

Tribute for Stephen Richard Merrett 7th June 1939 – 10th April 2018 written by Julie Merrett

Stephen Richard Merrett was born on the 7th of June 1939, in the East-End of London, to working class parents Ada Elizabeth Sinclair and Stephen Richard Merrett (Snr). Steve was an only child, but both his parents were from huge families, all the members of whom lived nearby and none of whom had lived outside the triangle of Hackney Wick, Bow and Leytonstone since as far back as my dad managed to trace his family tree. He always shared with us happy memories of his childhood; of playing out in the street, inventing games, singing songs, dancing and the oral tradition of the Celtic and gypsy storytellers in his lineage.

This happy childhood was however played out in the shadow of war, Steve's dad being posted in Burma fighting the Japanese, so his first memory of meeting his father being when he was 6 years old, when his dad returned from the war. It was never an easy relationship. His mother on the other hand he adored, and she him, Ada was a fantastically lively character, a great joker and fantastic storyteller.

Attending the local primary school, it was apparent that Steve was an exceptionally intelligent boy and he was encouraged to take the 11+ examination and go to Grammar School, which he did. Always a lover of learning and an A Grade student he excelled at languages particularly and became fluent in German and French (and later Spanish too). However, from his fascination with aeroplanes wrought from growing up in the war, he decided to enter the Airforce at age 18 to train to be a pilot. Although he made some good friends, discovered mountaineering and pot-holing and enjoyed the exhilaration of flying, in his own words: "I was an appallingly bad pilot, as anyone who has seen me drive a car would guess" and he left after two years.

So, he decided to go to University, but from a strange conundrum of not having taken Latin or Mathematics at A level many courses were closed to him. He always used to delight in telling us that, in the end, he stuck a pin in a list of the courses open to him and it landed on *Philosophy and Economics*, subjects which from then on would be a huge force in shaping the course of his life. He studied as an undergraduate at Bristol University and post-graduate at Nuffield College Oxford, becoming a Master of Philosophy and was later awarded a Doctor of Literature on the strength of his published works.

Steve had a phenomenal intellect, 'a man of words and numbers' as my mum says. He spoke a number of languages fluently, and always learnt some of the language of countries he visited and worked in, he revelled in the English language and poetry, Shakespeare being his great love, to quote my dad: 'the only hero I have followed to my final days'. He would spend an hour every morning before breakfast completing pages from a book of pure mathematics, just for the joy of it. However, frying an egg or changing a lightbulb were not on his list of skills, as he used to joke. Steve's great mind defined him.

Steve met my mother Alicia in Buenos Aires in 1965. As many of you who have read their book 'Darling Alicia' will know, he met her right at the end of his year there, as she helped him find a way to get to Cuba during the Che Guevara years, and they struck-up a writing correspondence while he was subsequently posted in India. The man of words fell in love through their letters and the rest is history, my mother came to meet him in England in 1967, they were married the next year and she undoubtedly was, and is, the love of his life, as he is hers.

Steve adored his family, his girls whom he taught to wrestle, shoot and box as his father had taught him, to have confidence in their own abilities, to run and climb and play outdoors with no fear, to love nature as he did. His marvellous imagination created games and chases, lava pools to leap and

monsters to battle; and his love of music, singing, dancing, joking and telling stories was rival to none. The first bedtime story I can remember, at approximately 3 years of age, was my dad's own abridged version, re-invented by himself, of JR Tolkien's 'The Lord of the Rings' – stories should be proper and epic, deep and meaningful and magic by my dad's standards.

Steve's work and political activism were central to his life. Having studied Philosophy and Economics Steve formed an ethical code and value system based on fairness, justice and finding practical ways to care for our fellow men and women and be part of creating a good society. Starting out as a great admirer of Karl Marx, he became a lifelong socialist and was a great believer in the welfare state and good public services. Steve's values are ones that have endured and been shared and passed on to his many work colleagues, fellow activists, students, friends and family over the years. My sister and I were brought up in a self-created housing association with many communal facilities and house meetings, a hotbed of political activism whether it be the anti-Vietnam war movement, the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa or campaigning for our local labour party, of which he was an active member. Our MP was Jeremy Corbyn, whose recent leadership of the party gave heart to my Dad no end, 'For the Many, Not the Few' was very much my Dad's kind of politics. My sister and I remember being taken on CND marches as young children, having democratic 'family votes' on any major decisions and the many, many of his friends and our friends who Steve would talk with about politics, economics and philosophy round the kitchen table, inspiring many.

Steve had a short spell as a civil servant in the Ministry of Technology during the Vietnam War and was always proud that his activism in supporting the anti-war movement, and writing under a pseudonym, got him the sack and a lasting file at MI6. He then specialised in the Economics of Housing at University College London for 20 years, writing a seminal textbook on the matter 'State Housing in Britain' still studied in Universities today. And I am sure, that if the policies he had prepared for the Labour Party with the then Shadow Housing Minister Clive Soley, centred around a National Housing Bank, would have been implemented by Blair and Brown, we would not have seen the scandalous property bubble and housing crisis emerge that we are saddled with today.

He later worked free-lance as a specialist in the Economics of Water Resources, working on projects all over the globe from Lesotho to Siberia, from Colombia to Palestine, from the USA to Australia. The project I am most personally proud of is that it was he who completed the cost-benefit analysis on a ground-breaking 'managed retreat' on the River Parrett here in Somerset, now known as WWT Steart Marshes, a leading light in harnessing natural processes as a means of flood control and a thriving haven for wildlife.

Which brings me to another of my father's loves – nature. For a boy born and bred in urban London he had such an immense and natural love and connection with nature. His mum had loved her small terraced garden, he grew up roaming wild on Hackney Marshes and Epping Forest, as Leytonstone was still part of Essex in those days and not so built up. He loved climbing, had hiked the Himalayas, always took us walking on Hampstead Heath in London near where we lived, always off for adventures to the countryside to share with us another of his great loves, birdwatching. Charles Darwin and David Attenborough were great heroes of his in this field, and I'm sure you can all see that this great love and wonder for nature has been passed on to both his daughters.

Now, as much as it is lovely to say all these wonderful things about my dad and celebrate him, I think it is also important to acknowledge that things weren't always easy. I personally had a complex and sometimes difficult relationship with him as his fierce logic and intellect was not always comprehending of a fiery and emotional girl. He struggled at times to understand and express his emotions, and sometimes could not understand other people's beliefs, lack of intellectual clarity or

philosophical thought processes, that were different from his own. He could be a lot to live up to! I actually go to know him a bit better when he had a semi-breakdown in his late 50's. He had suffered from bouts of inexplicable depression since adolescence and, in his vulnerability, I had the chance to understand him and love him in a new way. Not one to try talking therapies, he had to take anti-depressants from this time onwards and it is a huge testament to my mother that she helped support him and give him the structure, stability, love and understanding that he needed to carry on enjoying his life so much.

Grandchildren were another unexpected joy for him, I remember when he held his first grandchild in his arms for the first time and he said 'I never knew it was possible to feel so much love for a child that was not directly your own, I never thought I would feel this way as a grandad. In fact, it's better than fatherhood, as you don't have to do all the hard work, I should have just gone straight to grandfatherhood!' He and Louis grew to have a unique relationship as their minds were so similar, their love of numbers and logic and Grandad's great patience in travelling the London Underground with Louis when he was small. Grandad Steve adored the girls, always maintaining that females were the more whole and intelligent sex, and he adored the boys for their fun & games & sharing his passion for watching football, especially the Arsenal.

My dad's orderly mind loved making lists and completing projects that carefully covered everything of something... birdwatching was a very enduring hobby, but a few of his other retirement projects that always make us smile were his quest to see every one of Shakespeare's plays performed by the RSC, to visit every street and establishment in Soho and review of every pub in the City of London (as in the square mile) - Top Tip: Number 1 was a pint of Guinness at the Pelican in Soho! And maybe his finest project: a viewing of every single object in the British Museum, followed by personal tours of five meaningful objects, if you were lucky enough to gain my Dad's favour in taking you. And most of all my Dad was incredibly sociable, he had 'the gift of the gab' as he would say, he would talk to anyone, about any subject, be they a king or a pauper, he was interested in the human condition and curious for everyone's view of it, whether it be philosophical, historical, political, economic, poetic, artistic or simply, a feeling of being on planet earth.

In his final years he and my mother moved here to Wells, to be nearer their daughters and grandchildren and for my dad to finally have his own small garden, which he enjoyed immensely. It was also because we were beginning to realise that he was having problems with his memory and that moving later might prove difficult. He was diagnosed with dementia about 10 years ago, a great blow for a man whose mind defined him, but fortunately for him he was largely unaware that it was happening, though sad for us to lose him slowly, but he did have about 7 years here where he was still enjoying his life very much. As many of you will know, he deteriorated rapidly in the last 6 months having to be taken in to hospital a few weeks ago, and once he had got to this stage we felt very strongly that he would not want to live like this. So, although shocked and saddened when he passed away, it is a comfort to us that we feel he was ready to go. A few weeks before his death, he turned to my mother and said with great lucidity "I just want you to know that I have had a wonderful life and I love you very much and if I have to go sometime soon, that's ok". We know he rests in peace.

I was thinking how to end this speech, what words to say to sum up the brilliant man my dad was, the intellect, the speaker, his values, his bright spirit, but in the end, and maybe this emerged more and more as his mind left him, in the end, the really important thing he taught us, that he valued above all else, and which I hope you will feel from the readings he requested for today: is that what really matters is love. Above all else, love. And he had love in abundance.