

Via, veritas, vita. A tribute to Jean Humphreys

[Given by Professor Watson]

During several of our visits to see Jean when she was in the Nursing Home, she said to me in her inimitable Scottish way 'I want you to preach me out'. It was somewhere between a plea and a command; but before I respond to it, I should like to express my admiration for all those who looked after her, visiting, comforting and loving, in her final years. I shall not try to name them, because I might leave someone out. But their kindness and generosity of spirit did much to alleviate the boredom and pain of the last period of her life.

In one of my last letters I told her that this address would be based on the words '*Via, Veritas, Vita*', from her old University of Glasgow. We have just heard them in English from the 14th chapter of St John's Gospel, but the Latin words are found on the coat of arms of the University. They have much to tell us about the life of someone whom we admired and loved so much.

Via: The Way

Jean was born on a farm at Drumadoon, near Blackwaterfoot on the Isle of Arran, the daughter of James Currie and Jessie Ann Currie. As she often told us, 'a Currie married a Currie'. As was a Scottish custom, she was christened Kathryn Jane, after Aunt Kate. As a child her father took to calling her Jean, or Jeanie, after Jeanie Deans in Scott's novel *The Heart of Midlothian*. He sometimes even called her 'Deans'. She had a sister, Janet, and a brother James, who became the Minister of Dunlop in Ayrshire and an authority on Burns, whose immortal memory he toasted in many towns and cities throughout the United Kingdom, from Forres to Folkestone.

She had a very happy childhood: it was recalled in marvellous detail in the Presidential Address which Jean gave to the Leicester Literary and Philosophical Society in 2009, called 'An Odyssey: from Arran to Leicester'. It was typed out for her by Gordon Campbell, and can be found on the Society's website created by Aftab Khan. It was full of the hard work on the farm – the milking, the ploughing, the peat-cutting – and the need to economise. 'There was no money for a Saturday penny for us children', she remembered, 'though we were given sixpence each to put in the church plate on Sunday.' After her local school time, her secondary education took place at Whitehill Senior Secondary School in the East End of Glasgow, where she boarded with an aunt. From there she went to the University of Glasgow, to the great Gothic Revival building at Gilmorehill on the West End of the city, where the *Via, Veritas, Vita* inaugurated five and a half centuries of Godliness and good learning. Jean went from there to do teacher training at Jordanhill College, before joining a new school that had been set up in Arran.

It is important to remember those early years, because Jean never lost sight of them. She spoke in a lovely West of Scotland accent that salted her speech and contrasted finely with the East Midlands dialect. This city was her home for more than sixty years, but those who knew her soon realised that there was a part of her that had never left Arran, with its

mountains and its forests, and glens, and the water everywhere, and the people whom she knew and loved, and described in that Presidential Address. One story that did not appear in that Address was told by her nephew Charles Currie. It concerned Jean's future sister-in-law, Charles's mother, Peggy, who was Jean's age. She came as a Land Girl to the farm. One hot day, when they had been working hard, they decided to go for a swim in the sea. They had no costumes, but the beach was deserted. While they were in the sea, the shepherd came along, and began talking to the girls. He went on for some time. When he eventually left, they were able to emerge, blue with cold.

In due course she and Arthur acquired Meadow Cottage at Pirnmill, a few miles up the road from Drumadoon; it was a lovely place, looking west through the sunsets across to Kintyre. They spent many happy summers there.

She had met Arthur through Donald Brander, a teacher in a school for evacuees in Arran, who was sent to Turkey during the war, where he met Arthur. They went walking and climbing together, and when the war was over, Donald invited Arthur to Arran for a holiday at Easter 1946. Initially Arthur thought that the farm at Drumadoon was Donald's, and he was embarrassed when he found out that it wasn't. But he asked to come back in the summer to work on the farm, no doubt with romance in his mind; and two years later he and Jean were married on 8 August 1948 in Shiskine Church. In his wedding speech Arthur noted that if they were fortunate enough to be married for forty years, they would celebrate their Anniversary on the 8th of the 8th, '88. They got to that date, but only just, for Arthur was by then very ill, and he died on the following day.

It had been a true partnership of minds and hearts. For many years it was Jean's purpose in life to support Arthur in his work: together they believed that in their teaching and their lives they were offering undergraduates (and anyone else who would listen) gifts of learning and appreciation that would stand them in good stead for the remainder of their lives. They believed, in their own dedicated way, that they were doing their part in trying to build the New Jerusalem. They went through life with a mission: I sometimes think of them both with the words, 'I am come that they may have life, and have it more abundantly.' That saying, part of which is on the University of Leicester's coat of arms, 'ut vitam habeant', sums up much of what motivated them both during Arthur's life; and after his death, more than thirty years ago now, Jean carried on the torch of learning and love.

Veritas: The Truth

Lovers of Scott will remember that in *The Heart of Midlothian* Jeanie Deans walked to London to beg a pardon for her sister, who had been charged with infanticide. This is based on the true story of Helen Walker, who came from Irongray, near Dumfries. Helen was under pressure to tell a lie to save her sister, but she refused. She walked to London instead to beg for her pardon. Jean had the same regard for truth, the *veritas* of the Glasgow University coat of arms. It was unthinkable for her to be untruthful or devious in any way: the truth was plain before her, and she held to it in all her doings. She was outraged, some years ago, when a few years ago a book was published containing letters from Philip Larkin to Monica Jones, in

which in places he made fun of Arthur in the intimacy of private letter-writing. She had known Philip, and thought he was a friend. To find that he could lampoon someone to whom he was outwardly friendly was entirely beyond, or as she would have said 'outwith' her comprehension, and she was upset and angry. And she was right.

She did not walk to Leicester, but she did move south for almost four hundred miles from the west coast of Scotland: her mind and spirit traced every mile of the distance between the West of Scotland and the East Midlands. She supported Arthur throughout some difficult years at the beginning, but she found the young University a congenial place. She has recorded her debt to Principal Attenborough and his wife and sons, whose friendship is recorded in the photograph in your Order of Service. In Jean's own words, they 'took me under their wing and taught me a lot about English social and academic life.' This comes from the response that she made in 2008 when she was made a Distinguished Honorary Fellow, not long after her Honorary MA. In that speech she told the audience 'you will understand that the mores of the Scottish islands are very different from those of this wealthy Midlands city and I had a lot to learn, and indeed I am still learning.' She started early by responded instantly to its needs: she and others formed a club of what would now be called 'carers' to look after Jack Simmons's elderly mother; and she was tirelessly hospitable in the lovely house in Victoria Park Road, which they bought for £5,500, a figure that caused the then Registrar, Harold Martin, to predict that 'no-one will ever pay such a price for a house in Leicester again.' She had a way of greeting which was instantly charming: 'My dears', she would say, 'how are you?' She had her own collection of names for people: the distinguished Chilingirian String Quartet who played in a memorial concert for Arthur were 'the Chillis'; and Arthur himself was often 'Arturo', like the hero of some grand opera. There was a memorable moment for all who were present in the old Phoenix Theatre in 1968 or 1969. Arthur had just edited Shakespeare's *Henry V* for Penguin, and the Department of English was invited to a special performance of the play. In Act II scene iii, when the Hostess is mourning the death of Falstaff, she mis-remembers the parable of Dives, the rich man, and Lazarus, the beggar who ends in heaven in the bosom of Abraham: 'He's in Arthur's bosom, if ever man went to Arthur's bosom'. The deluge of affectionate laughter that followed must have bewildered the actors as much as it delighted the audience. In my mind's eye I can see Jean and Arthur now, sitting side by side in the middle row of the theatre among the undergraduates, acknowledging the pleasure with dignity and delight.

There was much fun in those years. But there was also a seriousness. Jean brought to all these activities and relationships an integrity that was part of her love of truth, the *Veritas* that everyone who knew her will remember.

Vita: The Life

It was this integrity that earned her the affection and respect of her friends, not only in the university but in the City of Leicester. She was a member of the Haldane Society, the Leicester organisation which existed to bring town and gown closer; and she became a great ambassador from the University to the city. The esteem in which she was held was marked by her election as President of the Literary and Philosophical Society in 2009. She threw herself

into University and City life, for she loved the city; and she loved, too, the way in which the University began to be regarded with affection by its former undergraduates. 'We are a three-generation university already', she said: remembering John and Tina Nay, who met at Leicester, where Tina's father had been one of Arthur's first students. Their daughter came to Leicester to read English like her parents and her grandfather.

In old age she supported the University at every opportunity. She attended day schools, conferences, and seminars, in spite of her increasing deafness, which often meant that she spent long hours unable to hear what was going on. But she was there. Every organiser of an event knows how important it is to have a full room, and again and again in her later years Jean was able to help by just being present.

Above all, she was always and obviously in love with Arthur, and he with her. It was a marriage that had echoes of Scotland's national poet, who also had his Jean:

Of all the airts the wind can blaw,
I dearly like the west,
For there the bonny lassie lives,
The lassie I love best:
There wild woods grow, and rivers row,
And mony a hill between;
But day and night my fancy's flight
Is ever wi' my Jean.

When a friend and I visited her at Meadow Cottage at Pirnmill, she told us something of Arthur's last days, and his burial at Shiskine beside her parents, where her ashes will join them. Nearing the end, he said to her one of the loveliest things that any husband can say to his wife: 'You gave me life'. We had this sudden vision of the shy young academic, embarrassed when he first came to Arran, transformed by love into someone who played a grand part in the world and held his head high.

'You gave me life.' That is what Jean did for so many of us. To be with her was to experience the *Vita* of the Glasgow coat of arms, the vitality of life lived to its fullest possible extent. That is why so many people are here today, for she touched many lives and made them richer and finer. She leaves a memory behind her that will sweeten all our days.

May she rest in peace in the earth that she loved so much.