

Jeffrey G Slack (1934-2023)

Jeff died in the early hours of 18 October, 2023. He was born on 11 May 1934 in Staveley, Derbyshire and went to Staveley Primary School. His father worked at the local colliery but later worked in Scunthorpe and Grimsby. Jeff remembered bombing and on one occasion narrowly avoiding being hit by a German fighter plane that was strafing the streets. His father died in 1943, which Jeff later discovered was suicide. Jeff's memory of his father was tainted by the family recounting how he was a drunkard, wife-beater and notorious "womaniser". The family moved back to Staveley to live with relatives, very overcrowded. Jeff was bright and at 13 years old



won a scholarship to Trent College, a "public school". His mother was working as a waitress for British Railways. The next few years were deeply unhappy because this working class boy was beaten and reviled by his peers, all from well-to-do backgrounds. Despite the scholarship his mother was expected to contribute to the fees and Jeff didn't have the heart to tell her she was slaving away for him to be miserably bullied. As he got older, proved his prowess on the rugby field and became a school prefect, things got easier. Jeff was grateful for the education, both academic and social, the latter leaving him with a marked distaste for the "upper classes" and the "establishment" for life. He remained a convinced socialist for life.

Meantime his mother had married again but the stepfather seemed to despise Jeff. The feeling was mutual, even coming to blows at one point. His younger sister, who he described as "Cinderella", hated him for leaving home for her to face this trauma alone. Jeff went to Durham University (Castle) studying Arabic among other things. But things at home deteriorated so much that Jeff left university part way through and returned home to try to sort things out. He worked for a while as a coal screener at the colliery which provided an income for him and the household.

Then he was called up for National Service. He was lucky to serve in the Intelligence Corps where he met more like-minded and agreeable people. It seems that the army put all "odd-balls" (educated people?) in that corps.

They said because he spoke Arabic, he would be sent to the Middle East. So they sent him to Cyprus and later Germany. He had a habit of listening to foreign radio stations but then contacting people and corresponding with them. This it seems was disapproved of by the Intelligence Corps. His experience left him with a lifelong contempt for the military leadership.

Returning home to the "poisonous" acrimony at home, he worked for the Derbyshire Times as a reporter. The chance came up of a job in Africa working for the Central African Post. He was working in Bulawayo. He became involved in African politics and was a friend of Kenneth Kaunda, then seen as a terrorist, later the widely respected President of newly independent Zambia. The work got him the sack as a "traitor" and he ended up in Stockholm having formed a relationship with a Finnish actress, Anita Loven. (She died in 2003).

This didn't work out and by 1959, still in his twenties, he was working for the Illustrated Chronicle and Leicester Mercury in Leicester, England. This is where he first met other journalists, Joan Elliott, a few years older than Jeff, and also an almost exact contemporary, Mike Pickering who became a lifelong friend. Soon Jeff and Mike were

on the move, going to Newcastle-upon-Tyne where Jeff was now the education correspondent for the Newcastle Evening Chronicle. He lived in Greenfield Place off Westgate Road which was handy for the Chronicle office, then in Grainger Street. Other colleagues at that time were Dave Crompton and Dan Van Der Vat who later became a noted author.

Joan Elliott's marriage was breaking up and so in 1960 she too moved to Newcastle with her two children and worked for both Tyne-Tees Television and BBC Look North. She also ran the "Joan Elliott Page" on the Evening Chronicle where she met Jeff again. In 1963 she and Jeff were married. They lived first in Joan's rented flat in Elmfield Road in Gosforth and then bought a new build bungalow on Chadderton Drive in Chapel House in Newcastle's west end. Still politically motivated Jeff worked closely for a while with the (in)famous T. Dan Smith. But Jeff became aware of a degree of skulduggery and broke off the relationship. Later Jeff got a job with the government's Central Office of Information based in Leeds so it was back to a flat in Park Villas in Roundhay Park. Joan got a job with BBC Radio Leeds running her own morning show, "Joan Elliott Calls", five days a week.

After a few years, Jeff changed jobs again, becoming a senior civil servant in Whitehall, as a 'fixer' for government ministers and speechwriting for cabinet ministers, Peter Walker in particular. Joan worked as a news editor for BBC Radio London. They lived in Ham, west London first in Kingfisher Drive and then Perryfield Way. Jeff then moved to the then Greater London Council. But the abolition of the GLC by the Thatcher government meant that Jeff took early retirement and so did Joan. Joan's daughter with her family lived nearby. He helped Joan run a volunteer group called "Ham SOS" helping elderly people for which she enlisted the help of many of the media people who lived in the area, and arranging transport for them etc., most often driving them herself.

London became increasingly expensive for them so they moved north to Durham, a city Jeff remembered of course, settling in Hallgarth Street. Durham was also where Joan's son Patrick was living with his family. But now Joan's health started to fail, first with the eye condition macular degeneration and later Alzheimer's, through which he devotedly cared for her for many years during her long decline. He never flinched at the increasing load on him. Joan died in 1999 and Jeff was alone. Patrick and his family continued to visit of course and Jeff continued to be a regular at "The Vic", the pub a few doors away. He served for a time as treasurer of the local Alzheimer's Society.



As the years went by his own health started to fail him, diagnosed diabetic and suffering painful leg ulcers. He missed Joan terribly. From around 2017 he became housebound, spending his days watching the news channel, never losing his interest in current affairs. Patrick helped him as much as possible, sorting out his shopping for him and later, as he became more confused, managing his affairs. He started to have falls but he remained stubbornly independent although very appreciative of Patrick's help, without which he would not have been able to remain in the home he had shared with his beloved Joan. In August 2022 a series of falls led him to being taken to hospital and from there to a care and nursing home in Chester-le-Street. His health continued to decline and he too seems to have suffered from dementia. Jeffrey Geeves Slack died in the early hours of 18 October 2023, aged 89.

The funeral will be at Durham Crematorium at 11 am on Wednesday 15 November 2023.