

## THE ELEANOR ROOSEVELT PROGRAM

May 14<sup>th</sup>, 1951

Description: In the opening segment, ER and Elliott Roosevelt respond to a listener's question about a statement made by Winston Churchill regarding the United States' as supreme command of the NATO Navy rather than the British Navy. In the interview segment, ER's guest is Christopher Fry, author of *The Lady's Not for Burning*.

Participants: ER, Elliott Roosevelt, Christopher Fry

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[ER:] How do you do? This is Eleanor Roosevelt speaking to you from Europe, where I'm attending the meeting of the United Nations Human Rights Commission.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Today's program is a very special one. It's the first of a series we've been recording in England especially for your listen-- for you listeners at home. Through special arrangement with Swiss Air, each recording is being flown to the States in time to go on the air at the usual time. Mrs. Roosevelt's guest today belongs to England primarily, but his work belongs to every playgoer in our own country as well. He is Mr. Christopher Fry, author of *The Lady's Not For Burning*, *Ring Around the Moon*, and many other important dramas. You'll meet Christopher Fry a little later on in the program, but first there's a current matter of interest, upon which I think you will Mrs. Roosevelt's views of interest, which we will discuss as soon as we have had a message from the sponsors who make this recorded program possible.

[Break 1:20-1:31]

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Mother, I have a question here today uh regarding a debate which took place in the House of Commons uh the other day, in which uh Winston Churchill uh charged that uh Americans should avoid giving the impression that they are grasping the supreme command everywhere within the Atlantic Treaty Organization. Uh Mr. [Winston] Churchill opened the debate uh on this subject by uh pointing to the fact that the uh American uh-American Navy had secured the supreme command in the uh Atlantic on-- under the uh new set-up with General Eisenhower in the Atlantic Treaty nations, and he felt that it should've been a British admiral uh in command. Have you got any thoughts on this topic?

[ER:] Well I think it was a very natural reaction on the part of Mr. Churchill. You remember he was always um very much interested in the navy and um uh Father always used to call him the former naval person [ER laughs] so that it was, I think it a very natural thing that he should've been jealous for the-- what he felt was proper um consideration for the tradition of the British Navy, which had uh always uh been at the head of- of the navies of the world, so to speak. And um I must say that uh I don't myself quite understand why the United States uh felt—I-- there must be some reason, I have no idea because I have no way of asking anyone, but I still don't quite understand why the United States has the slightest interest in having uh the command um be-be an American admiral. And I thought the British did it so nicely when um something was said about the Mediterranean and they said they would welcome the cooperation of the Americans at their bases [ER laughs] [Elliott Roosevelt: Yes.] I thought that was a very nice little way of putting it. But, um on the other hand, there must be a reason, and I suppose that there is a good reason why this is done, it must be a question of coordination or it may be that at the present time, more is going to be put on American ships in this area and it was, therefore, felt that it was important because it may be - I don't know this-- but it may be that British ships are going to be needed um for British purposes in other parts of the world, and um so that I don't think that I could be critical of it, but I could certainly understand Mr. Churchill's feelings. [Elliott Roosevelt coughs]

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Well of course uh Mr. Churchill went a little bit further in his argument by stating that the entire question of a--of a naval commander for the Atlantic area was absolutely valueless, that it was sort of like fifth wheel, and uh then he went on and uh charged uh the prime minister, Mr. [Clement] Atlee, with uh being singularly uh- uh lacking in knowledge and even less feeling in the matter, to use his words.

[ER:] Well, I don't suppose that Mr. Atlee would have the same um feeling for the British Navy that Mr. Churchill had. I think that's quite natural too, because he hasn't had the same close association over a long period of years. But, on the other hand, um on the question of a commander being a fifth wheel, I am in no position to judge. And I should think that the government in power uh must have reasons. Perhaps they felt that it wasn't an important enough thing to make an issue and like so many other things, they may have felt that this uh not being very important, was one of the things they could give way on because they could not give way perhaps on something that meant a great deal to them. For instance, I notice that they've been rather successful in the last two days in the allocation of sulfur, and perhaps, you never know, you may have given in on one thing on order to get another, and after all--

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Give up the naval commander in order to get a bigger allocation of sulfur, is that it?

[Elliott Roosevelt laughs]

[ER:] Well I don't know! Nobody knows, I don't know anything about it. But um after all, the government in power must have reasons for doing things [Elliott Roosevelt: Mhm.] [Elliott Roosevelt coughs] and though I realize that uh the personality of the people and the background of the people in power make some things more important than others, and uh it might be that had Mr. Churchill been in power, he would never have given up on that because it meant too much to him, you see?

[Elliott Roosevelt:] He would've fought to the last ditch.

[ER:] But I, I take it for granted that a responsible government does not do things which they know even if you didn't have much experience with the navy, you would know all English people love their navy. It's in the- it's, it's uh tradition, and they themselves- even the Labor Party loves its navy. (7:29)

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Well I think that uh in connection with that it might be interesting to explain to our listeners something of the reason for the background of interest and of uh preoccupation on the part of uh Mr. Churchill uh with the British navy. Why is he, probably more than almost any other person in public life in England, more interested in the British Navy?

[ER:] Well he was, he was for a long time of course, in the Admiralty, I don't remember the exact length of time. And--

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Well he was First Lord of the Admiralty, I believe uh at the outbreak of the First World War.

[ER:] Yes, he was. And um he has always had a great interest in England's preparedness, much more than um-- perhaps uh that was one of the reasons why for a time uh he was uh unpopular, because he advocated preparedness for uh Great Britain, and of course later, uh was proved right, I mean it was a very sad thing for a time uh England did let itself uh go down in its preparedness. Now, there were all these--

[Elliott Roosevelt:] In just the same way that the United States did.

[ER:] Just the same way the United States has done, and in a way, uh Great Britain did more in its um rise in social services uh than we did in the interval, I think. I think that they advanced more quickly. We have caught up in many ways, but they did it in uh in- in a shorter period. So I suppose you would say that uh they had- had made their choice and had got something for their choice. On the other hand, um I- I think you really- to understand what the British navy means to people in-in Great Britain, you always have to remember that this is an island, and that from its earliest history um it has had to depend not only for defense but for its wellbeing [Elliott Roosevelt: Yes.] on uh navy and trading and uh ships. Ships are-are part of the whole story of Great Britain and the story of its rise to power.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] I'm interested in one phase of uh the, this particular problem, uh because right now uh we are planning to send over roughly four uh- four divisions or 100,000 men, and all of the equipment and supplies necessary to support them on the continent of Europe. Uh What we have is a very uh interesting problem here, and that is the question of whether uh those troops and supplies are going to be carried mostly by American transports, or are they going to be carried by the- the fleets of the uh, of the various Atlantic pact countries, largely uh English ships?

[ER:] I don't know.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] You don't know the answer to that.

[ER:] No, I don't know the answer to that, I have no idea.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Because I imagine [ER: of course--] logistically, it becomes uh very important who's going to command at this particular stage, not so much on the warships so much on the merchant marine. (11:22)

[ER:] Well now I should think very likely a uh, in the past of course we've had to depend a great deal on British transport.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Yes. [Elliott Roosevelt coughs] So--

[ER:] It might well be that we would again depend--

[Elliott Roosevelt:] So that there is probably the crux of the affair at this particular moment. [ER: I don't know.] And uh the answer to that is going to probably give us the answer as to who should actually be the commander in charge of the naval operations at this stage.

[ER:] It may well be that uh, that is- that is the reason, but I- I don't know. I don't feel I know enough to give any answers really in uh, to--

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Well I think it would be much uh to everybody's advantage if the public were given some reasons every once in a while for some of these questions that come up and uh tantalize the imagination, and I certainly feel that uh from the American public's standpoint and their whole uh acceptance of the question of the rearming of Europe and American participation in that, that these problems which come up and the disagreements that come up as a result of charges such as Mr. Churchill has made, that those questions should be dealt with, and dealt with out in the open.

[ER:] I think that- and I think perhaps we should make an effort to find out more about them. I uh- I read uh read all this of course, and knew it had uh-- and thought that in a way it um uh historically it was um a

changeover uh which seemed almost unnecessary, [Elliott Roosevelt: Mhm.] but I didn't know enough to know whether it had a reason.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Well I see that our time is running out now, so that we'll have to go on to another part of the program.

[Break 13:22-13:27]

[ER:] The most talked of play of the current season in New York is *The Lady's Not for Burning*. Its author is being proclaimed as one of the most brilliant playwrights of our time, so it gives me great pleasure to present to you, for the first time over the radio in the United States, Mr. Christopher Fry, who is my guest in London today. Mr. Fry.

[Christopher Fry:] I appreciate very much this opportunity you've given me to meet you, Mrs. Roosevelt.

[ER:] Well I'm very happy uh to have you with us, Mr. Fry. And the first thing I'd like to as you is, what started you with the idea of this play?

[Christopher Fry:] That's a fairly big question. So many things combine to make a play come into shape. But I know I had one particularly strong thought in writing it. I felt that we were getting into a trough of despair about the world and ourselves, we were understandably depressed and self-analytical. We were very much in the state of mind in which the hero of the play, Thomas Mendip, the part that John Gielgud played in New York, finds himself at the beginning of the play. I met, in hospital at the end of the war, a character who was in very much the same state of mind. He couldn't see how he was going to fit into the world again at all. He was completely despairing but at the same time was able to make an ironic joke of it all. But those, it seemed to me, were hardly the kind of spirits in which to face the complications ahead of us. And- and so I thought, wasn't it possible to see that the full measure of darkness that we were plunging about in, and yet know the joy of it at the same time? The world, I always feel, is fundamentally a spiritual one, and laughter is a unique talent of man. It lifts him, at one guffaw, into a different sphere from all the other animals. It is one of his freedoms, and Thomas Mendip says in the play, "Laughter is an irrelevancy that almost amounts to revelation." And somewhere else he says, "Shall we not suffer as wittily as we can?" And then when Jennet, who is the heroine of the play, and knows she is condemned to death, she says, "If I could sleep," and Thomas answers, "That is the heaven to come. We should be like stars now that it's dark, use our souls up to the last bright dregs and vanish in the morning. Come, don't purse your lips up like a little prude at the humor of annihilation, it is somewhat broad I admit, but we're not children." I've tried to put it in a- in another way, in a play which I've just finished, which is rehearsing at the moment.

[ER:] Oh, you're writing- you're writing another play, then?

[Christopher Fry:] Yes, I just finished it two days before rehearsal started, so it was a very--

[ER:] Two days before rehearsal started! Well that's--

[Christopher Fry:] --they didn't know thing. And I--

[ER:] And now, was the first one uh, in a way an experiment, and is this a continuation of an experiment?

[Christopher Fry:] Well, I don't really call them experiments.

[ER:] You don't.

[Christopher Fry:] I-I-I should call prose plays experimental. The tradition of the theater in-in ancient Greece, medieval England, and right on to the eighteenth century has been a poetic tradition. I shouldn't be at all surprised to learn that when prose was first mooted to carry a whole play, the old hands were, were most dubious, probably, and-and-and said that it couldn't ever possibly be a commercial success.

[ER and Christopher Fry laugh] Theater without poetry, what nonsense.

[ER:] Theater without poetry was impossible! [ER and Christopher Fry laugh]

[Christopher Fry:] But they brought it in and now it seems to me it's time to be reactionary and get on with the native language of the theater again.

[ER:] Well I'm particularly interested in uh your whole desire to face the blackness of the world and yet um find the world worth living in, because um I think what you have touched on is of course particularly important to young people. I think many young people today are having uh a very much harder time than older people. [Christopher Fry: Yes, yes.] Older people have um seen the world go through a number of periods when it was- when everybody was very far down, and seeing it come up again. And um they can keep a- a perspective that goes over more years, but I don't know how it is for young people in Europe, but I think that young people at home in the United States um are having a much harder time than

[Christopher Fry: Yes.]uh older people.

[Christopher Fry:] Yes, yes I think that is very true.

[ER:] Is it true here too?

[Christopher Fry:] Yes, I think so. There has been, I think, in literature, such a despondent attitude, you know, that one--

[ER:] Yes, you're quite right, I think there has been.

[Christopher Fry:] The feeling was that you weren't realistically unless-unless you were being very pessimistic, which gave one no lift for the future at all and for contending with things. [19:33]

[ER:] No. Well I think poetry can give one um a lift. Uh it's always been the language down through the ages uh of inspiration, hadn't it? And it can give one that lift and, when combined with the theater, you can do a great deal for people, I think, that you can't do in any other way. But uh, whether the-the questions that need to be met today-- you said at the beginning that this was a- uh that fundamentally, it always is a spiritual world, and it's on the spiritual level that you have to find the answers. Um But, I wonder whether the questions that we have to meet are many of them not on the spiritual level -- how about that? Some of them are, of course, but aren't there a great many that are not on the spiritual level, and therefore, they present a difficulty that- that uh perhaps is harder to meet.

[Christopher Fry:] Yes, it's very difficult to know where the spiritual ends and the material begins, I think. It's almost impossible to divide them, really.

[ER:] I mean for instance, you take, with our young people- now we had young people who went into World War II um with the knowledge that World War I had been fought, for us, under a slogan of um-- to preserve democracy in the world. Then, World War-- and also, a war to end war. Then we had World War II, and within five years, we are remobilizing people uh who have only just got started to live in

[Christopher Fry: Yes, yes] civilian life. Now you're doing the same. Now how do you answer that problem, because there is a mixture: you've got to have a spiritual reason which will lift you over the material difficulties that you have to face.

[Christopher Fry:] Yes. It's a big question which I'm- I'm trying to answer in this present play, which is rehearsing now, which is about four prisoners of war, who are shut up in a church. It's the only building which is standing in that area and so they've been put inside the church. Um four quite different kinds of men, and the play is about their reactions to each other, how they get on with each other, and they fall asleep and dream four dreams about themselves-- so that each man, each- each actor in the play, is really acting four aspects of himself. what the other three men think of him, and what he is really him- deep down in himself, even though he doesn't know it, it comes out in the dream, you know. And because they're in the church, I think that's reminded them of what they know about the Bible, and so on. The uh stories of the dreams are stories from the Bible, which is to say the first man dreams of Cain and Abel; the second man dreams of David and Absalom; the third man dreams of Abraham and Isaac, and the fourth dreams of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, where they're all in the fiery furnace together. And through that, I have tried to work out some answers to these problems, which it's as I say--

[ER:] It will be a very, very exciting uh play, I should be most anxious to see how um you, you meet it, because I have- have met the questions with um young people, 'course they're different. The young people who were being called back, the young people who um were conscientious objectors in the last war, now face immediately the question. Now you here in this country treated your conscientious objectors, I think perhaps on a more understanding basis than we did. But uh that has to be met again, and very quickly.

[Christopher Fry: Yes.] And um then the young people who hadn't- who were in college, and have their whole uh-- or in school, and suddenly they saw their brothers go through it, now they're going through it too. Um I- I find that- and the girls having the same thing to meet. I-I find it lends itself to drama as nothing I have seen. [Christopher Fry: Yes, yes.] And now, for just one minute, um the announcer must have a word.

[Break 24:44-24:54]

[ER:] Now we come back uh to have a little further talk with Mr. Christopher Fry, the author of *The Lady's Not for Burning*, and now the author of a new play, but he hasn't told me what's the name of the new play!

[Christopher Fry:] The new play is called *A Sleep of Prisoners*. It's a sleep, a noun of assembly, like a sloth of bears.

[ER:] Are you, are you bringing it over to the United States?

[Christopher Fry:] I hope that will be possible.

[ER:] Well I hope very much it will be possible, because I shall watch for it with great interest. When does it go on here?

[Christopher Fry:] It opens in Oxford, first of all [ER: In Oxford.] on April the twenty-third, Saint George's Day.

[ER:] Yes, but when does it come into London?

[Christopher Fry:] Into London on May the fourteenth.

[ER:] May the fourteenth! I might just have a chance on my way home from Geneva to um see it, [Christopher Fry: Unclear] and I'd love to see it here before it comes to me in the United States. And now I want to ask you a little bit more, because you are interested in the reaction about uh what you find, with your young people, and how you think um literature and drama can help in solving some of these problems. Now I have found, on every level of our young people: young marrieds, students, uh young- young people who perhaps are not yet married but are being called into the service for one reason or another -- we have had, uh lately, some investigations of tie-ups between uh criminals and um-- who naturally operate in big cities or wherever there is a chance to gamble, um that seems to be the basis. Horse racing with us, which is-uh does not permit gambling, and so forth -- um tie-ups between the criminal and uh the local, or the state, or even in some cases with national government, the influence is gone. I have found that the effect to that, uh whereas in the past I think most of us, including the young people, would have said, "Well, this is a failure which you're apt to find in human nature, human beings are uh not always good [ER laughs], far from it," and it would have gone ahead without despair about it, uh simply trying to improve it as the chance came. Now I find that a kind of resentment: is this what we are sacrificing for, is this all that democracy or our form of life can produce, and is this what we're asked to go out and live um as soldiers or give up the kind of lives that we want to live and sacrifice in many ways uh to-to continue? And I don't know whether that's any of that here because of course you haven't had the same kind of headline uh sort of uh stories on this sort of thing, but you must have it to a certain extent, and your young people must know because it's-it's one side of human nature, when there's an opportunity, it nearly always comes out. And I wonder what your-what's your reaction on what can be done to help the- the young people of this generation to face these questions.

[Christopher Fry:] Yes. I think it's a very general thing amongst the young people, in possibly all countries, that their eye for right and wrong is becoming extremely acute. Things that they did let pass by before, they--

[ER:] Hasn't that always been the case, that there is always come a point where things which had been hardly noticed suddenly become wrong, and then the person who at that moment does it uh is made to pay for whatever he did without [Christopher Fry: Yes, yes.] any real comeuppance? [ER and Christopher Fry laugh]

[Christopher Fry:] Yes, I think it's the, it's the drive forward that's going on--

[ER:] What's brought about the change in conscience?

[Christopher Fry:] I think the two wars, partly [ER: The two wars.] which are bringing things right through the--

[ER:] Then life must be more worth living on a higher scale.

[Christopher Fry:] Yes, certainly. I think it-it makes all the sensibilities more acute, don't you think?

[ER:] Well--

[Christopher Fry:] For-for right and wrong.

[ER:] How, how then can we use poetry and the drama to- to help uh make this a fruitful thing and yet not to build up a resentment which will stop making it worthwhile living?

[Christopher Fry:] I think uh the drama, poetry has to uh be of the world which we're in as to make it clear that it is not being an escape, not avoiding any issues, but at the same time that it's not being got down by these things, and is all the time uh making one aware, as far as possible, of all the greater qualities which are in man, if they can only come upmost into the surface.

[ER:] That the great qualities that um- how can one show and bring home to people that the great qualities can be on all levels, how can you do that in a- I mean that you don't have to be, let us say, an Oxford graduate, to have great qualities?

[Christopher Fry:] No, that is a very important thing, I think, that one should believe in man as a living creature, not on any particular level. There uh--

[ER:] But, you see, they see so many failures, both on the- in every level. How- how do you- how do you help them to- to hold to that belief in the importance of the individual and the possibilities that lie in every individual?

[Christopher Fry:] I think one can show in the characters that even the- the uh individual which seems a failure has extraordinary qualities, almost miraculous qualities, that being alive at all, indeed, and being a human being at all, in itself, is a kind of miracle. And it's all that side of-of-of living, I think, that one wants to bring out -- as though you'd stepped out onto the world for the first time, and suddenly seen it as though you'd never seen it before, and you'd just come round the corner and there it is -- and surely then all one's um weighing up of it is bound to be a little changed, because of this new, surprising, strange thing which we're coming up against, which is bound to have pitfalls, things going wrong, because it is of such a stupendous pressure, anyway. And for the great things to come out, also there's the- the bad things are bound to be under this great pressure, which it's making all the time.

[ER:] Yes, it's the two side by side, [Christopher Fry: Yes.] of course, it's very hard for a [Christopher Fry: Yes, certainly.] great many people to accept that you cannot have the going-ahead without also having the other. [Christopher Fry: Yes, yes. It is-it is.] That's very hard for them to accept. I've lived a good many years, and as I look back, over the aggregate, I think we've made great strides ahead in the last uh fifty years. Um but I can quite see why the young people don't see it. [33:12]

[Christopher Fry:] Yes, yes, I can, yes.

[ER:] I was talking to um- just before I left the United States, to a young painter, um who has a new idea which I think rather interesting. He is um writing and sketching the history of roads for the moment, but telling it in the language of-- that would be uh easy to understand for a child. And the pictures also of course make it easy to understand, but of course if you take certain roads uh you tell the history of a whole people there. [Christopher Fry: Yes, yes.] And um it seemed to me that um there was a germ in what he was talking about which perhaps would help us all if we could see it more in perspective: what has actually happened in the recognition of the value of a human being over the years. [Christopher Fry: Yes, yes.] Because a great deal has happened, and it's vastly important to us. Um and it's almost the most important thing to develop today, that value of the individual human being, isn't it?

[Christopher Fry:] Yes, very, it is the greatest of importance, I think.

[ER:] Because unless we recognize that- I happen to be Geneva uh bound to work for the Human Rights Commission, and on a covenant which would be legally binding, and the whole point of that is that one should recognize that the individual human being is worth giving certain human rights to.

[Christopher Fry:] Yes. And one should never lose faith in- in that human being.

[ER:] But if you uh, if you can use it uh in- and make it dramatic for people that's the only real way they'll ever understand it. Because without it- uh your gift is at making people realize uh what we can do in a-in a covenant and nobody will ever understand it. Now I'm hoping that that's what you're going right on doing, Mr. Fry! [ER and Christopher Fry laugh]

[Christopher Fry:] Well, I try.

[ER:] I'm sorry our talk has to come to an end, but I'm very grateful to you for being with me today.

[Christopher Fry:] I enjoyed it very much.

[Break 35:48 to 36:03]

[ER:] A child who loses his mother in a crowd is a pretty unhappy youngster, as you know. But what about the child who suddenly loses both parents forever? The orphan. What can he do? That's the plight of thousands of children in Korea today, often war babies, cold and hungry. They need your help through CARE. CARE for Korea quickly turns your ten dollars into a package of warm clothing or of nourishing food for these little refugees. So contribute today to CARE for Korea, 20 Broad Street, New York, or your local CARE office.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] This is Elliott Roosevelt speaking and reminding you that you have been listening to the Eleanor Roosevelt Program, which comes to you each Monday through Friday at this same time. Today's program was recorded in London, and we wish to thank the BBC for making their facilities available to us.

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