

JOHN BOLITHO
1930-2005

The genuine article

Today we gather to celebrate an extraordinary life. First and foremost a husband, father, grandfather, uncle and brother. A life dedicated to helping others. A life of happiness and achievement erected on the foundation stone of his strong “sense of what life is all about”. It was this sense that ensured his prospering in the absence of academic opportunity and this sense which enriched the lives of so many.

John Bolitho was a great humanitarian. Affectionately called JB or simply Bolitho by his chums. His culture, his charming unfailing affability, sense of belonging and genuineness just scratch the surface of his virtues. His power and his strength principally came from nothing more than the exercising of his values; values which chimed with so many. His Bardic name was Jowan an Cleth, John of the North. To so many of us he was John the Voice and what a wide audience there was eager to listen to his beautiful singing voice and his passionately held beliefs. He enjoyed a great freedom; a freedom that comes to but few – free from nothing to prove and nothing to justify. You may not always have agreed with his point of view, but his motives, integrity and presentation ensured that, whilst he was not always listened to, he was always heard.

His appointment, in the Millennium year, as Grand Bard of the Cornish Gorseth could not symbolically have come at a better time. Cometh the moment, Cometh the man. The inter-connected world in which we live had, in Bolitho, a great communicator, a champion of a cause on a crusade with a melodious message to which the spirit of our age gave a new currency. History will record his defining contribution to harnessing the world wide Cornish diaspora. The Cornish community in Australia have been particularly saddened. Bolitho’s visit as Grand Bard in 2001 will be long remembered. Conducting a Gorseth in the city of Bendigo with the sun beating down

and everyone with wet feet courtesy of the Municipality who had over enthusiastically watered the lawns in front of City Hall for the special occasion. And who could ever forget the huge Sunday morning service in the Uniting Church with his singing of the Lord's Prayer in Cornish.

His friends celebrate how he balanced the dignity and respect for the office of Grand Bard whilst not losing his sparkle. One well wisher this past week recalls his delightful statement at a dinner we attended together on the Isles of Scilly - "I'm Grand Bard and if I say 'Tiz', 'Tiz' even if tiddn't.

But we are ahead of ourselves already along his life's journey which started in King Street, Bude on 10th of December 1930 with the War years spent in Marhamchurch where the bicycle played a prominent part in his life. Bolitho reminisced about his very early days as a Telegram Boy at a time when a small piece of paper in a leather pouch was the e-mail of the day and was bicycled around the highways and byways bringing the good news and, given that it was wartime, often the bad.

At 15, off he went to sea and served his time as a submariner cycling between Plymouth and Bude on every leave and contriving, with a shipmate, a complicated Heath Robinson affair in the bows of the submarine that allowed them to exercise on a bicycle that had been constructed on some timber rollers.

A love of the sea never left him and ensured his life story never strayed too far from its pull. Curiously, missing a sailing was to alter the path his life would take. He was signed on a Norwegian whaling boat, but his travel arrangements – how many of us have amusing tales to tell of Bolitho's relaxed view of travel arrangements? - meant he missed his sailing and ended up in London. There, his wonderful voice was his passport to the world of Billy Cotton's Band Show, the George Mitchell Black and

White Minstrels, two Royal Command Performances, summer seasons and giving pleasure to a world wide audience and pride to the inhabitants of his home town that, along with Ray Budd, had delivered two Mitchell Minstrels to international acclaim.

But, the adulation, the fun and excitement of being centre stage – the nation's favourite entertainment of the day – could not defeat the magnetic pull of Bude and the sea to which he and Heather returned in 1970, firstly to a cottage in Canworthy Water and temporary employment at Davidstow Creamery. For John and Heather it was their first Cornish home together and truly a Cornish homecoming.

And how did they meet? Yes, you're ahead of me Heather, sitting on a train, Boxing Day 1957 was captivated by what she heard coming from the Buffet car. She was compelled to have a look and there was Bolitho leading Curly Jennings and the boys from Bude, glasses in hand, singing their hearts out. John and Heather married the following year.

Bude Lifeboat came back on station in 1966. After Lifeboat exercise, some of the crew, helpers and committee would gather in the Brendon Arms for a few pints and a song and thus the Bude Lifeboat Singers came into being and a new chapter in the Cornish pub singing tradition opened. It was as if we had been waiting all our lives to find Bolitho, and Bolitho had been waiting all his life to find us – but how lucky were we? Some day someone might write the book, but the effortlessly forged lifelong friendships that flowed through singing together in Cornwall and beyond have played no small part in the overwhelming outpouring of affection this past week that Heather, the family and close friends have experienced and is reflected in so many faces here today – many of whom have journeyed far – but each with their favourite treasure stored memory. Perhaps the purpose of the day is best served by whetting the appetite, and jogging the memory for later.

Let's start with the Isles of Scilly. As Lifeboat singers Bolitho and I went over together first I think in the summer of 1970. With us was dear Jimmy Marshall who never missed an outing, but never sang a note. We always said it didn't matter because Bolitho sang for at least two! We were invited back in September to lead the singing for the Newquay Gigs weekend on Scilly and what a tradition that started. Not least the formation of the Isles of Scilly Male Voice Choir led by Glyn Lucas. And the tradition of being billeted with Eddie O'Grady at Innisidgen. It was only us and the lighthouse keepers who were prepared to stay there. Bolitho and Eddie established a special friendship. "Here, Bolitho" we said, "go and ask Eddie if we can have a bath" – there were no plugs anywhere. Bolitho negotiated a deal for us. We each paid Eddie O'Grady 10p in return for a bath plug and a promise that we would not use too much hot water. This issue came up on subsequent visits. "Here, Eddie," said Bolitho, "a lot of places nowadays have en suite". "Hon sweets", roared Eddie. "People don't come to Scilly for Hon Sweets"!

And at Cadgwith and what a wonderful singing tradition there. The legendary Buller Arthur invited Bolitho and I on many occasions for Friday evening singing at the Cadgwith Hotel and then on the Slipway into the night – "*The Fisherman and his Little Child*" – "*A Tear Fell Gently*". Buller and Bolitho each in awe of the other.

And at Padstow and Newquay – Johnny Murt, the only non Bude boy ever to be a Lifeboat singer. The magical Padstow May Day breakfast sing songs "Come on, Bolitho, give us *The Bantam Cock*". And so many happy hours wiled away at Newquay Rowing Club. Bennets, Tribilcock and Bolitho always deep in fishing and sea yarns.

And what of Liverpool – the Liverpool lads fell in with Bude one Scillies Gigs weekend. Visits to Liverpool followed along with two memorable sponsored bike rides, one raising a huge sum of money for the Hoylake Lifeboat Appeal and the legendary Bude-Lands End which substantially paid for the Bude replacement inshore Lifeboat. Who will ever forget Bolitho on his push bike? It was the first time he had ever been seen cycling past a pub stop..... with the words “Can’t stop, it will put me rhythm out altogether!”

And of course, Ireland. Bolitho’s mother came from Cobh and he was always in love with Ireland and the Irish – he handed this on to us as if by way of a gift. And this has led to a flourishing and fabulous generation of cultural exchanges between west Cork and Cornwall, particularly through the Bandon River Raft Run - once again for the RNLI.

Regular visits to Ireland with Brendan and Majella O’Callaghan and their friends were memorable and eventful in the same breath. Bolitho loved singing Irish songs.....
“She moved through the Fair The Galway shaw..... The Rose of Tralee.....
The biggest problem we had was that the Irish took Bolitho too much to their hearts and didn’t want to give him back. At the end of one fabulous weekend visit he was hijacked by Dan O’Donovan and Paddy Downing for just one more song and one more pint. We finally tracked him down, poured him onto the bus and made our travel connections with seconds to spare. Bolitho was in love with the world, but minus his weekend case and minus his false teeth. Nothing was ever said. Many weeks later, an Irishman arrived in Bude delivering a load of meat to Dewhurst the butcher and strolled into the shoe shop with a weekend bag of dirty washing in one hand and Bolitho’s false teeth in the other.

But, moving on, there was so much to his life beyond singing. Bolitho distinguished himself as a North Cornwall District Councillor and a Bude-Stratton Town Councillor always finding time to help and to reassure his electorate. He memorably stood as a Parliamentary Candidate for Mebyon Kernow for North Cornwall, worked tirelessly for the Cornish Bureau for European Relations and was appointed President of the International Pan Celtic Festival and Patron of the Victorian Cornish Association of Australia, amongst many other posts.

John Fleet reminds us that it was Bolitho who first spoke in Cornish within the European Parliament, at a Strasbourg session of the Parliament's Inter Group on Minority Languages and Cultures. A piece of Cornish history was made that morning to be remembered and recorded. These moments are just some aspects of the contribution he made to the forward march of civilised human progress.

And certainly let us not forget his retained affection and respect for his first career, The Royal Navy, witness to which his chums from the Royal Naval Association who bore him into this service today.

As to his business career, with Heather, firstly at the Troubadour Restaurant in Belle Vue and then the Shoe Shop in Queen Street both of which deliver a very special snapshot of "Bolitho - The Genuine Article." He employed his talents more in the interests of others than his own and in consequence his life's journey saw his bank balance more often besieged than bounteous. It is fair to say his reputation was not founded on being a great businessman But tell that to the little old lady from the bedsit in Bude who used to spend her cold winter mornings in the Troubadour all for the price of half a cup of coffee and tell that to some local families who walked into his Queen Street shoe shop with needs not matched by their resources and

Bolitho ensuring that at least they were properly shod, sometimes with the agreement that they would pay him £1 a week, if, in his judgement, that was all they could afford.

How shallow it is to measure a man's wealth by the depth of his pocket. Bolitho's wealth lay in his values, his family, his passion and his compassion. Bolitho was a millionaire, doing what he wanted to do, where he wanted to do it. This is nicely summed up by his son Julian, recounting to me their regular trips to sea together this past season when Bolitho remarked "Whatever happens, we have had one hell of a summer haven't we?"

The next generation is taking up the traditions so we need fear not for the future association of the Bolitho name and music which is now firmly in the capable and talented hands of grandson, Jack.

And so, Bolitho has inspired each and every one of us in a different and special way and his inspiration is richly deserving of the gratitude and honour we are all gathered here today to pay. Certainly we will miss him as our leader in seeking the intelligent truth of culture – in mapping our future by breathing contemporary awareness and significance into Cornwall's precious past. Both culturally and beyond culture, he was such an important part of our mental landscape one and all

The jaunty plume of the Bantam Cock, the twinkle in the eye, the sunshine of his smile, his passion for Cornwall and all matters Cornish oozing out of every pore – vivid memories so richly painted in colours that will never fade.

Jonathan Ball
Tregarthen
13th December 2005

A Tear Fell Gently

A tear fell gently from her eye
When last we parted on the shore
My bosom heave'd with many a sigh
To Think I ne'er might see her more

"Dear youth", she cried
"And cans't thou haste away
My heart will break, a little moment stay
Alas, I cannot, I cannot part from thee."

The anchor's a-weighed
The anchor's a-weighed
Farewell, Farewell
Remember me

Weep not, my love I trembling said
Doubt not a constant heart like mine
I ne'er can meet another maid
Whose charms can fix that heart like thine
"Go then" she cried "but let thy constant mind
Oft think of her you leave in tears behind"
Dear maid this last embrace my pledge shall be

The anchor's a-weighed
The anchor's a-weighed
Farewell, Farewell
Remember me

For John Bolitho - sung by Johnny Murt, Padstow & Bude Lifeboat Singer
13th December 2005