

FINAL MEETING WITH A REMARKABLE MAN

S M PARSONS pays tribute to an unknown radical.

On 19th May 2020 I attended the cremation of an extraordinary man, Michael Kerr. He would have liked human composting (*see p.54*), but this was no eco burial, and no family members were there to grieve; all were in isolation 20 miles away. Friends and family from further afield were likewise unable or not allowed to attend. Yet somehow the surreal disposal of his physical remains was in keeping with a perfectly imperfect life.

Opening Acts

He was brought up in a conventional, radical household. His father was a medical doctor, homeopath, and founding member of the Soil Association. Early education was traumatic. An undiagnosed dyslexic, he was written off academically and told to learn some useful skill with his hands. He developed a love for pottery and woodwork and was a gifted chair maker for most of his adult life. However, books were a wonder to him and he refused to remain illiterate. Scanning shapes and connecting sounds when his mother read to him, he eventually figured it out for himself. A Walt Whitman poem about the sea finally unlocked the secrets of letters and words. He then read avidly, making up for lost time.

National service didn't go well. He was an oddball, couldn't follow orders. To end the ordeal he managed the impressive feat of convincing the army he was insane. It worked a little too well, and he was told that time in an asylum would be required. He fled to Canada just before the men in white jackets could seize him. There he got work as a forest ranger in British Columbia after requesting an interview with the relevant government minister. Though no position had been advertised, his English accent was enough to secure both meeting and job all in one day. A year later, crestfallen at witnessing the clear felling of Canadian wilderness and dismayed at the intolerant, aggressive attitude of the lumberjacks, he headed home on an ocean liner.

Another Way

He then fell in with JG Bennett – founder of the Institute for Comparative Study of History, Philosophy and the Sciences, based in a country house called Coombe Springs, south West of London. For several years Kerr lived there, earning his keep as a volunteer. He studied, and met, some of the key characters in the emerging world of personal development and 'comparative methodology'. This was a formative period, laying the foundations for a lifelong investigation and synthesis of non-materialist thought, vibrational medicine, ecology, botany, and the study of ancient civilisations; books were constant companions. Over morning coffee he would often précis works by writers such as Albert Howard, Peter Kropotkin, Peter Tompkins, George Gurdjieff, John Michell, Rupert Sheldrake, John Neal, and sundry others. It was like listening to a living, transcendental version of Radio 4.

Interestingly Kerr, though passionate about soil health, did not actively support the Soil Association – he believed its method of certification rewarded 'lack' (no pesticide) rather than 'abundance' (healthy, sustainable soils). He loved circular systems; a label saying that you didn't spray your crops was a good start but not an end in itself. The work of English botanist Albert Howard (1873-1947) was a huge influence on Michael's outlook. Howard's conversion from imperial scientist preaching the wonders of modern agriculture to a proponent of the sustainable methods he observed in India, spoke with such force to Kerr's own convictions.

Keen to put theory into practice after years of relative isolation under Bennett's wing he next headed to the Isle of Arran where his sister ran a pony trekking business. He built himself a bothy, with turf roof, and settled in. It wasn't long before he met a striking young Swiss backpacker named Régine. Unimpressed by the lack of mountains she was charmed enough by the eccentric Englishman in his modest Scottish castle and they set about huddling together for warmth. Michael made the best tea; I suspect the skill was honed here, on the bothy's open hearth.

Appalled at the amount of waste shipped to the mainland he suggested various schemes to improve the island's environmental sustainability, advocating intensive recycling, composting and biodigesters. He was ignored; not for the first time in his life the planners would take a dim view of his unorthodox schemes. A first child had arrived and off-grid living was getting a little chilly. Time for another boat journey back to the motherland.

Eco Parenting

Two more births and a relationship breakdown later, he took on the role of middle-aged single dad. The kids became his life, his work. They may not have thought so at the time but a Somerset council house with no TV, no central heating, no double glazing, and no processed food, was a lucky break for the young brood. They are grateful now. It was a frugal but healthy upbringing, all are masterful hitch hikers. And all can dance, for their father had gone from "phobic non-dancer" to an obsessive – even inventing a new way to dance and teach the French waltz.

Michael wasn't alone in railing against the madness of industrial farming, and the materialist mindset generally, but it often felt that way: "in the land of the blind", he would say, "the one-eyed man is an outcast". Nor did he achieve anything we would normally consider 'great'. No published works, no impressive CV. However, he *conveyed* greatness. When facing a difficult situation he would stand up straight and quote his brilliant aikido master – Sensi Williams – "Lose the fighting mind Michael. Lose the fighting mind." Well worth taking heed, the words were uttered by a remarkable man.

Michael Kerr: ecologist, dancer, chair maker. May 1933 - May 2020

