

EULOGY FOR RONALD EDWARD WATKINS (1925-2015) ALDEBURGH CATHOLIC CHURCH 10/8/2015

I remember sitting in this church in 2008, seven years ago, listening to Ronald, my father-in-law, deliver the Eulogy for his beloved wife, Phyllis. It was a remarkable tour de force from a man still raw in grief. Father Christopher was concerned that it would be a step too far for Ronald. But Ronald had prepared well. He dug deep into the reserves that served him so well for all his lifetime – and he delivered.

That ability to deliver was part of the essence of the man whose life we are gathered together today to remember and celebrate: Ronald Edward Watkins. Ronald was a good speech-maker. He dedicated himself to getting it right. In the end it seemed effortless. Five years ago, we watched him deliver a talk about his experiences on the royal yacht, Britannia, to an Aldeburgh group, the Festival Society I think, that captivated his audience. He used no notes. Ten years before, we had seen him bring the house down at the White Hart Hotel down the road, proposing a thank you toast to the guest on that occasion, the renowned Brian Rix of Whitehall farce fame. Somehow, he steered the right side of decorum as he extended an invitation for the gentlemen to raise their glasses and drop their trousers.

In the ninety years that were graced to him, he rose to challenges, he achieved; he fulfilled his potential. He was a scholar who could have followed an academic pathway through life. His time at Exeter College, Oxford culminated in the award of a first-class honours degree in modern history. He was a cricketer and oarsman too. Mens sana in corpore sano; a fine mind in a healthy body. And as soon as he went up to Oxford, with the war against Hitler in full throttle, he joined the University Air Squadron and learned to fly. A year into his undergraduate life, he joined Bomber Command and left Oxford behind. We can only imagine what reserves he had to mine to return over two years later and still in his early twenties to complete his degree after having flown 99 missions and survived three tours. He was truly one of the few. His D.F.C. (Distinguished Flying Cross) and Bar tell only part of that story.

Returning to Oxford, he enjoyed not only academic and sporting success but also a glittering rise to the heights of the Oxford University Conservative Association, becoming its President a term or so before Margaret Thatcher added that title to her curriculum vitae. After Oxford, and now married to Phyllis, he faced one of the seminal crossroads of his life as he weighed up the options that his own talents and endeavours had made possible. He had met Churchill, his Conservative connections were well established – the safe Conservative seat beckoned. But he declined. He was later to say to us that he never regretted that decision.

Instead he chose the world of trade and commerce, making his mark and enjoying success first within ICI India and then Vick International before developing HVC, an international consultancy specialising in horticulture. That international dimension was always a key aspect in Ronald's life. As an airman in Bomber Command, he had trained in the U.S.A. and Canada, and later returned with Phyllis to cross the North American continent by train. Phyllis had grown up in British India, the daughter of a family that traced its roots back a couple of centuries to the first European tea-planters. His working life started as a management trainee with I.C.I. India. He and Phyllis became parents in Calcutta, first to Sarah who tragically died in early infancy, then Louise, my wife, in 1953 and Caroline, born in Delhi in 1956. It was in India that his gift for languages shone. I.C.I. had an enlightened policy of encouraging its employees to learn Indian languages and rewarding them with bonuses for each one they mastered. Ronald had mastered I think four of the languages of India before management took fright and put a cap on the bonuses any employee could earn for their linguistic prowess. Around this time, his sister and mother moved to New Zealand and that southern hemisphere connection with his loved and respected New Zealand family became very important in the last decades of Ronald's life. He flew there for holidays four or five times. Travel and air-flight were second-nature to him.

Ronald brought his intelligence and his integrity to the practice of management. He scorned the approach of a few of the bosses he encountered who bullied and controlled through fear. He encouraged; he delegated; he rewarded initiative and enterprise. He savoured the ideas of the British sociologist, Tony Giddens (now Baron Giddens), who had been introduced to him by his old tutor at Exeter College, Greig Barr, about how institutions work and perform best. Ronald was the very model of a very modern enlightened manager – Ronald loved his Gilbert and Sullivan and shared that experience whenever he could with his family on outings to the D'Oyly Carte Savoy operas in London. Such an enlightened and humane approach to managing people succeeded as it always will. He and those who worked for him enjoyed the fruits of his business acumen. The bestowal of the Order of the British Empire (O.B.E.) marked a state recognition of his services to the world of British trade and commerce.

A profoundly important event in his life journey occurred in his early thirties when he – and Phyllis – were received into the Roman Catholic Church. Ronald remained throughout the rest of his life full of faith. Family and faith were his lynchpins. His four grandchildren through his daughter Caroline, his New Zealand family – they were the future he talked about.

In April a few months ago he said to us that he knew he was approaching the end of 'my earthly pilgrimage.' Ronald's way of being in the world and relating to the people he met was indeed

shaped by Christian virtue and the humility of the true pilgrim. That is why he has been, and is, so respected and so loved. Ronald specified that there should be no mention of degrees or decorations, nor honours, in his obituary notice. They count, he suspected, for nothing in the great scheme of things. This, however, is his Eulogy and it is fitting that acknowledgement has been made of at least some of the achievements that have a value in this world. But in a deep sense, Ronald was, of course, right. What really counts in any final judgement are surely the voices of those who encountered Ronald on his journey through a lifetime. Here, to close, is a medley of some of the recent voices:

The doctor from Blue Bird Lodge where Ronald spent his last weeks who spoke of a good man, a gentleman.

The nurses who cared for him who spoke of a lovely, kind man.

His carers, Debbie and Carol, at Northfield Court who have shared their feelings of love and respect for a very special resident.

His contacts at Chantry House where his beloved wife Phyllis spent the last years of her life – Shirley, Kim, Cath, Jo, Linda and others - who speak of him as a lovely man, so caring, so generous, always going out of his way to help others. As Martin says, 'A fine gentleman'.

His contacts in the world of Aldeburgh societies who expressed their condolences on hearing of his passing with spontaneous thoughts such as 'We loved Ronald dearly' ... 'he was such a humble man' ... 'a kind man' ... 'a good man'.

I leave the last words to his nephew, Bryan, on the other side of the world in New Zealand. 'I always looked up to him ... he had a wealth of knowledge and wisdom and I enjoyed his company ... he achieved a lot ... I am very sorry to hear of Uncle Ronald's passing.'

Ronald's earthly pilgrimage is at an end but the influences from a life well-lived are passed on through the generations.

Ronald, we salute you.