

Funeral Service for Robert Alexander Cant

Memories of a Father

How do you do justice to a life of 86 years in a few words? What is it that makes a man a father – and more importantly my father? As I set out on the task of preparing what I hoped to be a fitting tribute to the man who was also your father, relative, husband or friend I realised that the passing on of genes has influenced many parts of my own life. Indeed when I met my wife Ann, she remarked that Dad and I were the only inhabitants of the planet with our particular way of walking. I share his pride in Scottish birth and ancestry. His thirst for knowledge even to the point of trivia. His sense of humour which to some may have been a challenge to adopt. But more of this later. So who was the man you have known as Robert or Bob but never Bobby!

Robert Alexander Cant was born into a family of relative comfort in a world somewhat different to ours of today. On 2nd April 1926 a son was delivered into the Cant family in Carlogie Road, Carnoustie. The marriage of his father Robert Bremner Cant and Hazel Mary Alexander in June 1925 had united the dynasties of the Cants and Alexanders of the Fife and Angus regions of Scotland. The home would score quite highly on the current taxonomic scale and their son would be destined for a reasonably privileged future. The country was heading for a period of austerity and those with position and moderate wealth would be in the best position to survive relatively intact. Funny how some 86 years later we find ourselves in a similar point in the circle of life. His mother Hazel was born in Boston, USA and father Robert was an out and out Scot. He was a director of Carnoustie based shoemakers John Winter and Sons but his first love was the golf course..... the curling rink....the hockey pitch...the football field or the fishing stretches of the Tay..... Indeed, had R B Cant spent more time in the boardroom and less on the golf course, the path of my father's life may well have been somewhat different.

Bob Cant was brought up as the only child of Robert and Hazel Cant after the heartbreak of the loss of his brother George in infancy. From what I know or information I have been party to he was what we would describe today as a typical lad!! A streak of mischief without stretching to rebellion. And here we find another common attribute. If you could compare Bob's and my school reports they would both probably say – has great potential but does not apply himself – must try harder! School was a train journey away at Dundee High and the opportunities for boyhood japes on the platform between scholars travelling to other destinations were many. During a reasonably uneventful education where episodes of concealing ownership of a motorbike from his parents and a highly suspect attack on a pigs bottom with his illicit air rifle are perhaps best forgotten, Bob was destined to follow in his father's footsteps into the management of John Winters.

But first there was the little matter of the country being at war with the Axis powers of Europe. I often wonder whether it was the knowledge that his father has been decorated with the Military Cross in the Great War serving with gallantry in the Royal Engineers that spurred him in his desire to become involved at the earliest opportunity. Missing out on

direct action as hostilities ceased, National Service provided Bob with the call-up he wanted. Even those who knew him really well would acknowledge that he was not at the cutting edge of practical handiwork. This coupled with his total dis-interest in water activities....indeed I cannot recall ever seeing him in water and he couldn't swim.... made his choice of the Royal Navy interesting at the least! But he served with honour during his time as a navy recruit as a radar operator on HM Destroyer Matapan on it's one and only sea journey from the yards of the Forth to her final resting place on the South coast. With the naturalist Peter Scott as captain, Bob keen to show his skill and ingenuity mistook a sandbank for a potential enemy target and was ready to suggest that torpedos were primed for firing!.

It was as a dashing member of Her Majesty's navy that his life took one of it's many turns as it was during this period of National Service that he met my mother, another National Service recruit in the Wrens also a radar operator who I have always thought that if the defence of the realm was in the hands of either of my parents or heaven forbid both, the fact that we were no longer at war allowed the country's population to sleep soundly in their beds!

Marriage to Ruth followed at the end of National Service in October 1949 and the young couple looked forward to a life of reasonable comfort near the family home in Carnoustie at West Haven with Bob destined for the boardroom at John Winters. Changes in fortune during life can come without warning and in the space of a few years two devastating events set them on a totally different course. But first came the birth of my sister Jennifer and I in February 1951!!.... and I was the first born....the most important 10 mins of my life. An instant family with all it's needs but far more serious events overtook them with the collapse of Winters in March 1952 followed soon after by the premature death of my grandfather R B in January 1954 at an early age of 54.

The two events were without doubt linked. R.B was firstly a sportsman and his passion for golf in which he excelled as a leading National amateur, left the business short of the hands-on management required to steer the company through a difficult trading period and it could no longer survive. His health quickly deteriorated and he never recovered. These events finally terminated any interest Bob had in following his father and grandfather in the noble art of golf and I too was encouraged to sign the pledge at an early age such that my education for what it was would not suffer!

His career in shoemaking shattered Bob had a young family to provide for. From aspiring businessman to the ranks of the unemployed in one fell swoop. If I can be so bold to equate the circumstances of 1952 to modern day reality TV – it was a case of the Apprentice – Bob Cant ...You're fired!! Opportunities in post war east coast Scotland were few and far between and Bob decided to take his family to seek his fortune in Belfast. Temporary work on the docks and driving a Corona Drinks lorry around the protestant sector of Belfast for £8 a week was barely sufficient to keep a roof over the family's head.

I have few scant memories of our short time in Belfast. We were told that Dad used to take us out in our pram and use it as cover for game shooting. I recall being woken up early one evening to be taken outside to watch our neighbour's house on fire. I don't think Bob was responsible in any way!

Our sojourn into Northern Ireland was short and Bob uprooted the young Cant family once more to take up residence with his mother and father in law in Somerset. Not the easiest of situations to live with but he had managed to secure a position at Street based shoemakers C & J Clark and resurrected his former career entering into training and personnel. We eventually moved into our own home in a converted windmill owned by Clarks in the nearby village of Walton. It may sound idyllic but the reality was somewhat different. No mains electricity – it was self generated. No mains water – a pumped well froze during winter and the garden for what it was provided a resting place for the products of digestion from sheep!

Life for less well off families in the mid 1950's was hard but stable. We relied on public transport if we wanted to go anywhere. Holidays were not an annual given and were usually every couple of years visiting my grandmother in Carnoustie. For some completely irrational decision, one year our parents decided to buy a tent, hire a car and go on holiday to Dartmoor. It didn't just rain! ... it was a monsoon. We came home early and the word camping was never heard again in our house!

But Bob's star was on the rise at Clark's and his efforts and initiative were recognised and he took a series of examinations leading to rapid promotion in junior management. From a severe set back early in his career, he had recovered his position not by quirk of birth but by his strength of character and application. As I look back I admire him for it and he was a great role model for me when my own career was derailed by lack of similar effort on my part in later schooling.

With a little more disposable income in the family and my mother's return to work as a teacher – my teacher for one horrendous term, my parents decided to move house again to a new build in Street nearer to Clark's factory. We were taken by bus on regular occasions to see progress during the build when once again Bob's deficiency in some practical aspects of construction left the finished dwelling with one glaring defect. Looking forward to basking in the warmth of a centrally heated home, it was left to me to point out that my bedroom was the only room in the house without a warm air outlet. Money changed hands and I got extra jumpers!!

But even then cracks were appearing in the relationship and just before our 12th birthday, the marriage broke up and we moved up to Leeds leaving Dad back in Street to progress his career at Clarks. We spent time together during school holidays and early on I could tell that his aspirations had been raised. On one visit back to Street he had acquired a car. In today's thirst for classic motors it might have had real value but back then it was a tired late 1950's Ford V8 Pilot. I soon realised my own expendability when I was persuaded by Dad to crawl underneath a jacked up rusty motor with a gun-gum bandage to repair a blown exhaust while he stood some way off. The current McClaren F1 team couldn't have done it and got out quicker!

Summer holidays were usually spent in Carnoustie where we became creatures of habit with a regular routine of places to visit and occupying the time between the important times of eating! I inherited his skill at card playing and perhaps his distaste of losing.

It was during these teenage years that we became aware of another new direction in his life. Bob had met and grown close to a colleague he had met at Clarks working in the same

department, Sybil Leach. I thought at the time that it was perhaps a strange match ... what did she see in him that made him such an attraction? Sybil was overtly from the blue side of Manchester whereas Dad for some reason had a soft spot for the Old Trafford contingent. But their love became strong and in May 1968 Sybil became the 2nd Mrs Bob Cant. I would like to say at this point that he could not have wished for a more loving caring and thoughtful wife and no-one would deny him the opportunity to share the rest of his life with Sybil having found real love and happiness. I would also like to thank Sybil on behalf of Jennifer and myself for her attention to Dad's care during the last few years of his life during failing health. Their 44th wedding anniversary would have been on the Friday following Dad's passing. Perhaps there is some irony in that exact same timescale marked the dates when her beloved City last won the Championship!!

Their life together involved a series of re-locations to Benfleet in Essex, Whickham in Tyneside where I believe Sybil thought it adjacent to the North Pole and finally back to the warmer climes of Baldock in 1974 where they have lived since. During this time having left C & J Clarks, Bob was plying his trade with the National Association of Port Employers, John Lewis and latterly before his retirement at a number of positions with smaller independent companies as book-keeper.

Being very much a family man it was no surprise that his second marriage would be blessed with further children do I mean blessed??....Yes. Following the heartbreak of their first child Judith being born with a number of medical defects and only surviving a matter of hours, Hazel, Lisa, Sally and Rob were born into the family. At the same time Bob became a Father – in – Law to Ann and Victor and then a grandfather when firstly Helen, Alison and then William were added to the Leeds contingent. This did cause a certain amount of confusion when our own children were younger particularly trying to explain the concept of a family tree, such that they genuinely thought all families should have a mother, father and a Sybil!

More recently John, Matt, Martin, Sam, Jo and Hannah have been embraced by the family....were they adequately warned I ask?.... and further grandchildren Celine, Abigail, Nathan, Johnny, Harry, Heidi and Danny have become part of the ever increasing Cant Clan together with Great Grandchildren Naomi, Nathaniel and George.

Dad was fascinated by genealogy and was able to trace our family tree back to the 1600s and was proud of his ancestry despite it uncovering a few unsavoury characters including one who was hanged for theft of a sheep!

I think it is fair to say that the different strands of the family are closely integrated and time we spend together can has been great fun. Who could forget the display of gymnastics attempted by Dad on the giant slide The riotous rounds of the board game Balderdash.

One thing I couldn't get to grips with on our many visits down south was that when Jennifer and I were kids, Dad was a really strict disciplinarian to the extent that fear sometimes invaded our lives.... At least for me as my dear sister never put a foot wrong! I couldn't believe what you younger Cants sometimes got away with!

In his latter years as the family grew up and left the loving home for places and different Continents far and wide, he started to suffer from medical conditions that restricted his previous active life but still managed to enjoy it as much as he was able.

Bob had always had a love of dogs which have figured significantly for the last 45 or so years. Perhaps this goes back to our time in Belfast when we had a boxer dog which actually won 3rd Prize in a local dog show just 3 dogs entered. It seems odd that in the succession of lumbering hounds that have been his companion for so many years the common theme appears to be lack of common sense.

He loved travel and visiting places... not just a regular return to his country of birth but they enjoyed holidays in Germany and Austria particularly. So much so that Dad even took up conversational German and soon mastered the essentials... Zvie gross bier bitte and Ich nien sprechen ze Deutche.

Dad and I shared a love of books not just reading ... but books to hold and look at. We both felt that wall space is there for the purpose of providing book shelves... perhaps a thought not shared by our respective wives. I couldn't see him ever taking to a Kindle!!

I will remember him for his strength of character and a good role model for someone such as me who also had to make something of his life after being knocked back in early career. For his sense of humour....his sharing of love..particularly for the whole of his wider family. ... his commitment to Sybil in whom he had found his true soulmate But also just for being my Dad.