

TRIBUTE TO GORDON SNELL BY DOMINIC DROMGOOLE

AT *ECHOES MAEVE BINCHY LITERARY FESTIVAL* AT DALKEY CASTLE

3RD OCTOBER 2026

'Love is tough stuff', the poet Adrian Mitchell recited in a birthday ode for his best friend at Gordon Snell's seventieth birthday party. Adrian was thinking of Gordon's early romantic misadventures, and he wrote...

Love is tough stuff,
And it was tough of love
To be so cruel
To the kindest man in the world.

The kindest man in the world. Who could dispute it?

To the surprise of everyone who knew him, Gordon's earliest years were lived out as a young princeling in Singapore, surrounded by a staff of eight. Born there on October 1 1932, his parents were nothing excessively grand, his father working as a quantity surveyor. But any luxuries were brutally shattered after the Japanese invasion of 1942, with his mother Margaret and himself scrambling for refuge in Australia, his father having been interned for the duration of the war. This bewildering rupture left a permanent impression on the young Gordon, separated by oceans from his previous life and justifiably terrified about what his father might be enduring.

Somehow out of that maelstrom of confusion and loss, the young Gordon resolved to be the kindest man in the world. A man who as a psychological assessment later pronounced, had a 'dangerous tendency towards elation'. Happiness and kindness were serious work for Gordon, and the work of his life. On one level this was expressed in his superpowers - a sort of radiant geniality - together with the most natural and bountiful good manners. On another level, it was something he worked through inside. The most inclusive and generous of men, he wrestled with his own rage against the nation which had interned his father. In stead of settling into an easy prejudice, Gordon worked on himself and told the story of his journey from rage to acceptance in a wise radio play he wrote for the BBC. It was typical of Gordon that he would not allow himself to settle into a negative emotion - he had to work it into the light.

After spending part of his schooldays at Geelong in Victoria, his family reunited and returned to Britain after the war. There he completed his education at Dauntsey's School in Wiltshire, where a love of drama was ignited and his first great friendship with Adrian Mitchell. Gordon played Hamlet to Adrian's Ophelia, and together they worked on poetry and plays. They conceived their own dramatic version of the poetic classic Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came. It is long on stage directions and only one line of dialogue. The play starts with a tower downstage and a very far off horizon. After a while a dot appears in the horizon. After a long while it becomes clear the dot is moving closer and it slowly becomes apparent it is a man on a horse. Slowly we make out their features. After another long time the figure gets to the tower, looks at it, and says 'Wrong tower' before turning around and setting off back to the horizon.

Gordon went on to read English language and literature at Balliol College, Oxford, usually a breeding ground for prime ministers and governor generals. Gordon became the least Bailliol of men, birthing his progressive politics while there, reading Sartre in French, acting and forming another of the great friendships of his life, with my father Patrick Dromgoole, an intimacy that endured for over seventy years, until recently when - like an old and loving married couple, they both waved goodbye to life within months of each other. Pat directed Gordon as Lepidus in Julius Caesar, rather unfairly killing him off and making him tumble down a long flight of stairs, though Gordon was forgiving. Poetry detonated its happy music in Gordon at Oxford, Byron and Wordsworth and Pope and Keats, words which would stay fixed in his head right up to the end of his life when he could still recite them with a happy lilt.

It was around this time he first met Peter O'Toole who became another long term friend. Peter came across Gordon working as a porter in a Leeds hotel. Unlike most kitchen porters Gordon was smoking a cigarette with a long and fancy cigarette holder. 'What the hell are you doing with that in your mouth?' O'Toole asked. 'I'm cultivating an affectation' Gordon replied with honest elegance, and they were fast friends.

Years of blithe and bonny milling about followed, a happy 1960's meander filled with acting in avant-garde theatre shows, with broadcasting escapades, as both a presenter and a less than intrepid journalist, he filled it with writing poems and pantos and librettos to rival Gilbert and Sullivan for their jaunty wit, of long nights on the whisky with the boys writing scabrous songs - one atheist anthem The Trinity Rock featured the chorus - 'Don't forsake me daddy-o, don't forsake me daddy-o, don't forsake me daddy-o - Dig that crazy three-in-one'. There were casual love affairs which seemed to hurt more than he admitted, and a host of classic 1960s experiments and excesses. During one long hallucinatory trip he claimed to have been given divine insight into how to make an omelette without breaking an egg- somehow he infiltrated himself into the egg - an achievement he remained fascinated by to his dying days. His various London pads were legends of partying and warmth.

And then into all this miasma and fug, burst sunlight and blue sky, with the arrival of one Maeve Binchy, then a rising star for The Irish Times. Set up by friends at a dinner date, their courtship was swift and crowned by a hovercraft day-trip to Boulogne where they talked with such relentless excitement and enthusiasm they scarcely noticed they were in France. Each one's previously *unparalleled* capacity for chat, and for storytelling, and for parties, and for joy, had now happily found a *parallel line*, to travel alongside through time and tide.

Amongst many sour legends of rivalrous and neurotic literary partnerships, nature threw up its paragon in Gordon and Maeve. Two effusive souls delighted for each other's successes, and happy to share the largesse of their joy with others.

Their marriage was celebrated for its harmony. Writing side by side in the first floor space they created for themselves in Polyvilla, their Dalkey home, at the end of each day they would read their work to each other. Love met sound strategy at this moment. If either had any comment on the other's work, they were allowed to speak freely, and then there had to be a mandatory 30 minute silence, while wounded pride was healed and tempers cooled, before they could thank the other for their contribution and celebrate the day with a brimming glass.

Happily both were profuse, and had little time for Writer's Block. Alongside Maeve's prolific output, Gordon produced more than 40 books for children, including classics like the King of Quizzical Island and Lottie's Letter. Stories which combined fantasy and fun, with a moral gentleness which left young readers feeling safe and held. Gordon was no fan of the dark side (maybe he had known more of it than those who indulged it), and he created worlds where whimsy and adventure, trumped moralising and cynicism. As if his books for children weren't enough he also wrote scripts for RTÉ, anthologies of folk stories with Maeve's sister, Joan, and collections of verse about famous Canadians.

Poetry poured out of Gordon. One year Maeve set him the challenge of writing a poem for every day of the year, and he damn near managed it. Some of them are jewels. Every major event in my family's life, a 21st birthday, a marriage, a baptism, or a book launch would be garlanded with the recitation of a Gordon poem and would feel incomplete without it. Gordon shared the old understanding of the poet, the public figure who brought people together in celebration with the happy and enclosing music of a rhyme.

Gordon and Maeve's writing took them on incredible adventures - sitting on floats dedicated to Maeve in St Patrick's Day parades in Chicago and New York, to South Africa where they have left behind such a generous legacy of philanthropy to help to heal communities ravaged by AIDS, to their much loved Australia, where Gordon was able to return and to love again the country which had looked after him as a child. Maeve and Gordon crossed off bucket list after bucket list. They even went all the way to the White House, where the Bush's hosted them for lunch. It was at a later Bush event, a gathering to promote literacy in Texas, where Maeve had to lightly admonish Gordon that he may be getting too familiar, as he cried out 'How are you George?', and 'Hey George W! High five!'. Maeve was worried that such behaviour might not befit an old socialist and a dedicated trade unionist. But for Gordon the joy of the present moment trumped all.

Following Maeve's sad and early death in 2012 he continued to live in their Dalkey home, surrounded by memories. He dedicated much of his life to preserving her legacy, helping launch her posthumous books, overseeing the issuing of new collections, doing broadcasts about Maeve, featuring with his beloved cat Audrey in the beautiful documentary made by RTE (and immediately being feted on social media as one of Ireland's most eligible senior widowers). But for all of that, there was no celebration of Maeve he appreciated more than this festival, curated and run with such generosity and imagination by Margaret and Henrietta. It was always a highlight of the year for him, and confirmed his faith that Maeve's books were a pleasure and a panacea for posterity.

After Maeve died, we were lucky enough to host Gordon many times in Normandy. In the small bedroom he used, he always built a little shrine to Maeve of framed photos and books. Yet he had not come to mourn. Our usual lazy and sleepy collapse of a holiday would be galvanised by Snell rhythm.

After a hectic day of breakfast with quotations, haphazard table tennis; a quick dash to the local cafe for an aperitif; a communal crossword puzzle; a lunch filled with anecdote and poetry; then more haphazard table tennis; then the watercolours would come out and Gordon would paint; then a pre-prandial game of scrabble; dinner with wine and memories; after all of that the day would end with a flit outside to serenade the moon with an array of old numbers - 'Blue Moon', 'Moon River', 'Say It's only a Paper Moon'; then Gordon would

stare up at the stars, eyes alight and open mouthed, with the innocent rapture of a child looking on that bright tapestry for the first time.

On one such occasion shortly after Maeve had died, we were lifting our eyes up towards the inky black, and asked Gordon for the right Shakespeare quote. 'There is nothing left remarkable beneath the visiting moon', he said gently and we all wept.

Gordon never lost his capacity for a party. Through to his final days, he was still assembling various Binchy's for a Tuesday afternoon ritual. Fish and chips would be eaten, Smethwicks and white wine drunk, and the Sunday Times Quiz crossword attempted. Any correct answer would be greeted with cacophonous cheers, and different levels of difficulty would inspire different degrees of acclaim, with cutlery being tinged on glasses for a difficult answer, dinged on bottles for a fiendish one, and clanged on an ice bucket for an impossible one. The fact that everyone had their phones out and were looking up the answers on google mattered not (no-one more than Billy Binchy, lecturer in jurisprudence), it was the celebration that mattered.

There is a two line verse from a Jacobean play which Gordon loved:

Heigh ho tis naught but mirth
That keeps the body from the earth.

In pursuit of that mirth Gordon was relentless, an Arthurian Knight Gallant riding out for joy.

Gordon was the most highly evolved human being I have known. After homo neanderthal and homo sapiens, came Homo Snell to teach us all a new dance of living. Kind, thoughtful, considerate, wildly generous, infinitely tolerant. community oriented, and always with an eye out and a kind word for the most vulnerable person in the room. An example, but no dull saint or dreary angel, he was fully human, a paragon who knew the whole Cole Porter songbook, with questionable tap-dancing skills, and with a sometimes alarming capacity to carry on playing cards and fall asleep at the same time. Gordon dreamt of the best sort of Jerusalem with justice for all and fancy dress, with full inclusiveness and cock-tails, with equity and endless laughter.

Heigh ho, tis naught but mirth
That keeps the body from the earth.

The greatest granary of mirth the world had ever known had given up its last grain, and it was time for the earth, and the generous embrace of Maeve, to welcome him home.