

Tributes to John Naylor

John Naylor always spoke of having led a happy life, but it was initially a slightly constrained one. Fred and Margaret Naylor had two children, John and Eileen. John recalled his parents as having a strict approach to child-rearing and imposing frugality, if not quite deprivation, at home. A car and a newly built house in Mottingham bore testament to the fact that John's limited selection of clothes stemmed from thriftiness, rather than poverty. To this can no doubt be traced John's almost excessive generosity in his own later life.

John did not lack affection. His mother idolised him and he knew that his father loved him too, albeit less effusively. He had happy memories of primary school, including his confusion at the jars of 'God-liver oil' on the shelves. Family history has it that his editorial instincts surfaced young. At ten, John visited the newsagents to cancel his sister Eileen's regular delivery of *Sunny Stories* to replace it with something more edifying.

The Naylor family regularly went away on holidays, especially to Clermont in the east of Belgium, where Fred had made friends with a family he met while serving in the Royal Flying Corps – the predecessor of the RAF - in the First World War.

The outbreak of World War II disrupted John's early education. Initially evacuated to north Wales with his mother and sister, John returned to London after a short period to live with his father. He attended Eltham College and spoke of 'inspirational teachers', who no doubt played a significant role in John achieving the distinction of becoming a state scholar at King's College, London in 1950. That rare status meant that John received a generous grant from the state whilst studying for his history degree. But Eltham was also where he made a number of good friends, of whom one, Richard Ellington, is with us today. His closest Eltham friend of all was Brian Southam, who died in 2010. It would have meant a very great deal to John that his son Andrew is also with us today.

At King's, John immersed himself in journalism, editing the college student newspaper and writing for a literary magazine. He began a romance with Elizabeth, the young woman who would become his wife for more than sixty years. Elizabeth also wrote for the newspaper, often chivvied along by John for her contributions as print deadlines came and went.

Like many of his contemporaries, John would have liked to avoid National Service. He had turned down a place at Oxford, who insisted on undergraduates completing it first, for one

at King's, who didn't, on the off chance it might be abolished in the interim. He duly joined the RAF, following his father. Although John detested basic training, he proved fortunate in being allocated to a relatively benign post in the psychological testing unit at the Cardington base near Bedford.

John and his colleagues in the unit must have seemed a somewhat rarefied band, with their shared love of literature and classical music. John was broke most of the time, but earned a little extra by offering an ironing service. A friend from that time in the RAF, Patrick Rossborough, sent Elizabeth some splendid memories of John:

In John's career as a National Serviceman at RAF Cardington his duties involved giving intelligence tests to recruits and interpreting the results so that they were fitted into the right job. The job he himself had got threw him in with a wildly assorted team. including actors, journalists, artists, accountants and the only non-commissioned baronet in the RAF. He played the tuba in the station band.

John found the life unexpectedly congenial, with lots of time for reading Stendhal and Proust. He also volunteered to teach history to a pair of flight sergeants who needed academic qualifications to become warrant officers. He did it impeccably, but couldn't hide his embarrassment at having to explain WW2 events which his pupils had experienced at first hand. He was a lot happier when he was instrumental in creating an entirely-fictional recruit (AC2 Gatling-Fenn) and inserting him into the system to see how far he could go. (Quite a way)

John and Elizabeth married in 1956. John became a teacher at William Penn School, then based in Peckham, before its relocation to Dulwich. John was assigned to the grammar stream, established to cope with the first wave of the baby boom.

His commitment to history led to John beginning an MA. His tutor, Michael Howard, recommended him to Batsford to write *Waterloo*, in their British Battles series - a feat he accomplished alongside his full time job, but only by working into the small hours. So impressed were Batsford, they offered him a job. After that he joined Methuen, where his publishing career really took off. Not only did he become Managing Director and later Chairman of the company, he also became Managing Director of their acquisition, Routledge. Thus he followed his great friend Brian Southam - and finally inherited the

Critical Heritage series, which had been dreamt up around the Naylor dining table but rejected by Batsford, and thus rehomed at Routledge.

Gill Davies worked with John at Methuen, and would like to share with you some of her own thoughts and memories today:

Gill

How can one do justice to John as a publisher? I could remind you of the distinguished books he published but I never heard John boast about his books. In fact he tended to underplay his part in their success

What I want to talk about today is The Man. I think that to know the man is to understand why he was such a good publisher. John inspired his colleagues to do our very best to earn the right to be called 'a publisher'. He taught us to be sceptical. To develop rigour in our judgements. To care about what we published. To live with risk, because you cannot escape it. Never to neglect attention to detail, where the devil resides, as he often liked to say. He insisted we be enthusiastic about what we published, otherwise we had no business working with books. And he taught us never to overlook the psychology and the emotion that lay below the surface – that of our authors as well as ourselves. None of that is easy to teach, but he was a great teacher.

I have been in touch with many former colleagues since John died. Without exception, they have been remarkably consistent in what they said. He was so kind, so helpful, so patient, so generous, so witty, so articulate.

Helen Fraser said to me that John was the very best first boss she could ever have had. She had learned so much from him. Enough to go on to become the managing director of Penguin. John was my third and longest serving boss, and from whom I learned the most. He started gently but kept a close eye on me, cunningly disguised as impromptu visits, as he just happened to be passing. 'My dear. What interesting delights are you working on?', he would say, and then patiently and charitably dissect what I was mulling over at the time. It was that analysis that really helped me sort out what was an idea, and what was an idea that might work.

It takes years to make a publisher. Whilst instinct and knowledge of the field in which one is publishing play a large part, the rest is down to gaining experience. If one was lucky, there would be someone, like John, who was prepared to spend a great deal of time chatting about projects, sharing his own experiences, helping us to think our way through and around them until we had reached the happy spot where we could answer the question, 'If it was my money being invested in this book, would I go ahead?'

Great patience is needed to bring someone on like this. When John settled down with you, he seemed to have all the time in the world. No pressure. He was also the most empathetic of men, deeply sensitive to how a young editor could be fatally undermined by a sudden loss of confidence. He 'held' us. That is why he was such a good teacher.

There are so many stories about John. Merylyn Julian, then an editorial assistant, recalled that with a few quick flicks through a new book, John always seemed to find a 'typo'. 'Error in the Persian carpet. Not to worry, my dear. Introduced so as not to offend the Divine Maker.' And then one day, when someone came in the worse for wear, he said, 'What you need is a good breakfast. Off to the greasy spoon you go. And don't forget the orange juice!', whilst proffering a five pound note. He was in his element at the Friday editorial meetings where we presented ideas for books we hoped would be accepted for publication. I will never forget his opening words for a book to be written by Richard Wilkinson, whom he had published before. For some reason, Wilkinson had moved to an unanticipated subject. John introduced it thus: 'Just as Rimbaud was drawn to visit Abyssinia, Richard Wilkinson has chosen to write about public health.' After that introduction, who could have refused John.

This affectionate and eloquent man was nobody's fool. As Jane Armstrong said, 'There were no flies on John'. Indeed he relished pouncing on the idiocies of life. One of his favourite expressions was 'A higher form of bunkum' often flung out when he heard pronouncements from the top layer of management. He sniffed out nonsenses before the rest of us had begun to notice them.

Oh the words, the expressions with which we became so familiar! 'Needs must, my dear', was John's rallying cry when one had something objectionable to deal with. 'Never let the best be the enemy of the good' was brilliant advice offered when one was foolish enough to be straining for perfection. John von Knorring wrote to me from The States, 'None of us will be able to emulate John's unique ability with language or his familiarity with wide literature, in all areas.' And he has never forgotten John's gift for 'comic irony'.

After John left New Fetter Lane, in painful circumstances, he continued to keep in touch with many of us. Occasionally, I would lunch with him alone. Whatever I was doing he seemed to have a good understanding of it. I thought, when I moved to Higher Education, that I would be able to shock him with the incompetencies of that sector, but no, he was up to scratch on that too. His knowledge, along with his memory, seemed encyclopaedic. His judgement cut through the spurious and the redundant. All of which is why he was such a good publisher.

When one looks back at life, just who made the difference? In my professional life, it was unquestionably John. He stretched the mind and through his company, he

injected energy and enthusiasm. He loved a good argument (he was a passionate man), but it is the laughter that we all remember. And the wisdom. So many times since have I thought, 'I wonder what John would make of this?' And I really cannot say better than that of anyone.

Let us now enjoy an extract from one of John's favourite works, Anthony Powell's twelve-volume cycle, *A Dance to the Music of Time*. The title and the opening scene-setting refer to the painting by Poussin reproduced in your order of service.

From *A Question of Upbringing* by Anthony Powell

For some reason, the sight of snow descending on fire always makes me think of the ancient world—legionaries in sheepskin warming themselves at a brazier: mountain altars where offerings glow between wintry pillars; centaurs with torches cantering beside a frozen sea—scattered, unco-ordinated shapes from a fabulous past, infinitely removed from life; and yet bringing with them memories of things real and imagined. These classical projections, and something in the physical attitudes of the men themselves as they turned from the fire, suddenly suggested Poussin's scene in which the Seasons, hand in hand and facing outward, tread in rhythm to the notes of the lyre that the winged and naked greybeard plays. The image of Time brought thoughts of mortality: of human beings, facing outward like the Seasons, moving hand in hand in intricate measure: stepping slowly, methodically, sometimes a trifle awkwardly, in evolutions that take recognisable shape: or breaking into seemingly meaningless gyrations, while partners disappear only to reappear again, once more giving pattern to the spectacle: unable to control the melody, unable, perhaps, to control the steps of the dance.

The reason we are all here in this locale today is that John had simply wanted to visit Dulwich Picture Gallery to see some of Poussin's work. Elizabeth was more concerned about finding somewhere to live, but John assured her it was the kind of place there was sure to be an estate agent. Those have proved prophetic words indeed. Sure enough, and after the Gallery visit, they found a flat in Thurlow Park Road and have hardly moved from there since.

When James was born in 1964, John and Elizabeth had moved from their first flat to their home for the next seventeen years - a flat in Chestnut House on Chestnut Road. Their final move to Pymers Mead came in 1980.

Despite his love of music, John had never learnt to play an instrument himself. Yet there are signs of influence from an early age. He heard music on the radio, of course, but also recalled being taken to the opera by his father. With their shared love of music, John and Elizabeth's home is full of classical DVDs and CDs, and boxes of opera and concert programmes.

Many of you here today can speak of John's influence on you. Elizabeth's youngest sister Frances knew him from childhood.

Frances

When my sisters, Anne and Esme, and I talk about John as we have a lot in recent weeks the same themes keep recurring – the kindness, the generosity, his learning, his real attention to what you were saying, the laugh.

I can't really remember a time when my sister was just Elizabeth and not John 'n' Elizabeth as I first met him when I was four. He has always been there – a benign and kindly presence who invited you to talk about what you were doing, showed genuine interest and involvement in one's concerns, listened respectfully and offered invariably wise and constructive advice. He possessed a genius for encouragement. If it is said to be the duty of the old to encourage the young, he started very early. On a personal level, in difficult times I knew I could depend on his generosity and support, as indeed I did. In happier times, he agreed to act as my father of the bride to my great delight. In some large measure he was responsible for much of my cultural education – never in a directive way but simply by sharing his own enthusiasms. There were gaps, of course – heavy metal and reggae did not figure. He was a wonderful companion on visits to galleries, great houses and cathedrals and always enhanced the experience with his knowledge and an apposite anecdote. I will always remember, for example, standing outside Chartres Cathedral listening to John explain how it only escaped destruction because the revolutionary government couldn't manage the demolition. His skill in threading historical events into a coherent pattern seemed astonishing to those of us who learned their history in disparate and unrelated chunks. When in later years John and Elizabeth made time to accompany us on visits to places of interest, his comment afterwards would often be, "ça vaut le détour" which made one feel absurdly pleased. Probably the most erudite man I shall ever know – he shared his knowledge freely and without condescension as if between equals.

He was a most generous and entertaining host and with Elizabeth's wonderful cuisine created some very special times around the table at Pymers Mead, Chestnut House and Thurlow Park Road. All of us, his brothers in law particularly, will miss the breadth, depth and eclectic nature of the discussions, which while they necessarily involved differences of view, never became adversarial. As a guest John was a delight, courteous and endlessly appreciative. Though his culinary tastes were wide, even he had his limits – rhubarb was not a favourite. Afterwards there was always the elegantly written note in that distinctive hand. A letter from John on any occasion was something to treasure.

My sisters and I have cause to be grateful to him for many kindnesses, for being a lovely and supportive brother-in-law, a much loved and respected uncle and great

uncle but perhaps most of all for the dedication and loving devotion to our dear Elizabeth for over sixty one years. So many of his wonderful qualities we see living on in James and his grand-daughters thanks in no small part to his and Elizabeth's approach to parenting and grandparenting.

The last few years have been so very hard in many ways but the essential John remained – the courtesy and concern for others and best of all, the heartwarming smile. In closing, Anne, Esme and I appreciate beyond measure the ways in which John enriched our lives and thank Elizabeth for choosing our senior brother in law so well.

With such cultured parents, it is no surprise that it would rub off on their son. While other children sat through commercial panto, at eleven James was sitting through Wagner. He suspects his parents worked out that taking their son to the opera and the South Bank cost no more than a babysitter. But when he later struck out for punk and New Wave, it was John who subsidised his purchase of a donkey jacket if just, in his words, "to have a flying picket in the house".

Before we continue with the tributes to John, let's enjoy a second prelude from Bach's The Well-Tempered Clavier:

Musical Interlude

The Well-Tempered Clavier, Book I, Prelude in F minor - JS Bach

In the Seventies John and Elizabeth developed a keen appetite for walking in the Dolomites and the Alps and visited many ski resorts, such as Saas-Fee in Switzerland, off-season. And in later years, John and Elizabeth made numerous cultural visits to the likes of Rome, Vienna, Sicily and former East Germany.

In contrast to the family trips, John made countless business trips around the world, to Frankfurt for the Book Fair of course, but also to New York (at least twenty times), Chicago and the west coast of the USA and even Australia and New Zealand. More often than not, John would travel out a night early to get to the opera, and most frequently the Met. But that all came to a halt when Associated Book Publishers were taken over in 1987, and, in the way of these things, the top tier of management, including John, was cut.

John had acquired considerable business nous in the course of his work in publishing. It made some sense, therefore, that he should take up a role within the Enterprise Initiative launched by the Department of Trade and Industry. His work involved writing up assessments of small-to-medium enterprises – the so-called SMEs – in the course of which

he became passionately interested in the businesses under scrutiny. As always, he treated all-comers with dignity, whilst helping many businesses take off. He produced a report on SMEs for the department and Number 10 in 1997.

By then, John had become a proud grandfather to Philippa and Emily. He connected with Philippa through music and with Emily through her verbal dexterity and a shared love of history; and their respective talents are of course on display today.

John much enjoyed visiting the British Library and the National Archives, preferring research to writing – notably for Brian Southam, whose book *Jane Austen and the Navy*, published in 2001, owed a happy debt to his old friend.

In his last years, John's formidable intellectual powers were gradually diminished by dementia. But he continued to be incapable of anything but charm and courtesy. After his first fall in February 2017, he found himself in the Clinical Decision Unit. Opposite, a fellow patient was shouting repeatedly for his lunch, only to complain about it when it arrived. "Here," he said, looking over to John, "what do you think of this food? It's rubbish, isn't it?" With a slight incline of the head, thinking seriously about the question, John replied "I think it is very well cooked and attractively presented." There was silence after that.

John was soon home, and shortly afterwards, Funke Odelola became John's principal carer, alongside the family, during the last year of John's life. She had the ability to uncover the core of John that had never disappeared, despite his illness. She would like to say a few words about him...

Funke

I first met John in March 2017; he was recovering from a fall and needed some help in the mornings; I worked with an agency at the time, so the care manager took me round to meet both him and Elizabeth. One of things John needed help with, unknown to me was shaving and as I listened to the manager tell them that , 'yes, she can shave' my heart sank because there was John with a full beard and all I could think of was that by the time I finished with him, he would look in the mirror and hate me instantly.

Anyway, the next morning came, what was supposed to be one hour turned into two hours but John sat patiently through it all. When we finished, he touched his cheek and said to me, “ My dear, well done; it feels so smooth”. That was the moment I realized that with John I had struck gold; he was full of so much praise for everything I did that morning.

As the days went by the relationship grew stronger, the morning sessions became an important part of his day it seemed. It started off by me saying; good morning John, how are you today? He would reply, ‘all the better the better for seeing you’. Then he would go on to ask about my children and how my journey into work had been. Two of his greatest concerns were whether or not he was paying enough for all my hard work and how the children were doing, especially my son. Eventually we started going out for walks round the neighbourhood, to the park and sometimes we would just sit under the trees in front of the estate watching the world go by. Anytime people stopped to say hello, John was ever so charming and would engage them in conversation which was normally about the architecture of the area.

As the dementia slowly gained more hold, John started withdrawing further and further but he never lost his charming nature. If I said, John shall we go out today? His response would always end with an enquiry as to whether or not I was ok with his decision. Even though he did not want the television on, he would ask if I wanted to watch it, wanted something to drink, eat or read. During the last few days of John’s life there were days when I had to work alone, on one, he looked at me and whispered ‘Bless you my dear’. In all the months I spent with John, he never lost his temper. Whenever he did not want to do anything he would calmly make it known that he had no wish to do whatever it was. That was the John I knew; a man who was always thinking about the other person.

So John, though the time has come when I must bid you farewell, I know that I will still see you as I continue on my journey, blessing me along the way and always making sure I am earning enough money but not working too hard.

John’s love of poetry was broad and lifelong. His last work in publishing was as a non-executive director at Carcanet, one of the country’s leading specialist poetry presses. The

idea in the following reading from Shelley that thoughts might survive the individual as the bed for love is entirely fitting for a man who really did believe in the literary canon.

Reading

Music, when soft voices die - Percy Bysshe Shelley

Music, when soft voices die,

Vibrates in the memory;

Odours, when sweet violets sicken,

Live within the sense they quicken.

Rose leaves, when the rose is dead,

Are heaped for the beloved's bed;

And so thy thoughts, when thou art gone,

Love itself shall slumber on.

James

Shortly before my father died, one of my friends asked which was his favourite book. After such a long life of reading, writing, commissioning and publishing books, that seemed a bravely simple question, but oddly enough, there is an official answer. And that is *La Vie de Henry Brulard*, by Stendhal. He was surely thinking of all of us – along with many others - when he said he'd never actually met anyone else who had read it.

Thanks to a recent translation, I've explored it on your behalf. It's a memoir about Stendhal's childhood in Grenoble, but an unusual one. It is written in real time, or something close to it, and it claims faithfulness not to the events it describes, but to the act of remembering. It's astonishingly fresh, 180 or so years after its composition, and it makes Stendhal come alive. In his sheer immediacy, he lives on.

Stendhal freely admits that he is a radical with aristocratic tastes. He is all for the people, but he'd rather not live as one of them. He has very strong, sometimes implacable opinions about artistic merit. He is contemptuous of hypocrisy and acute to the many ways in which cruelty can manifest itself. He understands very well how people get and keep power and influence, he is allergic to pretension and alive to the inherent stupidity of tyranny. He is devoted to charming women, and being charmed by them. I can indeed see a lot of my father in him.

But my father was also characterised by something else, and that was an unerring commitment to dignity. That was evident in his person and his manner. Nobody was

less likely to make a fool of himself. But it was even more true of his concern for the dignity of others.

He had truly excellent manners. Some of his compliments might seem heroic in their fulsomeness until you realised he was always quick to pre-empt embarrassment or anxiety on someone else's part.

Conversely, his displeasure and even censure were characteristically euphemistic. My mother pointed out that even food he didn't like was described as "substantial", which only through careful deconstruction was revealed to mean "I would rather that this had not physically manifested itself in front of me." Similarly, "perfectly respectable" meant only that he could, at a stretch, imagine someone other than himself respecting it. All this would be enough to preserve the pride of the average close listener, and perhaps throw a naïve witness entirely off the scent.

But I don't want to give the impression that my father was habitually given to saying one thing while thinking another. One of his favourite sayings was that "if you wear the mask long enough, the face fits". I think he was determinedly and deliberately kind and good because he believed that behaving in a kind and good way would in due course really make you a kinder and better person. In his case, and by the time all of us had met him, there was of course no need for a mask. That was him.

He was a moralist in the rarer sense of the word; rather than being concerned with the morals of others, he really did model goodness and honour in everything he did. He was generous and he was brave and he lived by the spirit as well as the letter of truth. That is something he shares with Stendhal. But what Stendhal did not have was a sustained successful relationship, let alone a marriage of over 60 years. It is impossible to understand my father's adult life without knowing that my mother was its bedrock, and that in her, he found someone to love intensely, an intellectual equal and his soulmate.

They seem to me to have spent much of their marriage trying to make each other laugh. My father was especially good at mimicry and alert to the unintentionally ridiculous. For him I would edge thinking over feeling in Horace Walpole's favourite phrase (and one my father was also given to cite frequently):

"Life is a comedy to those who think and a tragedy to those who feel."

He early on warned me against using irony at work, because in his experience that was when you were most likely to be taken seriously. As a historian he favoured cock-up over conspiracy, and as a follower of current affairs, he was keenly discerning of absurdity, pomposity and futility. He was deprived of, rather than spared, a full understanding of recent events.

His morality was inextricably bound up with the arts. He was as deeply cultured a man as any of us will have ever known. But his attitude towards the paintings, writing and music which so inspired him was one of reverence and a desire to share, not as the means by which to assert his considerable intellectual superiority. He didn't believe that pushpin was as good as poetry, but he regarded your opinion of poetry as being as important and as interesting as his. He was a cultural socialist and not a cultural capitalist.

Most of all, though, he was the most loyal, loving and exemplary of husbands, fathers, fathers-in-law and grandfathers. His moralism was always based on unconditional love, which is why it was so irresistible, even if very hard to emulate. He had a tremendous sense of duty and justice, but it was his inner confidence and generosity of spirit which made the people closest to him feel cheerful, courageous and strong. His consistency was remarkable; he was like this with all of the people he knew, and he was like this in small matters as well as great. A man of letters, his own finest work was his life. He set an extraordinary example to all of us, and if we choose to follow it, it is in us and our children that he will live on.

John's life came to an end peacefully in his home, as he lay surrounded by those he loved and who loved him. The family should like to offer heartfelt thanks to all of the healthcare professionals across the spectrum who over the years provided an array of help and support to John, both in hospital and at home.

This gentle and caring polymath, John Naylor, will be sadly missed, but always fondly remembered by you all.