

John Waterfield 30 December 2002

Address at his funeral by John Freeman

I am proud to be asked by John Waterfield's family to say a few words of farewell to my dear old friend. John specifically charged us to 'eschew all gloom'. So I want to take a few minutes to rejoice in his rich life and to contrive as best I can some sort of likeness of the parent or relative or friend we are all celebrating today.

It's not easy, for John Waterfield was a hugely endowed and complex character, and this can be no more than a thumbnail sketch of the Waterfield I knew. But I hope there will be something in what I say which will resonate with each of you.

First I shall tell you how we met. I was working at the time the Dip Service – I suppose it was the winter of 1965-66 – and an important vacancy had to be filled on my staff. I went to talk to the then Chief Clerk at the FCO and explained what I thought was needed. "I want", I said (or words to this effect) "someone who is clear-headed, capable and decisive, but also, if necessary on occasion to implement his decisions, prepared to be really ruthless and bloody minded. Of course it had better be somebody I can get on with". "Well", said the Chief Clerk, "as it happens I have a chap available who splendidly fits the first bit of that description. You'll have to see if you get on with him: not everybody finds him easy." So, with a slight feeling of unease, I took John Waterfield to lunch at my club – and, a bottle of champagne, a bottle of claret and three hours later, we had formed a friendship which (despite occasional unreasonable demands on both sides) has been a bastion of my life and unbroken until now. I knew that day that I would be, as our family saying has it, happy to go tiger-shooting with John Waterfield and I have never had cause to qualify that judgement.

The word that now comes first and irrepressibly to my mind is 'staunch'. Looking back over the years, my wife and I recall that, when times were rough for us, JPW (and dear Lee, his wife of four decades) were always there – supportive, loyal, an ever present help. We on our side felt a total obligation of support to both of them and later, in different circumstances, to John and Tilla.

Thinking of what I have just said, it occurs to me that I can best convey to you my thoughts by presenting a handful of characteristics which leap into my mind as I recall John and which seem, interestingly, to link together to form what is to me a lively snapshot.

John was gregarious and wholly self-confident on the surface; perhaps slightly less so underneath. His total lack of hypocrisy, humbug and fashionable political correctness was indeed a mark of confidence in his sureness of judgement. But it seemed possible sometimes to detect a certain lack of emotional security. I never felt sure about that and was never minded to pursue it with him. It could be argued – and some professional colleagues have done so – that his lack of humbug sometimes amounted to lack of discretion. I reject that. He had a remarkable capacity for embracing new ideas, and of course they weren't always good ones. But the ability and courage to think the unthinkable and advise the inadvisable, though never popular with those who drive the promotion train, is a rare and priceless element in civilised counsels. So let us rejoice in the absence of humbug and the flashes of lateral thinking.

John was loyal to a degree which I don't think I've encountered elsewhere. First to his family. That's not unusual, but the degree and fierceness of that loyalty is unusual. Waterfields, we were expected to understand, were best. If the children and grandchildren here today knew of the hours that I have spent over the last 36 years listening to the song of their praises and the defence of their, no doubt minimal, faults, I think their ears would burn. But it wasn't only family and friends. Institutions to which he became attached also invoked the same passionate loyalty. The Greenjackets could do no wrong and Boodles very little. If the Foreign Office could in extreme cases do slightly wrong, then it certainly did it better than any other institution in the world. So let us rejoice in 'Loyalty'.

I have never met anybody so prepared as John 'to have a go', to try something new when the opportunity arose. And to make the most of opportunities which were sometimes so fleeting as to be almost unnoticed by the rest of us. He relished challenges and novelties in a manner which is not commonly observed in the upper class English professional culture of which in so many ways John was a text-book example. It is more associated with the United States, and many of his closest friends were from the States. It is notable, indeed, that both his wives were American, though in other respects they could hardly have been more different. So rejoice in Adventure, and the can-do approach to life and getting the utmost enjoyment out of the changes that came his way.

Closely related to that I remind you of what a quick learner John was and what an enthusiast for new causes and new people – though never betraying or abandoning his devotion to traditional standards. Some 25 years ago, I suppose, my wife asked John and Lee to stay with us at her family home on the Cape Coast of South Africa. That visit was seminal in one area of John's life: captivated by the beauty of the country and the warmth of its people, John decided to make South Africa his own. He exploded with passionate vigour in every area of discovery: from the different tactics required to catch cob in the tidal waters of the Keurbooms Estuary, as compared to catching trout on the Nadder or the Test; to an arcane controversy which was causing division and hard feeling in the local catholic church; to the distinctive – and he thought identifiable – technique of South African prop forwards; to the politics and social rites of liberal South African society; to his ancestors, the Herschels, and their place in the history of the Cape.

These last of course reinforced his interest in South Africa – family loyalty – but they were not the cause of it. The South African connection arose from the love of something new and fresh in both opportunity and stimulation. The result is that John's friends in the Cape and in Natal are as varied and lively as his English friends. you can hear his words quoted, and often instantly recognisable, anywhere between Table Mountain and the high ranges of Natal. You may even find some of his paintings. And, characteristically, he seemed never to forget anything that anyone said to him. So rejoice in a 'Quick and enthusiastic learner'.

That is something like the sketch I want to offer you. Flattering? Well, perhaps. But essentially it is true. Staunch. Gregarious. No humbug. Confident in his dealings. Loyal. Adventurous. Quick learner. Enthusiast. Never a day wasted, never an adventure not relished to the end. These were the characteristics which caused people

to love and admire and enjoy him even when occasionally he could seem to invite them to do the opposite.

I saw him as being, at his best, not only an irresistibly delightful friend and companion, but also, though sometimes wrong, valiant (not to say pig-headed, even reckless) for truth as he saw it. When he died there was of course much distress in my family, and our youngest daughter came to hug me and offer her sympathy. She knew John Waterfield well and had indeed been taught by him the rudiments of fly-fishing, in which she showed an interest. She has always been fond, admiring and appreciative of him. 'I think', she said to me the morning after his death, 'I think John Waterfield was a brave man.' And so he was. Brave and true and an enhancer of life. In sharing much of our life with him, Jude and I have been on a roller-coaster ride. But from beginning to end it has been the greatest fun.

Farewell, old friend.