

FRANCIS COWAN, 1940 - 1996.

The world nowadays seems to be forcing people into increasingly narrow areas of specialisation. Therefore, what a privilege to have known Francis, and of what benefit he has been to all who have listened to him. A true Renaissance man: no Jack of all trades, but master of many, many aspects of life and of knowledge.

Francis was a highly skilled and disciplined observer of the world around him, both visually and aurally- particularly of birds: his knowledge in this field equalling that of most full-time ornithologists. By the time he was four years old, he already knew most of the birds of the surrounding countryside, and was already at that age eagerly devouring his mother's step-father's bird books! His step-grandfather, the distinguished gyneecologist Professor James Young to the outside world, and "Grump" to his family, was the person who most inspired Francis in the study of birds. It is not surprising that Francis associated birdsong with music, and Grump was astonished one warm Spring day to be told by a seven year old Francis that the local cuckoo was cuckooing on the notes Bb and G!

Going for a walk with Francis was always an amazing revelation as he brought to one's attention a wealth of detail every step of the way.

His knowledge of plants was extensive too, and he observed them closely- their likes and dislikes. His attitude to gardening was to observe what the plants wanted to do, rather than take over and dominate in the usual human fashion. He wouldn't dig [apart from growing vegetables]- preferring to weed out plants that were preventing the growth of the ones he wanted to encourage. This was because he was aware that the soil contained a whole ecoculture of organisms that he had no right to disrupt. He watched his plants grow with affection and interest. He was proud too of his unique style of hedge-cutting: the hedge in front of his house was like the sweep of a bird's wing- of an elegance reminiscent of Versailles.

He had great respect for the customs of the many peoples that he encountered on his world-wide travels, and was outraged at disrespect shown towards minority peoples by assumed superiority [the same human tendency disapproved of in gardening!] He would make it his business to know the names of even the most obscure, small-numbered peoples, not only through natural interest but out of respect. It was rare to come across the name of any ethnic people on the entire globe that he couldn't tell you about- particularly their language; its uniqueness or to which other language it might be related, and from this, where they might have originally migrated from. His fascination with linguistics led him to become fluent in many languages - and with his phenomenal ear could pass for a native in any of them. He would detect the subtle differences between neighbouring towns, not just in his own vicinity, but in far away places both in Britain and on the Continent. He had equal respect for people from all backgrounds: an attitude inspired and encouraged by family Quaker connections - his mother belonged to the Society of Friends; his sisters went to a Quaker school [Ackworth, in Yorkshire], and his father attends Quaker Meetings regularly to this day.

Francis didn't join any organised religion; but thought deeply and privately about spiritual matters. His mother was touched to hear him say, when a little boy, "I don't think God made the plants and animals: I think He makes them grow." Later, recognising the restrictions of labelling, he would refer to God as "the One who has no name". Francis drew inspiration from Jewish thinkers, and was particularly taken with the writings of Bruno Bettelheim. The quiet wisdom, deep understanding, and generosity of this great man touched Francis profoundly - he would speak of him with reverence, and gratitude.

Being extremely careful and thoughtful himself, Francis was irritated by carelessness and thoughtlessness in others, and would often speak his mind in no uncertain terms! He was both sensitive and street-wise, with a great sense of fun which he imparted to others through his ready wit, and huge fund of funny anecdotes! He had a flamboyant style, but also poise, charm and dignity: people often remarked on his gentlemanly behaviour.

Francis was dedicated, loving and supportive to his wife Christina, and to all the rest of his family. He regularly visited his mother during her long time in hospital, and as long as she could still speak any words at all, he would take with him a notebook and pencil, and write down whatever faltering utterances she made, to try and work out afterwards what she might have been trying to say. He was devoted to his father also: when Crinan became dangerously ill whilst examining for the Associated Board in Malaysia, Francis immediately dropped everything, flew out to Malaysia straightaway, and spent the next several months coaxing Crinan back to health; constantly by his bedside to alert the medics if his breathing became irregular, and later encouraging Crinan to eat up his shepherd's pie so that he would become strong again! If Francis hadn't done all that he did, Crinan would never have pulled through: we are indebted to Francis for his quick thinking and total dedication.

In 1963, when he was 23, Francis took part as ornithologist in an expedition to Greenland, organised by Dublin University. It was the worst summer in Greenland for 25 years, and they had to reroute, thereby missing many of the food parcels which had already been dropped by 'plane on the planned route. They had to trek all day on meagre rations of a few spoonfuls of porridge per day; but on one occasion when they did meet with a food parcel, they struck camp, feasted and went to bed with the wonderful prospect of having a good breakfast in the morning. In the morning - there was an arctic fox eating up their butter! It is typical of Francis' disregard for bodily comforts that his excitement at seeing the fox far outweighed his concern at losing the butter! On one particularly gruelling part of the journey, it took at least 4 long hours to trudge through thigh-high [his thighs!] snow. The temptation to lie down in the snow and lose themselves into sleep was almost overwhelming. He often spoke of what an education for life this trip had been: of self-discovery, endurance, perseverance and of pushing oneself far beyond one's imagined limits. And of how giving in to bodily comforts is potentially lethal.

Francis was a wonderful musician, in knowledge as in praxis. His musical knowledge was both broad and profound: everything he learned, he thought deeply about and related to everything else he'd learned: from other books; from his own observations; and from his understanding of changing philosophies and -to use a Mrs. Cowanism! -the aesthetic ethos of changing times and different cultures. He had extraordinary insight; and detailed knowledge of musical styles of the great European classical tradition - particularly but certainly not exclusively about Baroque music. Through his own jazz music, he had a particular affinity with mid-20th century composers such as Bartok, Stravinsky, Hindemith, as well as composers in his own field: if there could ever have been a Number One for Francis, it probably would be Dizzy Gillespie. Favourite singers were Billie Holiday, and Brazilian singer Elis Regina.