

BARBARA - A TRIBUTE

The 16th century poet and philosopher, John Donne, reminded us that any man's death diminishes us; the death of Barbara Mackintosh last week, diminishes us all no matter how well or how little we knew her.

Barbara was born in Kinross and was the only child of Alistair and Alison Mackintosh. Her not so distant forebears were the chiefs of Clan Mackintosh, a connection she was immensely proud of. In 1787 one of her ancestors, Thomas Mackintosh, sailed with Admiral Bligh on HMS Bounty for the Caribbean, on what was known as the First Breadfruit Voyage. Some of the crew mutinied after they left Tahiti but Barbara always assured me Thomas was not one of them!

Later the family became successful ship-owners and well known Edinburgh lawyers and in 1916 bought Samlaman and Glenuig Estate. It was through this connection that Barbara first came to the area.

Barbara was educated at a private school in Dundee until the outbreak of the Second World War when she was evacuated to Ochertyre House, a well known girl's public school near Crieff. There she took up ice skating which she excelled in and led to her first job at the City of Perth Ice Rink. Later her parents sent her to the Glasgow and West Of Scotland College of Domestic Science, famously known as 'The Dough School', to study cookery.

She was a first class cook but hot ovens and city life were not for Barbara and soon she made her way to Glenuig to live with her Aunt Maisie Bright in what was and still is the Inn. Then, in the late 1950s, Mrs Cameron-Head invited her to stay at Inverailort to catalogue the books in the castle library.

And so began a wonderful period in Barbara's life. Inverailort was what 'big houses' should surely be, but too rarely are - the living heart of the local community and a source of inspiration and excellence. Inverailort was also a house of constant courteous hospitality, charity, contentment and a happy Christian home.

Mrs Cameron-Head and Barbara, along with Annie MacBeth and George and Mary Howie, were the perfect team to entertain and look after the scores of friends and family who passed through Inverailort's doors every year especially at the time of the Glenfinnan Gathering and during the fishing and stalking seasons. After Mrs Cameron-Head's death in 1994 Barbara carried on living at the castle, entertaining old and new visitors, welcoming former commandoes, manning the weather station for the Met Office, running the Lochailort Post Office and much more. We might say of Mrs Cameron-Head and Barbara, as was said of Jonathan and Saul in the Book of Samuel, 'that they were lovely in their lives and in their death they were not divided'.

In every generation there are one or two people who act as a kind of magnet round which different groups of friends gather. They usually stand a little aside from the ordinary course of life and, being free from personal ambition, have time for the profession of friendship. Such a one was Barbara Mackintosh.

She always saw the best in everyone and in everything and went through life acquiring loyalties and friends to which she was always faithful. Now that she has gone, a light has been extinguished in the lives of a great number of her fellow beings.

I don't know what Barbara's religious beliefs were - she didn't speak of them; I didn't enquire, but if helping others and looking for nothing in return is next to Godliness, she cannot be far from the Kingdom. I remember one day after Mass at Inverailort asking her if she had given up altogether attending the Episcopal church at Kinlochmoidart. 'Oh no', she said, ' but as the floor in the chapel here is now so weak I feel that if it collapses, I really should go down with them'!

Of course we don't know where Barbara's psyche is now. Maybe she is in the post office at Inverailort or at the fish farm feeding the geese, the hens, the cats and the guinea pigs. Maybe she is checking the rain gauge or sitting on the bench in the sun in front of the house with her beloved terrier William.

Wherever she is I hope she is happy and content - she deserves to be.

Although not entirely comfortable in large crowds, Barbara loved people and a party.

She often came across as rather shy but she had a tremendous sense of fun and was never happier unless she was involved in some of the practical jokes which were often played on the castle guests. One, which she laughed about for years afterwards, was of a live duck being put into the bedroom of an eminent Professor and Cambridge Don and the effort made to get it out before he discovered it. She took an interest in local history and had a wonderful fund of stories of Glenuig and Roshven and of the people who lived there when the only means of communication was over the Bealach on foot or on horseback, or by boat with Ronald MacDonald. There was one particular legend that she always enjoyed and empathized with.

In 1746 a sea battle took place between French and British warships in Loch nan Uamh near Goat Island off Roshven.

As they were bombarding each other an old man was seen kneeling on the shore in prayer. 'Who are you praying for?' he was asked, 'the British or the French?' 'Neither' was the reply, 'I'm praying for my goats on the island'.

Had Barbara chosen a university career there is no doubt she would have made a first class doctor or a vet. She was well informed had a good knowledge of medicine and healing which no doubt she inherited from her father and grandfather who were both doctors. She loved animals and knew how to treat them and humans too when they were unwell although her prescriptions sometimes raised a few eyebrows. One year a guest at Inverailort complained of a sore stomach. 'I've just the thing for you' she said producing a large bottle, 'open your mouth' and in went two large spoonfuls of thick liquid accompanied by strict instructions to abstain from food for at least eight hours.

It wasn't until later in the day that the patient saw the label. What he read was 'Michael Carmichael, MRCVS, Fort William Veterinary Practice, not to be given to lactating ewes'. Whatever it was it certainly cured him!

Barbara always enjoyed a car trip. Once she and I went down to Glasgow to visit Mrs Cameron-Head who was in hospital there. I noticed as we set off that she was wearing a tweed jacket with large pockets which she kept putting her hands into.

As we were driving along the Great Western Road I suddenly heard some unusual noises coming from the direction of the jacket and before long, to my astonishment, three tiny chickens appeared. It seemed the hen had abandoned her nest that morning and in order not to let the eggs go cold Barbara had taken them with her hoping they would hatch in the heat of the car!

"End of an era' is a phrase too often used to lament a death, but in the case of Barbara it is appropriate for the daily lives of so many of us and of Lochailort and Genuig, will be less colourful and sadder without her.

A remarkably kind, genuine, warm-hearted woman and a steadfast upholder of all that was grand and best in the Highland tradition - we will not see her like again.

In remembering Barbara we do not, in the words of the Poet Dunne, have to send out to ask for whom the bells toll today - they toll for us.

Farewell dear Barbara, may you rest in peace and rise in Glory.

Iain Thornber

Glenfinnan Church

10 April 2015