

A Celebration of the Life of

Melvyn Le Poidevin

8 December 1939 – 13 January 2025

14 February 2025, Wealden Crematorium
Celebrant: Felicity Harvest



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So now, Mel's story, as told by Jackie, and drawing on the story he wrote himself for Ollie, back in 2009.

Mel was born on the 8th December 1939, in what was then the Town Hospital in Guernsey, now the main police station. He was named Melvyn after a romantic actor, Melvyn Douglas, who had appeared that year with Greta Garbo in *Ninotchka*. As Mel wrote "I can't remember what time I was born, but my mother was there when it happened." And his mother, Gladys, was there just six months later as well, when they were both evacuated to Glasgow, ahead of the German invasion of Guernsey. They left by boat, the first of the many boat-trips in Mel's story. His grandfather and grandmother Gran and Pappy, went too. Gran and Pappy had their fourth child, Terry, while the family were in Glasgow, so Mel had an uncle who was younger than he was. Terry and his wife Margaret are watching us from Guernsey today.

Quite why they were evacuated to a place as dangerous as Glasgow is lost in the mists of history. Glasgow was hit by more than 900 tonnes of bombs and incendiaries during the war, but at least it wasn't occupied. Apparently the family spent most nights in an air-raid shelter.

Mel's earliest memory was being taken to the photographers to have his photo taken. He cried all the way there because he thought it was going to hurt. In the resulting photo, he still looks very solemn. He started school in Glasgow when he was five, but not long after, his father Tom came by train to take them back to Guernsey, the war being over. And Mel had his second boat trip, back to the island.

Mel's best friend in those years in Guernsey was David, who lived next door. They played what they called "Cowboys and Itchi-bums", riding the garden front walls as horses. Mel wrote "Our inspiration came from the North Cinema, just up the road. Every Saturday morning we went to the Children's Club to watch Roy Rodgers, Gene Autrey *The Singing Cowboy*, and others. One Christmas David had a black cowboy suit and I had a normal one, so we could play baddies and goodies"

However, they did not stay in Guernsey for long, because in 1948 Tom headed off to New Zealand, presumably under the Assisted Immigration Scheme, to build a house in Wainuiomata, near Wellington, for the family to join him in 1949. Gladys, Thomas, Mel and his younger siblings June and Kenny were just five of the 77,000 people who left Britain for New Zealand under that scheme. June's daughter Jessica is with us today and another of her daughters, Catherine, will be watching us from New Zealand. Sharon, Mel's other sister, was born in New Zealand. We'll hear her memories of Mel later.

When the house was built, there was only one other house in that part of the valley, where Mel's friend Len Weekly lived, though later the street filled with new houses. Mel and Len rigged up a telephone between their houses, climbing the telegraph poles to nail the wires to them. One night, though, the wires blew down and they were hauled out of bed to clear them so the neighbours could get their cars out. They went to the

same primary school, where their very unpleasant head teacher (Mel called him "evil") often said to Len "I don't know why you're called Weekly, you're so slow at your work that you should be called Fortnightly", and said that Mel would write more neatly with a crow bar than he did with a pen.

There was no TV in New Zealand in those days and as Mel put it in this account to Ollie, "the only Wiis we had were the ones we did in the toilet." They had few books, but Mel was a regular reader of the Beano, Dandy and Superman comics. Holidays were beyond the family's budget.

Mel loved music, and when the LP vinyl recording of West Side Story came out in 1961, Mel bought the record and a little gramophone to play it on. His love of music was to last him all his life.

Mel was hopeless at maths, but once he started to learn French at Hutt Valley High School, he excelled at it, as well as English and biology. In those days, schoolboys in New Zealand had to wear shorts for school right up to the age of 18. His best friend there was Alan.

Mel left school at 18, and spent three years at Teacher's Training College and University in Wellington, as did Alan. Alan was a pianist, and also carved marionettes, for which he wrote plays. He taught Mel to work the marionettes, and for several years they performed Christmas productions for children in local department stores. After College, Alan moved to London to work for the BBC, and they lost touch for a while.

Mel taught at a primary school in Wainuiomata for a year, then left home, and taught for a year at a boy's High School in Hamilton. He then left New Zealand, journeying to Europe by boat, a trip which took six weeks. He spent two years as an English language assistant in France. He then went to London to meet up again with Alan, and worked for a while at a shoe shop in Oxford Street.

A friend introduced Mel to Alison, and they married on 7th December 1967, the day before his 28th birthday. Her father and other members of her family worked at DC Thomson in Dundee, publishers of the Beano and the Dandy. No wonder Mel felt she was the woman for him! The wedding was at Kensington Register Office. Mel had to take a day off from the posh girl's school where he was working, the witnesses were Alison's brother, Allan, and sister in law, Dorothy, and their two eldest children came too. Afterwards they all went for tea at a hotel across the road.

The next day Mel and Alison went to Victoria Station to go on their weekend honeymoon. They had no specific plans, choosing Hastings at random because that's where the first train was going. It snowed all the time they were there.

Jackie was born prematurely, on the 5th February 1968, so unexpectedly that she just arrived in their bed at home. Mel had to make sure she was breathing before he ran

down the road to phone for an ambulance. He always told everyone that he delivered his own baby, without any help.

The family moved back to Guernsey that August, first to Le Vauquiedor Close, then to L'Abri du Rocher – so named because it's in the shelter of Roque Balan, which we'll hear more of in a moment – and finally to Faldouet where Mel lived until December 2019. Mel taught at Vale Junior School, which he briefly attended himself as a boy and where Jackie also went to school.

Alison taught Russian and German at The Ladies' College for many years, Jackie in due course being one of her pupils, and an excellent one at that. Mel's passion for gardening appeared in those years – Jackie remembers him disappearing into the garden when he came home from school each day and not reappearing till dinner time. He grew abundant vegetables, hanging the onions in Alison's old tights by the back door to dry.

There were father and daughter adventures sometimes though. Jackie particularly remembers as a four year old climbing with Mel to the top of the dramatic Roque Balan. And then there was the family trip to Brittany & Normandy in their friends' Dormobile, Freda.

As Alison was a Scot, so the family's year was punctuated by Scottish festivals celebrated with friends like Sandra and John Cherry – Burns Night, St Andrew's Day and Hogmanay, when much first-footing went on. Mel threw himself into amateur theatricals at the Ladies College too, with drama teacher and good friend Gill Jackson often getting him to play the wicked baron.

Gladys visited in 1973, the first time she and Mel has seen each other for 12 years, and it would be another 16 before they saw each other again, when Mel and Alison went to New Zealand for Gladys and Tom's golden wedding anniversary, stopping in Thailand on the way out and Singapore on the way back, as well as travelling round New Zealand in a camper van.

They went to Russia too, a real thrill for Alison, and one of the trips which Mel remembered particularly fondly. You'll see pictures of both these trips during the reflection later.

Sharon's memories underline the impact of having a family so widely scattered:

The earliest memory I have of Mel is when I turned 5 and he walked me to school, holding my hand. He left New Zealand soon after to go to France to teach English. I didn't see him again for 26 years. Owen I and our four young children went to England to meet family that we had never met before. (Owen's side are also from England.) We arranged to meet Mel in Durham. I was expecting a tall man, but that was because he was tall to a five year old. In fact he was not much taller than me. We spent Christmas with him Alison and of course Jackie. I was amazed at the family characteristics obvious among us. He came to New Zealand three times after that. He and Alison came over for mum and dad's 50th wedding anniversary

and he also came over with Mary when they got married. I can't remember the third occasion, but I know he also went to visit our brother in Australia. I remember him helping me in our large greenhouse weeding and tying up tomato plants. (On the day I heard of his passing I went to the greenhouse to tie up tomatoes, remembering him with tears in my eyes). He came to the South Island to visit our mum who was in care at the time. I was always envious of his thick wavy hair, mine being so thin. The boys got the thick hair the girls thin. Three boys and two girls. Sadly I am the only one left now. Even though I didn't see him much I always knew he was there. Me the youngest, he the oldest. I think I will always remember him as I last saw him. It is always difficult having family so far away. Some I have never met. But we are still family.

Lots of love to everyone. You will all have your own special memories.

Mel's little sis Sharon

When he left teaching, Mel took his language skills into tourism, taking French day-trippers round the island, as well as working part time for the Museum service at Castle Cornet, Candie Museum and Fort Grey. There was dressing up involved here too, with him sometimes donning scarlet uniform, and firing the noonday gun.

Mel and Alison went to Egypt in December 1995, and Alison gave up teaching in February 1996, dying of cancer shortly afterwards. Mel was devastated, but in October 1997 Ollie was born, which gave him a new stimulus. "Grandpa hopes to come back down to earth soon" Mel wrote in an announcement in the Guernsey Press. Zoe followed in 2003.

After Alison died, Mel travelled alone for a while, then in 1998 he met Mary in Athens, and they were married on April 1st 1990. The toddler Ollie spent a lot of time trying to get his hands on the sword with which their cake would be cut, and when it finally was, burst into "Happy birthday". Mel gave up his various tourism roles around this time, and with Mary, he continued to travel, with a particular highlight being a cruise to Antarctica on the Saga Rose. When they went ashore, they were told to keep well clear of the penguins so as not to frighten them, but as Mel put it "No-one had told the penguins that, and hundreds swarmed around us and over our feet". His final trip with Mary, who was developing dementia, was the Saga Rose Farewell voyage in the Mediterranean, in 2009. After Mary went into a care home, he managed a couple more solo trips, including to Croatia and to Sicily.

In his memoir for his grandchildren, he said "My happiest and greatest memories are those of places in the world I studied and read about as a young man, and eventually got to visit. In no particular order: St Petersburg, Moscow, Scotland, Rome, Venice, Florence, Pompeii, Knossos, Athens, Marathon, Delphi, Mycenae, Cyprus, Rhodes, Chile, Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay, Paris, Hong Kong, Singapore, Thailand, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, South Africa, Zimbabwe, Prague, Budapest, Vienna, Germany, France, Holland, Belgium, Hawaii, Tahiti, Spain, and the length and breadth of New Zealand and Australia".

Birdwatching was another passion – one he took with him of course to all those places. But however many exotic birds he saw, he described some of his happiest moments as being “seeing 15 sparrows crammed into a tiny bird bath, all flapping and fluttering, with more trying to squeeze in”, and “fledgling blue tits coming out of the nesting box and landing clumsily on the nearest twig.”

When Mary died in 2019, Mel moved to Eastbourne to The Hawthorns retirement village, where he met his dear friend Terri, and then into Mortain Place Care Home in November 2022.

We often think of death as a cruel enemy, taking away those we love, but for those who are suffering or who have reached the end of their endurance, it can come as a quiet friend, closing the curtains, turning off the light, and settling us into a last sleep, free from pain and weariness. I hope it was so for Mel.