockney waif named Glad in a runaway hit, Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Dawn of a Tomorrow*: She and the entire cast wept all the way through the play, right up to her last line: "I'm going to be took care of now."

She married August Belmont two weeks later at her home at 302 West 77th Street in New York City.

After their wedding, the couple yachted in the Mediterranean for two months, and when they

returned Eleanor plunged into an entirely new role: that of mistress of two houses, as well as a bungalow, a cottage, a shooting place, a six-story mansion, and a beach estate. These Belmont homes spread from Long Island to Kentucky, Saratoga, South Carolina, New York City, and Newport. "It was a new world," Eleanor recorded, and initially, "the innumerable details necessary to smooth administration in this department oppressed me."

But Eleanor met the challenge with grace... and wit. In commenting about the private railroad car in which the Belmonts traveled, she said this is "not an acquired taste — one takes to it immediately."

August Belmont was an opera buff, and it must have been with supreme pleasure that his bride took her place beside him as hostess in Box Four in the Diamond Horseshoe at the Metropolitan. Eleanor's first visit to the opera, six years before her marriage, had been a mad dash during an intermission of *Merely Mary Ann* to hear the third act of *Gotterdammerung*. She had stood in the wings then and had seen only a portion of the opera, but she had been enthralled, and remained so for the rest of her life.

Eleanor Belmont came to share another love of her husband's — horses. Scarlet and maroon were the Belmont colors, and they festooned the Belmont Race Track as well as the Belmont Stud

1935. Mrs. Belmont honors Walter Damrosch at the Jubilee Celebration marking the 50th anniversary of

his debut with the Metropolitan Opera. Behind her are Lauritz Melchior and the cast of *The Meistersinger*.



Farm in Kentucky. Eleanor took pleasure in naming many of the foals, including the most famous racing stallion of its era, Man o' War.

Man o' War was sold, though, before he reached his prime. Late in 1917, August Belmont decided to reduce the size of his stables. The United States had entered World War I, and Belmont was commissioned a major in the Government Remount Service with orders to report to Paris.

There were other changes during those war years: Eleanor began volunteer work with the American Red Cross, taking to the speaker's platform to raise money and finding there a new outlet for her talent and training as an actress. In the spring of 1917 she delivered 45 speeches in 38 cities and ten states; in the fall she sailed for France to inspect U.S. Army camps and to report on Red Cross activities at the front. She carried a letter of introduction that began:

My dear General Pershing: This is to introduce a most valued and most charming friend. . . Mrs. Belmont is one of the few really able people who are also gifted with the power of expression. . . She has a man's understanding, a woman's sympathy, and a sense of honor and gift of expression such as are possessed by very, very few either among men or women.

It was signed, "Faithfully yours, Theodore Roosevelt."

Her dynamic energy and hard work helped the Red Cross top the one hundred million dollar goal set for its first drive. August Belmont said he wished he knew of some eight-hour Workmen's law that might include his wife.

August Belmont died in 1924 and was buried on his wife's forty-sixth birthday, thus bringing to a close another period of Eleanor Robson Belmont's life. During their fourteen years together, her husband had trained her well. "If you want a thing done — go," he said. "If not — send." Eleanor Belmont continued to "go." She remained devoted

to her step-children, and step-grandchildren, and to an ever widening circle of friends. And she remained active in volunteer work and outspoken on public issues.

Convinced — as were many — that the Eighteenth Amendment which instituted prohibition was a fiasco, she wrote a speech in which she declared,

You cannot change the habits of a people by legislation. Only education can do that. We must take human nature as we find it.

But she did not stop there. When she delivered the speech before the Women's Organization for National Prohibition Reform, the year was 1931 and the Depression was at its height. She minced no words:

Personally, I consider it a disgrace that today, when the world is facing great problems of economic adjustment that may even in a few years shatter this thing we call peace, when we ourselves are in the midst of a national crisis of unemployment, the most important political question is prohibition.

From 1931 through 1934, Eleanor Belmont devoted her organizing talents to the Women's Division of the Emergency Unemployment Relief Committee. As its chairman, she spearheaded a two-month fundraising appeal for New York's unemployed women. The goal was \$500,000, a sum that would create jobs for a thousand single women, at \$18 a week. Though her counsel suggested that \$350,000 was a more realistic goal, she and her workers raised a total of \$597,000. A second fundraising campaign under her guidance, conducted during the winter of 1931, marshaled \$4 million. Her approach was to directly solicit bankers and large business concerns.

While she worked on behalf of the City's unemployed, Eleanor Belmont continued her work for the Red Cross. As a programming and policy maker for both organizations, she wielded



*Eleanor Belmont
with Wagnerian soprano
Helen Traubel, 1941.*

much influence, serving as facilitator and liaison between the groups.

In May 1933, she resigned from her chairmanship of the Relief Committee and again went public with a strong conviction:

If you will permit me, I will be absolutely frank... The major portion of the relief program should be assigned to the City, State or Federal Government, and the amount agreed upon... as necessary to carry out an adequate program, should be obtained by special taxation.

Eleanor Robson Belmont's vision of a democratic society extended even beyond the guarantees of employment, food and medical care. It extended to participation in the arts and culture of society.

As the first woman appointed (in 1933) to the Board of Directors of the Metropolitan Opera, she conceived the notion of a group that held no class bounds of privilege or wealth, a group that could simultaneously help the Opera and benefit

from it. She founded the Metropolitan Opera Guild in 1935, and over the years it came to serve as a model for many regional opera and ballet guilds. To build the Guild and consolidate its strength, she used her theatrically trained voice over the radio to urge support. And again, she turned to the business community for corporate support.

The results surpassed most observers' expectations. Officials at the Metropolitan Opera credited Mrs. Belmont with keeping the company alive through her fundraising skills and her passion for the opera. When she discovered in 1940 that the old gold curtain at the Opera was to be sold for \$100, she quickly set into motion a more profitable plan: the ten-ton curtain was cut into hundreds of souvenir mementos and their sales brought in a total of \$11,000.

Eleanor Belmont was perhaps the archetypal Guild member: she worked zealously for the opera while continuing to be inspired and delighted by it. She kept her box, second from the footlights, although in later years she sometimes reclined on a couch in the box or donated her seats to young, impoverished opera lovers.

In 1937 her affection for young people (she had no children of her own) and for the Metropolitan's future audiences prompted her to inaugurate the Guild's series of Student Performances; in 1952 she founded the Metropolitan National Council, which not only developed national support for the Met but also encouraged young talent through an auditions program; and in 1966 she made a gift of \$500,000 to underwrite the Guild's program of student matinees. She was concerned as well with the aged, and she founded the Metropolitan Opera Employees' Welfare Fund.

Eleanor Belmont's enormous contributions were recognized with trays and medallions of silver and gold. They came from the Opera, from the Red Cross, the National Institute of Social Sciences, from the Theodore Roosevelt Memorial Association, and from the Hundred Year Association. Yale University conferred upon her an honorary Master

of Arts degree and Columbia University topped that with a Doctor of Letters.

As Eleanor Robson Belmont grew older, her beauty ripened and matured. Her eyes were once described as "thinking eyes, breathtaking eyes of fairy-tale blue." As a *grande dame* she cut a handsome figure, her white hair dressed always in a manner as classic as her clothes and the three strands of pearls she always wore. She used no makeup. Her voice — once used on the stage, now heard nationally on behalf of the Opera — remained commanding.

In 1957, when she was 78, her memoirs were published. *The Fabric of Memory*, her autobiography, is a 302-page volume that serves not only as a gathering of anecdotes and reflections, but also, significantly, as social history.

During her later years Eleanor Belmont divided her time between her Fifth Avenue apartment overlooking Central Park, and a home in Maine that looked down from a hillside to the boating town of Northeast Harbor. She continued her extensive correspondence and entertained quietly.

When Eleanor Belmont turned 90 in 1968, Governor Nelson Rockefeller — who had known and admired her since his boyhood — wrote,

Men have been paying tribute to Mrs. August Belmont for the better part of this century; beginning with George Bernard Shaw in the century's first decade. Her beauty, wit, talent and charm are legendary; from her days on the London stage as Eleanor Robson, when she captivated Shaw; to the half-century and more that she has ornamented the New York scene and changed it so profoundly for the better... Surely she must be one of the great salesmen of this century; as her fundraising activities for the Met, the Red Cross, the Community Service Society and other causes amply testify.

Above all, however, she is a great lady — a truly fabulous and wonderful woman, one whose personal example and human concern for others set a standard we must not lose. Knowing her is a rare privilege.

In 1923, Eleanor Belmont was appointed to the first Distribution Committee of The New York Community Trust. She served for more than 30 years. In 1965, she established in the Trust a Fund to benefit her own special charitable concerns — social welfare, medical services, and, of course, the opera. The Eleanor Robson Belmont Fund was created by her Will, and since her death in 1979 it has begun its work of perpetuating and extending those philanthropic interests.

On January 10, 1979, fifteen hundred persons attended an Opera Guild luncheon honoring Mrs. Belmont's 100th birthday. A slide presentation documented the activities and accomplishments of her life, and Metropolitan Opera Association president Frank Taplin declared:

Eleanor Robson Belmont... a magic name and a magic lady! She has encouraged us to think beyond our narrow times and places. She has given us a vision for the future.

On October 24, 1979, she died quietly in her sleep in her apartment overlooking Central Park, age 100 years, ten months and 11 days.

Eleanor Belmont's sense of adventure, coupled with an enormous reservoir of energy, was never dulled by ease or affluence. Life bestowed riches on her and she gave back to it generously.



The New York Community Trust is a publicly-supported community foundation which provides centralized management for many charitable funds. New York's major banks serve as trustees. Trustee for the Eleanor Robson Belmont Fund is Bankers Trust Company.

Cover photograph by Cecil Beaton