

REMEMBERING MIRIAM

THE LORD LESTER OF HERNE HILL, QC

I first met Miriam in late 1982 as her lunch guest at Wiltons. I had contacted her at the suggestion of Sir John Foster's secretary, soon after his death, to discuss how to commemorate his life and work. Miriam explained that I would recognise her because she would be wearing a large mauve kerchief and moon boots and looked like a Russian peasant. I knew nothing about her except that she was the mysterious Mrs Lane and was John Foster's lifelong friend.

It was easy to pick out the Russian peasant in her kerchief and moon boots. For me, it was love at first sight. I was fascinated and enchanted by her directness, her sense of fun, her curiosity, her dazzling conversation, her knowledge of the world, and her animal magnetism. And I was blessed by her friendship for the rest of long and fulfilled life.

Miriam invited me to come to Ashton for lunch with my wife, Katya and our young children. It was another case of love at first sight, this time of Miriam's habitat. To those who have never been to that magical place we have Miriam's own description¹.

In the courtyard round which the house is built, Miriam had "planted a wide variety of creepers and well-trained shrubs for all seasons.... There is a fine profusion of garden flowers and wild species where stone and soil meet round the foundations, in a sort of grassy border. A visitor arriving for the first time in this courtyard looked round at the untamed creepers and broom and the mauve and blue haze of candy-tuft and flax growing out of the gravel and, before ringing the bell, remarked uneasily, 'I don't believe anyone can LIVE HERE...'"

What might seem haphazard was carefully planned to reflect Miriam's aesthetics and her affinity with the natural world - in the courtyard, outside her sitting room, in the kitchen garden, and in the glorious wild flower meadows that Monet would have made immortal. She made Ashton a haven for butterflies and dragonflies as well as foxes, owls, mice and the huge Peer David deer that she was so reluctant to cull.

In "Butterfly cooing like a Dove"², the romantic and rambling anthology which she compiled with an anonymous collaborator, she mixed up "the poetry of words or line with technical facts concerning natural history." Miriam described it as a "crazy book" about "Aire and angels.... Wings, Doves the symbol of the spirit, and butterflies, the symbol of the soul". She explained that "Years spent squeezing the teats of fine pipettes, polishing slides and cover slips, siphoning sea water out of carboys, eliminating bubbles from plankton immersed in oil of cloves, and listening to the monotonous clink-clunk of plunger jars concentrates the mind wonderfully, but fails to engender either imagination or a love of poetry." Beneath her ludicrous self-deprecating description as having a "rubber-and-glass mentality", Miriam had imagination in abundance and a profound love not only of all creatures great and small but all forms of artistic expression. For her, doves and butterflies distilled "the essence of natural beauty and the poetry of life". Her insights into human fallibility and the world beyond consciousness made her exceptional for her wisdom and compassion.

¹ Miriam Rothschild and Clive Farrell, *The Butterfly Gardeners*, Michael Joseph, (1983).

² Doubleday (1991).

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She shared her Ashton creations with a stream of visitors - scientists, naturalists, ignorant city dwellers like me, and fellow animal lovers, like Katya. Her hospitality was excessively generous, especially for carnivores like me. Despite her own vegetarianism, her table groaned with plates of meat and fish, accompanied by mountains of vegetables and puddings in the tradition of Mrs Beeton, and fine Rothschild wines.

Every visit was a revelation. Miriam was curious about everything under the sun, even law and politics. She brimmed with original thoughts and unusual facts about everything: good animal husbandry, the evils of factory farming and transport of live animals, the cruelty of blood sports, the protection of rainforests, the psychic qualities of a friend's dogs, how non-human animals think, Jewish and Muslim ritual slaughter of animals, and memory-enhancing qualities of a chemical contained in red peppers. Only a year or so ago, she explained her latest experiments swearing us to secrecy about one of her discoveries because she feared that it would lead to the extinction of a species of butterfly.

Miriam was a maverick and a rebel, educated in her early years in a school room at home under her father's eye. He did not treat her as a child but made her believe that she was helping him with his work in natural history. Charles died tragically when she was fifteen. She shared for every year from 1908 to 1935 her grandmother's hospitality at Tring, together with her mother, sisters and brother and her uncle Walter- her "dear Lord Rothschild"³. Even so, her childhood years must have involved periods of loneliness and introspection. Not surprisingly, she was a handful as a child and as a mother!

When her fox terrier, Nelly, was killed chasing a motorcycle down Tring High Street, she asked her nursemaid, "Shall I meet Nelly again in heaven?" "No", replied the girl authoritatively, "Dogs are animals and they don't go to Heaven." For that moment onwards, Miriam became secretly highly critical of God. If dogs were not admitted, she had little use for Heaven either.

At thirteen Miriam made her first white-faced protest at the slaughter of newborn bull calves and the sale of culled calves on the open market. Later she tried repeatedly to persuade her farm manager not to shoot wood pigeon wrongly believed to be eating the growing points of peas.

Throughout her adult life, she fought for the vulnerable and the weak and against cruelty, bigotry, and intolerance. The Holocaust cast a dark cloud over the rest of her life. Her work for Jewish refugee children has been recalled by Rabbi Julia Neuberger. She campaigned to free homosexuals from the barbaric law criminalizing sexual intercourse between consenting adult men, and gave influential evidence to the Wolfenden Commission.

In a privately printed essay⁴, Miriam gave me credit for having persuaded the Government to set up a fund to compensate Nazi victims or their heirs for their savings arbitrarily and unjustly confiscated by the Attlee Government after the last World War. But in truth it was Miriam who deserved the credit for this campaign. It was she who told me of the efforts made by John Foster and herself to persuade anti-semitic civil servants to act fairly. It was Miriam who employed a researcher to uncover the damning official records.

³ Miriam Rothschild, *Dear Lord Rothschild: Birds, Butterflies and History*, Balaban and Hutchinson (1983).

⁴ Miriam Rothschild, *Sir John Foster and the Jews*, Sir John Foster Memorial Trust (November 1998).

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Her aunt, Johanna de Wertheimstein, an Austrian woman, was one such victim. Another was Miriam's mother's sole surviving brother, liberated by the Russians from a concentration camp in Hungary. Her mother's eldest sister was deported to Germany from Hungary. She was over 80 and blind. On arrival at Auschwitz she was dragged from the train and beaten to death on the railway line by guards wielding meat hooks. To Miriam's amazement, a cheque for £2000 was suddenly sent to her as heir, which the British Custodian had for some reason failed to confiscate. It is small wonder that Miriam identified herself so closely with Jewish victims, and was so prejudiced in favour of Jews.

Miriam began her magnificent Romanes lecture on Animals and Man⁵ "Jewish tradition suggests we die twice. Firstly when our breathing and our pulses stop, secondly when no one remembers us".

Miriam and her works will long be remembered. We loved her and shall not see her like again.

⁵ Clarendon Press, Oxford (1986).