

# A celebration of the life of Alan (AI) William Blackwood

23<sup>rd</sup> November 1932 – 23<sup>rd</sup> December 2023

7<sup>th</sup> February 2024, Putney Vale Cemetery and Crematorium

Celebrant: Tamiko O'Brien



*a personal goodbye*

Humanist  
*Ceremonies*

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Alan was born in Croydon in 1932, an only child to parents he described as “buttoned up to the point of desperation”. We don’t have details about his parents or wider family, but we know his father was an accountant and the family moved to Hove in Sussex where he worked for Hove Town Council.

When Alan was five, he witnessed the Brighton Blitz when the Luftwaffe bombed and strafed the sea front of Brighton, dropping 22 bombs in a 5-minute period. It must have been an apocalyptic sight undermining Alan’s sense of security and stability. But the memory that imprinted most deeply from Alan’s childhood was that of his parents’ dysfunctional relationship. Their discontent and coldness must have caused him considerable stress and he often spoke of it as the driver behind his lifelong determination to live his life in a way that was open, honest, generous, tolerant, and loving.

Alan went to the local grammar school but had little to say about his time there. We know he had a piano at home and learned to play. Presumably he also excelled at writing since he went straight from school to become a cub reporter with the Argus (or Evening Argus as it was then known) writing about everything from football matches to court reports. This gave young Alan a rare view into the many conundrums of everyday adult life. It also established his lifelong and loyal support for Brighton Football Club.

It wasn’t long though before Alan was conscripted for National Service, being in one of the first post-war cohorts at only 17 years of age. He was happy to leave Hove behind and saw National Service as a liberation and an education. Due to his skills with communication Alan went into the *Royal Signals* and spent his National Service time in Germany where, despite his youth, he rose to the rank of Sergeant and was known affectionately as “the Prof”.



Eighteen months later, and now a dab hand at reading maps (something that continued to fascinate him for the rest of his life) he returned to civvy street and so he began his career as a publishing editor.

Fast forward a little to 1952 and two significant developments in Alan's life - he married Marjorie, and he became a member of the communist party. He mainly joined the party it seems to go on the almost free trip to Moscow that resulted from membership. Inevitably Moscow was Alan and Marjorie's honeymoon destination, and the main highlight was their visit to view the open casket of recently deceased Josef Stalin.

Of that up-close and personal moment with Stalin (when apparently the main thing Alan noticed was that he was in fact "really small") Martin would often joke that somewhere in the bowels of MI5 there must be a little file on Alan. This was an idea that rather tickled Alan- that his uneventful few years as a card-carrying communist might have led to some undercover work and subsequent bureaucracy.

Alan and Marjorie divorced around 1955 and Alan never tried cohabitation again. One of the most significant outcomes of their short marriage resulted from their decision to respond to a small-ad in the New Statesman. Without the research possibilities of the internet or cheap airflights they boldly went ahead and purchased a small house sight unseen in Alba-La-Romaine in the French Ardèche.

Thankfully this resulted in a great love affair - with France. Well into his seventies Alan would set off in his little Fiat, known affectionately as the Blue Chap to spend his summers in Alba-la-Romaine writing and occasionally sipping cheap red wine. Meanwhile Marjorie bought a place next door, so they often saw each other and remained great friends until she died in 2018.

In the 1960s Alan bought himself a studio flat in Putney, mainly for convenience since it was an easy train route to Feltham where he was working at the time. He remained in Shelburne Court until the end of his life and referred to himself as "one of the original fixtures and fittings". Indeed, until last year his flat remained a bit of a time capsule with minimal changes to its own fixtures and fittings over the preceding five decades.

Alan wasn't remotely materialistic or acquisitive, he was content to live with the fairly spartan comforts of his flat and his small plain house in France, but he was very discerning about what he lived with. Items were chosen not for their monetary value, or the impression they might make on others, but for their meaning and significance.

So, while he was content to put up with a tinny analogue radio and dispensed with a record or CD player, he cared a great deal about the somewhat eclectic assortment of 'stuff', he had carefully curated.

Alongside particular maps and books was The Gang, a collection of teddy bears that were his much loved, constant, and inseparable companions, all with names and back stories, Eyebrows is with us today.

Alan was dashing, erudite and good-looking and enjoyed his life as a singleton. He was easy and affable in social situations but most comfortable with his own company and his own thoughts, never suffering from fear of missing out. He lived on his own terms and, while he had a successful career in publishing, he preferred not to rise too high in his profession, but to stay at a level where he found the work most interesting.

It was no great surprise that in the 1980s he 'retired' to move across the desk to become a full-time writer. Alan initially specialised in writing about music and commercially there were two particular highlights: a critically acclaimed biography of the English conductor Sir Thomas Beecham, and In Classical Mood, a substantial CD-Book series published worldwide, for which he was the lead writer, and which was named Best-Selling Classical Compilation Series in the US in 1999.

Alan continued writing about music well into his seventies when he began work on his first novel, *Writer's Cramp* which was published in 2020. This unconventional novel is set in the pre-computer age of publishing and is based on Alan's own experiences. A review stated, "*Alan Blackwood writes with an unflagging pace, energy and imagination from first word to last, while carrying the novel in fascinating new directions.*" His interest in structure along with his appetite for crafting luminous vignettes led Alan to the genre known as flash fiction, a form in which he became a master.

Flash fiction are short stories of less than 200 words, and in his micro-stories Alan provides vivid insights from the everyday. Humorous, compassionate, and revealing, they build from details into a wider sense of the human condition and demonstrate that his finely tuned ear and deep listening skills weren't only applied to music.

Alan was not only thoughtful and passionate about the things he chose to live with but also about the people he chose as his friends. Once he had decided to welcome you into his friendship group he was for you, no matter your foibles.

This was most evident in his friendship with Bippo an Italian engineer who caused some fantastically embarrassing scenes in restaurants due to his low tolerance for alcohol. This wasn't the sort of problem that Alan would allow to get in the way of a good friendship.

Despite his apparent indifference to world cuisine - Alan was a vegetarian in later life who was happiest eating pot noodles and ice cream - Alan found travelling immensely stimulating and he made many trips with Brigitte his companion on a number of adventures to the Far East and US. They both recognised travels power to broaden the mind, and for Alan keeping his mind well exercised was essential. When travel became less possible, he used the internet to watch journeys on the French railways (another great enthusiasm), and he would surf the web to find new performers and new interpretations of music that might challenge his way of thinking.

Alan was a great devotee of old British comedies such as ITMA and Round the Horne, but he also got hooked on Family Guy an American animation first screened in the early 2000s. Older people are often characterised as being rather stuck in their ways and unable to keep up with the fast pace of our contemporary world. But not so with Alan, he remained twinkling and sharp, easily following the speedy word play and absurdist satire of Family Guy, a show that is only supposed to appeal to millennials.

One of Alan's greatest joys was to see music live and he often went with Sally to both the great and the more intimate concert halls of London. He found that stripped flannel pyjama bottoms were the most comfortable leg coverings to wear for these outings - so evidently Sally shares his willingness to rise above social discomfort in the name of friendship.

Sally also remembers many happy hours spent at Alan's flat singing along as he played Gershwin on his baby grand, sometimes taking the music into unexpected places.

Sally has chosen one of Alan's extraordinary pieces of flash fiction to read today.

## Reading by Sally Webster

### *In Memoriam* by Alan Blackwood

*A sharp little nip on my big toe made me jump, and from under the bed sheet came the long bristling whiskers and little black shining eyes of a field mouse.*

*He raised himself on my chest, chocolate brown fur on top, snow white underneath.*

*He'd never seen a human before; I'd never been so close to a mouse.*

*We regarded each other at leisure.*

*Back on the floor, ambling not scampering, he went in search of other things to explore. Like, my bag.*

*Stiff, cold and weary after a long day's travel, I reached in it for my keys and touched something soft and limp.*

*Smothered by my pyjamas, little eyes now shut tight, tiny feet upturned in death, he'd said goodbye forever to the pine scented woods and rolling fields of sunflowers for the grey gritty corner of my street.*

*God rest his soul. And if he didn't have one, none of us did.*

## Personal Tribute by Martin Preston

I knew Alan for 27 years. We met through a publishing colleague. The late Beryl Leitch – spotter of talent par excellence – had recommended him to be the lead writer on our new CD-book project, *In Classical Mood*. “He knows everything there is to know about music”, Beryl told my colleague Edward, “and what’s more he can write.” She wasn’t wrong.

There can’t be many people who would comfortably accept a brief to “write 150 words on *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik* for someone who doesn’t know who Mozart is”.

Alan not only could but did so with relish. As I was to discover, unlike most writers who struggle with what they want to say, Alan was a master of what didn't need to be said. In doing so, he brought a lifetime of musical knowledge and editorial experience, plus a deep understanding of the creative process, and focused it laser-like on the job in hand. His words were chosen with extreme care. They were informative, yes, but never patronising.

In the months before Alan's words reached the public, a corporate reorganisation saw the development team go their separate ways – I to form my own company, others to join a rival.

I called Alan and we had lunch in a Korean restaurant in Acton where we were the only customers. I told Alan I badly wanted the project to come to my company but that I couldn't do it without him. It transpired that I wasn't the only one to tell him that – but Alan chose me; something for which I will be forever in his debt.

Alan also taught me about music – or rather, he taught me how much I didn't know. He explained how black Americans evolved jazz by playing on worn-out pianos on which only the black keys still worked... how Oscar Peterson had been influenced by Claude Debussy... how the late, great Burt Bacharach acquired his love of unusual time signatures while studying under the French composer Darius Milhaud, who in turn had studied them while living in Brazil.

Alan was also a fount of amusing musical snippets, many concerning the notoriously acerbic conductor Sir Thomas Beecham, of whom he wrote a critically acclaimed biography. Like Alan, Beecham combined a total mastery of his subject with a love of the pithy and the mischievous. Alan may not have agreed with Beecham's dismissal of the English composer Edward Elgar as "the musical equivalent of St Pancras Station" but he certainly admired the sentiment.

In *Classical Mood* went on to be a huge success, netting the publisher some 23 million dollars and myself a pretty penny. It also earned Alan a few bob, not that he cared. For part of Alan's magic was that he didn't care – at least, not about money. Alan cared about people – or rather he cared about the people he cared about. He would seek out the source of their pain and try to ease it. It's why we loved him.

In the late noughties Alan and I attempted to repeat our success by developing a book series on classical music for the Far Eastern market. Following a pub lunch in Putney with me and my brother, Alan once more got stuck into Beethoven and Brahms, while I bid farewell to the UK and took up residence in Seoul, South Korea.

Sadly, the project came to nothing and my promise to Alan that he would one day be 'big in Japan' went unfulfilled. Even so, we still met up whenever I came back to the UK – I to regale him with my adventures in land of kimchee and K-pop; he to talk of his increasing fascination with 'flash fiction' – stories whose extreme brevity and pithiness owed much to Japanese haiku.

For Alan, the transition from writing brief musical snippets to short stories inspired part by fiction, part by poignant moments in his own life was both natural and seamless. He ran the first few by me. I loved them.

I cannot resist sharing with you my personal favourite – inspired, needless-to-say, by Alan's experiences on *'In Classical Mood'*.

***Mister Big*** by Alan Blackwood

*Why the dark glasses?*

*Were they for the benefit of the Polish waitress Edward was busily chatting up ahead of our working lunch? A touch of the romantic and the mysterious?*

*As we sat down at our table, *The Great Composers* was top of our agenda, a mail order project of twenty-four illustrated monthly issues plus CDs. It was, said Edward, going to be the biggest thing in publishing in years. He spoke fast but softly with the hint of a transatlantic accent that could be very persuasive. 'There'll be more work, 'he promised me, 'than you can shake a fist at!'*

*He scribbled down a name. 'Tchaikovsky was queer, wasn't he?'*

*Yes, and his marriage was a disaster. The dark glasses gave nothing away, but Edward had been through more marriages than I could shake a fist at. Always some little thing, he explained.*

*The Polish waitress handed us the wine list with a sublime indifference. Edward lowered his glasses just enough to scan it, with one eye open. The other was black and blue.*

*Another of those little things, I supposed, as we settled for the Nuits Saint Georges.*



Much as I loved this and Alan's many other tales, each painstakingly crafted, the fat ruthlessly trimmed, I couldn't for the life of me find a way to publish them commercially. Eventually, Alan ran out of patience and published the stories himself, along with his first and semi-autobiographical novel, *Writer's Cramp*, which in spite of its more familiar length was no less intriguing or entertaining.

In the meantime, I returned from Korea – homeless, virtually penniless, but certainly not friendless. Despite my feeling somewhat alienated, and with work painfully thin on the ground, Alan was always there for me. When I thought I didn't want to speak to anyone, up would pop an email of characteristic brevity: "Ça va?" And that would inevitably be followed by an evening chez Alan, typically accompanied by red wine, a somewhat frigid camembert cheese and a packet of spicy Doritos. Epicurean it wasn't, but it never failed to cheer me up.

Our last project together came about post-pandemic, when my brother David, co-owner of Mad Wasp Radio, was at a loss to fill the station's 24/7 schedule and suggested that Alan might like to do a monthly one-hour show which I would record. Thus was born Alan Blackwood's *Accidentals* – an eclectic mix of classical, jazz and show tunes, delivered with customary pithiness by what was almost certainly Britain's oldest DJ at the time.

In all, we did 18 shows – in spite of the best efforts of builders, aircraft and Putney mums to disrupt our recordings. Afterwards, we'd sit and chat and test each other's knowledge on subjects ever more obscure. Who was chief engineer of the London, Brighton and South Coast Railway? Who sang "She was a Sweet Little Dickie Bird"? Which famous TV policeman flew in the First World War?

We laughed. Sometimes we cried. Often we cried laughing. And that, I suppose was the essence of our long friendship.

I don't suppose we'll ever meet again – but I know that if we do, we'll pick up exactly where we left off.

Goodbye Alan. Dear friend.

