

Jean Quatrine: Tribute

There was so much that Jean enjoyed, so much that she was good at, so much that she did and so much that she experienced that in looking back at her life it is rather difficult to know where to start. So, perhaps we should start from the very beginning.

Jean was born in Peterhead, Aberdeenshire, on the 17th March 1921, to parents George and Margaret Forman. Her father was a master baker – a talent that Jean inherited, for she turned out to be a very good baker herself. She had five brothers: her twin, George; Ian; Alec; and her youngest brothers, twins Robert and Doug.

As a young girl, Jean's formative years were spent in Fraserburgh – where by all accounts she had a happy childhood in the company of her siblings. She enjoyed the lighthouse, the harbour, skimming stones across the water; and she loved the countryside and being outside - a pleasure that stayed with her throughout her adult life as well.

Jean left school when she was 14 and her one regret, perhaps, was that she was not able to study further and go on to university. She was a very bright girl who read widely and voraciously – and indeed she was recommended for a scholarship. But it was not to be, because in that time and place the expectation was for boys, not girls, to enter further education and she was, effectively, not allowed to pursue that path. There's no denying that Jean felt the unfairness of this; but there's also no denying that it does not seem to have held her back. Her thirst for knowledge, her reading, her interest in the arts and so much more continued unabated throughout her life.

The family were by now located in Aberdeen, and after leaving school Jean worked as a nanny for a local doctor followed by various other jobs, including working in a hospital.

As a young girl Jean's thirst for adventure was not far from the surface. When she was about 16 she visited a travelling show and had a ride on what was known as the "wall of death". This was like a circular chamber where a motorcycle rode round and round, gathering speed and momentum until it was racing high around the structure almost on a horizontal plane. Jean was on the back of that motorbike! She said it was exhilarating – but she dreaded to think what would have happened if her parents had known! The story goes that she was also invited to run away with the circus after that escapade – very wisely, she declined the offer.

With the onset of the Second World War, Jean enlisted with the WAAF – the Women's Auxiliary Air Force – in 1939, when she was 18 years old. She trained as a Radio Communications operator – and for the next few years she played her part in history, met some famous Royal Air Force heroes... and suffered major personal loss.

In 1940 Jean was posted to the Number 11 Group nightfighter squadron based at West Malling, Kent. Here she made the acquaintance of Guy Penrose Gibson – a famous pilot who went on to become Wing Commander of the equally famous Dambusters 617 squadron.

The following year, now posted to RAF Tangmere, near Chichester, Jean met, and came to know well, one of this country's most famous war heroes: Group Captain Douglas Bader. Bader was a double amputee, and Jean was on radio duty the night he was shot down over occupied France; he had to leave behind one of his artificial legs that became trapped when he had to bail out of his crashing Spitfire. She was also on duty for a mission that involved a single aircraft peeling off from a raid, especially to parachute a replacement leg for Bader who was being held in a prisoner of war camp.

As well as Gibson and Bader, Jean met other fighter pilot "aces" such as Hugh Dundas and Johnnie Johnson. This is the stuff of legend, and Jean was part of it.

These few short years were tumultuous for Jean – a rollercoaster of events and emotions. In 1942 she married Corporal Alexander Wilson Campbell – who she'd met while on leave back in Aberdeen. Tragically, her new husband was killed aged just 25 during the Battle of El Alamein in Egypt that same year. The couple's son, Sandy, was born the following February. So in that short space of time Jean knew the happiness of love, romance and marriage; the sadness of losing her husband; and the joy of having her first son.

She suffered a second major loss in 1943 when her twin brother George was killed during a bombing raid over Eastern Germany.

We cannot know what Jean must have gone through during those years – we can perhaps only imagine how difficult a time it must have been for her. But what we do know is that she was a woman of strength, courage and character – and those attributes saw her through.

After the war, over 1946 to 1947 Jean met and married her second husband – an RAF Intelligence Officer called John Quatrine. The couple moved to Cricklewood in North West London – the upper floor flat of number 30 Gladstone Park Road to be precise - where Jean's second son, Tony, was born in 1948.

There are happy memories from this time. Among other things Jean was very skilled at arts and crafts, and she loved to make things – so there was always lots going on. And she was very sociable; she loved to meet new people and one of her greatest qualities was her ability to make friends. So the house was often full, with neighbours and local mums and dads popping in and out, and various kids running around. These were good times – and it's nice to remember Jean in this way.

In the early 50s the family moved to 13 Harpenden Road, Wanstead, which is where Jean had her third son, Chris, in 1958. This remained Jean's home for the rest of her life.

In terms of her career, Jean did a great many jobs. She was resourceful and capable, and among other things she worked as a nanny; she worked in the retail business; she was a housekeeper; and she took in boarders at the house. And after her husband John very sadly died in 1973, Jean and Tony took over and carried on running his wine and spirits delivery business until the early 1980s when it folded. Later she was involved in a second family business with Tony – helping out in the shop, selling models and games.

In the late 1970s, with typical determination and strong will, Jean faced a period of some adversity. She was diagnosed with a rare and very serious illness – Guillain-Barre Syndrome. The symptoms are flu-like but develop into loss of feeling in one’s limbs – especially the hands and feet – and difficulty breathing, among other things. In Jean’s case it was serious and for a while things were touch and go, and she was in intensive care at the London Hospital. She was, in fact, in hospital for six months and underwent a long period of rehabilitation where she had to learn how to walk again. Throughout though Jean remained positive and determined. She never felt sorry for herself, and she made good recovery. What a remarkable woman.

Let’s now take a moment to hear some personal thoughts and memories from Monica and Tony.

“96 is a great age to have lived to. For the vast majority of time she was fit and well enough to enjoy life, retaining a bright and sparkling mind almost until the end. Her history is well known to most of us. Born in a time when options for women were much more limited but that didn’t stop her from always doing her best, getting the most out of life, and loving and caring for people.

Mum, Grandy, Jeannie, Kirsty and Q were just some of the names to address her out of affection. A very warm welcome awaited you when you visited and she was, back in the day, the Scottish high tea queen. She made a mean scone and oatcake. One of my first introductions into the family was just such a meal.

An avid reader with a keen exploring mind ever open to new ideas, people and cultures she relished the variety of people and experiences in London. She loved to debate and equally enjoyed a good gossip. Gene Kelly was the bee's knees, not as refined as Fred Astaire but oh so athletic. She appreciated strong male characters. In latter days she was a fan of the fictional Jack Reacher (ex military police colonel and righter of wrongs) and Jamie Fraser, Scottish Laird in the Outlander books and TV series. Films, books, nature, cooking, crafting, music: Grandy would lap it all up and make so many friends because of that openness to shared new experiences.

She was my mother in law, second mother and friend. We all have our own memories and some of us shared memories. For that we are all richer and an inextricable part of her life's tapestry. Each of us has been blessed to have been part of her life whatever our role or relationship. So she will live on in our hearts and memories. For that on behalf of us all, both those present and those who cannot be here, I will simply say thank you."

"Mum, she brunged us up good, Sandy, Chris and myself. Though she said she cried when I was born because firstly I was not a girl and secondly I pre-empted Christmas Day by a week; but she did get, so she said, a largely trouble free baby. She always stood by me when I needed it. She nursed me through measles, mumps, migraines and frequent visits to the dentist for fillings and extractions because I had very soft teeth. Her story telling, ministrations, and cheery encouragement would sooth and bring rest. In her last years I was able to reciprocate through the time of her failing health.

Mum was a great cat lover and nurtured many over the years. A neighbour's cat and Ink, one of Sarah's cats, continued to visit her till her last day at home. When I had the business "Games People Play" she frequently served in the shop in Notting Hill Gate. She enjoyed seeing and sometimes meeting well known personalities that passed by – for example, John Cleese. She was very popular with customers young and old.

Providing good food was a key part of the hospitality she gave to family, friends or strangers. Unfortunately she pandered to my sweet tooth with homemade jams, rock cakes, Swiss milk toffee made by Granddad, and thick white bread lavished with butter and a crunchy layer of white sugar.

Both she and dad having lived through the hardships of the War and of post-war rationing she would spoil us with cakes, biscuits, sweets and crisps. Sandy and I made ample use of a friendly neighbourhood sweet shack called "Marge's". We were frequent visitors with our old money farthings, pennies, three penny bits, tanners, bobs and very rarely a half-crown. Marge also stocked fireworks in the days when there was far less concern about health and safety. We knew we had to handle them carefully. We were encouraged to buy and use jumping jacks, sparklers and sundry hand-held fireworks (golden and silver rains). With mum's help there was always a guy to be made, pennies to be begged with it, a bonfire to be built to burn the guy, and to cook tatties and sausages. Friends were always invited to share the fun.

Chris was born 10 years later than me. He was welcomed, loved, and nurtured equally. She embraced being an older mum, sharing different joys with him. Sandy and I were of the radio generation and wind up gramophones with 78 rpm records. Chris shared with mum TV and the new media. Enjoyable entertainment was high on mum's list of priorities for all of us. As our own children joined the family mum finally had a girl to care for. She gave them loving attention, entertainment and more good food. She was such a big help, allowing us to get on with our working lives. Sandy's children, Richard, Alec and Ross and Chris' Alexander and Charlotte will also recall that same loving attention that was given to them

Neighbours' children were cared, and winning many hearts and minds while making lasting friendships with parents (as Geordie and Cathy will attest). She showed us how to live well and with a generous spirit. I hope as sons we have learned well and passed on the same approach to our own children.

Mum: thank you for everything, sleep well in the woodland that will grow around you and may the wild wood that will grow here benefit from your green fingers."

Let's now take a moment or two to think about Jean's character; some special memories; and some of the things that she loved.

Well – Jean loved life; she had an adventurous spirit and was open to new experiences. When she moved to Cricklewood in the 1940s, she embraced and enjoyed all that London had to offer. She loved the ambience and feel of the place and seeing the sights – visiting museums and famous houses whenever she could; and she enjoyed the entertainment - especially the cinema. She had a wide taste in films – musicals; thrillers; war films; foreign films; and comedies; she loved them all. A particular favourite was the Alec Guinness Ealing comedy – the Lavender Hill Mob. And as we heard from Monica, Jean was also a big fan of the great American musical stars of the day – the likes of Gene Kelly, Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, and Danny Kaye.

When the family later moved to Wanstead, Jean was in her element – there were wide-open spaces nearby in the form of Wanstead Park and Wanstead Flats; and, just as when she was a child in Fraserburgh, she loved being outdoors with the sights, sounds and smells of nature.

And there are some lovely memories from this time. Jean was, as we heard earlier, widely read – and that was something she always kept up. But she was also a great storyteller herself – and Tony remembers the tales that she would make up to entertain the children. There was one called, I think, “The Little Leaf” – an enchanting story about the adventures of a couple of leaves. The great pity, perhaps, is that she did not write down these stories. But then again, if she had maybe some of their spontaneity would have been lost - and, in any event, they have stayed in her children’s minds to this day.

One of Jean's most endearing qualities was her contentment and her fulfilment with her lot in life. She never really wanted anything much for herself, and she was always happy with what she had. That is a nice way to live your life. I did learn from Sandy though, that she always had one small wish – which was to have a ride in a Rolls Royce. How that wish came to be granted is a lovely story.

In the mid 1950s, when the family was located in Cricklewood, there was to be a kids' fancy dress party as part of an exhibition event at the Dollis Hill Post Office Research facility. The theme was science and technology. So giving vent to her exceptional craft making skills, Jean created a full body robot outfit for Tony – who was about six at the time; and a mad scientist outfit for Sandy, who was about 11. Sandy had the control box, which – in one's imagination, rather than in reality – operated the robot.

Now, those imaginary controls did not function too well. You see, the ground was damp from rainfall the previous night; and on the way in Tony, with his vision restricted to only straight ahead through the narrow slit in the head section of the robot costume, took a tumble on the edge of a temporary walkway that had been placed over the wet grass. He landed flat on his front, and because the outfit Jean had made was so realistic poor Tony couldn't get up – his limbs were rigidly encased in the unbendable corrugated cardboard that formed the robot's arms and legs. But with the help of some visitors they managed to get him upright and into the fancy dress competition intact – where he and his mad scientist brother won first prize!

That itself is a good story – and testament to Jean's skill at arts and crafts. But where does the Rolls Royce come in?

Well, Tony wanted to stay in character and walk home in his costume. So they all set off at a slow pace, clutching the various prizes they'd won. At the exit gate, a large silver car pulled up alongside them, the occupant of which was none other than one of the judges from the competition they had just won; and that judge happened to be none other than a film star of the day – Michael Rennie, a dashing English actor best known for starring in the 1950's sci-fi movie, "The Day the Earth Stood Still".

The silver car was, of course, a Rolls Royce - so not only did Jean have a brush with fame, but she got her one wish fulfilled. And when Michael Rennie dropped them all off at home the neighbours were surprised and impressed with this rather posh arrival - which is why they gave Jean the nickname "Queenie".

It is anecdotes and stories like this that make a life. Jean must have loved every minute of that evening, and I hope you will love having that wonderful memory of her.

A bit later on Jean took a shine to one of Sandy's friends; this was Joe Brown, of "Joe Brown and the Bruvvers" fame – a rock and roll singer who is still going today. Jean met him before he became really famous in the late 1950s and early 60s – he'd come around to the house and join in jam sessions with Sandy and his mates. Jean cooked him macaroni cheese, which was his favourite, and even after he became famous he would still pop round from time to time and take Jean out for a spin in his Aston Martin. Another car ride that she loved!

Jean enjoyed so much in life. We've heard about her arts and crafts; her reading; and her love of films. The arts and crafts, by the way, was another source of income for Jean. She was so good at it that people wanted to buy her creations – and she was well known for making wonderful Christmas decorations and greetings cards. She was commissioned by the Financial Times, no less, to make some Christmas crackers out of the pink newspaper itself - they were something special.

As well as all this, Jean enjoyed gardening and flower arranging. She was a frequent visitor to Kew Gardens, where she became friendly with the groundskeepers, and got to see parts of the gardens and learnt things that would otherwise not have been available to her. Sometimes she visited on her own; sometimes there were trips with friends, or family picnics.

Jean also liked going to the seaside, and she enjoyed visiting her homeland of Scotland on holiday. And she had a memorable visit to Canada, celebrating her 70th birthday there whilst visiting her nephews living there.

Indeed her nephew Raymond, who is in Canada, sent his own personal tribute, which you can read in the order service. Among other things it talks of the enormous impact Jean had; her caring nature; and her lasting influence – as well as many fond personal memories. And we have yet another alias for Jean – because Raymond's nickname for her was "Ontay". And he closed his tribute to Jean with these words:

“The reality is that I have to say her name for the last time. But not in a sad sort of way. She’s with you all today. Look around. Check your heart. She’s certainly in mine. Aren’t you Ontay”.

Jean took pleasure from various television shows over the years – she was a great fan of Patrick McGoochan, who starred in “Danger Man” and “The Prisoner”. And she enjoyed period dramas such as “Poldark”, “The Onedin Line” and “Upstairs Downstairs”. The old comedians like Morcombe and Wise, Charlie Drake and Tommy Cooper were also big hits with Jean – she had great fun watching them.

She was lucky enough to see Judy Garland live at the London Palladium. And later, a favourite was the West End musical “Cats”, where she was particularly thrilled by the staging of the show and really admired the intricacies of the design and production. And it’s so good that Jean was not only highly entertained by all of this – but that she took satisfaction from a deeper appreciation from all that went into it.

Jean liked a nice single malt whiskey from time to time - in fact she swore by its health giving properties (and given her long life, I think she was probably right!). And she was a great one for special occasions. She loved celebrating Burn’s Night, and Christmas was a favourite time for her. At the stroke of midnight on New Year’s Eve, Jean always liked to go “first footing” – seeing in the New Year with a sense of hope and joyousness.

In terms of her character, Jean was a very special woman. As we've reflected back over her life, we've seen what a courageous, stoic and strong person she was. She was also kind, intelligent, compassionate, cheerful - and quite simply grateful for all that she had, with a complete lack of airs and graces.

Jean very much enjoyed the company of others and, especially as she grew in age and wisdom, she liked to "hold court" and adopted the role of a doyen. One definition of a doyen is: "a person considered to be knowledgeable or uniquely skilled as a result of long experience in some field of endeavor." And Jean certainly fitted the bill of being knowledgeable and skilled as a result of her long experience in the unique endeavour that is life itself.

Her real hallmark was indeed the way in which she touched the lives of others. Jean was a genuine and loyal friend to many – and she offered her friendship openly and unconditionally. She was interested in other people and she had the knack of always making others feel welcome and valued. That is a rare quality, and it was repaid many times over – because throughout her life Jean knew the love and friendship of a great many people including, in her advancing years, the carers that helped looked after her and became very fond of her.

I'm reminded of a quote from Thomas Aquinas: "There is nothing on the earth more to prize than friendship." Jean had that prize and that gift – and that is something in which we can all rejoice.

And that gift extended to bridging the generation gap – because Jean connected very well with children and young people too. In fact, I think she was an unofficial grandmother to a great many children over the years.

Above all, Jean loved her family – and having had three sons, she was especially delighted when her granddaughters Sarah and Charlotte arrived on the scene.

Here then, was a woman who gave love and knew love; a woman who met life's setbacks with dignity and courage and whose motto was: "never give up". Here was a woman who touched the lives of others in so many positive, lasting, ways. Here was a woman who knew what life was all about, and knew how to live that life to the full – with gusto, with an ever enquiring mind that remained sharp, and with a spirit that even old age could not dampen.

Although she became frailer during the last two to three years Jean remained ever cheerful and her mental capacity did not diminish. It was only in the last few weeks of her life that Jean faded, and we shall not dwell on that – far better that we celebrate the entirety of her well lived life. Suffice to say, though, that she dealt with her final days much as she approached her life – that is, on her own terms and without complaint.

In the end, in Sandy's words, it was her body that finally gave up on her and Jean died peacefully on the 9th of August. She will be much missed.