

My Cousin Norman

By Doreen Cornthwaite

“Oh! Look! There is a cousin of yours. I’ll introduce you,” said Jennifer Riley, another cousin, on my mother’s side.

Walking towards us, arm in arm, was a couple dwarfed by the huge sea defences at Haverigg. I was introduced to Norman and Yvonne and after a brief chat we went our separate ways.

This was way back in 1968. I know this for the following week a typed letter arrived at my office addressed to ‘My Charming Cousin’ (the flirt).

This was the start of almost twenty years of correspondence (some dated and some not) for Norman didn’t have a phone. Those twenty years were the most wonderful period, for Norman and Yvonne involved me in all the minutiae of their lives.

They often had me to stay—sometimes in the library or attic where he wrote. In the mornings I would take Norman out in their car and in the afternoons, while Norman rested, Yvonne took me out.

Norman’s three great ‘loves’ were wildflowers, music and cricket—not necessarily in that order. When I eventually bought a car, Norman and Yvonne would come to stay and we explored the area north of Carlisle. Driving them could be quite a nightmare for if Norman saw an unusual plant he would shout “Stop” and, no matter how dangerous it was, I had to while he got out to examine this rare plant! I found a letter where he mentioned such an incident and the flower turned out to be Water Chickweed and reasonably common!

His life after Yvonne was just as busy as before. This surprised him for he gave no thought that people admired him and enjoyed his poetry and prose.

His housekeepers, Jean and Margaret, looked after him wonderfully well. The weekends were lonely though, so I would go down to do odd jobs and take him out for a pub lunch, or have him to stay.

Whenever Norman received exciting news of an award or TV programme etc., he could barely contain himself to keep quiet, so he would tell me and thus relieve himself of the responsibility until the news was made public!

I was saddened to read in WEDNESDAY EARLY CLOSING that Norman had no memory of his mother nor a picture. I asked Aunt Sally Wilson if she had a photo and she produced one of a pretty, delicate-looking woman that I framed and gave to Norman. That was an emotional moment for him and us. He was pleased he did not get the photo before publishing WEC though!

I miss him very much and feel privileged to have had a famous poet for a relative and friend.

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