

A celebration of life

Phyllis Evelyn McDonald

20th August 1929 – 3rd March 2020

Ceremony written but not yet delivered – it was replaced by a direct cremation, and this tribute will be used at a memorial ceremony at some point in the

a personal goodbye

Humanist
Ceremonies

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Phyllis was an East London girl by birth – you really couldn't get more East London than being born and brought up on Green Street, near to West Ham's Boleyn Ground, and surrounded by a huge variety of shops and market stalls. Who knows, as a toddler she might have seen Ghandi pass by on his way to a match – he was apparently a frequent visitor on his 1931 trip to London. She was the youngest daughter of Edward and Elsie Gunn, with two elder siblings, Renee and Bob.

She remained in London throughout the war, and at the age of 11 she entered West Ham Municipal Secondary (Mixed) School, which was renamed Stratford Grammar School in 1945. The school was open throughout the war, despite being partly destroyed by bombs in 1941, and Phyllis flourished there, as this letter written by her Headmaster in 1947 shows:

Miss Phyllis Gunn conceals beneath an appearance of great diffidence an intelligence and mental capacity which are quite formidable in their strength. She has attended this school for seven years. After earning an excellent School Certificate in 1945 with three distinction marks, she has specialised in languages in the Sixth Form and has this month sat for the Higher Certificate with every prospect of a very good result.

She is able to apply her high degree of intelligence to the most varied problems. She will undoubtedly have a very successful University career, and her experience of a wider social environment will no doubt destroy the last traces of diffidence in her bearing.

And she went on to excel at University, gaining a degree in languages at Trinity College Dublin, and going on to work as a translator for many years.

She married Jim in 1961 at Shoreditch Register office. He worked for NCR all his working life as a field engineer. They moved into their bungalow in Telscombe Road in Langney just after they married and Phyllis stayed there till she left to go to Inglewood. They were members of the Communist Party for many years. They were soulmates in every way, sharing the same beliefs,

travelling together, and painting together. They had a great love of food and wine, which Phyllis continued to enjoy right to the end.

Stephen and Rosie spent several happy holidays with Phyllis and Jim, and remember these times fondly. Phyllis and Jim seemed very sophisticated, with their Sparklets soda syphon and quarter-inch reel-to-reel tape recorder. It was at their house that they had their first Chinese takeaway. And they organised wonderful trips, including one memorable day when they visited three castles in one day, Hastings, Pevensey and Bodiam, driving between them in their gold VW Beetle. They also took them to the Smugglers Caves in Hastings, and to the Dolphinarium in Brighton.

Phyllis's huge collection of books shows her political interests and her feminism, as do the magazines she subscribed to – the Winter edition of *New Humanist* for instance, which Rosie found at her home, the cover of which carried the words “HOW TO ARGUE BETTER”.

Phyllis stayed true to her beliefs, as the list of the organisations she regularly donated to shows:

Wateraid

Crisis

Oxfam

Imperial Cancer

Peoples Press - for the Morning Star

Research Into Aging

Rationalist Association

And I'd like to think that this poem, by Brian Bilston, reflects her approach to life. It's called *As I Grow Old I will March not Shuffle*

*As I grow old
I will not shuffle to the beat
of self-interest*

*and make that slow retreat
to the right.*

*I will be a septuagenarian insurrectionist
marching with the kids. I shall sing
'La Marseillaise', whilst brandishing
homemade placards that proclaim
'DOWN WITH THIS SORT OF THING'.*

*I will be an octogenarian obstructionist,
and build unscalable barricades
from bottles of flat lemonade,
tartan blankets and chicken wire.
I will hurl prejudice upon the brazier's fire.*

*I will be a nonagenarian nonconformist,
armed with a ballpoint pen
and a hand that shakes with rage not age
at politicians' latest crimes,
in strongly-worded letters to The Times.*

*I will be a centenarian centurion
and allow injustice no admittance.
I will stage longstanding sit-ins.
My mobility scooter and I
will move for no-one.*

*And when I die
I will be the scattered ashes
that attach themselves to the lashes
and blind the eyes
of racists and fascists.*

Phyllis was fiercely independent, and was determined to stay on in her home, but in November last year she had a fall and moved to Inglewood. Having got there, she found she actually really liked it, but her health continued to deteriorate and she died on March 3rd.

We often think of death as a cruel enemy, taking away those we love, but for those who are suffering or who have reached the end of their endurance, it can come as a quiet friend, closing the curtains, blowing out the light, and settling us into a last sleep, free from pain and weariness.

I hope it was so for Phyllis.