



Jester

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A TRIBUTE TO MICHAEL RICHEY

MBE, Hon FRIN (1917-2009) by *Kai Easton*
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I suspect I am the only one here who didn't know Mike in his transatlantic sailing days with Jester, but our lives have circled around each other for years, since I grew up, as it happens, not very far from Newport, just across Narragansett Bay in Barrington.

We met very soon after his 90th birthday in Brighton when my husband Robert, our rough-haired Jack Russell terrier Harry, and I moved into the same regency house where Mike had lived since his early days as the Director of the (Royal) Institute of Navigation. He was still cycling his 10-speed Peugeot bicycle along the undercliff, a daily exercise of some five miles, and he still kept his classic wooden boat *Ballerina*, which he would visit at the marina.



For the two years that I knew him, Mike lived his life entirely ashore, but for all intents and purposes you could say he still lived on a boat. It wasn't just that he called his kitchen 'the galley', but that he lived with the same elegance and simplicity that he had lived aboard Jester. Carefully shopping for and preparing his evening meal every day (it is a little-known fact that he never owned a refrigerator), his routine was entirely civilised. Though he gravitated to the sun and sat outside in good weather, when he was indoors he spent much of his time sitting upright in his high-backed wooden chair writing or reading at his table by the window: timetables, maps, missals, and pens scattered about. He had a perfect ground-floor view of our magnificent five-acre communal gardens overlooking the English Channel.

He was, of course, at the same time solitary and the very best of company, and after some months of getting to know each other our daily lives soon became intertwined and assumed a rhythm of their own. I would get him to tell me stories over a glass or two of good claret; and on feast days, as it were, this might be followed by a nightcap of a good single-malt whisky – a drink he would rarely refuse.

Alas I never saw Mike with Jester, though we did attend the last OSTAR together in Plymouth (where he was memorably asked by the Duke of Edinburgh, who, as Patron of the RIN, he actually knew quite well, how many times he had sailed in the race. Mike was somewhat flummoxed – he had never thought to count them. 'Many times', he replied.)

Sadly too, the bright orange 2CV I had bought for our intended adventures on land arrived the day after he suddenly died. He had, however, seen it and approved of it, and I have christened it Dugdale, in honour of one of Mike's middle names.

In late May, I successfully drove Dugdale, a 1986 left-hand drive Paris-built affair, to Devon, and had the privilege of delivering some of Mike's ashes to Jester's present owner Trevor Leek in Plymouth for the Jester Challengers race. Though Trevor and Jester did not in the end make it all the way to Newport, they accomplished their most important task: scattering Mike's ashes in the middle of the sea. Mike had travelled all over the world, but the sea was in many ways his true home, and he was particularly drawn to the Atlantic.

Only a month or so before he died, Mike discovered in the cupboard a rare on-the-spot recording he had made – of what he then called Jester's 'ultimate storm' in 1986.

It is just ten minutes long but has all the elements of a thriller, beginning cheerfully on 31 July with a report on the weather: 'fluffy clouds all round', he says, a glorious day though he is becalmed. The next day he is in the middle of a terrifying gale and yet his voice is almost Wimbledon-like in its commentary style. Occasionally he swears. Wave after wave hits the boat, washing up all of his food as well his person, leaving him shivering and no longer daring to look outside the hatch. Nevertheless, with all the drama of a monk at prayer, he pronounces that his chances of coming through this are 'about even'.

The two of us listened to the recording that cold November day on an old German cassette player that he used to take on Jester; typically for Mike there was no speaker and we stood in the middle of his room, in the quiet, sharing the earphones, surrounded by his books on navigation and sailing, pictures and engravings by Eric Gill and David Jones, signed first-editions of his friend Graham Greene's novels, historical nautical instruments. Afterwards, Mike simply looked at me and said, 'How it all comes back'.

As you all know, that storm, unlike the one two years later, had a happy ending as Mike and Jester were rescued off the Scilly Isles by a ship that was able to take them both on board safely. Some years later, he received an unexpected present, the gift of this crucifix that the ship's captain, David Boon, had carved from the original Jester mast.

When Nicholas had this marvellous house in Newport blessed some years ago, Mike wrote to wish him well. He had dislocated a shoulder and couldn't travel, but said that he would like him to have the Jester crucifix, which he thought might also be blessed by the good priest who had blessed the house.

This seems a fitting occasion to present it to you now, Nick. It lived to the right of his table hanging from the settle, very much a presence in his home in Brighton, and he envisioned it here with you in Newport.

Mike once said that Graham Greene had the 'great gift of friendship'. Mike had it too. He was magical and magnificent and it was our great fortune to know him.

KAI EASTON

Written on the occasion of a reception hosted by Nicholas Scheetz, manuscripts librarian of Lauinger Library, Georgetown University, at his home in Newport, Rhode Island.

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