

Alan Mynall, Record of Remembrance.

Alan Mynall (1949-2019) had a distinctive spirit and presence in the world – a wonderful lightness of being. Quakers are wont to describe some of their members as ‘weighty’ Friends – full, perhaps, of ‘gravitas’. Alan was never like that by nature, or in his life and art.

Whether at a session of *Poems I like and why I like them* in the Library at 43 St Giles during the last ten years of his life (often accompanied by his elegant lurcher, Tapper), or at early-morning Meetings on Tuesdays or Thursdays in the Garden Room during the twenty years before that, Alan – wherever he was to be found – was fleet, light-footed and always warm in his wit and self-mockery. He made his many friends – and the most solemn of Quakers – laugh, even at times of personal suffering and difficulty. Alan had the great gift of avoiding self-pity, while also being open to other peoples’ difficulties. He could be quick in his judgements as well as with his sympathy, a smile of understanding often playing on his face.

Alan will continue to be remembered for his plays on words and for his paintings, at least as much as for the biographical details of a life. ‘A record of remembrance’, we can imagine him saying, ‘a record? It had better be a 78, not a 33’. Alan’s life was a *practice* and an *effect* on others, rather than a conventional *career* or accumulation of *posts* or *employments* held, whether in Quaker Meetings or in the wider world. In that sense, Alan’s record – his Remembrance (‘funny word that’ he might have said) – should surely resemble one of his portraits or self-portraits more than a conventional CV.

Alan was a remarkable portrait artist as well as a painter of vividly-imagined, half animal, half human, half plant, tree and other life-forms. He was enthralled with the beauty of the natural world. This was his inspiration. He was deeply knowledgeable about many aspects of nature and particularly loved trees. The day preceding his sudden, midnight stroke was, for him, a ‘perfect day’. He and Sue had a picnic in the woods, surrounded by bluebells. He painted, and felt that, for the first time, he had captured the true colour of bluebells. He survived for a further six days after his stroke, for the most part asleep. His was an unusual achievement in our times: to be able to put a livelihood together from his art work – from his head, heart and hand – without striving to become either rich and famous, or subordinate to a private or public employer. He was also a practical teacher. For example, during the last

two years of his life he painted portraits of Jonathan Bard's family and gave Jonathan a year of watercolour lessons, as it were a master with an apprentice. 'Alan', Jonathan wrote,

'was a fine artist of people and nature who could actually paint anything ("Give me a brush and I'll give it a shot"). I met Alan a couple of years ago when my wife selected him off the web to do her portrait; he then did mine and my grandchildren (I would not have thought it possible to capture one of their wicked gleams on canvas). I asked Alan if he would teach me watercolour painting from scratch and spent a year or so visiting him and Sue in Radley. As a result, I now see the world through new eyes and have proper standards for appreciating art. I will never meet those standards, but Alan taught me that what mattered was enjoying putting brush to paper.'

Jonathan continues,

'I loved listening to Alan talk about art, I marvelled at his skill, his technical knowledge, his ability to pull essence from visual muddle and the way in which he captured tone as light played on surfaces. Then there was his gentle humour: outside the door of his painting shed was a sign saying "Don't knock, I'm disturbed already". It lied - he wasn't! There was a sense of tranquillity and contentment about Alan that I will treasure as I look at his pictures on our walls.'

In outline, Alan's life went as follows. He was born in Rugby on April 10<sup>th</sup> 1949, the youngest of four. He died on April 27<sup>th</sup> 2019 in hospital in Oxford. He had lived with kidney cancer for twelve years. For the last six of these the disease had been diagnosed as terminal. He is survived by his beloved partner of almost twenty years, Sue. Sue is herself an artist and illustrator. He is also survived by two children from previous partnerships, Marie and Ben and by two grandchildren, Tess and Fern. It was in 1968 in Bristol while he was doing an Art course that Alan met and married Louise, Marie's mother. Like so many of us belonging to the *Soixante-Huitard*, or Sixty-Eight generation, Alan cherished, and worked hard to make a multi-faceted and sometimes painful family life out of less nucleated, less 'ideal home' situations than are seen by more conventional folk as 'normal'. His story was full of loss as well as love, illness as well as health, sad as well as happy endings, disappointments as well as hopes for himself as well as

for his loved ones. He always maintained a loving relationship with both his children, despite not being able to have the closer family life he had imagined.

In 1975 Alan moved by himself onto a converted boat as his studio and home. He had already worked in a boat yard in Crick doing their sign writing and ferrying passengers. He spent a lot of time on the canal, doing various jobs away during the winter months. These included being a carpenter and screen painter at Harrogate Theatre. In 1977 he met and was joined by Ursula. They lived together on the boat for three years before moving to Cornwall, where he and Ursula bought a piece of land and built a place to live, and where they could stay. Their son Ben was born there. Things didn't work out as had been hoped, before Alan moved to Rugby and then headed back to Jericho in Oxford where he formed many lasting friendships. At the centre of these was Sue. For the last two decades of Alan's life, Sue and he lived happily together close to woodland in Willow Way, Radley. It is there that he is now remembered so fondly. 'Two things stand out', a Friend and friend remembers,

'his kindness to everyone and his utter devotion to Sue, his wife. The experience of being with them in that haven in the woods was to experience a beautiful sensation of peace and love.'

Alan's life as an artist had begun early. At the Christmas preceding his fourth birthday he had been given a box of poster paint. This set him off on an artistic path which later included a one-year Graphic Design course in Bristol. His typical take on his own skill and passion was, "I've got Artism or I'm somewhere on the spectrum". A carefully-posed photographic self-portrait on the celebratory programme for the Celebration of his life at Oxford Crematorium in May 2019 made Alan look uncommonly like Stanley Spencer: surely an appropriate fellow traveller along the border between the quotidian and the surreal.

On the same page of this beautifully designed, Celebration programme is Alan's poem, 'Ode to Skin':

I like my skin; it keeps me in  
It fits me fat; it fits me thin  
Without it, I would need a bin  
Or box, or empty tin  
to keep the rest of Alan in  
And, when I think it underpins  
So much, my head begins to spin  
Until my ears – those flaps of skin  
around the holes the sound goes in –  
oppress my brain and I begin  
to think I need another skin –  
full. Mine's a pint, thanks

This was typical of his Alan's playful *persona*: life, among other things was, for him, a performance, representing as well as being 'Alan', inside himself as well as looking out at other selves, under 'another skin'. He had the courage to laugh about life's dependencies and afflictions as well as its pleasures and dependencies 'Mines a pint, thanks' !

Oxford Friends remember him at Poems in the Library on Monday afternoons, sometimes with and sometimes without Tapper. The poems of E.E. Cummings, with their plainness, word play and complete absence of Capital Letters was Alan's favourite choice. He also loved Dylan Thomas's *Under Milk Wood*. He would also read from local, small-edition pamphlets, sometimes by relatively unknown Oxford bards he had known personally. He would also bring song lyrics, for example by Bob Dylan, and comic verse by, among others, A.A.Milne and

Hilare Belloc. Alan had his own rich store of limericks, ditties and one-liners, to be produced off-by-heart whenever the occasion demanded.

Twenty or so years before 'Poems...' Alan was a regular attendee at Thursday early-morning Meetings for Worship. He always retained a strong belief in a higher power. Elisabeth Salisbury, a mainstay of these Meetings, recalls how

‘ The Meeting sat in a circle in the Garden Room with Tapper on a rug at Alan’s feet and the Meeting cat on a chair on the other side of the circle. This represents Alan perfectly: holding together in place and in peace different elements and their potential for conflict’

*Thanks above all to Sue Mynall. Also to Caroline Worth, Elisabeth Salisbury, Judith Atkinson, Nigel Carter ( the Pastor of a small chapel outside Frilford who delivered the funeral address ), Jonathan Bard, Jill Green and Connor Slamon, our gardener at 43 St Giles who first told me of Alan’s death one Thursday in the garden. Connor remembered him vividly, in ways which chimed well with mine.*