

A TRIBUTE

Helen Beale



From Robin Davis

The funeral took place today amidst rain and wind in Dunblane Cemetery, where we laid Helen to rest beside her mother, Vera, and her husband Francis, who died back in 2006; a score or so people were present. The family hope some day to be able to hold a memorial meeting. Her cousin Anne read a poem written by my daughter Alison in 2013 when she too was dying (at home in Dunblane) of cancer, and which told of not trying to have everything tidied up before she died but "would end my days not neat and collected but felled mid-stride". This was so like Helen who was still trying to finish an article while she was in the hospice.

I took up my post at Stirling in September 1966 and met Helen when she arrived two years later. It helped that I was the subject librarian for French and had heard of Guillaume Apollinaire! I also came to know her as a Friend for she came to our only recently established Quaker Meeting here in Dunblane. Indeed she remained in the list of members till the mid-seventies though her attendance tailed off as she became absorbed in work - and Francis. We had a celebration in 2017 to mark fifty years of Dunblane Meeting and we were delighted when Helen came among to that. After Francis died, she moved out to a small house in Whitecross on the outskirts of the town (but close to where Francis lay buried) and I would see her regularly visiting her mother in the Ramoyle; they had lunch out together every Sunday at the Stirling Arms. A few years ago she moved out to a small house in Whitecross on the outskirts of the town (but close to where Francis lay buried) and I would see her regularly visiting her mother in the Ramoyle; they had lunch out together every Sunday at the Stirling Arms. A few years ago she moved nearer the centre of the town as we had done in 2013. I would see Helen frequently in the town and we would have coffee together, and an occasional meal. She was a family friend. She may indeed have left the Religious Society of Friends but she "let her life speak", always humble but always there to help others. I miss her a lot.

From Robin Campbell

I was very sorry to hear this dismal news. I got to know Helen a bit – she was always reserved – through our attendance at art events, and a shared interest in certain artists, notably André Dunoyer de Segonzac, who was a friend and associate of J.D. Fergusson during the latter's sojourn in Paris. Under Helen's reserve lay acute observation and wit, a combination of traits she shared with her husband Francis. Like many on the Arts side, she was left a little stranded when the University closed down its Art History Department – an act of pointless vandalism, but nevertheless continued to make valuable contributions to Art History from her perch in the French Department (also vandalized) and during retirement. She will be much missed, and I hope very much that her passing can be suitably memorialized.

From Richard Sibley, a member of the French Department 1970 – 75

The news about Helen was sad. She had held on for quite some time. I think Alastair and Bill's description of her as a 'treasured member of the department' was spot on. Although her public face was of a rather shy and retiring personality, on the few occasions I met her at her home or mine, she showed some different aspects. You could feel what she and I called her "Yorkshire grit" and that certainly showed in her last few years (although I do not believe that Yorkshire people in fact have more "grit" than anyone else). Above all she showed her fun-loving side. She and her mother were very good at serving sherry in plentiful quantities, and consuming it. She was relaxed and full of good humour. She was one of the last two people I saw before moving to France.

From Valerie Fairweather

I first met Helen when I came to the University in 1971 as an academic wife in the French Department. Her warmth and welcoming manner were immediately apparent to a young woman with two small children in a new environment. In the young University the life of the department spilled out into social events, which was delightful, and she was very much a gentle part of that.

Throughout her life she had the ability to make you feel that your situation was important to her and her empathy just shone. Her intellectual ability was clearly evident but she wore that lightly and in some ways almost apologetically. She was the most modest gifted academic I have ever met. She had an unforgettable openness and generosity of spirit. Later on she bore the loss of her beloved Francis with great fortitude as she did when facing the long years of her illness. At one point earlier in my life in the late 1980s she was a true friend when things were difficult for me. Her friendship also extended to my daughter Rowan Walker who in recent years especially was very close to her. She has made a lasting impression on both our lives. She was very encouraging when I started to paint and even bought some of my watercolours, which gave me hope!

It was about this time that Robin Davis and I were trying to put together an Art Committee to steer me in my post as Collections Curator. She played a great role both with ideas and support during my time as Curator. I fondly remember sharing a Lecture at Aberdeen University on the Fergusson Memorial Collection. This was at University Museums in Scotland Conference and I have to say it would have been quite a trial for me had Helen not been standing quietly beside me. Being open and talkative did not stop me being very nervous at the prospect of delivering an academic lecture. She put me at my ease.

It gives me such pleasure to know that she continued as a trusted friend to the Art Collection after Jane Cameron took over. I was so pleased about this and I know that that relationship was very fruitful. She will be sadly missed but certainly not forgotten.

From Jane Cameron, Curator of the University's Art Collection

Valerie Fairweather, the then Curator of the University Art Collection, introduced me to Helen Beale when we were both invited to select (from a competition) the proposed new Cottrell Memorial sculpture for the campus, now colloquially known as the Blue Boy. Helen was impressively insightful, considered and thoughtful. She exuded enthusiasm for art and displayed a wealth of knowledge but she was also kind and welcoming as I was new to the University.

When I took over as Curator from Valerie in 2003, Helen was generous in offering support and suggestions and her depth of knowledge was invaluable. She contributed a wonderful essay to our *Fergusson at Stirling* publication and she willingly gave tours and lectures that were always lively, entertaining and thoroughly researched. She once gave a tour to a group from the RSA and talked brilliantly to them about the Fergusson Collection. She was hugely embarrassed (in her usual self-deprecating way) to find that some of the writers she had cited were actually present. Of course they were delighted and offered further details before Helen slipped surreptitiously away. We enjoyed a giggle about it later.

In April this year 2020, (pre COVID) Helen had planned to deliver a paper to the French Department on Eduard Pignon, a French artist on whom she was an authority: *Trials & tribulations, and decision-making, in Pignon's XXe siècle (1988-70)*. She was thrilled to be presenting her work to former colleagues and current members of staff and said: '*it will be a fantastic opportunity to try my ideas out and get feedback*'. Her youthful enthusiasm bubbled through despite the health challenges she was facing.

We have some of Helen's books in the office and she has also gifted a small drawing to the Collection. We're so pleased as we'll be able to record her significant contribution to the University and to the Art Collection on the collections catalogue for posterity.

We are so sad to have lost such a bright, enthusiastic, intelligent and unnecessarily self-effacing friend and colleague.

From David Chapman

I first met Helen at the beginning of the 1968/69 academic year when we were both taking up appointments in the French Department (and indeed shared a study in those early days). From our first encounters many of Helen's abiding qualities were apparent, not least her legendary kindness and concern for the other. This was immediately apparent (for example) in what, to my mind, were the inordinately long and detailed comments she would attach to the merest undergraduate faltering essay which was invariably returned covered in critical appraisal and numerous suggestions for how the topic might more profitably have been approached.

Many years later, we met these kind qualities again, when on one of our many detours to Dunblane, travelling north or south from Kent to the Highlands, and when Helen was already quite ill, we would have a preliminary conversation about calling in for a chat. We would stress that she really should not tire herself providing refreshments for us. We would devise itineraries that would bring us to Dunblane either just after or just before a meal (due elsewhere) on the clear understanding that we would not need to be "refreshed". All to no avail! This was not Helen's way – and she could be very strong-minded: we were always regaled with the best of buns and cakes, scones and sandwiches that Dunblane could provide – and then something (pies, fruit, bottles of juice) for what Helen called "the onward journey". What generosity! On one occasion knowing that Fiona and I both drank coffee, she, as a non-coffee drinker without even a cafetiere or coffee jug in the house, went shopping for coffee for us and bought two sorts "in case we didn't like the first she bought". There was then a great brewing and further problem when it was found she did not have any small sieve to catch the coffee grains from the jug eventually found – a cup of coffee never forgotten.....

At a certain moment, on the birth of our youngest child, Zoe, our search for a possible godmother was swiftly ended when we thought of Helen. And through this connection also we were able to keep up with Helen's evolving life, even though we soon afterwards moved to Kent. Helen throughout this whole period was punctilious in remembering birthdays and Christmases – even if she often sought advice about the suitability of a proposed present for a growing boy! (v next paragraph)

Helen seemed, from our observation of her and our grandson Jack, (Zoe's son) to have the ability to make an immediate rapport with children: we remember an occasion when, at Helen's suggestion, we met for lunch and a walk in the Edinburgh Botanical Gardens. This was the first time she had met Jack(3-4) but immediately they were chatting and laughing – which continued throughout the meal and afterwards along the pathways of the Gardens. Jack then spontaneously adopted her as his Godmother and subsequently only ever referred to her as Godmother Helen: they continued to exchange cards and letters and gifts, Helen more conscientiously than most "real" Godparents, I suspect. An amazing final gift to Jack(now 9) and Zoe combined was the wherewithal to buy a Paddle Board, a gift

that she wrote, “It is something I would never have thought of!” but which delighted her as she enjoyed the photos of both of them learning to master it earlier this summer.

We know little of Helen’s academic prowess and developing interests, apart from the snippets of information shared in her cards and letters; but for us the essential Helen was a person, a friend – kind, thoughtful, concerned; moral without being preachy or censorious; always ready to enjoy a laugh; accepting and matter-of- fact about her illness and treatment without falling into self-pity; a person who knew her own mind. As a family we are privileged to have been her friends for over half a century.

From Bill Kidd and Alastair Duncan

It is with great sadness that we record the passing on Sunday 16 August of Helen Beale, a treasured member of the French Department for over thirty years. Helen was appointed to the Department along with the second intake of students in 1968. At that time, fresh from her postgraduate studies at Hull, her main academic interest was in poetry and especially in Apollinaire. Over the years she came to specialise more and more in painting and sculpture. Successive curators of the University art collection benefitted from her help and advice. Long after her retirement Helen continued to write and publish. Her reputation grew. She became a leading authority on the French artist Eduard Pignon.

Helen's lectures were a joy to attend: lively and spiced with her often self-deprecating humour. Quietly, self-effacingly, she set the tone for the whole Department. Her care for both students and staff was legendary. Whatever the circumstances, a note or a card from Helen would come to thank, console or just perk you up. Her passion for her subject and her empathy with different audiences were felt and appreciated beyond the departmental confines and nowhere more so perhaps than in the context of the University Retired Staff Association. Her collaborative project with Val Inglis on the ‘Glasgow girl’ Helen Lamb whose art work includes the 1914-1918 Honour Rolls in Dunblane Cathedral was one of several well-received SURSA presentations. Another originality was her art and sculpture walking tour of the campus, which highlighted an increasingly confident sense of the interaction between physical place and artistic space. And many of us will recall with affection how enthusiastically she embraced the opportunity offered by the gardens group in August 2019 to fulfil a long-cherished ambition to visit Ian Hamilton Finlay’s ‘Little Sparta’.

Helen’s wonderful spirit shone out in the last years of her life. Struck down by a grievous illness, she was given six months to live; to the astonishment of doctors, she lived on for four more years, still working, still caring and acquiring new friends and admirers, not least among the hospital staff who saw her regularly. She will be missed by many. All those who knew her have had their lives enriched.

From Carolyn and Peter Rowlinson

We first met Helen in the late sixties. She came to Stirling as a shy and inexperienced lecturer in 1968, and originally stayed in Dalnair, a house in Bridge of Allan with accommodation for single staff. There she met Francis Bell, her future husband.

Coming from a traditional university (Hull), she was initially rather shocked with the informality which pervaded the University of Stirling, but quickly came to appreciate its caring community. Several decades later, after she had trained in fine art, Helen was to laugh at herself for seeking circuitous routes around Pathfoot in the early days, in order to avoid the 'enormous breasts' of J D Fergusson's 'terrifying figure' in *Rhythm*. [as she recounted in her SURSA Oral History interview, <http://www.oralhistory.stir.ac.uk/nameA-B.php>].

We often saw examples of Helen's kindness, consideration and generosity to colleagues and students, to neighbours and friends, including ourselves. She never missed an opportunity to send a carefully selected card to offer congratulations or commiserations or to share her experiences (from holidays in France to visits to galleries). Both she and Francis showed commitment beyond the call of duty in helping and encouraging the students they taught. Following Francis's premature death in December 2006, she spearheaded the establishment of the FK Bell prize in Mathematics, awarded to the student who showed the greatest improvement in third year courses.

Her courage and determination saw her through many difficult times, and led to new opportunities to write and travel, which she clearly relished, and which brought her further academic recognition. She had a gentle wit and we enjoyed many a chuckle with her. We shall certainly miss her.