

## Charles Prest's Tribute to his father John Prest given at John's Memorial Service on 22nd September



Six months ago we were beginning to plan Dad's 90<sup>th</sup> birthday celebrations. It wasn't to be. Then again, we might have held this thanksgiving service ten years ago after Dad fell from a tree in Jean's garden, broke every bone in his neck and twice stopped breathing while in hospital. We have a great deal to be thankful for.

I cannot remember what the article was about, but I can remember the simile: it was "like dancing with the Bolshoi, or reading history at Balliol". If so, teaching history at Balliol may be like being a premier dancer with the Bolshoi.

And Dad taught history at Balliol for 42 years. That is nearly a century of direct influence: his last students in 1996 may still have more than half their career ahead of them. Balliol's roll-call and reputation ensured a high proportion of students Dad taught would enter public life including, in Chris Patten, a future Chancellor of the University, and in Tom Bingham a future Master of the Rolls, Lord Chief Justice and Senior Law Lord - the obviously outstanding lawyer of his generation.

Dad however did not give a jot about greatness unless it were directed towards the wider good, something that underlay all the political, social and economic thought that he taught. More Gladstone than Disraeli by temperament, his natural inclination was always towards those in difficulty or disadvantaged. So Suey, an unmarried Catholic, was given a home during her pregnancy; Giles, an indebted

student in danger of being sent down, found money credited to his bills; and Roy, whose formal education had been limited, was encouraged as a late-starter in his career at Westland Aircraft. Among all the tributes to him that we have received Dad would immediately have been drawn to the self-deprecating email that began, "As, almost certainly, his most disappointing undergraduate ..." before, I'm sure, warmly rebutting it.

The threads come together in this story known to the family. At the height of her miners' strike unpopularity, Margaret Thatcher was to dine in Oxford. Dad, driving home via Elsfield, saw her limousine, and told us he had in that instant wondered whether it was his duty to accelerate and crash into it. It is inconceivable that he would have done it: respect for democratic process and the rule of law, and above all the commandment 'You shall not kill', were deep within him. But it reflects the quickness of his mind, years of thought about the effect of the corn laws, and his sympathy for those who were struggling.

Dad was one of the first Balliol fellows to buy a house rather than live in College accommodation. He chose Chideock, half way up Shotover Old Road, from where he could walk to College, and from where in the snow and ice of early 1963 Mum, heavily pregnant with me, bicycled into the village. I don't know whether Dad thought this was reckless (my ex post facto opinion) or the confident, carefree happiness of youth (as I'm sure Mum would have had it) but later that year he sold Chideock to his mother and his sister Jean and he and Mum bought The Walled Cottage where they lived, very, very happily, for more than 53 years.

Dad also bought next door Sunnybank before repeating the trick and selling it to Jean who lived there for 40 years, but retaining the building that became his study. That triangle of Wheatley was completed by the Aitchisons who arrived at Ardwick House in 1967, a family of unimaginable sophistication who were even seen to cook spaghetti for an evening meal. Camilla, Serena, Jonathan and I joined forces in , increasingly disastrous Christmas plays and magic shows inflicted upon George, Angela, Mum and Dad. Angela with endless patience indexed Dad's biography of Lord John Russell (Ted Heath's thank you letter from 10 Downing Street is in Dad's bedroom copy) and she drank gin with Mum, each giving the other the excuse to do so.

Julia was born, and Jonathan and I were given our first sips of champagne. A year later she took her first steps by the royal military canal in Kent. Tiffany, the red setter who Dad had once dubbed 'mahogany dogany' because he was one short

of the twenty names he had, with uncharacteristic exaggeration, claimed she had, became Thorley, the English setter, who was dubbed 'four-fleas' by me when that was what Mum removed from his face with a bar of coal-tar soap. All three - Julia, Tiffany and Thorley - were adored (Julia I hope will know this to be a compliment). Only Thorley escaped serious teasing.

Morris dancers performed in the courtyard in return for jugs of beer brought from The Sun, and Mum's birthdays were marked with parades, horses and, on one occasion, the laying out of the entire garden as a board game. Freedom of speech was encouraged: during the 1974 elections The Walled Cottage displayed posters side by side supporting the Tory, Liberal and Labour candidates. Issues of fact were authoritatively determined by recourse to the Encyclopaedia Britannica. I was disciplined (I still maintain unjustly) for throwing Julia's toy dog Terry out of her bedroom window, windows that years earlier had had to be barred to prevent Jonathan's climbing activities and through which a 12-foot snowman had once stared. Holidays came to be spent at Tattels Cottages in the Isle of Wight where a vast map of the island covered an entire wall, where walks and picnics were had with Oxford friends the Hunts and the Jacobs who were never seen in Oxford, and where Dad placed 'jabiru' on the board to beat Mum in a game of Scrabble.

Balliol and Wheatley, professional and personal, were intertwined in many ways. They come together

- in the Balliol alumni who are here today and who also live in Wheatley;
- in Norway, with King Harald V resting on Dad's shoulder at High Table and the long line of au pair girls who helped look after us, most of whom were called Inger and therefore given their own regnal number, and all of whom told us it wasn't a common name;
- in the local and family history that Dad worked at in the last fifteen years of his life and which led to his being the next person after the Queen to drink from the bottle of dubonnet at the Honourable Artillery Company;
- in this church (and I believe he once danced with Miss Theresa Brasier, as she then was, at a St Mary's event) and the College chapel, equally at home in each and equally committed to both;
- in the written but unpublished book about stained glass windows that might have stood side by side with his book about botanic gardening;
- in his love of plants and gardens at The Walled Cottage, Balliol (attested in a fine cartoon of him), and the Oxford Botanic Garden of which he

became a trustee and for which we still have a special key that I am reluctant to surrender;

- and in the kind people from Wheatley and those from Balliol who came to visit him in Yorkshire in the last months of his life - the days I think he most enjoyed while he lived with us.

Dad's body was cremated on 19 July. With him were his Cambridge University Air Squadron tie, dahlias from Jonathan's garden that had once grown in his own mother's garden in Surrey, lavender cut by Mum, and a copy of the many kind things sent to us about him that concluded with the Balliol College prayer. Dad's ashes were interred earlier today in the churchyard here, in the same place as those of his sister Jean had been interred in 2007.