

Susan: A personal appreciation, 25 January 2013

I hugely admire, as we all do, Susan's academic achievements, but today I have the honour of talking about Susan as a friend during her life in Edinburgh.

Our first meeting was the culmination of a series of events which can only be described as serendipitous. To cut a long story short, my husband, Jim, and I went to a house warming party, in Edinburgh, of friends we had first met in Aberdeen. At the party, we met Howard and Susan who had recently moved to Edinburgh, and, when we discovered that Susan was the newly appointed Grierson Professor of English Literature, I was astonished, as I had just finished reading Professor Herbert Grierson's daughter's book *Cross Currents*, a book which particularly appealed to me since it described the Grierson family's move, over 80 years earlier, from an area of Aberdeen near where we had lived, to an area of Edinburgh near where we now live, and gave a wonderful picture of the then life of an academic family in Aberdeen and in Edinburgh.

Our conversation thus got off to a great start, and we bonded immediately, discovering shared tastes in poetry, books, plays etc., and by the time the party was finished, we had arranged to see each other again.

Over the years, Susan, Howard, Jim and I have taken part in many ploys, of which a favourite was to arrange a Sunday walk or visit culminating in a convenient place for lunch and refreshment, and where the conversation could last well into the late afternoon. We walked the Union Canal at Ratho; along the shore of the Firth of Forth near South Queensferry, with lunch at the Hawes Inn — no surprises about what we talked about there; visited St Mary's Church in Haddington to see Thomas Carlyle's epitaph for his wife Jane; Dawyck Botanic Garden twice; and, less than 48 hours before Susan died, Susan and I were planning a visit to Howard and Susan's recently acquired retreat, the Lobster House at Burnmouth. On occasion, we went further afield on longer trips, introducing Susan and Howard to such delights as the Inversneckie Café on the Prom at Aberdeen on a Sunday morning, and the beautiful lower Deeside garden of friends where we had the pleasure of seeing a red squirrel!

In inclement weather, or when Susan was in recuperative mode, we might visit a museum or art gallery in Edinburgh, or gather round the fire at home. One of my abiding memories of Susan, on such a fire-side occasion, was her eccentric tea drinking. Definitely a tea ceremony, but not quite as the Japanese do it. I can see her now, sitting by our fire, and as I placed a large tea pot and hot water jug in front of her, she beamed and said 'Am I allowed to skiddle?' And as each cup of tea was poured, the tea pot was immediately filled up with more water — Howard, Jim and I were all meanwhile drinking coffee. I also remember those occasions when it happened that Susan and I had met in town in a café which didn't provide tea pots — we made sure we didn't go back there — Susan would order a tea *and* a mug of hot water, and would nudge me (an inveterate coffee drinker) and say 'Get a mug of hot water with your coffee', thereby ensuring that she had enough water for her skiddling!

During our walks, when Howard and Jim would stride ahead leaving Susan and me to ‘potter’ along behind, and when Susan and I would meet thru the week for a quick lunch before Susan went off to a nearby meeting, or for tea and cake at the end of the working day, our conversations ranged boundlessly: what we were involved in at the time; our families; any worries or problems we had; our gardens; what we were reading; the news of the day; and current plays and exhibitions we might see. Susan was a great conversationalist, but also a great listener, and I can absolutely understand how her warmth, interest and compassion endeared her to people in general, and to her students in particular. Interestingly, when one of Sir Herbert Grierson’s former students wrote of his ‘warm and lively interest in people, their interests and doings, their experience and their minds’ that student could equally well be writing about Susan.

That same student also remarked on Grierson’s having ‘inherited the tradition [of being] the absent-minded professor of legend’, and David Hewitt, in the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, writes of how ‘Grierson was hopelessly impractical’ and that his wife ‘sheltered [him] (except at stated intervals) from familial interruptions and other distractions.’ How different, how *very different*, in that respect, was Susan, from the professor in whose memory her professorship was named. No need to shelter Susan from her family, who were always very close to her heart, and in recent years she has: celebrated each of Laura’s, Lindsay’s and Sophie’s graduations, and their settling into their chosen careers; seen them happy with their partners; and has welcomed Poppy, the first of a new generation, a real delight for Susan. And, amongst other examples, her practicality was seen to great effect in her garden at Bright’s Crescent where she worked hard to bring the overgrown garden back to all its former glory, and I well remember arriving one damp, dreich Sunday for lunch and being told ‘Don’t take off your coats and boots yet’, and being led out into the back garden to see some new delight that Susan had literally unearthed. Susan truly loved her garden, and could even get very excited at Dobbies!

Although, today, we are grieving for the loss of Susan, we are also celebrating her life, a life that showed her to be wonderfully brave, unselfish, high achieving, and a much loving and much loved friend. I know that I will always see her with her beautiful big smile and her brown curly hair, bobbing as it did when she was excited. Susan truly, as Rod said, was a star, and I feel as if a light has gone out of my life; and I’m sure many of you do, too. It was a privilege to know Susan and an honour to be one of her friends — so warm, so uncomplaining, in spite of her horrendous health problems, and with a bright spirit and determination which shone through to the very end, an example to us all.

My heart goes out to Howard and all the family — what we are suffering is only a fraction of what they are going through. But they are a close family and will, I know, be a comfort for each other.

Betta