

JOHN GILLING

Eulogy: 21st April 2010

‘His flighty wit was matched by a stern, even craggy, sense of propriety.’ So said an old friend, whose memories go back to undergraduate days in Cambridge. Telephoning, emailing and talking to friends and family in the wake of John’s sad but peaceful death on the early morning of Palm Sunday, I have been struck by how little any of us probably knew the whole man. Your John and my John will have points of similarity but there will be discrepancies. He was, I suspect, a much more private and complex human being than his jolly, avuncular, bon vivant public image would suggest. What I think we all felt – those of us who knew him over and beyond his priestly role – was that this was a decent man, a kind man, a man of honour, a man of principle. He combined these qualities with a keen mind, an unusual breadth of vision, an outrageous wit and a remarkable degree of tolerance.

John was born in 1925 in Chelmsford. His father was the bank manager and his mother, who survived her husband by many years, became a JP. He had happy memories of a semi-rural upbringing in Springfield, where the family lived through John’s formative years. There were two older sisters; Mary, who became Lady Marre, died several years ago but her children, Andrew and Kate have travelled from Ontario and Fife, via Krakov, to be here today (you can imagine the anxieties their journeys have caused them); John’s other sister, Meg, was due to be with us but was taken ill last night. His younger brother, Dick, lives in Australia and has not been well enough to travel but his son, Daniel, represents their branch of the family. To them all, we offer our sincere condolences for the death of a brother and an uncle whom they remember as a slightly exciting, rather risqué visitor, someone happy to share their interests, write them illustrated stories of an imaginary Arabella or tell them of their grandmother pouring tots of whisky into goldfish bowls to revive ailing fish or down the throats of chickens with the same purpose – or possibly to improve their flavour.

John was sent to St Edward’s Oxford as a boarder. His memories were not happy ones but he found solace in the Art Department. He became a talented water colourist and he was always ready to boost someone’s morale with a highly flattering and affectionate portrait in crayon, charcoal or pencil. Mine still hangs at home! Although he loathed the school, he and three friends, including Brian Tovey, later Head of GCHQ, had a brilliant History teacher and all four of them won major awards to Cambridge.

He had the misfortune to reach the age of 18 in 1943. He was commissioned and sent to India with a signals regiment, in command of men far older than he was. For all his self-deprecating remarks about his war service, he must have made some mark for he remained in contact with his old sergeant and his family until recent times. The dying days of the Raj appealed to John’s sense of style and he enjoyed much of his time in India. He often spoke with affection of Lutyens’ New Delhi, Himalayan hill stations, officers’ clubs and interminable but fascinating railway journeys. However, in 1945, he and his men were on the point of being sent to Burma – a mission which his commanding officer warned him could result in 90% casualties – when the Americans bombed Hiroshima and Nagasaki. He always said that this left him with a rather different perspective on the evil of the atomic bomb.

Returning to Trinity Hall, Cambridge, later than many because of his war service, he took a first degree before moving to Downing for an MLitt under the guidance of The Slade Professor of Art, Nikolaus Pevsner. Then he was accepted by the theological college at Cuddesden, outside Oxford. Curacies followed at Romford and Little St Mary's in Cambridge, under the stern eye of Edward Maycock. Doing his best to get through the elaborate ritual of Mass there on his first Sunday, to his terror, he heard Edward hissing at him: 'What do you think you are doing there?' In time honoured fashion, John soon won him round with a delicate and affectionate pencil drawing. John wasn't beyond being waspish himself, especially if he was feeling hungry. An old friend, Hugh Rice, remembers an incident in the days before intincture was common. A communicant took the wafer but kept it in his hand, arousing John's suspicion of skulduggery. After a moment's thought about what he ought to do, he said in his sternest clerical voice, "Consume it!" Naturally the man obeyed. John's art may have been a bit sentimental but his approach to religion wasn't. There was always humour in his sermons but he had no time for sloppiness of thought. A curate at St Mary's preached a deeply sentimental sermon on the subject of 'The Good Shepherd' which greatly impressed a parishioner. John lost no time in telling her that he thought it was absolute nonsense.

John approached Christ Church for a living and their response was to invite him to become its first-ever College Chaplain. Thanks to Cardinal Wolsey's vaingloriousness, the Oxford college of Christ Church was built around the cathedral. With its Dean and Chapter running the cathedral and ministering to the undergraduates, it was not until 1962 that the decision was taken to have a priest to deal specifically with the undergraduates. John was a brilliant choice. A bit of a maverick, he didn't always please the powers-that-be but the undergraduates learnt to love him. He introduced College Evensong and organized reading parties during vacations. His parties are remembered as some of the best of that post-Brideshead era, thanks to his abundant generosity with refreshment. John was an early and passionate adherent of hi-fi. He constantly developed and improved his equipment, sometimes brandishing a soldering iron and frequently rearranging his layout. His musical tastes were broad but his favourites were Mahler, Bruckner, Wagner and Richard Strauss. On a professional level, his door was always open, his advice always restrained, wise and comforting. Sherry was dispensed in large quantities in the early evening and Scotch late at night. He never seemed to tire with what must often have seemed trifling adolescent anxieties and the endless self-questioning of unrequited love. His niece, Kate, reminds me that he even invited her up more than once to divert some love-sick boy. Certainly, he was responsible for at least one life-long union amongst his charges and their girlfriends. There was always that slight desire to shock which so delighted us as youngsters. An old Cambridge friend, visiting John in his rooms in Tom Quad remembers his looking through the window at a poster, set across the road on St Aldate's Church, advertising a sermon in a course on life's problems: 'Living with Sex'. John mused: 'It's living without it that's the problem' – and he laughed merrily.

It was at Christ Church, in 1962, as an undergraduate, that I met John and introduced him to my family. He has been an integral part of our lives ever since. It was typical that he should so quickly have understood my parents' complicated personal lives, seeing good where others would have censured, always acting as a restraining influence when rows threatened, picking up the art pad and pencil to defuse tension and contributing so much joy and laughter to our Christmases together and summer holidays in Italy. John came to Orta every year but one – when he had no curate - for over 35 years. There is no part of our house or garden on the water's edge that I do not

associate as much with him as with my own family. He regularly painted the trees hanging over the water and the blue hills on the farther shore. He skilfully captured the water in all its moods. He would swim out into the lake, or row a boat out, for matins and evensong, sometimes bobbing around in a jumbo-sized, red rubber ring. He always went to Mass on the island on Sundays, bemoaning the length of services, conducted in German as well as Italian, but enjoying the faded frescoes of the lovely San Giulio. One day, an over-zealous oarsman pulled the boat up sharply as John was standing, arranging his dress, prior to disembarking. To the astonishment of all on board, of a small crowd on the shore and, by chance, of two members of the congregation of St Mary's who just happened, by coincidence, to be going to the same service, the rotund Vicar of St Mary's, Bourne Street, performed a perfect backward somersault and disappeared below the surface of Lake Orta. He would read voraciously and at great speed. Jane Austen and Anthony Trollope were constant companions but he often re-read his favourite thrillers until the bindings collapsed. Michael Innes gave him special pleasure. He began *The Lord of the Rings* one morning and finished it before breakfast the next day. What was even more remarkable was that a year later, on the same terrace, we discussed the trilogy and he seemed to have remembered every plot detail and the names of most of the characters. Speed reading and a retentive memory, natural empathy for all sorts and kinds of people, encyclopaedic knowledge of music, especially Mahler, an attractive artist in his own right and a brilliant art historian. One hot day in the Uffizi in Florence we gathered a large crowd of admiring and grateful Americans as he whizzed through room after room of early-Renaissance masterpieces, shouting loudly: "Nothing interesting here... Ah, but now, this is the one we want to look at". And off he went with a funny and blessedly brief explanation of why we wanted to look at this particular work and we were immediately caught up in his enthusiasm. "Very good!" was his inevitable response. What a talented man!

And when he left Oxford, how lucky both for him and for St Mary's that the opportunity presented itself. He loved St Mary's. He told me more than once that St Mary's was higher than he was but that he was happy to be part of an institution that served the Catholic tradition so well. This is borne out by the memory of an old friend who attended his induction here. Following a medley of clerical vesture, John appeared 'in the classical Anglican simplicity of surplice, scarf and hood'. Even so, he loved the beauty of the ritual and the quality of the music. He loved the church community: the priests and nuns in the Presbytery, the staff who took so much care of the church and the vestments and the congregation, which grew encouragingly during his tenure. In his time at St Mary's, he produced a wonderful exhibition of Vestments and Flowers, opened by Princess Margaret. John borrowed a large number of models from Peter Jones which he stored, naked, in a side chapel, before dressing them with vestments. Imagine the consternation of Fr Maskell as he arrived, unsuspecting, for Mass. John edited the *Graham Street Quarterly*, producing articles of the highest calibre from the likes of Eric Maskell. With Sister Patricia, he produced an influential work, *When We Pray*, which is still in print today. He acted as Chaplain to the Frances Holland School across the road and he was, for a while, Rural Dean of Westminster. He was especially concerned that St Mary's finances should be sound and worked hard to achieve this. There are many here who are better qualified to speak of John's ministry at St Mary's than I am but I believe that the community loved him. His secretary, Virginia Johnston remembers how meticulous he was over thank you letters, particularly cherishing his comment: 'What I have always wanted was a knitted tortoise'. At Candlemas, he told the congregation: 'This is a simple service and the only rule is, when we process, try not to set light to the hair of the person in front of you'. In preparation for Corpus Christi, he asked the preacher to 'keep it short and highly superstitious'. Like Giovanni

Guareschi's Don Camillo – with whom I think he shared many characteristics – he might be found up a ladder, polishing the haloes of the statues with Brasso and there was an infamous little pot of gold paint which he secreted about the church. As his nephew, Daniel, said to me when discussing a family heirloom of a bucolic scene, to which John had apparently added the odd cow: “Thank heavens he was never left alone in the National Gallery overnight.”

John served St Mary's from 1971 to 1990. He would have liked to retire in London but property prices made this impossible and friends in the Chichester diocese found him a tiny house, a short walk from the cathedral. This was, he told me, the first time in his life that he had ever had a front door of his own. He enjoyed his new-found privacy and especially the small, walled garden which he made beautiful. Until 2002 he took some services in the cathedral and acted as confessor to a diminishing order of nuns who had moved to a local rest home. He was an excellent host. He loved food, he enjoyed cooking and he knew his clarets. He made some good friends but he especially enjoyed seeing old friends from St Mary's and Oxford. In 2002, he was struck down, in Italy, by a mysterious anaemia which made him very ill. Safely home, a cure was found but he never regained his former strength. Entertaining became more difficult for him and eventually even the walk to the cathedral was more than he could manage. He never returned to his beloved Lake Orta. Local friends in Chichester tried valiantly to hold things together but finally a move to a retirement home became inevitable.

And here he was indeed fortunate. A room was made available for him at St Mary's Convent and Nursing Home in Chiswick. There, Sister Jennifer and the sisters of the Society of St Margaret provided a happy and peaceful sanctuary for him in his last two years. Kindness, good food, comfort, a charming chapel, a magnificent garden and as much entertainment as he cared to participate in made his stay as easy as it could possibly have been. After he died, so many of the residents and staff came to me to say how much they loved John – and I know he came to love them too, even if his condition, belatedly diagnosed as Parkinson's, meant that he may sometimes have appeared less demonstrative than he would have been when in good health. You will notice that the retiring collection is for the Convent whose sisters plan to buy a new altar in John's memory.

To remind you of what John was like in his heyday, I want to end by quoting from a letter he wrote to David Skeoch who was, in those days, Chaplain to Graham Leonard. It concerned a planned visit by the then Bishop of London, at the time of the Dedication Festival Weekend at St Mary's in 1982. I am indebted to David for allowing me to use it.

‘I have come under certain discreet pressure from a more than usually large number of members of the congregation that something truly exceptional should take place to mark this especial visitation.

‘Personally, I feel that the drum majorettes – who, as you have observed, bear more resemblance to modern nuns than anything else, together with the St Peter's Rover Scouts Mountaineers (not as elegant as the nuns but with better developed thigh muscles) – will be sufficient as ‘extras’ to entice any wayward souls back to the faith. But the congregation desires a ‘spectacular’, and we have at present, within the parish, a 100ft crane – which it would be foolhardy to ignore as a means of evangelism. It towers over us all, and seems the appropriate vantage point from which the Bishop might give benediction.

‘We could install hoisting equipment, to suitable music, and the faithful would be able to be blessed even upon the rooftops of their houses.

‘I am assured by Gerald Row police force (which now contains a number of young but very efficient constables) that they could be in attendance to prevent any dishonour or disrespectful behaviour attaching itself to the proposed proceedings.

‘My request is that I must know whether the bishop suffers from vertigo before I write to suggest to him a benediction of the parish from the sky.’

John, of course, was terrified of heights.

John leaves this world a better and a happier place for his presence. We who are left behind, and who loved him, will often have cause in the years to come to remember his wit and his wisdom. His own catchphrase sums him up to perfection: ‘Very good!’

Carl Gilbey-McKenzie