

# A celebration of life

# Dr Roger Paul Woods

30th December 1948 – 28th February 2020

Bluebell Wood Burial Park, Hainford, Norwich.

Friday, 20th March 2020

*a personal goodbye*

Humanist  
*Ceremonies*

Welcome to this beautiful place. Bluebell Wood is home to centuries' old bluebell woodland, newly-planted woodland, and a glorious wildflower meadow, all resting under big Norfolk skies. The estate was the home of Robert Marsham, a celebrated English naturalist and founding father of phenology – the study of the effects of the seasons on plants and animals – now overseen by The Woodland Trust. There can surely be no better place for Roger, a man committed to the natural world, to be laid to rest.

My name is Rachel Narkiewicz, and I am a celebrant with Humanists UK. It is my privilege to lead this ceremony today. We are here to pay tribute and to celebrate the life of Dr Roger Woods. We are here to say a final goodbye. Roger is at the very centre of this ceremony today.

The nature of our gathering forms a ritual that has been practiced for a long, long time by our ancestors, going back into antiquity for many thousands of years. Throughout all of time, families, friends, and communities have accompanied their loved ones on their final journey, to express their respect, as we are doing today for Roger.

Roger was a very special man. But you already know that, which is why some of you have travelled to be here today for him. Let us also remember that there are people who are unable to be with us today but who will be thinking of Roger and paying tribute to him in their own ways.

We could spend much more time than we have available here today listening to Roger's story and still barely be able to scratch the surface of who he was. We will do what we can to remember Roger, through music chosen with him in mind, through readings, through memories shared by his wife, Liz, and through many of you who have been kind enough to let Liz know what Roger meant to you. We will be hearing of Roger's talents, interests, and achievements. Roger was a modest man who didn't shout about the many things he had accomplished during his life. It may come as a surprise to many of you just what Roger had attained and how highly he was thought of.



**READING: *From The Peregrine* by J. A. Baker, read by Francesca**

*Above South Wood, a small stream flows through a steep sided valley. The northern slope is open woodland, rusty with winter bracken, silvered with birches, green with mossy oak. The southern slope is pasture, unchanged for many years, rich with worms, lined by small hedges, freckled with thick-branched oak. Two hundred lapwings, and many fieldfares, redwings and blackbirds, were listening for worms as I went down to the stream, which was loud in the quiet morning. There was no ploughing in the river valley, and I expected the peregrine to hunt the lapwings in the higher pasture.*

*A hard tapping sound began, a long way off. It was like a song thrush banging a snail on a stone, but it came from above. In a hedgerow oak, at the tip of a side branch, a lesser spotted woodpecker was clinging to a small twig, hammering a marble gall with his bill, trying to hack out the grub*

inside it. To the six inch long woodpecker this gall was the size a large medicine ball is to a man. He swung about freely on the twig, sometimes hanging upside down, attacking it from many angles. His head went back at least two inches, then thudded forward with pickaxing ferocity. His black shining eyes were needle bright as he looked all round the yellow gall. He could not pierce it. He flew to another oak and tried another gall. All morning I heard him tapping his way across the fields. I tapped a gall with my fingernail, and with a sharp stone, but I could not reproduce the woodpecker's loud cracking sound, which was audible a hundred yards away. He was fairly tame, but if I went too near he stopped, and shuffled further up the branch, returning when I moved back. When jays called in the wood, he stopped hammering, and listened. Lesser spotted woodpeckers are wary of predators; they fly from cuckoos, and take cover from jays and crows.

Jays were noisy all day in the wood, digging up the acorns they buried a month ago. The first to find one was chased by the others. Several woodcock were feeding at the side of the stream, where the flow of water was checked by fallen branches and dead leaves, and I flushed many more from their resting places in the bracken. During the day, they like to lie on bracken slopes facing south or west, usually near a cluster of sapling chestnuts or small birches, occasionally under holly or pine. Some birds prefer bramble cover to bracken. Woodcock go up suddenly, after one has been standing near them for a time, as little as five yards away. They may wait for a minute or more, till they can bear the uncertainty no longer. You can flush a greater number by making frequent stops. When trudging straight on through the wood, you put up only those directly in your path. Watching its first steep ascent, you can, for a second, capture the woodcock's colour. Held in a sudden yellowness of light, the blended browns and fawns and chestnuts of its back stand out in relief, like a plating of dead leaves. In the middle of the ridged and stripy back, behind the head, there is a tint of greenish bronze, like verdigris. They may seem to go right away into the distance of the wood, but in fact they pitch steeply down to cover as soon as they are screened by trees. A sudden zigzag and downward flop, over open ground, can be deceptive. They may fly low for a time, rising again when out of sight. Thousands of years of escape practice have evolved these crafty ways. It becomes easy to guess where woodcock are resting, but the actual catapulting ejection from bramble or bracken always startles. One is seldom looking in the right direction.

All wormy mud must have its wader. The fugitive woodcock finds his way along the small windings of the brooks and gulleys, past the forlorn ponds and the muddy undrained rides, to his hermitage of bracken.

The 'pee-wit' calls of plover grew louder as the sun declined. Standing among oaks and birches, I saw between the trees the dark curve of the peregrine scything smoothly up the green slope of the valley. Fieldfares fled towards the trees. Some thudded down into bracken, like falling acorns. The peregrine turned and followed, rose steeply, flicked a fieldfare from its

*perch, lightly as the wind seizing a leaf. The dead bird dangled from the hawks-foot gallows. He took it to the brook, plucked and ate it by the water's edge, and left the feathers for the wind to sift.*

## **REMEMBERING ROGER**

I did not have the pleasure of meeting Roger, but spent time in his home talking to Liz about his life and the type of person he was. Liz showed me his study – a room full of books, folders, and clearly a place where much writing and research took place. Similarly, the kitchen was filled with cookbooks. I could not fail to notice an enormous cheese plant in the corner of the room. Apparently, Roger inherited this plant when he moved into a flat in Offord Road, Islington, over thirty years. It has followed him ever since, and has been part of Roger and Liz's homes also. Clearly, Roger's loyalty extended itself to this particular plant, too! He even remained loyal to *The Archers*, despite other friends becoming less interested as the programme changed over the years from one concerned with rural life to one where the storylines became less credible and more fantastic.

I also had an opportunity to read some of the letters and e-mails Liz has received since Roger's death. There are common themes that run through these, and I would like to share some of those extracts with you now.

Some people wrote of Roger's kindness:

*"I recall his generosity and care: one of the things he did for me shortly before I left London, which was extraordinarily generous, was buying me my current piano, which I got second-hand from a house in North London. It's a good make and has a lovely tone. It still has a lovely tone and is a memento of Roger whenever I play."*

*"I found him to be a kind, patient and principled man."*

Others spoke of his intelligence and approach to his work:

*"In debate he was serious and focussed, but never earnest or ponderous. Indeed there was always a vein of dry humour running through what he said. Roger had a clear, principled commitment to social justice which was nevertheless balanced by a pragmatic analysis of the prevailing balance of forces"*

*"I always remember Roger being a gentle and humorous colleague, albeit a bit overawed by his scholarship!"*

*"Roger was a fine historian with a deep understanding of the past and an ability to communicate that in a compelling manner. I profited greatly from his writings".*

Some had memories of Roger's wonderful meals and his love of nature:

*"We remember the wonderful meals Roger cooked when we visited and how involved you both were in the countryside and particularly the birds and the lovely walks we had with you in Norfolk and Dorset."*

*"It was that time of day, after returning from a long walk when Roger would start cooking and the kitchen would become his kitchen and we would move to a different room. The sound of cricket on the radio would join the sounds and smells of a feast being created, for Roger was such a great cook, and he would always produce a magnificent meal. The dining room table took centre place in the house, the place where the whole evening would unfold with Roger at the head of the table in his chair with Liz in her chair. The meal was a time to savour the taste and delights in Roger's creativity and for wine and conversation to flow."*

*"We shared a love of birds, in particular the wonderful devil's bird, the screeching Swift – here for May, departed by August."*

*"I recall Roger patiently teaching me about the differences between greenfinches and chaffinches, when I was trying to identify a bird I'd seen on a walk in the countryside. His love of birdwatching grew when he and Liz moved to Norfolk and I learnt a lot from them when I visited. On my last visit we went to Titchwell and experienced the thrill of watching the Marsh Harriers in flight – an occurrence that Roger had been so keen to see. This more than made up for him missing what he described as 'that damned snowy owl', which appeared briefly near Wells over one winter weekend in 2018. As was typical of Roger, he had been devoting his energies to providing a warm welcome for guests and creating one of his delicious meals at the time and had consequently missed the Twitterstorm heralding its arrival."*

So what do we know of Roger's journey through life? He was born in Winchmore Hill in the London Borough of Enfield, North London, the only child of Rose and Henry Woods. Henry was known as 'Harry' and also as 'Son', as he was the first boy after several daughters. Both his parents had come from large families themselves, but, like nearly all their siblings, chose to have only one child.

Roger left London when he was around eighteen to study at Warwick University, but this was interrupted by the death of his mother, and he did not continue. He did, however, remain living in the area for a while until returning to London where he completed a degree at University College London in Anthropology and Linguistics. He then obtained a grant for a PhD but became involved in psychoanalysis and followed another path for a while.

A friend from Roger's student days recalls times spent drinking in *The Marlborough Arms*; Roger sporting a leather jacket and hennaed hair, earnestly regaling his friends with talk of the Socialist Workers Party and The

Revolution. He also had a spell in the Communist Party, the Labour Party, but in more recent times found that the Green Party was more aligned to his values.

Roger and his then partner Jane bought a flat together, and lived in London for about three years, whilst Roger worked for Camden Social Services. His initial role was one of administrative responsibilities, and, unsurprisingly, Roger gradually worked his way up within the department.

He undertook a Masters in Social Policy, achieving a distinction. This area of study shaped Roger's future to some extent. Following the death of his father, Roger took stock of his own life and did consider writing a novel. Instead, he became a small business man, working from his flat, but he did not seem particularly enamoured of this career.

He accepted a role at what was then Luton University, where he taught a number of courses, again working his way up until he became Head of Department and a Senior Manager. At Luton, Roger was known for his calm, thoughtful, and easy manner that were much appreciated in what could be a turbulent place. He was known by colleagues as someone who could be approached for advice or guidance and be relied upon to give it with good humour and patience, despite being under pressure himself.

In 2005, Roger was offered redundancy, decided to accept, and began work on a research project. He later worked with Aimhigher. This initiative was created in 2004, and was aimed at widening participation in United Kingdom higher education, particularly among students from non-traditional backgrounds, minority groups, and disabled persons. Roger became a lynchpin in this project across the East, and was an inexhaustible source of policy papers, data analyses, and strategic planning. It will come as no surprise to those of you who knew Roger well that he decided to commit himself to this type of project, given his sense of social justice.

His final job was working on a research consultancy programme, until retirement brought him to Wells-next-the-Sea. Of course, it was never really retirement for Roger; he took a change of direction and completed an MA in History, and, at the time of his death, had pretty much completed his PhD.

The title of Roger's thesis was "Representing Eighteenth Century Norwich: Perceptions of the Past in a Declining Present". His primary sources were historical accounts of Norwich, the people who produced these, and their networks. He was interested in exploring how each of the historical accounts characterised their contemporaneous Norwich and to what extent the histories' accounts of the present correlated with the city's decline. These accounts provoked questions about historical distance and memory, and about civic pride and identity. In concluding, Roger also queried whether the histories themselves reflected the emergence of modernity.

There was poignancy to Roger being awarded the PhD shortly before he died. While he was unwell, his supervisor emailed to say she and his second supervisor had applied for him to be awarded the PhD without a viva. She added they had *“written a paragraph each about how brilliant you are, and that you have already completed 68k words that don’t need any tweaking”*. So, although he did not know he’d been awarded the PhD, he did know his supervisors held him in high esteem.

Following Roger’s death, his supervisor, Andrea, who is unable to join us today, wrote to Liz saying, *“He was quite the best student I ever had, and I wish I had been given permission to let him know that the University awarded him his doctorate last week. It will bring you no comfort now, but perhaps in the future, to know just what a superb scholar he was. And a thoroughly decent and nice man.”*

And that achievement is certainly something to celebrate, because when someone dies, as Roger did, with much to give and much to live for, it can be difficult to know how a ceremony like this can be a celebration. But you can celebrate that you knew him, that you loved him, and that your lives are the better for that.

Roger was a polymath. His extensive knowledge spanned many areas, and we haven’t heard of all of them yet. He also had a talent for being focussed on whatever the task of the moment might be. He was able to move, apparently seamlessly, from one task to another, being fully immersed in each one in its own right.

Roger was a self-taught cook, and we have heard how friends delighted in his food. Retirement and living in Norfolk enabled Roger to devote more time to cooking. He made his own sourdough starter, and passed portions on to others, who are continuing to use it. He was a fan of the food of Yotam Ottolenghi, an Israeli-English chef whose cookery books full of delicious recipes adorn the shelves in Roger and Liz’s kitchen. It is clear from looking at these books that they were much-read and much-used.

If Roger decided to do something, he did it with total commitment. He transformed the garden in Islington by digging it up and turning it into a beautiful patio space. Quite why he decided to undertake this project in the dark, cold days of February is unknown! He spent less time in the garden in Wells, but perhaps that is no surprise given the other pastimes he was passionate about.

In addition to cooking, there was his fascination with bird-watching. Unsurprisingly, Roger had an almost encyclopaedic knowledge of birds. Roger could often be seen walking in the local area of Wells with his backpack and binoculars, always waiting for the moment when there might be a cluster of birds such as snow buntings.

He didn't confine his bird watching to Norfolk though. He and Liz travelled all over the United Kingdom, to places such as Orkney and the Hebrides, and had even begun to consider a move north – although that was driven more by recent political changes rather than the birds alone! When the birds made their annual migration, Roger turned his interest to butterflies.

Roger always considered the environmental impact of what he did. He was not keen to fly, and he did not own a car. One of the last books Liz bought for him at Christmas was all about re-wilding. Roger Woods trod lightly on this earth.

And in the midst of all this was Liz, with whom Roger shared almost thirty years of his life. They had come across each other at various events, but met properly in 1992, when Roger was in his small businessman role. Some of you here today will remember their wedding day at Islington Registry Office. A guest remembered a bloodshot reception at a small restaurant in Westleton and the need for a four-mile run next day simply to function again!

Their move to Norfolk was in part due to the happy times they spent visiting Liz's mother, who lived in Westleton in Suffolk. Life in Wells suited them well, although Roger could not be persuaded into the sea, as he had a genuine fear of water, and would really prefer it if Liz didn't go anywhere near it either. He wasn't too keen on heights, so maybe the flat terrain of Norfolk suited him far better than if they had ever done that journey north to Scotland.

Roger's love for Liz was apparent to the people who knew them. In some of the condolences Liz received were the following comments:

*"My understanding is that Roger's feasts were not just for visitors and guests but part of Roger's love of Liz. For he did love and adore her."*

*"He was a very thoughtful kind man and devoted to you".*

And finally, a sentence that I'm sure speaks for many of you here today:

*"I would like you to know that I hold Roger, yourself and your family and friends tight in my thoughts".*

Roger's diagnosis and the speed of his decline came as a great shock to him, to Liz, and to many of you here. Nevertheless, Liz is sure that Roger felt his life was fulfilled and that he had few regrets. And that is surely something to celebrate and be thankful for.



**TRIBUTE from Steve Priddy**

Terrence Malick, *Badlands*, University College London, the small mews house on the corner of the estate, opposite Dillon's University Bookshop, autumn 1974. Someone has written a cryptic, withering one liner about Malick's movie on the white board of the Linguistics common room here on the ground floor. And in my memory Roger Woods sits just below the board alongside other students of his year. Conversation's desultory and to my overawed perception, quite profound.

Those early years moved at a rapid intellectual pace. We were fired up by the trail left in the wake of May 1968 – Levi-Strauss, Althusser, Barthes, Foucault, Lacan, Derrida, and the English sympathisers – Hindess, Hirst, Eagleton, McCabe, alongside contrarians such as EP Thompson, and the New Left cultural critics with Eagleton, Hall and Williams. Roger was right in the middle of all this, rebelling against a Chomsky orthodoxy on his Linguistics course and finding instead the genius of Saussure, Volosinov and Marxism and the Philosophy of Language. Interdiscourse. I think in those early years I tagged on to the Offord Road set, and the 'Ideology and Consciousness' journal caucus hanging out near The Marlborough pub.

From the start, then I recognized Roger as a scholar and a Marxist. Something in him played to the solemnity of a Sartre. But also he always carried a dry sense of humour which was as much to do with self-deprecation as to go on the offensive.

In 1980 with PhD enrolment finished – ah the bliss of those days without loans and token fees – I took up work and we moved away from London, Camden, and Roger's world to the remoteness – as I saw it – of Braintree and Essex. Roger at that time self-identified totally with London. This was exemplified by a rare visit to us when he complained that the open landscapes, vaulting skies and birdsong of Essex gave him headaches...

We kept up with one another. I remember beers in The Lamb on Lamb Conduit Street. We both of us drifted and were more or less successful in our different work directions – Roger passing from nearly falling into public sector accounting to the rather more mixed terrain of academia.

Always in awe of the scholarship, still we got to know each other better. We shared musical tastes. I remember him introducing me to Michael Tippett's *The Midsummer Marriage*, and Richard Strauss's *Four Last Songs* – he said there were quite a few of these. And with Deb, my wife, we went to see a performance of Britten's stunning *Curlew River* A Parable for Church Performance at Orford. I remember him surprising me then with his increasing sympathy towards the Greens in the local elections, and growing scepticism about the Left's commitment to the safety of our planet.

Roger's headaches passed and he was blessed to meet Liz Webb, his partner of many years. With her parental home in Suffolk I think she must have played a transformative part in his conversion to East Anglian life and their subsequent move north to Norfolk and Wells Next The Sea.

And Roger's last song was, of course, his doctorate on Norwich – a fascinating study of historians in history and their discourse on that great city. I am so happy that he found his calling in this academic pursuit – history which demands the highest level of scholarship, combined with how we find ourselves, our place and our identity only through the play of signification.

It is, at the same time, profoundly sad for me to think of Roger not having final confirmation that in the end he had written something of outstanding originality, and richly deserved his doctorate. But I suspect from the last conversation we had late last year he had a good inkling that he was there, that it was time to move on.

So, my dear friend, who I never really ceased being in awe of, I want to leave you with Eliot and the ghosts of Burnt Norton:

*The surface glittered out of heart of light,  
And they were behind us, reflected in the pool.  
Then a cloud passed, and the pool was empty.*

The ghosts never depart; they remain with us. God bless you, Dr Woods, scholar, thinker.

The final reading today comes from James.

**POEM: *Let Me Go* by Christina Georgina Rossetti, read by James**

*When I come to the end of the road  
And the sun has set for me  
I want no rites in a gloom filled room  
Why cry for a soul set free?  
Miss me a little, but not for long  
And not with your head bowed low  
Remember the love that once we shared  
Miss me, but let me go.  
For this is a journey we all must take  
And each must go alone.  
It's all part of the master plan  
A step on the road to home.  
When you are lonely and sick at heart  
Go the friends we know.  
Laugh at all the things we used to do  
Miss me, but let me go.  
When I am dead my dearest  
Sing no sad songs for me  
Plant thou no roses at my head  
Nor shady cypress tree  
Be the green grass above me  
With showers and dewdrops wet  
And if thou wilt remember*

*And if thou wilt, forget.*

*I shall not see the shadows,  
I shall not fear the rain;  
I shall not hear the nightingale  
Sing on as if in pain;  
And dreaming through the twilight  
That doth not rise nor set,  
Haply I may remember,  
And haply may forget.*

## **INTERMENT**

Before we proceed, let's take time to stand together in silence. Feel this place around you. Breathe in the air, feel the breeze, and hear the sounds of life continuing around us.

We have gathered here to lay Roger in his final resting place. Roger – a man who was a committed environmentalist would have appreciated this spot for its ethos and its simplicity. If he were able to, maybe this is what he would say to us.

*Give me back into the earth so that I will be part of all you see: the growing trees, the bursting buds, and the falling leaves. The sombre ferns and the bluebells dewed with diamonds. I'll be here, in the sound of the wind in the trees, reminding you how we shared in the joy of living.*

In placing Roger in the gentle earth we do so with respect for his body, which during life was a unique and much-loved person. We dedicate this simple plot, under the wide and open Norfolk skies, to his memory. Roger will be part of this place for all time, through the warmth of summer and the cold of winter, through the freshness of spring and the mellow mists of autumn, he is at peace.

*Into the darkness and warmth of the earth  
We lay you down  
Into the sadness and smiles of our memories  
We lay you down  
Into the cycle of living and dying, and rising again,  
We lay you down  
May you rest here in fulfilment and in peace.*

Thank you all for coming.

And now, as we begin to move back to the Hall for refreshments, please allow time for Liz and close family to remain at Roger's graveside for their own private farewells.

Please look after yourselves, and each other.