

## **Mark Whittow**

Oh my best beloved; what is there to say that hasn't already been canvassed today?

Well, parties: Mark gave legendary parties – he justified serving fizz on the basis that it was an economy, because white wine wouldn't stain if it was spilled. He used, while at St Peter's, to cook a wonderful dinner for the First Years on the evening they finished Mods. The parties had a theme. One year it was Russian food, and he went especially to Soho to buy flavoured vodkas - lemon, lingonberry, gold leaf - to go with the blinis, beetroot, salmon and other fish that he'd prepared. He had however failed to take account of the fact that some of his students finished their exams at lunchtime that day, and had spent the afternoon in the pub. The rest joined them there at 5.30pm before coming on to us, to be offered neat vodka. Rookie error. Suffice it to say that the next year it was Middle Eastern food, with unlimited mint tea and some Turkish beer...

Books: His library genuinely eclipsed that of the Bod in his particular specialist area, because of the foreign content. Years ago in Wapping I realised his obsession with buying books was out of the ordinary even for academics, when our local postman gave up delivering books in ones and twos but instead chose to store them each week and then deliver by the sack load. Since (in those days)

the Post Office sacks were sewn by my own clients in prison, I felt there was a certain symmetry to our joint careers.

When we moved 120 cases of books from Corpus this summer – the sainted Henry de Fossard, a friend of George’s, packed them all; at a conservative estimate, 2.8 tons of books – we found books in 7 languages in addition to Greek and Latin. They covered subjects as diverse as Medieval Poultry, Living Without Silver (a particular favourite of mine - not sadly a guide to middle class life post Brexit, but a reference to coinage); books on Tang pottery kilns, modern British and American politics, the 2004-2014 Afghan War, nineteenth century Rumanian novels, medieval charters, many of the publications of the Bollandistes in Brussels, and of course the odd Byzantine volume. Bearing in mind that that is only one third of his library - the other two thirds being in Holywell St and Eydon - and you will see we have the usual academics’ problem. His books are in fact one of the things that depress me. What a crying waste of intellect; of inspiration; of intelligent engagement. But your efforts today have encouraged me that much will live on, that academics will use his work, be inspired, irritated, launched into agreement or disagreement with him, generally be better informed and enthused by him.

Byzantinists are an impressive breed. Only today have I learned that you are to be credited, it seems, with the second Russian Revolution in 1991. I have spoken on an earlier occasion of the Byzantine Conference that took place in

Moscow in August of that year, but today I learned that on the last evening of our trip when Mark and I were manning the barricades, a small number of the most senior international scholars were invited to meet the Vice President, who was in charge while Gorbachov was on holiday in the Crimea. Apparently, the Vice President complained of how tired he was, and insisted that he would not be interrupted while he talked of Byzantine art and history to his guests. And all the while, just down the road, Yeltsin was rallying the troops around the White House. Who knows what might have happened if the Vice President's phone had not been switched off? If Byzantine scholars had not distracted him at the vital moment?

What else? I can't ignore Mark's sartorial elegance. Who else would bequeath 18 stiff-fronted white tie waistcoats to his son? Mark regularly wore 3 ironed shirts a day, and never went to the gym save in an ironed T shirt. And lest you think any of this was my influence, apparently he irritated his mama in Cambridge, aged 13, by resolutely, flatly, refusing to wear polyester school-uniform shirts. Plus ça change.... He went away to boarding school with cotton shirts, a black pepper grinder, home made marmalade and good bread from Fitzbillies. And in his first week, he was pitched into a hedge by the school bullies for being a toff. Nothing in fact could have been further from the truth but I think he was secretly delighted by the label.

Love of music – he had an eclectic taste, from Corelli and Galuppi to the Dixie Chicks and the Kinks via English folk songs – his rendition of ‘what shall we do with the ‘errings ‘eads? Turn them into loaves of bread’ became a family favourite.

He was in every sense a hands-on cook. Once - quite accidentally- I employed a vegetarian nanny. She was delightful. Intelligent, kind to the children. She lasted exactly 10 days until she walked into the kitchen to find Mark disembowling a hare: he had blood up to his elbows. She took one horrified look, turned green and fled.

Mark very much enjoyed his year as Senior Proctor, but a particular highlight may be unknown to many of you. He paid a visit to the University Arboretum, where his advice was sought on disciplining a peacock. Apparently a lady had visited the Arboretum with her young son who was keen to photograph a peacock in full display. She suggested that her son lie on his tummy to get a better picture. Unfortunately, the peacock became somewhat distracted and tried to mount the boy. His mother wrote a furious letter to the Director of the Arboretum, demanding that Something Be Done. The Senior Proctor was able

to advise a short re-education programme for the peacock, to address its future behaviour in the presence of 10 year olds.

Mark inherited and expanded Jeremy Catto's eclectic language. Things were “a giggle and a shriek”; people were “stars on toast”. Sometimes “with an egg on top”. When Beatrice Caseau, successor to Jean-Claude Cheynet, was undergoing her ‘habilitation’, Mark was asked to give a speech in her praise and honour at the Sorbonne. We spent an hilarious evening trying to translate his speech into French. Could we really describe this most illustrious of French academicians as: “une etoile sur pain grille – avec un oeuf a cheval”....?

He was a wonderful travelling companion. Most journeys started several hours after the latest possible advertised time; some were even put off to the next day. Given that it is almost impossible to hear the so-called in-car audio system in the Landrover, a book or 3 would be chosen for the passenger to read aloud – Stendhal was a particular favourite. (In a reverse of that situation, I used to drive with the radio on before I met Mark – and when first travelling with him, I recall being surprised that his voice didn't go fuzzy in tunnels and under bridges). Long distance journeys were punctuated by good food – good coffee – and side excursions to places of interest. We spent many an hour looking for the burial place of Senator Joseph McCarthy in Michigan (a search prolonged by

the fact that our host, Andrew O'Shaughnessy an Oriolensis, now an eminent member of the American academic community, was so mortified at asking the way to such a place, that he struck up lengthy conversations with the locals before dropping his query in at the very end).

The last trip back from Rumania in the company of Clive Foss included visits to the house of Admiral Horti in Hungary, to the ossuary of Kutna Hora in the Czech Republic, and to Aachen where Mark's interest was equally divided between the Carolingian Cathedral and the cakes. Kaffee und Kuchen – mit Schlagsahne...

He became in due course Senior Member for Reactionary Clubs. OUCA; the Grid; the Oxford Caledonian Society; and the Country Sports Society, the umbrella which most notably sheltered the CCFHB. When hunting was banned, Mark proposed founding the Holywell St Hunt – hunting with dogs was illegal, so he thought it would be a good and useful idea to train a pack of foxes to hunt rats in Holywell St. What could possibly go wrong with that idea??

Enough from me.

May I please end with three things – first a huge thank you to all involved with organising today, and particularly to Max Lau who has shouldered the bulk of the work, and without whom today would never have happened.

Next, it would be wrong not to mention Jeremy Catto tonight. This is Jeremy's college. He was Mark's mentor, his great friend. He was a surrogate grandfather to George, Mary and Flossy. We have spent every Christmas Day with him for the last 10 or 15 years and his Memorial took place yesterday. He inspired generations of historians and was very much, in some ways, Mark's role model. He was beloved by many of us.

And finally, please can I thank all of you for everything you have done for me, and for George, Mary and Flossy, over the last 10 months. We are acutely conscious that each one of you has looked out for us, supported and cossetted us. You have been in touch at random moments, fed and watered us, come on holiday with us. You did it for Mark, because you loved him. But we have been the beneficiaries. Thank you all.

Gaudeamus igitur; and please raise your glasses to Mark.