

Penny Tweedie (1940-2011).

Funeral Service, Kent, England. 27 January 2011

Eulogy by Duncan Campbell

We are here today both to say our farewells to Penny and to celebrate the remarkable, rich, adventurous, good-hearted, life of someone who in many different ways - as mother, daughter, sister, friend, lover, neighbour, colleague - has touched the lives of all of us here and countless others around the world.

We all have our particular memories of that irrepressible, energetic figure, that somewhat wry playful smile, that ever-present camera over her shoulder, that sense of what was right and wrong that informed both her work and her life.

From the age of 16, inspired by Cartier-Bresson and Robert Capa, Penny had wanted to be a photographer and she wasted little time in fulfilling her dreams. Her work now may be best known for her coverage of places like Bangladesh and East Timor, Vietnam and Rwanda, Fiji and Uganda but she also took a remarkable number of portraits. Her subjects were often charmed by her and became friends and admirers.

The late Alistair Cook whose photo she took for the BBC said she was “as cute as a dimple.” And looking at the list of those who pictures she had taken I couldn’t help thinking what a wonderful dinner party you could have assembled from them all, perhaps on one sunny summer’s evening at Foxhole: Groucho Marx and Germaine Greer; John Lennon and Yoko One and Colonel Gaddafi with perhaps Penny sitting at the end of the table, taking the pleasure that she always did in introducing people from different parts of her life to each other.

I met her first in London in 1970 when she was a young photographer happy to go anywhere at the drop of a hat. So I suppose I shouldn’t have been too surprised a year or so later to see that familiar slight figure on the main street in Calcutta. She was about to embark on one of the defining stories of her career, covering the Bangladesh war for the Sunday Times. It was one of her earliest assignments in a war zone and she was to find herself mistakenly arrested as a spy and held for a while by the Indian army. But it was while covering that war that she was summoned to a victory celebration outside Dhaka. She realised that some terrified prisoners were about to be bayoneted to death for the benefit of the foreign press. She and a small group of others refused to participate; some of those who stayed later won prizes for their work but Penny had no regrets: “my reaction was instinctive,” she said later, “and I stuck with my instinct.”

That was typical Penny. Principled, respectful, fearless. And those are the qualities on which so many of her friends from around the world have been remarking in these last two weeks as news of her death sunk in.

Her friend and former housemate, Andrea, wrote from Australia: “We know that Penny saw her identity as her work. But she was also an exceptional and generous friend and an extraordinary mother. She joyfully embraced her pregnancy, nested in Sydney and decorated a cradle for the baby. Her resolute determination to give Ben an incredible life, filled with a loving constancy, possibilities and well-being was inspiring... Penny loved the bush, the wilderness, the beach and the sea... Hiking, swimming, picnicking,.. Her lithe brown body striding through paddocks, deserts and rain forests, swimming in the sea , scrambling over rocks, exploring rock pools, camping. Her

energy was huge, her tenacity unparalleled...her laughter infectious. Her self deprecation and surprising vulnerability and humility were at odds with the confident brave Penny the photographer.”

Ann McFerran, who worked with her in Rwanda recalls that she “was completely transformed by taking pictures, as if some inner light came on as she photographed those sad Rwandan genocide orphans whose story we were trying to tell. I could also see in their faces how much it meant to them to be photographed by her, how she gave them a dignity, a grace, even a certain sense of peace. Photography as catharsis. There was a magic in her work.”

Another Australian friend, Daniela Torsh, met her in 1975 and knew her as she embarked on her legendary work that is captured in Spirit of Arnhem Land: “I was so impressed by this small short person with blonde fly-away hair who had covered the Yom Kippur war in 1973 and the Vietnam war which I had protested against in the 60’s. I had never met a woman like her and still have not. She was unique. Penny was a whirlwind. Her work was marked by her cooperation with the people she lived amongst and photographed in their daily lives. Her access was exceptional as a result. The iconic photograph of Tom Noytuna in whiteface holding the orange phone has been often reproduced. I was in awe of her energy and the intelligence and persistence she displayed. Her passion for the cause of this oppressed peoples was unstinted. The other passion in her life was her son, Ben.”

Mike Wells recalls: “Penny loved nature, the land and the light, and her splendid last project was for this cookery book for the Hospice in the Weald. At dinner just before Christmas, she told us of her adventure accompanying the first woman hot-air balloonist across the Channel in the 1960s, their crash-landing in France, her arrival back in Fleet Street bandaged and bloodied, but with the pictures.” Always with the pictures.

But she is not, of course, just defined by her work, outstanding though it is. There were so many other sides to her life. She loved walking in the Kent countryside and playing bridge with her pals nearby; caring for her mother; going to the Kino cinema; hiking in Canada with her brother, James; cooking for friends who came to stay from around the world; getting into rollicking political discussions and expressing her deeply held beliefs; hitting the art exhibitions in London or a show at the Tricycle theatre.

Some of the last few years may have been difficult and frustrating ones for Penny. She fought a very gallant battle against the dark clouds that sometimes gathered. She stayed as long as she could.

All of her marvellous photographic work will, of course, live on. But her greatest achievement, as far as Penny was concerned, was Ben, her companion in so many of her adventures, who brought such joy and happiness into her life and who received, in return, such love and admiration from her and who she was so pleased had found love with Jo and fulfillment in his own work.

We will all miss her and we will all carry in our hearts a memory of this brave, resolute, loyal, independent, loving, compassionate woman: Penny Tweedie.

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