

Margaret Mary Feeny, MBE 1917 - 2012

Margaret did not want much said of herself. She was always personally modest, and unattached to the things of this world. The only matters to stir her passions were ideals of Justice and Kindness. She was completely un-stuffy. She was straight-forward in her dealings with people, unaffected by rank or wealth, but well able to use them as tools to get things done.

Margaret was born during the First World War, the eleventh of twelve children. In 1919 her family moved into a fine house overlooking the Thames, where, as she remembered it, most of the social action surrounded tennis and music. Her father was a successful businessman who was frequently away in the Far East, and would return with exotic items, cloth and artifacts, which were the stuff of his trades. Far-away places and distant cultures were thus a part of the Feeny household.

At the time of her birth, older siblings were already living abroad, showing a pattern for the Feeny family which still pertains today.

Margaret followed her sisters to school with *Les Oiseaux*, the French nuns who had been in exile in Kent since the French Revolution. She strongly identified with the French pupils, in their language and culture, and objected to being offered tea, because she was English, rather than coffee which was reserved for the French. After school she returned to *Les Oiseaux* to teach French for a while. But her father's health and wealth were waning; so Margaret gave up thoughts of further education, did a course at St James's Secretarial College, and was living at home again, caring for her parents, when the Second World War broke out.

During the war, early gyro-compasses, Sperry compasses, were quietly provided by the Americans to the Admiralty. They were distributed in a secret operation by the Admiralty Compass Observatory at Ditton Park. The head of this operation knew Margaret from church, which gave him confidence that she could not be a spy. He recruited Margaret to instruct naval officers on how to use the compasses, and very importantly, how to destroy them if their vessel was in danger of falling into enemy hands. Margaret delivered the compasses, heavy boxes she found difficult to manage, to ships around the country. She told me that the security arrangement was that she was so small and unprepossessing, no one would ever suppose she could have anything important about her.

After the war Margaret first worked for a couple of horticultural businesses, then for a British-Yugoslav trading company, negotiating contracts and keeping books. But it was as PA to Douglas Woodruff at The Tablet that she came to the attention of Archbishop Bernard Griffin: he wanted to restart a wartime operation which examined international relations in the light of Catholic values. This was “Sword of the Spirit”, which Barbara Ward started as a prayerful reaction to the policies of Hitler and the Nazi party. Margaret assisted Ronald Breck in running the Sword of the Spirit. The Sword became the Catholic Institute for International Relations, and continues today under the name “Progressio”.

Margaret was one of those fuelling the energy, optimism and tumultuous expectation of the 1950s. Perhaps people were surprised that they and the world had survived the war. They had won, but they were not stopping at the finishing line! Margaret was at the centre of a British culture in which young people were going to fix what was wrong with the world.

As General Secretary to the CIIR, Margaret began by explaining development work to Sixth-Formers, then to teachers, church officials, MPs, to foreign dignitaries and diplomats, to government ministers and Heads of State. Her remit, and her travels, covered South America and Asia. But it was Africa, packed full of nascent independent states, which called most urgently to her. She founded or played mid-wife or nurse to a plethora of aid agencies which the war and its aftermath had thrown up. Among them, were :

- Catholic Overseas Appointments (sending teachers to Africa),
 - the ecumenical, Christians Abroad,
 - the British Volunteer Programme
 - and the UK Council for Overseas Students.
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- She was a founding member of the Catholic Fund for Overseas Development, CAFOD.
 - She was on the UK Committee of the United Nations Freedom from Hunger campaign, which closely involved her with the growth of Oxfam.

Margaret may have been working officially for the CIIR, but Christian Aid, VSO and War on Want were all in her immediate circle. She just wanted to help.

She was a governor of Farnham Castle Centre for International Briefing, and she kept in personal contact with African Heads of Mission in London, and ministers for Overseas Development and at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

I am sorry about the long (though incomplete) list, but I wanted to mention these things now, because they might never be mentioned again. The idea of remembering oneself, of making a mark, were quite irrelevant to Margaret and her fellow travellers at the time. They just got on with it; they achieved what they set out to do, and they quietly moved on.

By the end of the 1950s, with a growing African diaspora displaying self-confidence in African cultures, Margaret identified the need for an African cultural and social centre in London. Prakash Ramgulam says Margaret closed her eyes and stuck a pin in a map to choose a place. It is a large property in Covent Garden which, almost uniquely in the area, could be bought freehold. Then single-handedly, and against all advice, Margaret set out to raise the funds to buy it. So it was that in November 1964, President Kenneth Kaunda and Cardinal Laurean Rugambwa opened the Africa Centre in a half renovated tomato warehouse, where Margaret was its first Director, and London's first ever African restaurant, The Calabash, was in the basement.

The Centre immediately became the London focus for African writers and artists, exiles and dissidents, the spiritually ambitious and the politically displaced. Margaret's PA was Sally Mugabe, the quiet and devout former wife of Robert.

After fourteen years in the rôle, Margaret withdrew from the Centre. In 1979 she retired to Bath, to get out of the way of her successor, Alastair Niven.

For a while, she picked up a few of the old threads, sitting on local committees of some of the national charities she had known ten or twenty years earlier. But her urge was always to work *with* the people she was helping. She found greater satisfaction door-knocking for the Lib-Dems. She was elected for Abbey Ward, and set about, as she always had, putting things right that she felt were wrong. For decades, the Empire Hotel had been an abandoned black hole in the centre of Bath. She told me she would get that sorted. And the rubbish-strewn York Hotel in George Street. I don't know how these things get done, but Margaret, in her great experience, found the starter levers.

It was while she was Mayor of Bath in 1996, that she suffered that terrible stroke, after delivering a speech in Aix-en-Provence. I was given the news that she would probably not recover her movement or speech. But with typical disregard for expertise, she was back in her flat in two months. And with kind help from the Mayoral office, she was even able to take up some official engagements again before her term expired.

Everything Margaret did, she did for other people. She never planned for her own comfort or wellbeing. She had absolute faith that God would provide for her as necessary. If you said, "God bless you", she would say, with a sort of pride, "He always does!" Her faith was unquestioning, and utterly beyond doubt. But her spiritual devotions were almost always private, and I was seldom able to share them with her.

Margaret served this church with devotion. She had a flat across the road, over-looking the river. When you leave the church, if you peer over the railings at the end of the road, you will look down upon the river-garden she kept so that other people could use it and see it.

In her last years, while Margaret seemed to be forgetful and confused, her conversation sometimes came directly from the spirit. She told me on many occasions where she was going, and what the future held for her. And when she talked of her "husband" waiting for her "upstairs", she was probably quoting the French sisters, *Les Oiseaux*, of her school years.

She was not innocent: she was profound. Having not had a sensible conversation for months, when Father David anointed her, she responded actively, and was emotional with gratitude. Rejoice for her at her passing. She was as determined as anyone could possibly be. She had done the job; she has achieved what she set out to do, and has quietly moved on.

Tom Craigmyle
Bath, 18th January 2012