

In Memoriam: Hazel Rossotti, by Tim Gardam

I am going to read a poem by **Rab-in -indrath Tagore**. It is very short but there is one phrase at the centre of it that for me anchors Hazel within it.

“..that she was”.

I asked Hazel's son, Ian, if I might say a few words by way of preface about how Hazel “**was**” for me. For all of us here, Hazel “**was**” in St Anne's, as St Anne's “**was**” in her, in a cluster of vivid, different snapshots that immediately come to mind.

I knew Hazel in the years after she had retired as Chemistry Fellow but her down to earth presence, her understated unobtrusiveness insofar as she never drew attention to herself, but, at the same time, her sort of no-nonsense magnetism – places her in so many scenes of college life. I recall watching her from my window, in the landscape of the main quad, walking past the Ship mural on the way from Hall with that angled- forward sense of purposefulness, satchel over her shoulder, setting off towards the Hadow Room. Or weaving her way through a college reunion where she would seek out the chemists of previous generations, remembering the name of each one of them – recalling one to me later from the early 1980s - “a quite dreadful chemist but a delightful man” – or coming into lunch on an ordinary weekday and immediately getting engaged in conversation with whomever she sat next to, whether they had been in College for years or just a few weeks or days. No sense of hierarchy, no sense of formality, just a direct interest in you or who you might be and what there might be interesting to talk about.

My first memory of Hazel must be a few days into my first week as Principal, before term began. I had been politely, but quite definitely, summoned to present myself in the Hadow Room to have my photograph taken, not because I was the new Principal, - she had photographed many of those, and if you google -“Hazel Rossotti, St Anne's” - one of the first pictures that comes up is a wonderful portrait she took of Claire Palley – but as a new arrival. She told me we hadn't got long as there were a number of people she had on her list - a new Junior Research Fellow, someone who had recently started work at the porter's lodge, a stipendiary lecturer. In being added to Hazel's St Anne's Senior Common Room photo album, that heaving tome of arresting black and white portraits in the Hadow Room, I was being inducted into a very democratic family. That I was the new Principal was neither here nor there.

Hazel set off, with me in tow, to that patch of garden behind the Hall, where she gave me my instructions and she set to work, not stopping until she was satisfied. "That will have to do", she said, and she added, in passing "you're the *second* most awkward member of Governing Body I have photographed". That black and white grainy photograph, so I have been told, is by far the best anyone ever took of me, and it still looks out from the password page of my laptop, though I am not sure how it got there. I am sure that Hazel even now will be hovering near the recording angel at the gates of Paradise to take the pictures of the new arrivals.

I have one other photograph by Hazel; its a Christmas Card from December 2012. It does not look like a Christmas card. Here it is. It is very different - as it is in colour. It perfectly captures the light of the Greek islands in summer. It is of a brightly painted fishing boat moored in a harbour. At first, I could not, for the life of me, work out why she had chosen to send it. The note inside, as definite as her voice is in my head now, explained:

"Dear Tim,

When this card has done its job of wishing you a Happy Christmas and a rewarding and enjoyable 2013, perhaps it could go into your younger daughter's personal file. I took it with her in mind whilst waiting for our departure ferry. I wasn't aware of the composition at the time, but it seems ok. Anyway, I hope Sophia and the rest of her family flourishes.

Best wishes, Hazel".

I looked back at the card; more closely at the boat and there, in Greek capital lettering on the prow- Sigma, Omicron, Phi, Iota, Alpha. Sophia, the name of my then five-year old daughter, who had been at the St Anne's nursery.

That gruff kindness of Hazel, in the midst of traveling back from holiday, catching sight of the boat, making the connection, taking out her camera, framing the shot beautifully, and then a few months later taking the care to remember to send it to us as a personal Christmas card. And it does indeed still sit in my younger daughter's scrapbook of her early years. That is what I think of when I recall how Hazel "**was**" to me.

A poem – by Rab- in -indrath Tagore

Say not in grief that she is no more
but say in thankfulness that she was
A death is not the extinguishing of a light,
but the putting out of the lamp
because the dawn has come.

Rabindranath Tagore