

A celebration of life: Iris Robinson

4th August 1932 – 2nd February 2021

13.30, 5th March 2021, Exeter Crematorium



a personal goodbye

Humanist
Ceremonies

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Iris Robinson, 4 August 1932 – 2nd February 2021

Iris was born in Cork in 1932. She came to England at an early age and grew up in Bournemouth with her sister Esther and brother Ken. After leaving school she went to Paris as an au pair to widen her horizons.

Iris trained as a nurse at the Middlesex Hospital where she formed lifelong friendships. Marriage followed and then a few years as an army wife and the birth of her children abroad.

Back in England, Iris combined bringing up a young family with work as a nurse. After a short spell health visiting, she moved into education at Exeter College, where she met Geoff Barr. Alongside her teaching of human biology and various related courses, Iris also taught yoga until a serious accident ended that. Iris played her part in college life; for a period she was membership secretary of the lecturers' union (then called NATFHE).

At 64 years of age, Iris graduated from the Open University though interrupted her studies by qualifying as an acupuncturist. In retirement, she built up her acupuncture practice and then came allergy testing which opened new doors and Neuro Linguistic Programming. She helped a lot of people using her new-found skills.

Iris read avidly, had a wide ranging taste in music, loved poetry, had fun travelling with Geoff, had an eye for colour and design, relished time with her children and grandchildren. She took up the violin in her 80s.

Growing up with Iris – Ken Wright, her brother

It is really sad to be saying goodbye to Iris today, and sad that I can't be present in person, but it's also comforting, and a real pleasure, to share some memories about our childhood and our growing up together.



Let me start with a little vignette: I was the baby of the family and Esther was in the middle. Iris was 5 years older than me, and I think she saw herself as my second mother. There's a family photo that illustrates this, taken at the seaside in the summer of 1937. In it you can see the spades and toy sailing boats, and a shallow pool; Esther is in the water with a happy smile; and Iris

is sitting on a sandy ledge, with feet dangling in, me half on her lap, and her arms circled tightly around me. Her mouth is open as she concentrates on her motherly task.

Looking back, I think she was quite bossy, but it never seemed like that to Esther and me. In fact, we rather enjoyed her taking charge and loved the way she organised our playtimes in front of the garage. The hours would fly by as we moved excitedly from one game to another; but when she wasn't there, it seemed that something vital and essential was lacking. We all excelled at hopscotch, leapfrog, and other exciting games, but Iris was our inspirational leader with the magic ingredient that kept us happy and involved.

These were wartime years, yet strangely, some of the happiest of my life. Daddy was away, and of course we longed for his return, but when he actually came back, a dark cloud descended because he brought with him the gloom of oppressive religion. Our parents were both Plymouth Brethren, but while Mummy was flexible in her approach, our father insisted on strict conformity. Mummy's cheerful jurisdiction was thus replaced by a raft of deadening observances – regular attendance at Brethren meetings, no playing on Sundays, and serious family prayers at bedtime.

Two years later, and from where I stood, Iris was now on another planet. She'd become my 'very much older sister at the big grammar school who spent all her time with her friends.' Our exciting play by the garage was over and Esther and I were left to our own devices.

When I was 12, I went to boarding school, and this further compounded our separation. But I was growing up too, and when I was 14 or so, we began to relate in new and different ways. Iris was training to be a nurse in London, and we started to talk about 'life', 'religion', 'the wider world', and of course, the difficulties at home. We talked about everything - and crucially, saw things in a similar way.

When she finished her training, Iris went to Paris to live and work as an *au pair* a broadening of horizons for her, but for me the chance of a great adventure. It was thus that my first trip abroad was arranged. I probably imagined some more soul-searching, but in reality, it was like a resumption of childhood play. My best friend from school joined us, and we hitchhiked together to the South of France. There was hardly any money, and we lived on baguettes, camembert and *pommes frites*, washed down with forbidden *vin rouge*. I'll never forget the crazy night when we booked a double in a cheap hotel, and smuggled Iris in after dark, with a bottle of wine as well!

In adult life, our meetings were never frequent enough, but they always felt like conversations without a break. We'd instantly re-form our exclusive twosome and leave poor Geoff, and anyone else, out in the cold.

I think when someone dies, we all lose them in a different way. I've given you a small glimpse of who I'm losing: an elder sister, a second mother, a twin-like confidante and friend, and one of the few soulmates I've ever had.

So, Goodbye Iris! But not 'goodbye' - you will always be there in my heart.

Nursing – Jeannette Grenfell

Iris and I met when we started nurse training at the Middlesex Hospital in 1951. On the first night, in the room we shared with Rosemary, Iris flung open the lower half of the large sash window. It was obvious that she believed in good ventilation.

But it did not take long to establish that she was a very considerate roommate. She was easy going, didn't get easily bothered and was fun to be with. We three began to form an easy, friendly relationship.

We were expected to work hard – not passing the PTS exams could mean the end of our nursing careers before they had begun. Iris was a calming influence at these times. She had a 'well, just let's get on with it' attitude which was a good influence. However, we did have a little relaxation. A favourite pastime was window shopping in the West End.

I remember Iris's laughter as we told each other the outrageous outfits we intended to buy, with money no object! They were happy days.

After our State Final exams we went our separate ways. However, there were a group of eight who kept in some form of contact over the years. Iris always had interesting news to share, contributing to the memories and the laughter, and showing a genuine interest in everyone else.

In more recent years, we kept in touch by phone and a call with Iris was always positive. When I first learnt that she needed dialysis, her focus was her gratitude for all the care she received and on getting portable equipment so that she and Geoff could go away on holiday.

I remember our last conversation, a few weeks before Christmas, expressing her appreciation of the 'wonderful nurse' who visited daily so that she could dialyse at night. She expressed her appreciation for the care she had received from the NHS. I think she must have been an extremely rewarding patient. I know she was a good friend to have and that not knowing her, would have made my life and that, I'm sure, of many others, a lot poorer.

Iris as Mum – Paula and Richard

Mum and dad started married life with the army in Libya, North Africa. Paula was born in Benghazi while they were stationed at Tripoli. The army then posted the family to Germany where Richard was born in Osnabruck.

After time with the army in Scotland and Yeovil, the family moved to Somerton where we watched the house being built. There are memories of cold and snowy winters. Both of us remember the excitement of being pulled by mum on a sledge to nursery school through the snow. Here, Mum encouraged us to collect and look after various caterpillars in jars – we also got our first pet cat, all white and fluffy, called Candy.

We then moved to Exeter where we continued to collect caterpillars and also started keeping guinea pigs. With mum's help Paula got to know how to make clothes using a Singer sewing machine that is still working. Richard loved cycling and making go carts.

All through our childhood we made wonderful visits to Nana and Grandee at Kent's Farm Cottage. Here we would set up 'home' in a chicken run, which we named Elder Cottage. We would then invite mum, dad, Nana and Grandee to tea. In the autumn, there would always be so many leaves to collect and we had rides on top of the leaves in the wheelbarrow. We would brave the cold, dark and scary visits to the outside loo, the only one for a number of years. In contrast, the scent from jasmine, that covered an archway would fill the evening air.

Holidays were spent camping and caravanning. We went to Lyme Regis, Buckfastleigh, and France, and we learnt to surf in Chapel Porth. Firstly, using wooden body boards that we decorated ourselves and then moving onto standing on surf boards.

Mum joined the Renal Unit at Whipton, which was founded in 1967 by Dr Harry Hall. Dr Hall drove a convertible which Richard remembers well. In the school holidays, mum would take us along to Whipton hospital, while she attended the renal staff meetings. It is ironic that mum, in later life, developed renal disease and needed dialysis herself.

We were so fortunate, given the current circumstances, that we were able to spend some wonderful time with mum at the end and these will be forever in our memories.

Living with Iris – Geoff Barr

Iris was born in Cork in 1932. She remembered a little of life in rural Ireland as she came to England at an early age.

In a 2016 visit of reminiscence to Bournemouth, she talked about the fun that she, Esther and Ken had playing and learning there. The war was a strange time, however, as Ken has said.

If Iris had been young today, she surely would have taken up medicine but instead she went into nursing at what was then an elite establishment: the Middlesex Hospital. There she formed friendships that lasted a lifetime. Jeanette has said something about that.

Marriage followed and then a few years as an army wife and the birth of her children abroad.

Back in England, Iris combined bringing up a young family with work as a nurse. Remarkably and perhaps ironically, she was in the first team at the new kidney unit in Exeter. However, ever restless, Iris moved on to a course in health visiting, which opened up the world of social thinking. She did not last long as a health visitor. She was discontented with the tangles of red tape involved. Iris shifted into education. That was where I met her.

Years at Exeter College were largely enjoyed. Even when Iris was in hospital decades later people would talk about the benefit and pleasure they got from Iris's teaching.

Alongside her teaching of human biology and various related courses Iris also taught yoga until an horrendous accident ended that. Iris played her part in college life, for a period she was membership secretary of the lecturers' union (then called NATFHE)

Iris was a great mother as we are hearing today. Her children and grandchildren will miss her desperately. I felt that love massively when my son Tony died in 1998. I was distraught but Iris was there for me with support and love alongside practical help. Unforgettable!

Iris went from success at school and nursing and on to more qualifications than most people could dream of. When her colleagues were counting down the days to the coming pension, Iris was starting her Open University degree. That course was a success but more remarkably it was interrupted by her qualification as an acupuncturist. Then she retired. But she didn't! She stopped teaching and built the acupuncture practice. To get the feel for acupuncture Iris went on a practice/study course in China. Next came allergy testing which opened new doors. However, Iris recognised that all health work has a psychological and social aspect. So, she studied Neuro Linguistic Programming, known as NLP. She helped a lot of people using her new-found skills.

Look at her books. Tons on practical health, basic biology and psychology but also a collection of magical realism, oriental philosophy, French literature and much more.

It was not all toil. We had fun. Our pictures show Iris almost always smiling or laughing on four different continents. We got to know much of Spain and Italy. We also got to North Africa, Sri Lanka, Moscow and elsewhere.

What was remarkable was her enthusiasm. As Jenny has said Iris took up the violin in her 80s.

A side that few people knew about was her grasp of the arts. Her taste ranged from jazz to rock to Indian ragas, classical music and Irish folk music. But it was not just music. She endlessly astounded me with her memory of poetry. Suddenly chat would lead to her bursting into verse. Usually it was serious, 19th or early 20th century. But by contrast, we both enjoyed writing bad limericks.

I have received a lot of cards offering sympathy. One, from a work colleague, perhaps sums up a lot about Iris. It said, "I have many happy memories of Iris. She was a beautiful sympathetic and kind lady. I had many valuable and memorable conversations with her and was always impressed with her quiet wisdom."

Those words were echoed many times. Kind, sympathetic, and wise. Never loud or flashy. But I would add that there was a little bit of steel there. Often, she would sit quietly when people who knew little about health offered foolish opinion. Iris's firm words would soon have them recognise that she knew what she was talking about.

Something else that often came up on social and other occasions. That was taste. Iris had an eye for the tasteful. The home we built used her colour schemes and her choice of furnishings. She was the only woman I knew whose grandchildren asked admiringly about where she bought her clothes.

I look back on an exceptional woman at work, at play, in culture and in family life. Truly a life worthy of celebration even as we do so through our tears. I will miss her desperately.

Iris as Grandmother – Tim, Will, Rosie, Charlie, Sophia

When Iris came to Charmouth, Tim, Will and Rosie would take her paddling and fossil hunting. We remember giving Iris a large fossil that we had dug up ourselves at a local quarry. She was with us when we collected our first puppy from a farm in Dorset which was special as it was our first.

Visits to Exeter would always include a swim and lunch at the Golf & Country Club with all the grand children together. On every visit to Exeter, Will recalls the freezer being full of ice cream! My last visit was no ice cream but grass cutting and gutter clearing at the new house.

When Iris came to stay with us in Winchester, Rosie always decorated her room with flowers picked from the garden. We would all go strawberry picking and then come back and make strawberry jam. Tim remembers the acupuncture room at the top of house with acupuncture equipment and models with acupuncture points marked.

Once Iris had more grandchildren she then accepted being called Grandma!

Charlie and Sophia think back to times spent with Grandma, and can only recall times of happiness. Throughout our lives, we have always been very close to Iris and through everything we've done she has always been incredibly supportive, encouraging us to try new things from a young age. We would look forward to every Wednesday, when she would pick us up from school (often with a little bit of road rage) and would always provide plenty of chocolate biscuits and oranges, followed by homemade flapjack. I don't know if or when we told Grandma that we liked the song 'American Pie', but one day she bought the album and would play the entire song every time we were in the car without fail for years.

She would take us to everything from squash sessions to drama productions, funnily enough almost always at the Golf Club. We would often swim there, followed by lunch.

Grandma would always take interest in our hobbies, attending everything from scout ceremonies to drama performances, disproportionately excited to sit in a cold hall on a plastic chair for hours on end.

Grandma came with us to Disneyland twice. A particularly fond memory is Grandma happily buying us guns of our choice from the Wild West gun shop as we had spent so long in the Wild West zone!

More recently Charlie enjoyed visiting Grandma with Elsbeth. No matter what time of day we visited, we could guarantee there would be lunch, coffee, and a lengthy discussion on politics. Iris was always interested in what we had going on, showing equal enthusiasm if we had passed a big exam or just spent some time in the garden. I'm not sure what it says of our personalities but we both picked up and started to learn the violin a few years ago, completely independently of one another and enjoyed a few sessions playing together.

Sophia very much enjoyed their lunches and shopping together, often at TK Maxx! A few occasions Grandma would give me the opportunity to bring out my inner interior decorator and together we would decide colours to paint different rooms in her house.