

FOR RONALD MANN

Mary and John, you must be very proud of Ron today.

Ronald's life was characterised by almost ceaseless initiative and hazardous risk-taking. It was also a very full and varied life - local government servant, army officer, prisoner of war, daring escapee, Moral Re-Armament worker, prominent Methodist layman, water colour landscape painter, theatre impresario, author, fund-raiser extraordinaire. And that was just Ronald's public life. To Mary, John and sister Dorothy he was a devoted husband, father, brother. He was a keen gardener; he loved walking and climbing in the mountains and entertaining his many friends. Beneath it all was the firm foundation of his faith. He was launched on his many adventures and sustained in them by the hymns of the Wesley brothers, Whittier and Watts and by his daily practice of listening for the still small voice of God's leading and direction.

The story of Ronald's capture in the Western Desert, his eighteen months in prison camps, his eye injury playing camp football, his escape from prison hospital and his six-month 700 mile trek south along the Appenine mountain range in winter is told in full in his book *Moving the Mountain*, so I won't dwell on the details of it here. But already in those events one can see the character of the man developing. Commissioned into the Royal Artillery Ronald was sent to join a light anti-tank regiment, the Northumberland Hussars, who penetrated deep into enemy territory, often operating behind enemy positions in the ill defined battlefield of the desert. And this was how Ronald and his troop came to be surrounded and captured - behind enemy lines. Prison camp can become a safe haven, safer than the hostile world outside, - especially if you are injured, have lost the sight of one eye and, as most prisoners were, are undernourished. But Ronald was never one to take the safe option, so weak and handicapped though he was, he got out - into a terrain he didn't know, where they spoke a language he hadn't yet mastered and where he might run into a German patrol around any corner. The recapture rate of escaped prisoners was phenomenally high. Ronald often used to tell us that he only evaded capture because he refused to settle down, even when he was offered hospitality by partisans and friendly villagers, and even though it was bitterly cold out on the mountains. Those who did settle down during the worst winter weather were almost always re-captured or shot. Operating behind enemy lines, risking escape, staying on the move - did not Ronald in that whole war episode establish a template for what was to follow?

At war's end he took another enormous risk. A secure job in the Treasurer's department of Lancashire County Council was waiting for him. Instead Ronald decided he wanted to do something to heal the wounds of war-torn Europe, so he decided to work unpaid with Moral Re-Armament. From that time to his death Ronald never drew a salary.

In prison camp Ronald had taken lessons in painting with oil and water colour. After the war he spent some months recuperating in the Lake District where Heaton Cooper and Bernard Eyre-Walker, two established Lakeland artists, took him on climbing and painting expeditions among the fells and tarns he loved so much. Under their expert guidance he developed his own talent as a landscape painter in water colour and held nearly forty one-man exhibitions over the course of the next forty years.

Several of these exhibitions were opened by friends Ronald had made in the theatre - Thora Hird, Wendy Craig, James Fox. His passion for theatre arose from his burning wish to communicate the truths and experience of his Christian faith. He had witnessed the effectiveness of plays and films in reaching people from all walks of life, atheistic

communists as well as people of nominal faith during the decade he spent with MRA back in Italy in the 1950's and a spell in Latin America in the early 1960's.

In 1963 Ronald returned to England to undertake the marketing of the MRA plays at the Westminster Theatre. He became a director of Westminster Productions and in 1975 founded Aldersgate Productions as a Methodist initiative with the late Dr John Gibbs, a former vice-President of the Methodist Conference. Aldersgate Productions was originally set up to produce a musical about John Wesley, *Ride! Ride!*, which toured ten number-one provincial theatres before reaching the West End. Following the success of this production Ronald Mann and John Gibbs decided to continue and invited representatives from other denominations to join them on the board of Aldersgate Productions. Over the next 23 years, with Ronald Mann as its Secretary and Producer, Aldersgate presented or co-produced twenty productions either in London or on tour.

Mounting *Ride! Ride!* represented a huge risk. John and Sheila Gibbs put in £10,000 from their family Trust. Ronald raised another £20,000. The whole enterprise cost £155,000. By the end of the run all the bills had been met. Each subsequent production meant a similar leap of faith. For Ron and for Mary it meant living dangerously. You might say that the knife-edge has been their spiritual home.

Ronald had an unusual approach to raising financial backing for his productions. He would hold an exhibition of his most recent paintings and donate the proceeds to start off the production fund. He then felt confident in approaching others for money. "I have put in this much - how much will you put in?" was his convincing opening gambit. He was rarely refused. But he did not confine his fund-raising skills to his own productions. He was very mindful of the struggle of young Christian artists and smaller production companies. So in 1981, again with Dr John Gibbs, he founded an ecumenical charitable trust, the Christian Arts Trust. He was its first Secretary, a post he held until 1996. Over the last sixteen years the Christian Arts Trust has been able to make modest grants to thirty productions or exhibitions, often at an early and crucial stage in their development. More recently Ronald has been instrumental in raising sizeable sums for the work of the Lantern Arts Centre and its production company New Creations, both based at this church, in whose mission he believed strongly.

Ronald was born in Fleetwood, on the Lancashire coast, in 1917, and attended the Fleetwood Grammar School where he played rugby for the first XV. He had that Lancastrian streak of toughness, of stickability, one might even call it stubbornness. And another Lancastrian quality - of seeing people as they were and not being over-impressed with the airs they might give themselves.

Leaving school at sixteen he began work in the Treasurer's department of the Lancashire County Council in Preston and studying in the evenings until the outbreak of war. His family attended the Methodist church and it was a Methodist minister, the Rev Cecil Rose who first spoke to him about the Oxford Group and its programme of Moral and Spiritual Re-Armament which was launched in 1938. He attended several of the Group's weekend "house parties" where he learned the practice of the "quiet time" and listening in silence for God's guidance each day.

Ronald sought constantly to renew and deepen his personal faith. The Methodist hymn book and the practice of listening for God's direction were two foundations which both sustained him and launched him on the many risky initiatives he undertook. He found refreshment and renewal in nature - particularly of the wilder and more spectacular sort, and especially among the Lakeland hills. Although on his return from his frequent trips there I would ask him if he had had a good rest - and he would reply "Yes, I did ten paintings"! Shortly before his death

he completed a book about his spiritual pilgrimage and the lessons he had learned, which will be published shortly. He believed that the Holy Spirit never stopped working and that a person guided by the Holy Spirit should never stop working either! He drove himself hard, and was equally demanding of those who chose to work with him - as my wife and I and others present here today can testify!. As Lord Coggan wrote in the foreword to *Moving the Mountain*, Ronald Mann was "driven by a passion - to share with others the riches which he has found in the Christian way of life."

Ron wore many hats - impresario, painter, Methodist, Moral Re-Armament worker. His work with many bodies overlapped - Aldersgate Productions, Westminster Productions, the Christian Arts Trust, Pro-Vision, the World Methodist Council, the Oxford Group, Raynes Park Methodist church, the Lantern Arts Centre. Yet for Ronald they were all one. To the perplexity of some and the fury of others he would say "we" or "us" - and you were never quite sure which body he was talking about. A nightmare for accountants and Company Secretaries and all those with a legalistic mind. But as far as Ron was concerned they were all part of the Lord's work and he was committed to doing the Lord's work.

Last weekend Mary asked my help in phoning some of Ron's many friends to inform them of his death. I will always remember phoning one lady of profound Christian faith. I started off by saying I had some sad news for her. But when she heard that Ron had passed away she said "O how wonderful! Isn't it marvellous when one of God's saints goes to be with his Lord!" Ron would have strenuously denied that he was anything like a saint. He was too mindful of his own frailty. The problem with constantly launching new and risky initiatives is that they don't all come off. Only afterwards can you know whether or not you were truly guided by the Holy Spirit or whether more human and less noble motives and characteristics had prevailed - whether sin had got in the way. Ron was always honest to admit where he had gone wrong, to identify the sin, if sin there was, to repent of it and then to move on. But one dictionary defines a saint as one who may not be perfect but who lives the Christian life to an heroic degree. On the basis of that definition I reckon Ron qualifies. "O Lord may grace to us be given to follow in his train."

Hugh Williams
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