

A Tribute to John Linton **By J E Singh**

My husband and I first met John Linton when he and his wife, Erica, came to dinner at our tiny bedsit in a very unfashionable part of London. I remember how gracious he was, what the English call 'a true gentleman'. He accepted our humble hospitality with sincere pleasure although he was clearly from a well-off, upper middle class family and can't have known many people who lived in one room heated only by a paraffin stove!

That was the spring of 1970 and was to be the start of an extraordinary friendship lasting until his death in March 2010 at the age of 99.

John was born in London in 1910. He came from a long line of Anglican ministers and bishops, landowners, professors and army officers. After a traditional education at public school, he studied Classics at Oxford and then worked briefly in Trinidad before beginning theological training in Birmingham. However, he was not cut out to be a clergyman and after a few years teaching in a preparatory school, in 1939 he volunteered for the Indian army.

This was his first experience of India and it was to prove a life-changing one. He became a major on the general staff in Delhi where he met his first wife, Zoya, a Russian Jew. He loved India and, unlike many Englishmen of the time, was keen to meet and talk on an equal basis with Indians. He learnt Urdu and gained a lifelong taste for Indian food.

After the war, he returned to England but his interest in India remained and in 1946, he joined the India Office in London and later became India programme organiser in the BBC World Service. Sadly, he lost Zoya, to cancer, an illness that their only son inherited. He died when only 21.

Erica, John's second wife, was also Jewish, a refugee from Silesia. Both eventually became Quakers and in 1970 were appointed Quaker International Affairs Representatives for South Asia, based at Quaker House in Delhi. By that time, Mukat and I were also in India, living in his native village and trying to develop that very poor and backward area. During his time in New Delhi, John made many visits to our village Amarpurkashi. He always felt for the poor and downtrodden. Indeed, his love for us and our children grew out of his love for those

who were doing something to bring change to the lives of poor villagers.

After their return to the U.K., both John and Erica kept a keen interest in our work and raised money which enabled us to build two modest classrooms and start a junior high school in the village. This steadily grew and today is a fully fledged inter college with over 800 students.

They also sent us our very first volunteer, a young man in his Gap year. He stayed with us for fifteen months and proved invaluable. He taught local villagers how to drive the small tractor that we had received a grant for and lived, without a word of complaint, the very basic lifestyle that was all we could afford in those days.

Although by now in his sixties, John went to Bihar as an Oxfam volunteer and later researched Indo-Pakistan relations at the Gandhian Institute of Studies in Varanasi, followed by another stint in Delhi as an international Quaker representative.

Retirement for John only meant that he had to live on a modest pension. His mind remained active. He had always believed that no single religion had a monopoly on truth and in 1978, he founded the Universalist group. He had seen Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs and Christians worshipping together in Quaker meetings in India and out of that experience Universalism was born.

For my husband, John was a wonderful fountain of knowledge for he knew Indian history better than many Indians. He was familiar with every historical building in Delhi. He was also fascinated by the history of Indian names and the patterns followed in naming new born children. He had carried out a considerable amount of research into this and hoped one day to write a book about it. He was always interested in the work that Mukat was doing in his native village and kept up with all the news of India, even when he had retired to Oxford and could no longer manage trips abroad.

John loved to discuss India's politics and current events and never failed to read every copy of the journal we produced, IJRS

(International Journal of Rural Studies), invariably with something pertinent to say. He was a Life member of Indian Volunteers for Community Service, the U.K. based, registered charity that supported our project work in India. He was also a Life member of INTAF (International Task Force for the Rural Poor) and was, at one time, on the Advisory Board of the IJRS.

For me, John and Erica became like family. My own parents were thousands of miles away in Australia and still struggling to accept my marriage with a man from a different race and religion. Erica became like a second mother while John was the quiet, supportive partner in the background. When Erica died suddenly of a brain tumour in 1981, I was devastated. I couldn't help wondering whether John's interest in us would continue, especially when he later married again. However, his affection and concern for us was deep and unflinching.

For our children, John was the only grandfather they knew. At his memorial service in June this year, Shobhana, our younger daughter, spoke very movingly about him.

"My first memory of John Linton was just before I turned 4 years old, when my family came to the UK. We were kindly invited to live with John and Erica in their house in Blockley until we had found our feet. We were there for a few months and spent our first ever Christmas with them and I recall being overwhelmed and excited by the novelty of a Christmas stocking, and all the presents before us and all the Christmassy traditions in their home.

My brother and sister and I always referred to John as Grandpa and Erica as Grandma. He considered us his adopted family as he had no grandchildren of his own. We had maternal grandparents but they lived in Australia and we only met them once. We had no family at all in England, so it really meant something to us to call him Grandpa.

We often went to visit him and spent other Christmases with him over the years. It was because of John that I took an interest in playing the piano. On the rare occasions I heard him play, I loved to listen, and later on, when he moved to a retirement home, he gave me his piano, something I considered a huge act of generosity which meant the world to me.

I will always remember John's very generous nature; he sent us birthday cards and gifts for years when we were children, just like a grandfather would. Right up until last year, he still sent a Christmas hamper to my mother for our family to enjoy, and he always took us to dinner when we visited him in Oxford.

It was not until I was much older that I began to fully understand and appreciate the relationship we had with John. I began to write to him and take more of an interest, but it is a shame that this was not until he was beginning to get quite elderly and frail so he was limited in what he could write back and equally limited when we visited him with his hearing rapidly deteriorating. The more I read, now, about his beliefs, the more I realise how much we would have had in common and I sometimes like to imagine that we might have spent hours talking about religion and philosophy over a glass of wine if we'd had the chance. Nevertheless I am glad he enjoyed my letters and most of all I am glad I told him how grateful I was that he had been like family to us, so that we had known what it was to have grandparents in our lives."