

A tribute to Frances Darlington

1947 - 2010

I was very sad to hear of Frances' death, and because I could not be at her funeral I have been passing around these few remarks to Broomhill neighbours who knew her.

She had been a school teacher, of English and French. I once made the mistake, finding myself sitting next to her on the bus, of jocularly embarking on a conversation in some version of the French language, only to find myself enfolded in such a cascade of elegant French, so perfectly structured and pronounced, as I could escape only at the next available stop.

A friend of hers now tells me that Frances was the daughter of a head teacher, the eldest of five, and that she had lived in Sheffield since 1971 where she came to study for postgrad teacher training. For twenty two years she taught at Brinsworth Comprehensive in Rotherham. For years after that, most admirably, she gave free tuition in English as a foreign language, in her own home.

In fact, I know hardly anything 'about' Frances Darlington; but I know very well who she was. She had a formidable character that will be missed from our neighbourhood.

I used to encounter her, crossing the park or making for the bus, within the overlap of our various routines. She wasn't one for small talk, so I'd just greet her with 'What d'you think about that?' It was quickly understood between us that that meant anything which had been on the news, or one had been reading or otherwise thought about. If this happened on a shopping morning, two or three others might get obstructed on the pavement and we had a sudden parliament with many chuckles and sharp comments on her part.

We disagreed politically, as much for entertainment as any more trivial purpose, and neither of us was at a loss for opinions, but she enjoyed the ding-dong. I suppose she was one of those intelligent strong minded women who fifty years ago might have been caricatured as some kind of battle axe. She once remonstrated with another lady for feeding pigeons near the shops, as in her appraisal this could attract only rats. The bird lady (her equal, apparently) replied that 'You are exactly the kind of person who starts World Wars.' But the point is that Frances told me this herself, with overflowing mirth.

She was involved in a correspondence of Dickensian complexity and duration with the Home Office, about an asylum case. Every few months, this would present some wrinkle of hope or setback. Late last year, but again as a chance encounter, she introduced me to a mother and a little boy with all the pride and affection that she might have shown had she been a near relative of this family whose remote cause she had undertaken.

Indeed, she had a subtle and experienced understanding of children. Nearly a decade ago, I asked her advice about children's games to be put on at a birthday party in a patch of woodland belonging to the Girl Guides. One of her charming ideas was to challenge each of them to go about the woods and find as many different objects as they could fit into a matchbox. Accordingly, I bought dozens of boxes of matches and emptied their contents into an air-tight jar for future use. The children's game was hilarious; but I do know that this was roughly ten years ago because, as I used to tease Frances from time to time, we are only just now using up all the matches.

Some of us got to know Frances a bit better through the Broomhill neighbourhood's effort to make something of the park which had fallen into neglect. She felt very personally about this scrap of grass and birdsong, she was in at the start of its refurbishment, and she attended every known meeting as well as a few that nobody else had been aware of. Her tenacity helped press through the very successful improvement of the park. She was a kind we need.

One day I asked her 'What d'you think about that?' and, after a brief attempt to supply our usual food for thought, she mentioned that she had been told that she had inoperable cancer. This may have been near the start of her long period of treatments, alternating with uncertain remissions. Throughout those strenuous and frightening years, she was an example of stoic realism.

It is also characteristic of Frances that she turned her own health difficulties into a resource for others. She was active in the Commission for Patient and Public Involvement in Health and the Sheffield Cancer Services Advisory Group – as well as goodness knows what other organisations over the years. A doctor who met her at several of these meetings has told me objectively that Frances was very effective at them. In her immensely sympathetic work for the Endometriosis Society, it is clear that her questions of health improvement converged with those of equality for women.

Towards the end of last year, I spotted Frances in a queue and asked how she was, but just at that moment her bus arrived. Without a word she stepped on, showed her pass to the driver, turned to me briefly, gave a thumbs down, and went along the bus to take her seat. That was the last I saw of Frances. I grieve for her and I value her example.

She was clever, generous, funny and determined. Perhaps we owe her more than we knew.

John Birtwhistle