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Kathy Wilkes
(Dr Kathleen Vaughan Wilkes)

When in 1972 Kathy applied for the post of Tutor and Fellow in Philosophy at St Hilda’s one of her referees, who had taught her as an undergraduate, wrote ‘I admired enormously the fortitude and passion with which she pursued her interest in philosophy in spite of everything’. Kathy was a woman of remarkable intelligence, warm affections, extravagant energy and enormous charm - but her most striking characteristics throughout her life were indeed the courage and intellectual passion with which she pursued a succession of causes dear to her heart.

When she and her four brothers (two older, two younger) were born their father, already ordained in the Church of England, was Warden of Radley College. The children’s lives changed considerably when their father resigned from Radley and went as vicar to a parish near Leeds, returning a few years later to be Vicar of Marlow. The family attitude to education was, nevertheless, Radley-centric and in later life Kathy used sometimes to talk as though she herself had actually been educated at Radley. In fact she had had one year at Leeds High School before being sent as a day girl to Wycombe Abbey. Throughout her teens, her passion was for every kind of sport, and above all for riding. She had her own horse, which lived normally in a meadow by the Thames but accompanied the family on summer holidays in Herefordshire, where they camped in the fields near Treago, the family home of an aunt and uncle. And it was at Treago, at the end of her first year as a scholar at St Hugh’s, that her horse tripped over an unseen wire and rolled on her, breaking her pelvis and part of her back and condemning her to a life of almost constant pain. For the first few years sitting was impossible, she could only stand or lie down, and we hear of her reading, or writing essays, standing at a friend’s mantelpiece – and working to considerable effect, for she obtained a congratulatory First in Greats. Philosophy had now become her passion – and would remain so for many years.

She spent the next three years as a graduate student at Princeton, with glowing reports from the distinguished philosophers whose seminars she attended, and then one year as an ‘external student’ at King’s College, Cambridge. She had just completed her Princeton doctorate when she came to St Hilda’s as a tutor – aged twenty-six. Tall and animated, witty and irreverent, Kathy made a considerable impact on the College, and in the University. At first closer in age to her pupils than to the majority of the Senior Common Room, she was also closer in attitude. Throughout her life she shared the libertarian views of the ‘revolutionary’ generation of the 1960s and strongly supported, for example, undergraduate demands for representation on the Governing Body and the extension or, preferably, abolition of ‘visiting hours’. (When, in the early 1980s, I took somewhat unfair advantage of these views and asked her to become Dean, she roared with laughter and said ‘I should have seen that one coming!’ Needless to say, she made an excellent Dean.)

For the College she taught across the whole philosophy syllabus, but her own interests were in the philosophy of mind, and particularly the relationship between mind and body. From the start she respected the work that physiologists, medics and psychologists were doing in the same field and her own ‘nuanced and realistic’ version of physicalism was set out in her two books, both received with respect by her
philosophic colleagues, *Physicalism* (1978) and *Real People* (1988), and in more than fifty articles. She wrote always with elegance and great lightness of touch, whether in scholarly journals or personal letters.

Science and philosophy together drew her finally away from the Christian faith of her childhood, but left her — in the words of one friend — always ‘culturally an Anglican’.

Kathy demanded from those she taught the same high standards that she imposed on herself. In descriptions by former pupils of tutorials with Kathy the terms ‘rigorous argument’, ‘stimulus’, ‘incisive questioning’, ‘clarity of thought’ recur again and again. She was particularly skilful and kind with pupils who had done no philosophy before arriving in Oxford. She listened to their views and was prepared to explain again and again, and — if necessary — again, points of logic or concept that they had found impossible, the tutorial stretching far beyond its scheduled hour. We also hear frequently of her sympathy and practical advice in pupils’ personal crises.

Thus far, Kathy was simply the very best kind of Oxford tutor, but events were about to enlarge her sphere of interests and activity far beyond Oxford. In December 1979 the Oxford sub-faculty of philosophy received a letter from the Czech philosopher Julius Tomn, asking for a lecturer to visit the informal seminars on classical philosophy that he was holding in his home in Prague (because philosophy could not be taught in schools or universities). The police watched and frequently broke up the seminars and intimidated, and sometimes attacked, their members. Kathy volunteered at once. At that stage she had no experience of life behind the iron curtain and the situation that she found in Prague was a revelation. On her first visit she gave four seminars, each lasting about six hours — partly because everything she said had to be translated but chiefly because the students were so eager ‘to find out what philosophy had to say to them about how to live in this world of Communism and lies’. Before the Czech authorities refused her a visa, Kathy made two more visits to Prague, during which she showed complete indifference to the threats and active intervention of the secret police and gained the respect and affection of countless young Czechs. Throughout the 80s she helped to co-ordinate the visits to Prague of other Oxford philosophers, and to arrange for books to be sent for the seminars that continued, with the help of visiting lecturers, right up until the ‘velvet revolution’ of 1989.

When Czechoslovakia was closed to Kathy other doors opened and invitations to lecture flooded in, at first from other east European countries. She made many visits to universities in Poland and Bulgaria, taking with her parties of undergraduates and young colleagues to join in the philosophy seminars and discussions with Polish and Bulgarian students. She was also tireless in helping students from eastern Europe to come to the UK to study. Gradually the invitations started to come to her from further afield. In 1987 she wrote ‘I think my summer might be fun — Poland, then Yugoslavia…then USSR, September in Brazil, Bulgaria early October’, and in 1991 ‘No, no holiday for me — China for a month, two lectures a day, then back, then Yugoslavia for September’.

She was also involved from its earliest days with the Inter-University Centre in Dubrovnik. This was an institution after Kathy’s own heart, a forum where scholars from all over Europe, east and west, could meet to discuss their subjects in total freedom. Kathy spent some time there every summer and played a key role in many of the Centre’s programmes, particularly in the annual course on the philosophy of science. She was there, on holiday, in September 1991 when, almost without warning, the Serbs started their long and brutal shelling of Dubrovnik. Kathy stayed
on – ‘it has not been easy, to put it mildly, to leave’. She described herself – in a letter to the Evening Standard – as ‘unofficial, temporary English language secretary to the Mayor’, but she was far more than that. By phone, fax, email, articles in newspapers, broadcasts, letters to personal friends and to government officials, she tried to rouse public opinion in the west to what was happening in Dubrovnik, and badgered western governments to recognise Croatia as an independent country. She managed to get out to the west to buy medical supplies, and mine detectors, and books to restock the burnt libraries, and to get them back to Dubrovnik. We hear of her helping the wounded, entirely indifferent to her own safety, doing whatever seemed necessary at the time.

To Kathy all this followed naturally from her affection for Dubrovnik and its people, and was a logical extension of her hatred of injustice and tyranny; but the people of Dubrovnik recognised her extraordinary courage and were grateful. She was made an honorary citizen of Dubrovnik and – somewhat to her own amusement – an honorary member of the Croatian army, and received the Hrvatska Danica order from the Croatian government in 1997.

When it was all over she came back to St Hilda’s and her Oxford life, but the whole episode had taken a terrible toll on her health and in many senses she never fully recovered. At all events, Dubrovnik was now the cause dearest to her heart and she remained in touch with the city and its problems for the rest of her life.

Kathy had always been a generous hostess, to undergraduates and colleagues alike, and alcohol helped a lot with the pain from her back. Sherry frequently accompanied tutorials, and drink was an essential component of the philosophy sessions in eastern Europe. But what had been an occasional support gradually became a necessary prop and it undoubtedly hastened her too-early death at the age of fifty-seven.

Kathy was an outstanding figure in her generation as philosopher, tutor, colleague, friend and warrior. Her remarkable intelligence and energy were combined with modesty, courage and a great capacity for human affection. She remained close to her family – ‘the brothers’, to whom two more had been added, figured frequently in her conversation – and she is mourned by devoted friends all over the world.

Mary Moore

(In writing this memoir I have been greatly helped by many of Kathy’s pupils, colleagues and friends and by her family. I should like to thank in particular Dr Anita Avramides, Jenny Carter, Heather Devine, Lady English, Professor Paula Gottlieb, Dr Mary Gregory, Miss Elizabeth Llewellyn-Smith, John Lucas, Val McDermid, Dr W Newton-Smith, Dr Margaret Rayner, Dr Helen Steward, Miss Nita Watts, Peter Wilkes. Barbara Day’s vivid account of the Oxford philosophers’ visits to Czechoslovakia, ‘The Velvet Philosophers’, is published by the Claridge Press, 1999.)

Kathy Wilkes in Prague

Last month I received a message from an old Oxford friend announcing the sad news about Kathy Wilkes and I want to share my memories of her with others, not least to help me to come to terms with it.
I first met Kathy when she came to Prague at the end of 1970s with Steven Lukes from Balliol College, as a co-founder of the Oxford University project of aiding Czech dissident intellectuals after the publication of Charta 77. Steven was an old friend of mine from my Oxford days (in 1968 I was a Czech student stranded in England after the Warsaw Pact armies’ invasion of my country and I was offered a grant by St Hilda’s to read English language and literature). I was thrilled to learn she actually taught at my old college, the place that for me, then, was proof there was a real world outside the Iron Curtain, a safe haven I could resort to if things got really bad. Right away she became not just a friend but a member of my family.

In the early eighties she used to come quite frequently, organizing lectures, supplying her Czech colleagues and would-be students (deprived of the chance to receive formal education) with much needed literature, and - perhaps most importantly – demonstrating to all of us there were people in the UK, in Europe, who knew about us and who believed things would eventually change - even for us.

As a friend she was open, sincere and helpful. As a member of our family, she would help with household chores, collect my children from the kindergarten, shop with my little son in the dreary local supermarket, each of them consulting their shopping list in their respective languages, and keeping us all cheerful. She is one of those people both my children should thank for having been brought up almost bilingual.

In 1981 she even managed to persuade the then Principal of St Hilda’s to send me an invitation to Oxford, pretending I had been awarded a grant for former graduates (in reality it was money I was given for my dissident translations). In this way, she helped me, my husband and my son to escape the depressive atmosphere of our own country at least for a few weeks. I am afraid I never thanked her enough for it and I have never let her know exactly how much it meant for us. And we were only a few among those in our country she helped in so many ways.

I met Kathy, the last time, just a year ago in Oxford. She did not look particularly well, yet she was very lively, and still obviously interested in my rather passionate criticism of the current situation in the higher education sector in the Czech Republic. I rather hoped then we would continue the debate at some later time and come up with a meaningful proposal for change. We even made a sentimental trip (admittedly by car this time) to the Victoria Arms, with old Oxford friends reviving our memories of our undergraduate days and suffocating my partner from Prague with old stories. I was amazed to learn from him later that he saw her on that September night in the same way that I saw her in 1979: extremely intelligent, knowledgeable and British, and yet very ‘normal and very close to us Central Europeans’, whom she understood so well.

Kathy, of course, became renowned for her work in Dubrovnik, Croatia, - justifiably so. But we should not forget her deep involvement in the dissident movement in former Czechoslovakia, and particularly her personal friendship that made the lives of so many people in our country at least somewhat easier.

I miss her very much and I know I shall never cease to feel a gap in my life. Still, I consider myself lucky. I am very happy to have met her.

Jana Frankova (Vanatova, 1968-71)