

Francis à Court

1931 – 2004

Francis à Court, a warm and enthusiastic member of The Friends, died in early October, only seven months after discovering he had cancer. It is a shock, and hard to believe for many of us who knew and loved him.

I first met Francis twelve years ago at a dinner for the Friends of Coleridge at Alfoxden. There was a talk by Alan Bullock which stimulated a lively debate between some of us afterwards; and one of the things that struck me most about Francis, apart from him being such generally good company, was his enthusiasm and his intellectual engagement, especially in literature—not because it was his job or his livelihood, but really for its own sake. Later, another friend who was an English teacher, commented after a party here that it isn't every day you can have the pleasure of a deep discussion about Coleridge with a pig farmer!

In fact Francis ran a very successful pig farm which he established in mid-life. This was following his previous work in the auto trade and for Oxfam. Both of these involved travelling to Eastern Europe and India; and all took place alongside his family involvement as well as all his other activities and interests. Many of these interests were expanded when he retired. He went back to university, for instance, and completed courses in philosophy and geology. He also embarked on his own piece of research about Thomas Wedgwood, having fun, together with Alison, exploring relevant places and connections here in Bristol. They had fun too with their children and grandchildren. He was a large, warm, yet diffident man, who wore his personal qualities lightly—and his nobility too! It was years before I realised that he was actually a Lord. He was much more interested in talking about his first edition of the *Lyrical Ballads* than his peerage.

Francis was a person with passions—for a wide diversity of things: from mountaineering and gliding to the operas of Wagner and the works of the romantic poets. Alison says that he could recite all of Keats' poems—and we often turned to him—as to an encyclopaedia—to discover who said this or wrote that! He and Alison went together to Wordsworth conferences at Grasmere and meetings of the Lamb Society in London too. Apparently he had a life-long love of the Lake District where he spent many holidays walking and climbing over the hills—like Coleridge himself—and in one of these walks he followed Coleridge's route down Scafell, a journey recorded in his 'Relics', (Bulletin 21) but not mentioning there that he had in fact knocked himself out in making the leap off the ledge! He did an impressive number of 'Monroes' on his frequent trips to Scotland, and we did a number of more gentle walks all together locally—around Bristol, the Quantocks, the Wye above Tintern and others; and when we discovered we had all been on Alternative Travel holidays, we decided to go on one of these together. We chose the organised and guided journey along the pilgrim route to Santiago

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de Compostela. It proved to be a particular highlight for all of us, combining, as it did, the abundance of interesting history and architecture as well as walking the best bits of the route and imbibing the best food and wine of the region—a great opportunity to hear and share Francis’s knowledge and views on all of them! We went on some other ones later including a walking tour in Tuscany. This was on a non-guided, ‘footloose’ basis where your hotels are all booked and a lovely route mapped out for you; and you just have to try and follow it! Not always easy! But it seemed to work as long as Francis was doing the navigating!

Although not formally an academic, Francis had graduated in history at Cambridge. At his funeral, his friend from those days aptly referred to him, as a ‘well-educated 20th century English gentleman.’ I think he loved learning—again, just for its own sake. It is a great joy to meet up with this kind of engagement in these days when value tends to be assessed mainly according to measurable outcome. He would have appreciated the Hans Christian Anderson song: ‘Inchworm, inchworm measuring the marigolds/ Don't you ever stop to think,/ How beautiful they are?’ just as he appreciated Coleridge’s love of ‘the Great’, & ‘the Whole’.

This is one of the reasons why we all love the Kilve weekends where the combination of high-calibre talks and the unpretentious atmosphere originally created by Reggie and Shirley Watters enables professionals and amateurs to share and contribute from very different points of view and without any particular outcome in mind (except to demonstrate our appreciation and enhance our understanding of Coleridge and his contemporaries.) It has often occurred to me that these weekends are rather like especially good house parties, only with a specific theme and shared interest, brilliantly organised and hosted. Francis and Alison were keen participants in them—the walks as well as the talks, and the socialising at the meal table and the bar! And Francis was beginning to write papers and give talks himself. I, for one, was looking forward to more of them. I’m sure many others will be feeling that they’ve lost an interesting and lovely friend. He was a man of many parts and full of life. It is very hard to register he is no longer with us.

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