

# Remembering Venetia Phair

**A tribute at her funeral by OE Charles Gallannaugh (Fayrer 1949-53)**

**W**hen I first met Venetia, Patrick had just been born. I joined Epsom College in the Lent Term. A small number of new boys arrived at Heron Court, the Phairs' home just down the road from the College, before being introduced to Fayrer House.

Venetia's kindly and reassuring presence was very comforting to anxious young boys about to take a step into the unknown. Tea and cakes for us and discussion with our mothers about the new baby showed us that our world was not about to end after all. I had no knowledge then, of course, regarding her influence on the academia of Oxford and the naming of the planet Pluto as recently related in her obituary in *The Times*. The family tragedies of her early childhood no doubt influenced the development of the friendly and compassionate nature which so many of us remember. Venetia provided an air of calmness and kindness in our somewhat male-orientated world, demonstrating by her interest in us all that there was a maternal presence in the background with an ever-present concern for our welfare.

One has to understand that at that time small boys were generally regarded as a serious risk to the wellbeing of adults – characterised perhaps most brilliantly by Richmal Crompton's portrayal of William Brown. To us boys it appeared that the prevailing ethos could be summarised thus: 'If he moves when he shouldn't, thrash him, and if it doesn't move, thrash him anyway as he's probably asleep when he should be awake.'

We entered a world of structure and discipline and soon adapted to new surroundings. One of the ways of dealing with those who broke the rules was for the prefects to issue 'lines' – a tedious chore which meant copying reams of boring text onto a sheet of closely lined paper. I appeared to have a hidden talent for attracting the award of 'lines' rather as an MP is attracted to an expense account.

However after a while Maxwell had the brilliant idea that this wasted talent could be reassigned to more constructive activity if the Prefect awarded a period of time for an offence instead of lines, the time to be spent attending his garden at Heron Court.

I rather enjoyed gardening and I enjoyed it even more when I discovered that Venetia would appear with a large piece of cake and tea or ginger beer to make sure that we were rewarded for our work, in complete contrast to the purpose of the exercise which was to punish us for our wrongdoing. Those who have brought up young boys will be aware of their capacity to consume vast quantities of food. At a time when some food was still rationed after the war, and my memories of meals at Epsom revolve around beans, condensed milk and horse meat, the opportunity to eat Venetia's cake was something which lingers in the memory to this day. 'Let them eat cake', as Marie Antoinette so unwisely said, and the proletariat of Fayrer House flocked to eat Venetia's cakes.

After leaving school I did not meet Venetia again until many years later. I returned home one evening after a long day in the operating theatre to be informed by my wife that someone had telephoned and had left a number for me to call them. She had not ▶

◀ managed to catch the rather unusual name. I rang the number and Maxwell's voice came down the wires just as I recalled it from far in the past. "Venetia and I were in Athens. Knees. We met someone who said you were an expert on knees. Eric Radcliffe – Wilf to you probably – is having terrible trouble with his knee; will you see him?"

We arranged a meeting and in due course Venetia and Maxwell brought the patient to see me in my rooms. Eric Radcliffe, the Housemaster of Carr when I was at school, was becoming frail but his arthritic knee was causing him great pain and in due course I replaced the joint. When they all came to see me for Eric's final check some weeks later, Maxwell pointed out to me that I had not submitted an account. When I said that I would not be doing so and therefore neither would my anaesthetist, he fixed me with that expression I remembered so well from the past which said more than words, 'Why not?' He left out the word 'boy' on this occasion. I pointed out that anyone who had had the unenviable task of trying to teach me European history at A level had a right to expect some recompense in later life and after a little more discussion we parted.

A week or two later Maxwell and Venetia called unexpectedly at my house, Maxwell bearing a bottle of port supported on a pillow carried by Venetia to avoid undue disturbance of the sediment. It was no ordinary bottle of port but Taylor's 1927, which he had received as a gift long ago and which he now wished to pass on as thanks for my help with their old friend. It was an act of kindness which meant more to me, the recipient, than they probably ever realised.

Venetia and Maxwell Phair's influence on the lives of all of us is their lasting memorial. Their interest in us and their innate kindness kindled a sense of duty and service towards our fellow beings which exemplifies education at its very best. Kennedy's saying, "Ask not what your country can do for you but what you can do for your country" perhaps summarises most aptly the philosophy which lay behind the education the College gave us and I have no doubt it still teaches this today. Venetia and Maxwell embodied these values at the highest level and by their example handed them on to those of us whose lives they touched. They will never be forgotten by those of us who knew them.

**Charles Gallannaugh, June 2009**