

Ann Waswo by Jenny Corbett

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I reckon I knew Ann for 38 years from my arrival in Oxford in 1982. That's over half my lifetime and she was a very big part of many of the most important events, large and small. It's hard to pick just a few to share so let me start at the end to say that Ann was one of the most interesting people I know: smart, warm, funny, generous and unflinching. Few of the things I value in Oxford would have been the same without Ann - the College, the Institute, Japanese Studies and even my family life. She was my Best Woman (in so far as we did the formalities) at our wedding, she was an unsentimental but staunch support when our son Daniel died at birth and we shared laughter both grim and hilarious through many university battles.

My memories of Ann in the early years of the Nissan Institute – when we were in Church Walk – are of the mix of characteristics that I came to know over many years. She cared deeply about how the Institute operated right from the beginning. It's physical fabric and the way we used space were a focus even then. And she had strong views - which almost always prevailed. Behind them was a desire to make spaces where people were comfortable and where interactions could take place at all levels, from the formal to the very informal. In Church Walk she changed the layout of the library where we held the first Nissan Seminars, taking us from a traditional classroom with rows of chairs to the – radical at the time – roundtable format where she had carefully worked out how the sight lines ran so that nobody was intimidated about asking questions. She found a kindred spirit in the ferocious caretaker living in the basement flat, and the two ensured we had the cleanest, best-maintained space in College. While the Nissan family (Arthur and I) were sometimes a bit cowed by her zeal, successive Nissan visitors were enormously grateful for the improvements she brought to the upstairs flat and the vagaries of English plumbing, heating and cooking arrangements.

But while she was keeping us up to her high standards in living arrangements, she was kind and generous at every opportunity. When I was evicted from my College room at the end of my first term and was miserably recovering from a broken relationship back in Michigan, Ann lent me her house in Jericho during the vacation. There I found a copy of *Jude the Obscure* set out for me on the bedside table and I always wondered if this was Ann's not so subtle message about not wallowing in self pity about doomed love affairs. Later, when I was having a thesis crisis, she patiently helped tear perforations from the edges of the continuous printer paper we were cursed with in the early days of personal computing so that I could dispatch my final copy to the binder by my deadline. But I didn't avoid a lecture about my lack of planning and inability to meet deadlines without panic. I didn't know then that the title of her graduation speech at Newport Harbor Union High School in 1957 was *Thinking Ahead* but I wasn't surprised when Roger showed me the program of that event.

We were two of only three women on governing body at that time and would probably have been thrown together even if we hadn't liked each other. Fortunately, we did like each other – instantly - and that was a godsend for me. I had deep misgivings about an Oxford fellowship as my first academic position. It seemed like foreign and hostile territory for an American-educated Australian woman with no Oxbridge credentials. Much more alien and mysterious than Japan as a graduate student. Ann's straightforward, take-no-bullshit, attitude gave me courage to deal with some fairly bizarre behaviours that we encountered. Together we drafted the College's first sexual harassment policy and supported each other through the embarrassing period when calling out sexist language was *infra-dig*.

We had other great women friends in the College then too and a social group of older PhD students including Susan McRae and visiting academics began meeting regularly in each other's flats for dinners where much wine was drunk. Ann was a great cook and enjoyed other people's entertaining too. The conversations would cover the kind of ground you might expect from a group of smart Oxford women- the big issues of the day, radical politics, Britain under Mrs Thatcher - plus a whole lot of domestic trivia that we enjoyed equally much. We privately enjoyed the fact that some of our male colleagues thought we were plotting the overthrow of the patriarchy when actually we were more likely swapping recipes and shopping tips.

Ann's great egalitarian respect for both high and low culture was always evident – trashy TV alongside London theatre, street art along with great museums, backstreet Tokyo photographed on the same reel of film as Ginza glitz. In some sense she was always an American in England – calling out British snobbery and self-delusions where she found them - though she had whole-heartedly committed to Britain as her home.

Probably the biggest contribution Ann made to the fabric of Oxford was the building of the Nissan Institute in 1990 to 91. It was also a project we worked on closely together. The construction coincided with tough times in the lives of all three members of the Nissan – the end of Ann's marriage to Rick, the death of Arthur's son Tim and my incarceration in the John Radcliffe for months with a complicated pregnancy that had an unhappy end. We might all have decided it was just too hard, but Ann was not going to give up – especially not on the opportunity and obligation to build a building we'd be proud of for years to come. The formal works supervisor retired with a broken leg a few months after the ground breaking, so Ann - and I somewhat more reluctantly – supervised the building. This actually meant weekly meetings where Ann would bring the plans up to my hospital room at the JR and we'd lay them out on my bed and pore over them, measuring every filing cabinet and window frame to check it was as agreed in the specs. I always felt the spirit of Ann's mother Sylvia – who had been a building contractor (probably one of the first women licenced in that profession) - hovering over us.

I could go on with stories about helping tear out the old lino on the floor of her Boulter St house when she first took possession, to a lunch party where Audrey Stockwin struggled to teach a rabble of St Antony's women how to make pots, to the file note I recently came across from Ann correcting me for an error I had made in a College meeting confusing two categories of Honorary Fellow which were different in miniscule details and many more, but let me end with a classic Ann remark when she first visited the house Andrew and moved to a few years ago. We had given up the elegant townhouse in Parktown where Andrew grew up, for a sizeable "bungalow" in a 1980s development near Summertown. Most people thought we were mad. Ann came and immediately saw the appeal, announcing that she approved but that she was suffering "utility room envy". She had resignedly lived with her washing machine in her bathroom for 40 years and begrudged me my purpose built laundry room.

I will miss her a great deal. She never let you get away with anything she disapproved of without comment, but she was usually right in her criticism and it was always offered in the spirit of making the world a tidier and more ordered place.

If we have time I will read the poem that she wrote for Arthur's 80th birthday celebration. She wanted to be eighty "now and forever" – and she is.