

A celebration of life Josie Stuart-Smith

10 June 1932 – 24 June 2021

12:30pm, 13th July 2021, Cambridge Crematorium, East Chapel



a personal goodbye

Humanist
Ceremonies

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Eulogy

Josie died at Addenbrooke's hospital on the 24th of June 2021, just two weeks after her 89th birthday. While her last illness was hard on her physically, she remained lucid, recognising the family members who came to visit. In her last weeks in hospital, she was joking that what she wanted was a new leg! Earlier in life she had begun to suffer from dementia, but the illness seemed not to progress too far and she always remained herself, retaining her own character.

No death can ever be easy, but there is comfort in knowing these circumstances.

As a horticulturalist, Josie knew that all living things are subject to an end. Her scientific training – her commitment to observation and independent human reason – was likely a part of what led her away from the religious explanations in which she had been brought up. But an understanding that nature is complete in itself and that our existence is defined by the bounds of this, our one life, never meant that the world lost its enchantment for her, its delight. Rather it opened new questions to explore: about nature; about ourselves; about the best way to live. Some of these are questions that can, perhaps, never be answered definitively. But Josie showed – though always with her characteristic humility – that they can be met with curiosity and with creativity, and also with a practical response – through our actions and the love and concern we show to others.

Yet it can be hard to take comfort in such general thoughts when individual grief is raw. It is the uniqueness of Josie's life, who she was, what she meant to you, that is at the root of present loss and sorrow. And it is that uniqueness that we respect today.

Josie was born at the home of her parents, 280 Humberstone Lane in Leicester. It was the 10th of June 1932, during a heatwave. The Stuarts were a loving family. Along with Josie's father, Horace, and mother, Phyllis, there were two elder brothers, Ralph and Trevor, and they were soon joined by a younger brother, Tony. Horace was a foreman at a hosiery machine builders company, Phyllis a dedicated homemaker. It was Josie's generation that was to be the first to attend university – taking up new opportunities, determined to make their own lives.

From the first, Josie loved nature and enjoyed being in the family garden, with its apple trees, gooseberry bushes and blackcurrants. She looked after her pet rabbit, walked in the nearby countryside and was a member of the Girl Guides.

She was seven when the Second World War started, thirteen when it came to an end. War was a part of her childhood experience. She later recalled seeing the distant flames as neighbouring Coventry and its cathedral were consumed by fire. The bottom of her family garden soon gained the forbidding form of a corrugated steel Anderson shelter but, half buried in the soil, this was often flooded.

The alternative during an air raid was to sit in the pantry under the stairs and eat jellies and anything else the children could lay their hands on – this, Josie said, was much better!

Josie began to create her adult life in earnest when she went to Nottingham University to study agriculture and horticulture. In Practical Horticulture, she was told that she was the best pruner, and she learned other practical skills too, not least to drive a tractor!

Nottingham was also where Josie met a fellow student, a tall young man from the West Country who greeted her with the classic line 'Are you doing anything this term?' Josie and Mervyn became first friends and then 'an item'.

After Nottingham, Mervyn joined the Colonial Agricultural Service. Training involved a year in Trinidad, preceded by a year at Downing College, part of Cambridge University. For both Mervyn and Josie that was a first time staying in the city that was later to be their home. Josie obtained a placement as a 'student gardener' at the University Botanic Gardens. Working hard in all weathers, she helped create and tend the beautiful gardens that we enjoy today.

Josie and Mervyn married on the 16th of July 1954 at the Parish Church of St. Michael and All Angels, in Thurmaston, Leicester, close to the Stuart family home. Josie was twenty-two and Mervyn twenty-seven. Josie's mother used her great skills as a dressmaker to make the wedding dress and dresses for the bridesmaids. Josie and Mervyn then honeymooned in Brittany in France where they enjoyed the pine trees and beaches.

The Marriage Certificate records Josie's 'rank or profession' with the proud title of 'horticulturalist'. She was never quite happy with changing her surname though and in the mid-1980s the family adopted the combination 'Stuart-Smith'; a profound and eloquent tribute to determination, love and partnership.

As if the wedding wasn't enough, Josie and Mervyn then set out on another, and more literal, voyage, sailing to Malaysia for Mervyn's first posting in Kuala Lumpur. Their first son Ben was born on the 11th of July 1956 and soon after, they moved to Sabah on the island of Borneo, and a small village named Tuaran. This was an astonishing location, at the foot of the sacred Mount Kinabalu, itself over 4000 meters tall and, with its dramatic slopes, amongst the highest island mountains on earth. For someone attuned to nature, the area was a paradise, with thousands of plant species, from carnivorous pitcher plants to rare orchids, and hundreds of birds and mammals.

Josie and Mervyn were not your stereotypical expats. They loved local life and their many friends included both Europeans and locals. Both learned to speak Malay fluently and in later years Josie would often use a Malay word when there was no equivalent in English that quite captured the emotion she wanted to describe.

In later years, Josie would often describe these as the happiest times of her life. She was still young, with a new husband and son. But there was also something liberating in escaping the rigidity of post-war England and its class system to discover a new community and culture, a freedom in embracing the exoticness of life at the equator. There was no rationing in Borneo's greenery.

Josie and Mervyn returned to England in 1966, for Mervyn to retrain as a lecturer in Horticulture. Their second son, Jonathan, was born in Wolverhampton on the 24th of May 1967. Soon after the family moved to Cambridge for Mervyn's new job lecturing at the agricultural college in Milton – an institution which continues as part of the College of West Anglia.

The family bought their home at 153 Gilbert Road. Over the following years this was to be the site of extensive improvements to both house and garden, all with much creative direction from Josie. Cambridge was to be Josie's home from this time on, and she became embedded in the city's life, making the best of what it had to offer and offering something back in return.

After arriving in Gilbert Road, she took up evening classes in pottery at the local school and this soon became a passion. Jonathan describes how the greenhouse and then the garage were converted to pottery rooms, with potters wheels, a kiln, and slabs of clay along with many different glazes, oxides and coloured glass to add to the firings. Josie made hundreds of pots which were well used and admired, from plant pots and vases to dishes and plates. She became so accomplished that she sold her work in galleries around Cambridgeshire and opened the house and garden up to visitors as part of Cambridge's annual summer Open Studios. Jonathan notes that Josie would reward herself by buying works of art by other local artists, including her beloved picture of a goat, bought on a visit to an exhibition at Magdalene College Old Library. Josie's pots will continue to be enjoyed by family, friends and collectors, in England as well as in Japan with her grandchildren Kanna, Emi and Tommy; in Thailand with Jonathan and in California with Andrew and Anjum.

Josie's bowls and plates have even travelled around the world, with Jonathan's friends Robert and Vanessa, as they moved from London to New York, onto Singapore and finally back to London!

Josie enjoyed introducing her grandchildren to pottery, and there are some lovely photos of them enjoying working with clay in what was known as the 'Old Pottery' at Gilbert Road.

Josie went on to teach both pottery and gardening at schools in Cambridge. These included the Leys and the Perse, but particularly rewarding to her was her work with children with physical and learning disabilities at the Roger Ascham school, just a little way from Gilbert Road. Josie always had a quality of helping others. She would get on with things, not make any fuss and certainly not seek any credit for doing so. She was such a kind person.

Of course, Josie continued to love plants and gardening and to exercise her horticultural skills. During her time in Malaysia, she and Mervyn visited Japan and fell in love with Japanese gardens and culture. In Cambridge, she cultivated a collection of bonsai trees, which were displayed on tables at the rear of the house. Nottingham's best pruner was still active! Bonsai's mix of science and art, nature and culture, and its encouragement of contemplation amidst everyday life seems to have struck a chord with Josie.

Not that she had abandoned working on a larger scale. She took a number of paid commissions as a landscape gardener, often working for friends with generous gardens such as the Morrises on the Huntingdon Road.

Josie also enjoyed nature untamed, with country walks and rambling holidays with Mervyn in both the UK and Europe in the 1990s. She loved camping holidays, staying under canvas in Cornwall, Wales and France. Mervyn remembers the delicious smell of bacon being fried for breakfast on the camping gas stove outside the tent.

Indeed, Josie was a marvellous cook, making everything from traditional roast dinners to nutritious soups made with home-grown vegetables; and from Malaysian 'Nasi Goreng' fried rice to strawberry Mille-feuille. Jonathan describes how she would often be working all day, and Mervyn would have to plead with her to sit down in the evening and put her feet up, with a favourite glass of cider or white wine. In later years, her granddaughter Jasmine went to a summer school in Cambridge and took baking classes. Josie was delighted when Jasmine would offer her some of her home-baked cakes.

Josie was a deep thinker and in many ways was ahead of her times. She championed vegetarian cooking in the 1970s when it was regarded as being for cranks – which was also the name of a vegetarian cookbook she used. She would visit Arjuna and Daily Bread, vegetarian and organic food shops in Cambridge, both still very much going strong.

She was a voracious reader. She enjoyed twentieth-century classics by authors such as Daphne du Maurier and Iris Murdoch and passionate writing by journalists such as Katherine Whitehorn and Polly Toynbee. In later years she was taken by Nigel Slater's memoir of family, suburbia and the transformative power of food. She also enjoyed the theatre, taking in a variety of plays at the Cambridge Arts Theatre, though Jono's highlight was definitely the annual pantomime. And she caught concerts at various colleges and went to ballet put on in a tent on Jesus Green.

She was also quite a political person, with strong feelings and beliefs and firmly on the side of minority groups and the oppressed. She was a member of the Liberal Party and later the Lib Dems, the front room at Gilbert Road on occasion doubling up as an election headquarters on polling day. She supported the nuclear disarmament movement CND in the early 1980s and the women's protests at Greenham Common. She was appalled by sexual violence and when the TV news reported court cases, she would advise the TV (and anyone in earshot) that the appropriate sentence for the offending man was to 'Chop them off!'

She was often described as 'feisty'. Even in her last weeks in hospital, when weak and frail, she was, according to the nurses, still able to make her views known! But it was a feistiness always balanced by her great sense of humour.

Josie's strength of mind – her resilience – helped her to deal with times of great difficulty. Her beloved father died in 1963, in his early sixties, and sadly Josie was not able to travel back from Borneo for his funeral. Her mother moved to Cambridge and was able to spend a lot of time with Josie and Jono, and had a lovely relationship with Ben. Even more tragic, though, was Ben's death in 1995, aged just thirty-nine. Ben was a fabulous son to Josie and Mervyn, and brother to Jono, full of fun and excitement. He took Josie and Mervyn on many holidays, including a wonderful trip to South Africa.

Josie was always good at staying in touch with friends and family, and would often host get togethers in the house and – in the summer – in the garden. There was a lovely party for Josie and Mervyn in July 2014 to celebrate their Diamond wedding anniversary. All of her brothers and many of her nieces and nephews joined, along with their great local friends.

Josie kept in good shape. She was a keen cyclist and amused that when setting off on her new, 10-speed racing bike aged 50, she received a wolf whistle from an admirer! She also continued to be a fiercely competitive badminton player, over the washing line in the back garden, as well as at the local school.

As she entered her 60s, Josie developed a few health problems: polymyalgia, which gave her severe pain in her shoulders and a cyst which required a major operation. She never complained of pain, but got on with life. She did used to tell Jono: 'Don't get old!' She said that she felt the same inside, but her body would not always let her do what she wanted it to do.

To complete this eulogy, I will read a poem by Clive James, one of Josie's favourite writers – also fascinated by Japan and another resident of Cambridge. The poem was written when he too felt his body failing, indeed when he knew his own illness to be terminal. But that sense of mortality brought a gift, a reminder of what we should all always know – that beauty is here in this life, to be grasped while we have it, as Josie did. It's called *Japanese Maple*.

Japanese Maple

Your death, near now, is of an easy sort.
So slow a fading out brings no real pain.
Breath growing short
Is just uncomfortable. You feel the drain
Of energy, but thought and sight remain:

Enhanced, in fact. When did you ever see
So much sweet beauty as when fine rain falls
On that small tree
And saturates your brick back garden walls, So many Amber Rooms
and mirror halls?

Ever more lavish as the dusk descends This glistening
illuminates the air.
It never ends.
Whenever the rain comes it will be there,
Beyond my time, but now I take my share.

My daughter's choice, the maple tree is new.
Come autumn and its leaves will turn to flame.
What I must do

Is live to see that. That will end the game
For me, though life continues all the same:
Filling the double doors to bathe my eyes,
A final flood of colours will live on
As my mind dies,
Burned by my vision of a world that shone So brightly at the last,
and then was gone.

Clive James