Penelope Fitzgerald

Ray Watkinson

On April eight last, we lost our most distinguished member – Penelope Fitzgerald. Her last letter to me was dated 8th March 2000. In it, after a few such words as we exchange on that tiresome preoccupation of the aged, health, and enthusiastic praise of George Borrow, she went on “I have to review the second volume of I Will Bear Witness . . . I’m anxious to do it justice . . . but I work so slowly now, really it’s a disgrace. I’m used to laying out in my mind, before I get up in the morning, exactly what I’m going to get through in the day . . . and then finding, at bed time, I’ve not done even half of it – and that is getting worse . . .” So, as we would expect, she was working to the last, and that she should do justice to a much admired book was her great concern. Her judgments were never abstractly literary: books have authors, who to her were always also, and first, people and the authors whom she had loved in youth and childhood were still to her friends then found precious, not to be lost however much older judgment might call for another view – Stevenson, James Hogg, were still dear and wonderful to her, who had opened her imagination.

In the February of 1920, J.W. Mackail wrote and printed for family and friends a little four fold sheet in honour of Georgiana Burne-Jones whose son-in-law he had the good fortune to be. Reading this, I saw how much of it might have been written for Penelope, in whose best-of-all books on Burne-Jones Georgie is ever present, and from her Penelope learned how large a person Morris had been. So let me borrow words from this lost friend: “She was herself a personality of extraordinary distinction, power and charm . . . No one, man or woman who made her acquaintance failed to come under the spell of a nature which radiated beauty. All those who were privileged to know her more learned to love her very dearly. Her intellectual powers were great . . . she had clear large eyes for art, books, human beings . . . She made up to the end a ceaselessly practised and beautifully executed art out of daily life: unaffected and touching humility was combined in her with quiet dignity. Her boundless generosity was never thoughtless or reckless . . . Few, if any, were more humorously alive than
she to follies and absurdities but to no one, and of no one, did she every say an
unkind word . . . Her heart did not harden nor her eager receptiveness lessen with
years . . . She burned to the last with a clear steady flame . . . leaving to those who
loved her a memory which is a continuing presence, precious and adorable for
ever.”

Others have long since acknowledged her excellence as a novelist. My friend-
ship with her was rooted in our membership of the William Morris Society, and
dates from a garden party at Kelmscott House in 1975, at which we were made
known to each other by Ronald Briggs and the precise point of connection was the
recent publication of her book on Burne-Jones, then by no means seen as a great
artist – as she had seen and understood and not doubted to make very clear. This
I had had the pleasure of reviewing in the *Daily Worker*. So our first conversation
was in Morris’s Hammersmith garden, about him, his work, his friends: for just as
it had been said of Georgiana Burne-Jones’s *Memorials*, that Morris is the real
hero, so now Burne-Jones’s Georgie appears as the great woman she was,
supportive, understanding, with no diminution of her husband or his achievement,
or negation of the lifelong friendship with Morris. I have no idea just when these
friends and their friends first came to attract Penelope’s admiration and love.
Maybe already in girlhood: perhaps at Oxford; perhaps her book was provoked
by the surprising publication, by Phaidon of all publishers, of the excellent,
admirable, even-handed and learned *Pre-Raphaelite Painters* by Ironside and
Gere. With no parade of scholarship. She was one of the best scholars in this field,
ever succumbing to the sentimental tide which has flowed too freely since then.

For a long time, we would meet at Kelmscott House or other places where the
WMS programme offered us all enlargements of shared knowledge: between those
moments, would exchange letters; and latterly, as both grew more and more
incapacitated by our borrowed years, continued on paper, exchanges no longer
face to face. No letter to her ever waited long for answer to fall through the
letterbox, addressed – and the letter within written – in that slightly tremulous
highly personal non-Johnston script, each letter formed as if a tiny seal: and at
Christmas, the same had accompanied truly childlike neat drawings, reminding
not only of the season but of her love for her grandchildren.

I confess that the only one of her novels I have read was the one which came
out after her *Burne-Jones*, winning her the Booker Prize – *Offshore* – which
pleased me much: but in her latest years, as she was drawn into what became *The
Blue Flower*, by her interest in Novalis, we did exchange thoughts around that
topic. For me, the book waits to be read, which I yet hope to do.

Lastly, for a touch of serendipity which we never exchanged but which may
well have amused her as much as it does me – we shared a birthday, she coming
into the now past troubled century) three years after me.