



Professor Katherine Duncan-Jones

Tributes from the 2011 Birthday Book

Debbie Forbes (White, 1965)

Katherine Duncan-Jones' arrival in Somerville was something of an excitement to those reading English, because she definitely looked trendy. I can't even remember what adjective we used then to denote trendy, but Katherine dressed in a way that marked her out as young, which she was, and aware of fashion. Sadly, no particular outfit comes to mind, but back then it must have meant that she wore skirts that were short and that her shoes met with our approval. We were not really sure whether she was a graduate student or a bona fide don.

My first encounter with her was after the summer vacation of my second year. We had had to write an essay on a subject of our own choosing which Katherine marked and returned to me. I had chosen to write on Tennyson and the Pre-Raphaelite painters and remember feeling quite proud of my research, which was probably rather primitive, but I also remember how much I enjoyed it. Katherine was encouraging in her comments, but she also pointed out how the Pre-Raphaelites were drawn to the Romantic poets and I experienced one of those moments of awareness of one's own ignorance which were a part of the Oxford education!

After I finished, I lost touch with Somerville a bit, although I always kept in touch with my friends. I married, had children and did what teaching I could find. When I went back to work full-time it was at a prep school, which proved a disadvantage when I wanted to return to teaching literature to older pupils. I applied for a job at Cheltenham Ladies' College but, because I had been teaching younger children, I was asked to provide an academic reference. In some trepidation, and being certain that she would have forgotten me, I wrote to Katherine. To my delight, she not only remembered me, but even recalled the essay I had written on Tennyson and the Pre-Raphaelites. She provided the reference and I got the job.

Maggie Gee (1966)

My first two meetings with Katherine Duncan-Jones came puzzlingly close together – she interviewed me at Cambridge, at New Hall, then a very new college with a white dome recently built and even more recently vandalised, and then I met her again at Somerville, where I think she had just become a Fellow. What I remember from those first meetings was her youth (she seemed barely older than me), her height, her coltish shyness combined with obvious, unsettling acuity, and her cheeks, blushed like a rose. I did not expect dons to be like this, and mostly they weren't. What I responded to was her passion – for Shakespeare and Elizabethan dramatists, who were alive and breathing in the room with us as we sat, the unbelievable luxury of just two minds, one of them (hers) so well-stocked, in her airy Vaughan-block room – in the days when Vaughan was even newer than both of us, and the 1960s were not yet old.

She was very kind to me, something I will never forget. When I loved the texts, I worked rather hard, writing too-long essays, but on this this occasion in my first year I came to my early morning tutorial with a broken heart and no essay, so she found me sitting on the landing outside her room distressed. Startled but sympathetic, she promptly urged a very large whiskey upon me. Since I had never drunk whiskey, I suspect most of our tutorial then became an impromptu five act recapitulation of the drama of my life. Sorry, Katherine – but this incident did show her compassionate heart.

Helen Wise (1966)

Two of the things that struck some of us most in what must have been KDJ's second year of teaching at Somerville were her youth and her almost other-worldliness. She seemed to have stepped out of a Pre-Raphaelite painting! Also, we marvelled at her collection of books and the expanse of her knowledge. How could someone only a few years our senior have read so much and be such a scholar? We were quite intimidated, I remember.

Years after my student days, I met KDJ on one of Somerville's Mediterranean cruises. She was eager to find time to talk, and I anticipated literary discussions. Instead, she really wanted to know how I was managing as a working single parent. She, in turn, was candid about her own struggles and modest about her achievements. And she wanted to learn from me. I was incredulous. She was Aurora still, but also—good heavens!—a human being. Eventually, too, we got round to talking about literature with undiminished love.

Sheila Drury (Peach, 1968)

My memories of KDJ stem from 1968-69 when, as a young Don, she supervised my BPhil thesis on Barnabe Barnes' *Parthenophil and Parthenophe*. KDJ had the advantage (over other dons) of being nearer in age to us (I came up to Oxford in 1965). She was simultaneously of our world and beyond it. A member of the Academic Order, she was also a fey Pre-Raphaelite beauty riding a bike precariously through the city, with the *de rigueur* long locks of the 60s and fashionable, swaying ropes of beads. Memory conjures up a Virginia Woolf fragility, a shy courtesy combined with fiendish erudition.

My working life took me to other territory but I think of my Oxford days with KDJ cycling through them as a golden period. In a busy, exciting, but all too often morally tarnished world filled with commercial and political pressures, there is much comfort in the knowledge of a distinguished academic devoting her mind – and life – to that bright crisp period of literature before the great tsunami of 19th century verbiage and emotion. Oxford and KDJ have remained a source of inspiration and an unfading delight.

Professor Fiona Stafford, Somerville College

One of my regrets about the electronic revolution was its effects on other forms of communication. When I arrived at Somerville in 1992, I was fortunate enough to receive frequent notes and phone calls from my senior colleague, Katherine, but by the time she retired, less than a decade later, these had largely given way to emails. Of course – emails were a marvellous development for busy tutors, enabling constant communication but without the danger of interrupting tutorials, classes, meetings or interviews. We were both delighted by this and adapted accordingly. What it also meant, I now realise, was that all the

highly distinctive communications that I'd been lucky to receive hitherto would largely be things of the past. Katherine's beautiful handwriting, with its almost Elizabethan angles and flourishes, is instantly recognisable and made even the simplest note a pleasure to read. Her confident signature was an almost daily reminder of the loveliness of the letter 'K' – for which no electronic sign off can begin to substitute. I am not wholly persuaded by the pursuit of graphology, but I do relish the individuality of handwriting, and the personality that it is instantly before us on a handwritten page. And Katherine's distinct hand was matched by her telephone manner. I always knew who was on the phone because I could hear the voice before I had a chance to get the receiver to my ear. It was very flattering to think that Katherine was so eager to speak to me that she couldn't wait for me to identify myself as the person on the other end of the line. Katherine's wonderful voice was also a great pleasure to hear, so unmistakable in manner, tone and expression, irrespective of the particular content of the conversation. Email has in many ways made communication easier and more efficient, and of course I am still lucky enough to see Katherine in person very often. But I now prize a card or letter even more highly than of the old, because that bold black ink still says KDJ more clearly than any screen or printed text.

Sarah Wedderburn (1971)

In the early 1970s, along with many of her students, Katherine was often to be seen walking around Somerville, wearing long, dreamy cotton dresses. Am I imagining it, or did she sometimes go barefoot? Well, whether the barefoot bit is true memory or false, the point is that unlike us with our grubby feet, incense burners and Neil Young LPs, Katherine was not remotely hippy-ish. She had far too much gravitas for that. Tall, with magnificent, copper-coloured wavy hair, she emanated a special, rather shy grace as she moved about college. She was a like a lady in a Pre-Raphaelite painting – a heroic rather than a syrupy one. Henry Holiday's picture of Dante meeting Beatrice by the river in Florence comes to mind, and I know Beatrice doesn't have curly hair, but that's the closest I can get to what Katherine was like: beautiful and a little remote. She made a very strong impression.

In the years since then, returning to Somerville for reunions, I have met her again from time to time, always to be greeted with the same kindness. Now, as far away as I am from my precious three years of reading English at Oxford, I find that her writing on Shakespeare and the Elizabethan world brings it all to life in a thrilling and vivid way. It's like being in the thick of it all again.

Cindy Gallop (1977)

A Somervillian's Love Song (with apologies to John Betjeman)

Oh Miss KDJ, oh Miss KDJ,
Furnished and burnished by Elizabethan play,
What strenuous discourse we plied over tea,
We in the tutorial – you against me!

Sir Philip Sidney, the courtier poet,
Shakespeare ungentle? How else would I know it?
With carefulest insight, so wisely you play,
I am weak from your scholarship, Miss KDJ.

Miss KDJ, Miss KDJ,
How mad I am, sad I am, glad that you say
My insights, they matter; my ideas, you press,
And even when fumbling, you urge me no less.

The glass box of Vaughan gazes down as we walk,
And swing past the chapel all giggling and talk,
To cool SCR corridor that welcomes us in,
To discussion, and challenge, and learning to win.

The long road to Finals, the shorter to Mod,
The view from the window of sun-dappled quad,
As I struggle with Marlowe, the wherefore and why
For we work on my essay, my tutor and I.

On the floor of her study lie books in their piles,
And the cream-coloured walls are be-trophied with files,
And westering, questioning, settles the day,
On your low-leaded window, Miss KDJ.

Miss KDJ, Miss KDJ,
From Penrose to study I swift wind my way
Oh! Somerville twilight! Leave trivia behind!
Oh! Strongly adorable professor's mind!

The kettle is boiling, the light's in the hall,
The pictures of Sydney are bright on the wall,
We sit there before you, intent and alert,
While your burgundy tights match the shade of your skirt.

By roads throughout Oxford, wherever they wind
You ride on your bicycle, bearing behind
Small precious cargo so often in place,
A mop of blonde curls and a critical face.

Around us are colleges where the men flex,
Above us the roof that contains just our sex,
And here on my right is my tutor of choice,
With the tilt of her nose and the chime of her voice.

Arcadian pastoral, playwrights long dead,
Who knew what the future held so far ahead?
We sat in tutorials day after day
And now I'm indebted to Miss KDJ.

Kitty Turley (Parham, 1979)

We admired you for your gentleness and what we knew were your extraordinary literary perception and scholarship: alas, I was too inexperienced a reader then to enter into proper

dialogue; how I wish I might do so now. I admired you also for your handwriting, and for your patience in tutorials with what I knew were essays inchoate and uncertain (when they came at all). Always, you supported, pointed out the possibility of new directions.

Preserved for some 28 years now is a note from you, written in brown ink on a Bodleian ordering slip, and attached to an essay I had written on Browning. Commenting on some insights, fruit of the extended discussions with a fellow Somervillian that preceded the writing of essays, you quoted from Browning's 'Fra Lippo Lippi': 'God uses us to help each other so / Lending our minds out.' Thank you for lending your mind out during those years, for your generous and discreet kindness and interest, and for your constant support.

Christine Kavanagh (Armand, 1981)

I was at Somerville from 1981 – 1984 and I have very fond recollections of tutorials with Katherine in her room at Maitland. However much I had been rushing around beforehand, my hour with her was always a chance to take a step back from everything and just enjoy the privilege of discussing Shakespeare and his contemporaries with someone so insightful. Katherine never made pronouncements about anything; she would merely offer up ideas for me to explore and would gently steer me in the right direction if necessary, never making me feel stupid and always supportive. However, she could be disarmingly honest on occasions, but without ever causing offence. I remember her telling me once that I wasn't offered a place at Somerville because of my academic brilliance but because I showed an independent, resourceful streak and she felt I could contribute to college life. She told me, "Somerville doesn't just want academics, we need people like you!"

Katherine instilled a lifelong love of Shakespeare within me; I now teach English to adults and whenever anyone tells me (which is often) that they hate Shakespeare, I try my hardest to open their eyes to the beauty and genius of Shakespeare's word and hope to carry Katherine's inspiration to as many as possible.

Professor Heather O' Donoghue, Linacre College

I could not have hoped for a better colleague. But I was very far from the ideal colleague from her perspective. I was heavily pregnant when I was interviewed for the post at Somerville, and my first term was spent on maternity leave (I went on to have two more children while I was working in Somerville). I hadn't even finished my DPhil thesis. Katherine supported me unstintingly, and without the least hesitation, throughout those hectic and often difficult years. By turns, she encouraged me to achieve more, and propped me up when it all got too much (sometimes that even involved covering up for me!). She was a loyal colleague, and an utterly steadfast friend. And of course, she was an inspiring role model: she kept up to the most exacting standards her teaching and world-class scholarship at the same time as bringing up her own girls and attending to the many pastoral needs of some of the students.

Anne-Marie Brennan (Biggs, 1986)

I recall many tutorials in KDJ's room, sitting on the small, squishy sofa and looking out at the different seasons. On one occasion, KDJ was unable to hold her tutorial in college and asked me to come to her house instead. I cycled to the address, and she showed me into a wonderful kitchen, which had a fireplace and a sofa at one end. I had never seen a kitchen with either a

fireplace or a sofa and thought this was fabulous! KDJ gave me a cup of tea in china illustrated with scenes from Dickens; it all seemed wonderfully eccentric and different. I don't recall what we talked about in the tutorial, but I do remember KDJ's kindness in looking after me and her touching appreciation that I had come out to her house. Some years later I came to an event at Somerville, and KDJ still remembered my name – I think this was typical of her extraordinary ability to make each student feel special; she always made me feel as if I had something to contribute which was worth hearing.

Jackie Watson (1986)

Memories of a golden time are usually, after 20 years, a mixture of brief snapshots, and mine of being an undergraduate at Somerville are no different. The quad was always in springtime with the lovely cherry in white blossom; the meals were always leisurely and convivial; the work always stimulating and the essays delivered on time...(!) The memories of your tutoring, though still composed of snapshots, are more realistic but no less rosy. I vividly remember standing, filled with trepidation, outside your baize door in Maitland, always sure you'd reveal the simplicity of my carefully prepared ideas, only to find every time that, although you'd push, you'd also reassure, patiently talking over new concepts and allowing me to think my way through. All to the accompaniment of a coffee (in those delightful green Parisian café cups) or even, occasionally, a brown sherry (or am I fantasising from the memory of the bottles of College Fino on your filing cabinet?)

Twenty years on, I'm still lucky enough to enjoy the pleasure of your conversation, over a meal or over tea in your lovely house, and to accompany you on theatre expeditions (though perhaps I'm a little less tongue-tied now than on that first trip with you to review *Faustus* in Hammersmith), and you seem more a real person than a presiding, Laura Ashley-adorned goddess!). I still value greatly your honesty and your intellectual rigour. Katherine, thank you so much for all your support (then and now), for your humour and wisdom, for being the person who wears blue with black, or sits on the grass – in fact, for simply being you.

Kate McLoughlin (1989)

She seemed to be made of literature. In my first year at Somerville, Katherine taught me for what was then the Mods special subject of Tennyson and Browning. As an undergraduate at St. Hilda's, she had, she told me, gone about reciting Clough. From a non-literary, non-university background, I didn't even know who Clough was, let alone know any of his poems, let alone go about reciting them. Katherine was a being of another order of existence entirely. She was kind to me then and continued to be kind when I returned to Oxford after a misfired career as a lawyer and set about a DPhil. Tasked with reviewing an RSC production of *Eastward Ho!* for the TLS, she invited me along as her guest and drove us to Stratford (we waited so long to get on to the Woodstock roundabout that I began to think we'd miss the play). When we arrived at the theatre, Katherine produced sandwiches and we sat down to share them with our backs to a hedge. Embarking on one of the nuggets of academic gossip for which she was legendary, she stopped suddenly, turned round and scrutinised the foliage. 'X might be behind this hedge,' she explained. It was a very Katherine, and a very Shakespearean, moment. I half-expected the academic in question to appear and declare: 'This can be no trick.' Katherine would have maintained her aplomb. She was brilliant, wicked, funny: the quintessential don.

Susan Owens (1990)

I remember arriving at Somerville and thinking KDJ was so striking and elegant and impressive – and, later on, finding how kind and down to earth she is, too. I also remember that if we had an early morning tutorial with KDJ, she would make a pot of exceptionally strong coffee – you almost had to chew it – so the second half of the tutorial was always taken up with trying to behave normally with double the usual heart-rate. I'm not sure how well we succeeded.