2016

A Tribute to Barbara Hardy

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A Tribute to Barbara Hardy

Barbara and I were close friends for over fifty years. She was the external examiner for my doctoral thesis in 1962, and from then on we met three or four times a year. I had previously reviewed *The Novels of George Eliot* and been impressed by the subtlety of the sustained investigation and the freshness of approach. It would be accurate to say that it was the major influence on my own studies in Victorian literature.

Some twenty years or so after our friendship began she made me her research assistant at Birkbeck following my redundancy from the College of All Saints. She virtually restored my self-confidence, and for the next three years I had the constant stimulus of her knowledge, the inspirational impact of her imagination and personality, and the buffeting of her energy, her sharpness, her unpredictability and her warmth. She enjoyed power but never abused it. Many things remain in my memories of her at this time – her search for perfection (revisions often
very late, in appalling handwriting), her resilience and stamina, both intellectual and physical, her abiding sense of responsibility, her discussions of her work – and theirs – with friends and students, her receptivity to suggestions, corrections, ideas, her formidable attention to detail (she virtually retaught me proofreading). She barked, snapped, praised or was grateful, but always without pettiness or condescension.

And over the course of time certain things stand out: the width of that knowledge and the innovative force of her interpretations, her independent and fearless stances, witness her championing of Nelson Mandela (then still imprisoned on Robben Island) for the Chancellorship of London University, a flying-in-the face of the Establishment’s predictable choice of Princess Anne (still in office).

Barbara had an astonishing capacity for embracing what was new, and an equally astonishing tenacity in returning to what was old and finding something fresh in it. This in part perhaps accounts for her stimulating and mind-opening teaching which so perfectly complemented the range of her academic interests and achievements.

All this and so much more was Barbara. Dorothea’s Daughters, Dante’s Ghosts, the moving and revealing poems say of Severn Bridge and The Yellow Carpet, all are testimony to her inventiveness during what is defined as old age. A few months ago I read a chapter of her book on Ivy Compton-Burnett in proof and found it as poised, probing and as exciting as her first book on George Eliot. And only in November we were discussing her return to Mrs Gaskell; I sent her half a dozen volumes of Gaskell criticism, knowing that she would absorb them and that I would be engaged in testing dialogue. It was not to be.

Barbara was a radical humanitarian. She was passionate, dedicated, loved. She had a deep love of family and delighted in their individual achievements whether great or small. She treasured her roots. (‘A human life, I think, should be well-rooted in some spot of a native land’). And she had a fierce and uncompromising loyalty to friends. Thank you Barbara.

Graham Handley