

PLASDWBL AND MARION ESTELLE SWATTON (27/10/1898 – 28/9/1990)

In 1979, Marion Swatton and her two close colleagues and friends, Nim de Bruyne and Mary Hayden, retired from 'Bank Cottage Farm', a unique little hostel they had created some of the boarding pupils of Michael Hall Steiner School in Forest Row, Sussex, and bought Plasdwbl Farm in Pembrokeshire – now one of the RMT colleges – as their retirement project. I first met them in 1988; we made a strong connection and I subsequently spent many memorable holidays at Plasdwbl. Marion was a real character! The following article is based on an obituary I wrote after she'd died.



Who has ever heard of anyone retiring from years of running a hostel for children, selling up everything, and buying a run-down farm in the middle of nowhere instead, as a retirement project ~ and all of this at the age of 81?

Years before, I had heard the saga of 'the old ladies' of Bank Cottage Farm in Forest Row who had done this. The whole story had the touch of a fairy-tale about it. Marion, the eldest of these women, was said to have gypsy blood in her. Indeed, she commanded over such character and strength of will that she was still converting barns and building garden walls from the stones she had dug up from the ground while she was approaching her 90s.

I had already half forgotten this saga when in the summer of 1989 life circumstances brought me to Plasdwbl Farm

in Wales. And this is how I was first introduced to Marion.

One of the first pictures I remember on entering the homely and welcoming farmhouse living room, a space as ensouled as a room can possibly be: there was this old woman in her Austrian-style dirndl dress and scarf around her head sitting in her armchair by the large green Aga in the alcove, immersed in a colourful and disorderly jumble of

sewing materials and half-finished dolls and clowns, with the indispensable cup of tea by her side. Emerging from her activity, her striking face met you with a friendly and inquiring smile, and her large, bony hands reached out in welcome. She looked so ancient and young at the same time. Everything about her made me feel that here was someone with an unusual presence, and her silent inquiry of “Who are you?” called on your own presence. I subsequently got to know her as one of the most unpretentious and direct people I have ever met. It seemed to me that in the presence of Marion and her qualities many people were somehow put in touch with themselves. Marion was open to whoever came, but expected accessibility and an open look into the eyes from the other person. Unconventional and a non-conformist in many ways, she yet expected an inner courtesy of the heart. It disappointed her when it had not been possible to ‘make a connection’ with someone who had visited or stayed.



Another unforgettable picture is ‘Marion outdoors’: extracting weeds from the earth with vehemence and determination, or cementing a garden path at the age of 91 ½. The path led to a Nissen hut she was converting by the simplest means into a ‘hall’ with a small stage. She referred to it as her ‘swan-song’. Even the muddiest and dirtiest work was undertaken in skirts!

The impression of Marion’s youthfulness was perhaps due to her boundless imagination and creativity, her ability to create magic, united with her strong will and choleric temperament. Her power of vision took hold of every nothing and turned it into something, and that something, however rough, would always bear the stamp of beauty and originality. This was also due to her single-minded absorption with whatever she

was doing, her strong love and reverence of nature, and the awake interest that she took in everything around her in all its manifestations. It was as if she had the gift of hearing the hidden stories whispered by the creation.

Linked with her own youthfulness was her great love of childhood. Having first looked after Wynstones School pupils during WWII, then Michael Hall School boarders from the after the War, her gift to transform any raw material into an object of beauty or character had served especially the young: rags were turned into fancy costumes and toys, stories into plays, scripts into performances, barns into theatres, and seemingly ordinary events and trifle scene developed into anecdotes that would stick in your mind and connect you with the unobserved wonders of life. She was famous for her festivals and parties! She was graced with the gift of turning every prose of life into some kind of poetry, however humble and imperfect the outcome might have been. And there was no end of gripping memoirs that she would recollect from her rich life. In Marion's presence, life became magical, through the power of her imaginative, creative participation in everything. During a memorial meeting that was held in Forest Row after her death, there were many moments of roaring laughter as the community remembered her.

A rich and enriching life! Yet with all her manifold gifts, she had only ever had four years of formal education. Following an illness around the age of 10, she was taken out of school and spent the remainder of her childhood and youth on her uncle's farm in Dorset, a child of nature. Maybe that was one of the secrets of her unspoilt elementary force of character!

One of her favourite quotations was by Goethe:

Whatever you can do,
Or dream you can, begin it!
Boldness has genius, power and magic in it!

Her own version of this was often, "You just got to be bloody bold and resolute!" To me, this attitude of hers had something Michaëlic in it: this constant working out of nothing, taking initiative in spite of obstacles, picking yourself up after setbacks, rolling up your sleeves and getting on with things!

We had many talks about her favourite book, Rudolf Steiner's Philosophy of Freedom, which we were reading together only a few weeks before she died. Such readings and subsequent conversations were often connected to a subject close to her heart: the younger generation. She was concerned whether we would follow the call to wake up, and not fall asleep in materialism and conventionalism. She hoped that we would not fall asleep into anthroposophical conventionalism and dogmatism either, but would only take and stand for what we could really make our own. She hoped that we would hearken Rudolf Steiner's call and learn to think for ourselves in its fullest sense, and thus stand our ground in the world as independent, strong individuals who cannot be fooled. The Philosophy she regarded as a secure path to this ideal. It had helped her find her own inner ground after a nervous breakdown she had suffered in earlier years.

Marion was no saint nor did she think she was. Her fiery temperament would sometimes draw a hasty conclusion, a hasty opinion that was not always justified. But whenever her fire had calmed down, it was possible to have a calm and objective look at what had happened, and she would acknowledge her mistake. Neither did she think that she herself had already attained to the ideals expressed in The Philosophy. In fact, her very creativity was often a drive she could not resist, something that worked in her like an elemental force. But she had grasped clearly the idea of the free human being, of ethical individualism and moral imagination, and had a deep understanding of the part thinking plays in the human being and the world.

Mention must be made of her very special life and work relationship with Mary Haydon (since 1945) and Nim de Bruyne (since the 1950s) over many years. What such different individuals, with the constant help and collaboration of many others who joined in, created and achieved together by harnessing their very different gifts and personalities in front of the same cart, is extraordinary. It rayed out into the very land and elemental realms, and into the hearts of those who had had the good fortune to come into contact with them. And one can only have the deepest admiration for the integrity and mutual respect they maintained over all these years.

There were others who became part of this little, rather active, 'retirement' community: soon after they had moved to Plasdwbl, they were joined by Katherine Castelliz, formerly head farmer at Emerson College in Forest Row who bought a cottage in the village, and Barbara Saunders-Davies, former Emerson College librarian as well as involved with biodynamics, who moved into the bungalow at the end of the farm drive. Much later, for a shorter time, Mary Brett, a dear old friend of theirs joined them and lived at the farm – she was mother of John Brett of Garvald Community, also a biodynamic farmer. The wonderful Keith, a farmer who lived in the village, joined Katherine as her right hand, as they cultivated the land biodynamically, with a few crops, a herd of Welsh Blacks, two Jersey milking cows (providing the milk for all of their homemade butter, buttermilk, yoghurt and cheese), as well as growing their own vegetables. They also made their own bread and the best scones ever! Katherine was mostly busy on the farm and in the garden, Nim in the garden and dairy and wherever else help was needed; she was also the musical one who played the piano; Marion was busy with the garden and building projects, while Mary took care of cooking, canning, freezing...she's don her apron in the morning and never took it off till the evening.

They would take young apprentices throughout the year and had a constant trickle of visitors – many of them former Emerson students who had lived with them, as well as former boarders who loved to come and visit and stay in simple accommodation (the converted 17th century smithy and the converted roof space above the cow byre). At Christmas time, there was always a huge basketful of Christmas cards, some of them from all over the world, from the many people whose lives they had touched. Christmas at Plasdwbl was unforgettable – since all of the furniture in the humble (yet cosiest of all living rooms I've ever known) were 2nd hand, the room felt like a distant relative of that humble stable in Nazareth. Here the wider community would gather for annual readings of the Legend of St Bride of Iona, slightly rewritten and dramatised by Marion (initially for

the children in the hostel), and accompanied by Hebridean songs played on the lyre by Nim.

I visited just a couple of months before Marion died. I had hardly arrived at Plasdwbl when she told me, "Sibylle, I've been re-reading Rudolf Steiner's Theosophy. That's put me off death altogether!" She had planned her funeral proceedings in every detail!

She did not easily let go of her rich life on earth. For the first three days after her death, the room on the farm in which her body had been laid out, surrounded by candles and flowers, felt as though filled with turbulence. But on the third night there was a sudden peacefulness, and on the day of her funeral a rainbow spread across her garden, and the bees and butterflies danced on the Michaelmas daisies. Not long after her urn had been buried at the end of one of the fields, Marion appeared to an artist friend in the village and pointed out that her request that her ashes be buried by the recently planted tree next to the Nissen hut had been ignored, and could she please do something about it! So the urn was dug up and buried in its rightful place!

Marion has lived on in many people's hearts – no doubt she's been rolling up her spirit sleeves, getting on with things!

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