

GEORGE O'BRIEN – A TRIBUTE

5 March 2011

When Anne asked me to pay tribute to my brother-in-law at this his funeral service, I felt at once honoured to have been asked and daunted by the challenge of presenting in brief the many facets of this remarkable man, four weeks younger than me in age, but many years older in his knowledge and wisdom. But I can give you a variety of snapshots of the person that we loved and admired.

George as a collector

George was a compulsive collector from early childhood:

- of **butterflies**, collected in a net in the garden and fields surrounding his first home on Cullybackey Road, Ballymena, augmented by some exotic specimens from South America donated by a neighbour;
- and then there was a growing collection of **stamps**;
- and of **postcards** similarly from places near and far ;

- and of **cigarette cards** from the local smokers;
- and of course **photographs**, now meticulously catalogued in numerous hefty albums;
- and finally of **books**, now constituting a handsome library in Park Place.

George's love of music and Oxford

George had a great boy treble voice which won him cups and prizes in the Music Festivals so popular in his early years, and later a fine tenor voice. Only last September, at his last Trinity College reunion, he was delighted to join the choir in the College chapel to sing Evensong. George also retained a great love of Oxford as his *alma mater*, and derived enormous pleasure from running the Tayside Branch of the Oxford University Society, providing a social and intellectual focus for old Oxonians in east and central Scotland.

George as moral guardian

George had an instinctive and highly developed sense of right and wrong, and he was vehement against any whiff of corruption or injustice, wherever in the world he found it. His espousal of the Liberal Democrat cause was no shallow affair, rooted in William Ewart Gladstone as a hero from boyhood.

George as father

George was fiercely proud of his daughters Juliet and Leonora, and particularly pleased that he and Anne could bring them up as Europeans through the European School in Brussels, entirely free of narrow nationalism.

George the traveller

George was an intrepid cyclist from his youth, exploring all over Ireland, culminating in a pedal journey with his sister Olive when they reached and rounded the Ring of Kerry in the rain.

Not only in Ireland but across Europe, he could orientate himself at least as well from a church tower as from a map. Indeed, his knowledge of geography, history, politics and international affairs was prodigious.

Later, he travelled on many continents with an undying sense of curiosity and adventure. Three pictures:

- the young student taking a Greyhound bus from New York across the United States to Mexico;
- on his last European project in Albania, where Anne and he explored much of the country, and brought Olive and me on a memorable drive to Lake Ohrid, across which the mountains of Macedonia glistened under spring snow, and his secret mission took us, in the words of Saint Paul, “over into Makedonia” to a little Greek orthodox monastery with peacocks on the roof.
- And he and Anne sailed for ten weeks around South America, including a three-day trek to the ruins of Machu Picchu.

George loved poetry, and he and I shared in our last conversation the sonnet of John Keats which David Nelson has

read to you. I finish with the final lines of George's own poem contributed to his Methodist College, Belfast school magazine in 1951. Describing the glory of a great cathedral, which we can readily compare to this magnificent Abbey Church, he wrote:

*The great east window multi-coloured, mellow,
Upon the varied walls and pavements plays.*

*Alas! That age of craftsmanship is dead and gone.
No more can masonry record a human life.
We have betrayed our heritage of stone,
Replaced it by a cheap and endless strife.*

*But still the bells, in glorious exultation,
Peal forth their joyful message near and far.*

George O'Brien Requiescat in pace. May he rest in peace