

A celebration of life

Mervyn Stuart-Smith

28 January 1927 - 20 September 2021

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



a personal goodbye

Humanist
Ceremonies

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Eulogy

Mervyn died at Etheldred House in Histon on the 20th of September 2021. He was well in to his ninety-fifth year and, though he had grown frail towards the end of his life, he remained lucid and engaged with the world around him. By any reckoning it was a good innings (and as a cricket fan I'm hoping that Mervyn would forgive me for that metaphor). No death can ever be easy, but there is comfort in these circumstances.

Mervyn was wise and considered, but he was also practical and brave. He thought things through and then followed through on the consequences, even when that required something of him. Early in life he felt the answers given by the church to life's larger questions were inadequate and its place in English society stifling. As we will see, he was willing to act on this despite the conflict with authority that followed and he remained an advocate of secularism throughout his life. He developed his own strong ethical sense and acted on it, looking to play his role in combatting injustice in this, our one life. These are humanist attitudes and Mervyn was a member of Humanists UK.

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

Mervyn was born on the 28th of January 1927 in Frenchay, a village on the outskirts of Bristol. Frenchay has a lovely central common that was used for playing cricket from the early nineteenth century; indeed, the legendary Victorian cricketer W G Grace was captain of the village team. I'm not sure that explains the pleasure Mervyn was to find in the game, but it has an elegant symmetry! Mervyn's mother was Beatrice May, her maiden name Taylor, with a family background in farming. His father was Gilbert John Smith. He was also to have one sister, Margaret, who was eleven years his junior. Gilbert's own father had been a groom to the local gentry, but Gilbert himself worked as a chemist in industry, including in the manufacture of rayon. It was a career which gave a peripatetic element to Mervyn's early years, the family moving from Bristol, to Edmonton in North London, to Burton-on-Trent in the midlands, before a return to the West Country and the Bristol area.

At school, Mervyn was lucky to have good teachers, the kind who could encourage a bright, conscientious boy and he passed his eleven-plus and went on to grammar school with a scholarship. His favourite subjects were English, Art and Biology – a range that reflected the breadth of his interests and his lifelong curiosity about all aspects of the world. It was a time when he was discovering his own ideas and voice, chafing against elements in a conservative, narrow world despite his own natural courtesy. He walked out of an RE lesson when its churchiness proved too much and he joined the debating society where, in his own words, he and his friends 'imagined ourselves as communists'. Alongside this earnestness he was also enjoying cricket and particularly watching Gloucestershire Cricket Club, including the great Gloucestershire and England player Tom Graveney.

Mervyn's adolescence, however, was marred by one great tragedy. When he was fourteen, his mother was killed following a shooting accident at home when friends, over for dinner, were playing with a gun;

wounded in the stomach Beatrice died of septicaemia some weeks later in hospital. It was a terrible blow: an immediate consequence was to affect Mervyn's O-Levels, which he subsequently re-took; in the longer term he felt the sheer shock had caused him to lose much of his earlier memory of his mother.

After this terrible event, Mervyn went to live with his maternal grandparents on their farm, Rodford Hill, at Yate. It was the beginning of a degree of distance from his own father: they were very different men. The farm, though, was a place that he had already come to love on earlier visits with his mother. Across his life he remembered a first trip to some nearby nurseries: their bedding plants, the warmth of the earth, the greenery and the smell of bone meal provided a sensory overload. It was itself the seed of Mervyn's occasional reflection that, perhaps, he preferred plants to people! Now resident on the farm, he helped his grandfather and learnt practical farm skills. The breadth of life that Mervyn was exploring as he entered manhood – high ideas and ideals at school; the practical and earthy on the farm – was one that was to shape much of the rest of his life.

As a teenager in wartime, Mervyn was forced to confront experiences we all might hope to avoid at any time. He recalled running through fields to avoid bombing raids and, when he got a little older, he joined the local ambulance brigade. On one occasion he had to deal with the corpse of a US airman who had been shot out from his aeroplane; body parts and uniform were spread across the area. Mervyn toyed with pacifism, but when called up for national service he nonetheless made a bid to join the Royal Marines. The fact that he couldn't swim swiftly put paid to that idea and he ended up in the Royal Armoured Corps. It was a difficult start: basic training seemed to consist of marching, poor food and deliberately rough treatment. The officers – though pleasant enough – predictably fulfilled a stereotype of public school, "huntin', shootin' and fishin'" types. Mervyn himself was seen as 'officer material', though he caused a bit of a stir when he entered his religion as 'none' on his entry form and was packed off, unrepentant, to see the padre – you couldn't have atheists commanding in the British army! In the end Mervyn chose against trying for an officer's commission anyway. It would have meant six months more training, and he just didn't feel at home with the officer class. As a result he lost his status as an NCO, returning from Corporal to Trooper.

In the end, though, things didn't turn out so badly. Mervyn applied for and got a role within the structures of the War Office. This was as a 'Sergeant Tester', with special training on administering psychometric tests, to help with the process of demobilisation, selecting and guiding servicemen for roles in Civvy Street. In this job he went to Nottinghamshire and then, following his own application for an overseas posting, to Ismailia in Egypt in 1947. There, as well as working, he learnt to swim in the nearby Bitter Lakes and visited Jerusalem, the Dead Sea and the Mount of Olives, and pondered what he too would do next. Informed by his knowledge of biology and his long-term love of plants, he wrote to the Royal Horticultural Society in London who, helpfully, told him of three university courses in horticulture. The army offered him a six month posting as a warrant officer, but he was homesick and ready to move on so, with the help of an ex-serviceman's grant, he took up an offer for one of those courses, at Nottingham, becoming the first person in his family to attend university. Mervyn made his way to the Sutton Bonington campus of the university by bike. He'd been keen on cycling since his school days and more recently had made several trips, including a multi-day tour of Devon and Cornwall. At university he was once again an able and conscientious student, his studies including botany and soil science, glass house work, planting and work with fruit and vegetables. He

was also a keen participant in the wider life of his college, not only making many good friends but becoming Secretary of the Debates and Lectures Society and elected to the Student Executive. When he came to the end of his course, research was raised as an option but he was interested in something broader, a more immediate application of the knowledge he had gained.

Moreover, something else had changed for him, too, that entered into his plans for the future. Right at the beginning of his course, at registration, he had spotted Josie across the room. Their eyes had met and he greeted her with the classic line 'Are you doing anything this term?'. Josie and Mervyn became first friends and then 'an item'. When he made his next move, to Cambridge, he did it with Josie, who took up a placement as a 'student gardener' at the University Botanic Gardens. Mervyn himself had a place at Downing College. It was the first part of a two year training course that was required after he gained a place as a horticulturalist for the Colonial Service. Mervyn was fairly damning about the quality of Cambridge teaching, but he learnt something of how to apply scientific horticulture in the field, and a lot more in his second year's training, spent at the Imperial College of Tropical Agriculture in Trinidad. This meant time apart from Josie, but it was a great experience, combining exotic plants, field experimentation, cricket and plenty of rum punch. Along with his earlier experience in Egypt, this time in Trinidad established his interest in living abroad.

On his return to England, Josie and Mervyn were married, on the 16th of July 1954 at the Parish Church of St. Michael and All Angels, in Thurmaston, Leicester, close to Josie's family home. The couple then honeymooned in Brittany in France where they enjoyed the pine trees and beaches. Mervyn's love for Josie had been a central pillar within his life from the moment they met. It was to continue to be such through their wedding and as then they raised their children, in their lives once the children had grown up, and it endured – still a constant – beyond Josie's death earlier this year. Their co-equal partnership was given expression by the family's decision, in the mid-1980s, to adopt the combined surname 'Stuart-Smith'; it was a perfect expression of Mervyn's belief that Josie was a part of him and he a part of her. As a tribute to Mervyn and Josie's shared life, I'd like to read a poem that Jonathan has chosen from an anthology bought for him by his father. The poem is called 'It is here' and it is by Harold Pinter. It's a work dedicated to Pinter's own wife, Antonia Fraser, and captures the way the momentousness of a first meeting echoes down future the years of love.

It is here by Harold Pinter

What sound was that?
I turn away, into the shaking room.
What was that sound that came in on the dark?
What is this maze of light it leaves us in? What is this
stance we take, to turn away, and then turn back?
What did we hear?
It was the breath we took when we first met.
Listen.
It is here.

After the wedding and honeymoon, the couple were straight off to Malaysia, where Mervyn had been appointed as an Agricultural Adviser. Their first two years were spent in Kuala Lumpur, with Mervyn chiefly responsible for parks and playing fields while both he and Josie were also learning Malay. The posting was not without danger, the Malayan emergency had been underway since 1948 and they discovered later that the pool where they swam was watched by communist MNLA insurgents.

Josie and Mervyn's first son, Ben, was born on the 11th of July 1956. Shortly after Mervyn chose to transfer and, along with his family, moved to a new location, Sabah in North Borneo, and a small village named Tuaran. They were prepared for things to be basic, they'd been promised a bungalow without electricity, but what they weren't expecting was that the bungalow would be set by the river with a spectacular view of the sacred Mount Kinabalu. There was a romantic streak in Mervyn that perhaps in part prompted this move, but more practically, too, he was after more responsibility, something closer to local people and their needs. His job in Sabah was to help the farmers there improve their crops and yields, looking to make lowland rice growing more efficient and to introduce new crops to the highlands – market garden produce such as lettuce and runner beans. He worked at two agricultural stations, one in the flood plain and one in the hills. Arriving at the latter involved a trip in a De Havilland Rapide to the airstrip, followed by a nine miles uphill trudge – a donkey was supposed to help with this, but when that didn't work out, Mervyn walked!

The family were to spend ten years in Tuaran and it was a happy time for them. They made friends with locals and the few ex-pats alike, enjoying their company over a beer or perhaps one of the potent local brews made from fermented coconut or tree bark. Generous leave gave an opportunity for occasional trips back to England and to explore Asia and the Pacific by boat. They made trips to the US and Mexico, to Australia, to Hong Kong, Bangkok and Singapore, and twice to Japan. Most of all, though, for Mervyn this was a time when he could use his knowledge and training in the service of others. He viewed his work for the Colonial Service with pride; in his own words, he was there 'not to exploit but to serve', to edge the country forward. It was, he said, 'a privilege'.

The family left Sabah, to return to England, on the 28th of January 1966: it was Mervyn's 39th birthday. Though the offer to continue for a further ten years in North Borneo was there, Josie and Mervyn wanted to be with Ben, who had been sent to a boarding school back in England from age 8, while Mervyn felt it would be easier to make a new career at 39 than 49. The territory's move towards independence meant that he would be replaced by a local officer.

Back in England, Mervyn spent a year in college at Wolverhampton, re-training as a technical teacher. Though a new direction, vocational training reflected the importance he had always placed on the practical application of knowledge. The following year, in 1967, he accepted a job in Cambridge at the Francis Jeeps farm college lecturing in horticulture. It proved to be a good choice for a second career: Mervyn enjoyed teaching and found it fulfilling. He had a strong relationship with his students; when some went on to impressive positions as head gardeners in Cambridge colleges and elsewhere they stayed in touch with their former teacher.

It was twenty years later that Mervyn retired from Frances Jeeps, when he was sixty. Before and after retirement, though, he extended himself with other roles. When the opportunity arose he would lecture in other colleges around East Anglia and he went on to teach evening classes in Cambridgeshire and for several years at Mill Hill. He also became an examiner in tropical agriculture for the Cambridge University exam board, helping to set 'O' level papers and mark the work of overseas candidates.

On first arriving in Cambridge, the family bought their house at 153 Gilbert Road. Home, embodied in the Cambridge house, was a key focus for Mervyn. For all his travel and adventure, it was home that gave him happiness and which he nurtured. Sometimes that nurturing was literal: they were able to buy half of a neighbour's garden and Mervyn used it as a vegetable garden producing a plethora of fruit and veg – carrots, potatoes, runner beans, sweetcorn, courgettes, apples, pears, gooseberries and plums. In the 1970s there was homebrew from Boot's kits while some of the fruit went into wine – of, frankly, variable quality. There was work in the house too, with floors sanded for an early Scandinavian look.

Along with Josie, Mervyn enjoyed the Cambridge cultural scene, becoming a regular at the Cambridge Arts Theatre and at concerts. He always continued to develop his mind and ideas. At home he was a voracious reader, taking in works on travel by writers such as Somerset Maugham and Patrick Leigh Fermor, on history and natural history, where Jonathan recalls buying him John Wright's 'A natural history of the hedgerow' and, indeed, on secularism. He was particularly keen on works about England and the British Isles, enjoying Patrick Barkham's 'Islander' and Kate Fox's 'Watching the English'. As with horticulture, he was also a man to put his wider ideas into action. He was a long-time and active member of the Liberal Party and its successors, though he was never sectarian, admiring compassionate, liberal voices from any party, and particularly principled women politicians such as Jo Cox. The schoolboy communist had found a path within democratic politics, but one that still demanded sympathy and commitment.

Many of these activities continued after retirement in 1997, when he also continued to enjoy watching cricket, with some of his old Borneo friends and on one memorable occasion on a solo trip following England on tour in the West Indies; a return to the Caribbean that he very much enjoyed.

One rather important thing I've so far missed from the chronology of Mervyn's life is that, back in 1967, his second son, Jonathan, was born. Jonathan recalls Mervyn as a marvellous Dad: open in his love and practical in his support. Mervyn encouraged an interest in plants and created an allotment for Jonathan within the garden. The two played cricket together for many hours, while the family went on walks and to the theatre and – of course – shared many happy meals together at home. Jonathan's relationship to his father stayed strong through his university days and beyond, with visits to the pub and conversations that were honest and open.

The older generation of Mervyn's family could cause some difficulties. Relations with his own father were never close and, despite his great generosity to his sister Margaret – including providing refuge when it was needed – they became estranged from the mid-1980s. Mervyn found more

straightforward, loving relationship with Josie's family and he will be remembered with fondness and thanks, in particular by his nephews and nieces.

Mervyn was inevitably and permanently affected by the tragic death of his first son, Ben, 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 them on many holidays, including a wonderful trip to South Africa. After Ben's death, Mervyn and Josie chose to use a legacy he had left to go on rambling holidays, often around the Mediterranean. Mervyn continued to talk of the happy times they had all had together, always with pride in his son.

He always asked Jonathan about his grandchildren – Kanna, Emi, Tommy and Jasmine – and was very proud of them as people, as well as taking a keen interest in their academic progress.

This year, Mervyn had to deal with Josie's death. He was himself frail by this time, but well enough to take stock and to talk fully and intimately with Jonathan. As ever he spoke with bravery, wisdom and generosity, open in his love for Josie, clear in his pride in his family and in all he had achieved.