

Stories by my Aunt Chris (Christiana Grace Mackie, 1873-1953)

Aunt Chris lived in a cottage in Thornbury, Gloucestershire, where we often visited her both before and after the second world war. She was a Justice of the Peace and an important and loved figure in the life of her village as the tribute by Rev. Rawsthorne at the end shows. She was right at the hub of a large family network and corresponded regularly with her brothers Per, Hugh and Austin and their wives and offspring. Chris looked after her mother Annis in her later years but she never married herself. She was “favourite aunt” to many of us.

When we visited Aunt Chris, we often had afternoon tea in the old horse- drawn carriage she kept in her field behind the house.

My nephew Peter Mackie discovered a collection of writings by Chris and transcribed them and sent them around to family members. Peter and I agree they ought to be available online along with other family memoirs at <https://sites.google.com/view/mackiefamily/home>.

George Mackie (mackie.geo_at_gmail.com) July 2015.



Chris at Thornbury Cottage with her geese, 1938

ESSAYS BY CHRISTIANA MACKIE

These are neatly typed on quarto paper, and the collection has a note attached in MEHM's handwriting:

'Copies of her own MSS, all written while laid up in bed, March 1953 onwards. Found in an envelope entitled "Some memories of things I would not like to forget". Though written scratchily, with a biro, on the backs of letters and odd scraps they are perfectly legible.'

THE SHEEP DIP

When we had our cottage in Montgomeryshire we used to go up there for the greater part of the summer and early autumn. It was on the upper reaches of the Wye and we had fishing for 5 miles and rough shooting over 30,000 acres of mountainside and valley, the estate of Sir Harry Verney, late Secretary to the Queen. It was the time for the sheep washing and for days the sound of their voices in the distance grew louder and more insistent.

I went off to watch the scene. On the river bank, a flat pebbly beach, there were hundreds of sheep – half grown younger animals awaiting the start. There had been a good deal of rain in the night and the river had swollen, fed by the many streams from the hills, and was running fast. So much so that the farmers were not anxious to start dipping. One, after a lot of talk, began to drive his sheep into the dipping pen and after being dipped and dressed with chemicals, they were pushed into the river to be washed, while the dogs went before them to prevent their going down stream. In a few minutes there was shouting and yells and I saw that the stream had been too strong for the dogs to keep the sheep on the broken water and all they could do was to swim to the bank and save themselves, and I watch the sheep being swept down stream helpless to their death.

This took place on the opposite bank to where I was standing helpless to do anything.

Then suddenly I saw a sheep coming towards me and I knew she would be close to my bank in a few seconds, so I hung on to an overhanging bough of an ash tree nearby and made grab at her neck, which brought her towards me and the sloping bank behind. For an awful moment I thought we would both be swept away, she was so heavy and so scared I could only just stop her and luckily she knew it was her only chance, and after a frantic scramble we both got back to the bank above, and then she shook herself so violently that I nearly fell in.

I got a lamb after that, but that was not difficult and I had learned my lesson.

The owner came over the bridge to retrieve them and the other folk shouted in excited Welsh on the opposite bank; not till the evening did I learn that it was congratulations for me.

Later on, a message came asking me to come to the supper which ended the washing.

I went and watched from a sort of straw stage-box in the wall of the barn, now in shadow, the shearers at work finishing the last ewes.

They were sitting in the entrance to a very large barn with wide open doors and a westering sun lighting up the scene and showing up the glint of the swift shears of the man clipping the fleece of the sheep he held between his knees.

I watched the whole picture, age-old, and thought – "As a sheep before his shearers is dumb".

A babble of "baas" came from outside the pen where the next animals were being shoved as soon as there was a shearer ready to start on another. The fleeces as they were cut were almost shell pink in colour and as soft and fine as wool can be. There was an extra man with a jug and a brush to dab on to any stray cut of the shears due to a sudden movement of the animal – but it was rarely used.

Later I went up into the loft to look at the neat piles of fleeces folded square, but the pale pink colour had faded.

After the day's work had ended I went to the farm to see the feast and stayed and then heard the impromptu song the men had sung in my honour. I always wish I had known what the words were. I think they were complimentary.

As I walked home in the dusk of evening I felt that I had taken part in a sacrament.

PEACOCK BUTTERFLIES

I went to see a garden – the owner was not at home, so I wandered round and had a good inspection of the many interesting plants and flowers, in quite undisturbed peace.

As I went across the lawn I was struck by the heavy scent; as I got close, I knew it was that of a young Buddleia tree loaded with very long hanging blossoms the size of a big carrot. But the blossoms were blue, not the purple of Buddleia.

As I came nearer, I saw that every long blossom was covered with Peacock butterflies. I counted 250 and then got tired and wondered. They were drunk with honey and I lifted one or two off and they made no attempt to fly away. There were a few tortoiseshells and garden whites but they all were as if stupefied, a few rose, wings fluttered, but they dropped again to drink.

I took up several of the pendulous blossoms just to feast on the sight of these hundreds of blue eyes on the soft brown wings and none of them seemed to notice it.

I have always loved the Peacock butterflies and kept one all the winter on a curtain top; she was ragged and old but she came down and fluttered at the window just the very moment the Royal couple were plighting their troth at their wedding. I was listening on the wireless and thought it a happy omen.

“Elizabeth”, as I called her, flew away when the weather was ready and came back twice to the window from the garden.

TRUE TALES OF THE COTTAGE

I was looking out of my bedroom window as I was getting up one spring morning and in the corner of the paddock where two walls met I saw a flurry of white feathers and pawing into it was a donkey who was an unpaying guest of mine. I ran down as I was, half clad, to see what was the matter.

The donkey had got a swan in the corner of the wall and was pawing and biting it to death.

As soon as I could get Jerry off his victim, which was not easy, I lifted the bird up and carried him into the house to get him tidy, and washed off the blood and mess he was in. He was as quiet as possible and, having given him a spot of comfort, I took him in to my neighbour who had a garden with a lily pond in it. In a few hours, he was pecking his feathers into order and next morning he had gone. But I well remember how thin he was and docile to carry.

He may have come from Slimbridge, which was always a resort of wild sea birds, before it became famous as the Wildfowl Trust.

THE THREE TIERED NEST

In a scraggly short fir tree outside the window leading out of the drawing room a blackbird built its untidy nest and hatched out four young birds. Ten days after they had flown a thrush and her mate took possession of the nest and redecorated it, plastering it inside with clay and making it to their liking. They too hatched out and the young birds fled (all but one who fell out of the nest and died in infancy).

In a few days, a pair of blackbirds again took possession, and the same pattern of events was followed successfully. By this time the three nests looked like a small bolster and I kept it there till some jackdaws came and took the remains for their nests in the church tower close by – was there a shortage of housing even among the birds?

THE KNEELING SISTER

My father when he was Chaplain of the BRI used to like to hold a quiet little service for the convalescent patients, able to sit up, round the open fire at the end of the ward; it was a quite informal gathering and the various people were rather pleased to be able to join in.

One of the nurses had been very much against this and always tried to break up the group if she could.

This time she barged in with the big coal box, rattling the ashes out of the grate with angry noise of poker on iron. Quite undaunted my father continued the prayer she was disturbing saying: "And now O Lord grant thy blessing on this thy servant, the Sister of the ward now kneeling before Thee in silent prayer, grant her thy grace and strength to carry on thy healing work. Amen." She never interrupted the service again.

HEDGEHOG

On my way to church in July I came across a hedgehog half grown on the road with bits of tennis or strawberry netting all over his bristles. I took him home and put him safely in a shallow basket till I had time to cut him free. When I came back from church to my surprise there was a very large hedgehog in the basket nipping off the strands of net and trying to free the younger one: he straddled away leaving the job not done, but when I came back to cut what was left with scissors both hedgehogs had vanished.

THE TOAD IN THE HOLE

I had cut a hole in the centre of the lawn just large enough to hold a golf ball for golf croquet. Next spring when coming to mow the lawn I was surprised to see the hole had grown large enough to hold a bulb bowl and deeper than my hand could feel. The hole was quite smooth and curved and at the bottom, as I peered in, I met the orange eyes of an outsize toad. I lifted him (or her) out carefully and she seemed glad to waddle off for food. I like toads, but she was the largest I ever handled and we met several times afterwards.

THE GOAT AND THE LETTER BOX

On my way downstairs one day I heard the letter box in the front door rattle and saw what I thought was a stick moving up and down the slit.

I pulled it and it wouldn't come in or out, it seemed to me like a thick walking stick a little warm to the touch. I opened the door and there looking at me was a billy goat, who I knew belonged to friends of mine a mile or so away.

A broken chain and a collar spoke their tale. He was a stud goat with a local reputation, and was a fine handsome animal with large yellow eyes and the usual mass of hair and beard falling from a soft grey chin.

I took him by the collar and led him to the gate of the paddock and shut the door on to the road leaving him basking in the warm dust of the gateway.

Unfortunately, soon after this my landlady came across from the opposite side of the paddock with her gardener, on the way to feed her fowls. The billy, who hated all men and boys, promptly up on his hind legs and knocked the old gardener backwards to the ground.

His mistress, nothing daunted, true to her breed, stood her ground and offered the goat the basket of fowl food which was a successful peace-offering.

But how angry she was with me for putting Billy in her paddock. On hearing the details she forgave me, leaving me with this injunction: "Next time a lion or tiger pays you a visit please tell me at once. I like to feel I can use my own grounds in safety."

THE ONION BED

I had spent two mornings in getting my new onion bed into good condition and sown the seed very carefully, as one does. Twice did I find two of my neighbour's hens making dust bowls in the so carefully made bed.

At the second time I managed to catch one of the intruders and threw it with anger over the fence into the paddock. Fortunately just missing my landlady with basket coming to feed her fowls as was her wont.

"Don't be so cruel to your poor hens", she called out, "what harm have they done to you?" "They aren't mine, they are yours," said I, "look what they've done to my onion bed." She was desperately angry and shook her fist at me.

"You shall be a hen in the next world as a punishment, and I think I shall give you a quarter's notice."

But though it scared me at the time – all was well. She was like that and I was fond of her.

THE CHURCHWARDEN

It was always very cold in Fylton church in winter and we had a new portable oil stove put in the chancel to try and get some heat as that part of the church was so draughty.

When the time came for the churchwarden and sidesman to bring the alms to the altar rails the churchwarden forgot the stove placed in the centre of the chancel. He was a tubby and very pompous little man who always seemed to carry the alms on his bow-window like stomach and his pince-nez at the end of his nose and he just crashed into the stove – falling on to the altar rails leaving the oil creeping like a snake around the overturned stove and the collection rolling about everywhere.

Fortunately it did not catch fire but the sight of the churchwarden picking himself up with oil over his trousers and lost pince-nez sent us children into the bottom of our pew with handkerchief stuffed mouths longing to go and help find the coins.

THE BANNS OF MARRIAGE

A party of four people, a man and woman with their respective son and daughter, came one evening in summer to put up the banns of marriage.

After a short talk, my father asked the parents to go out into the garden whilst he had a talk with the young couple, giving them a few words of advice, and full of common sense those words would be.

The older couple could not be found at first, the garden was large, but they came at last into the study and said, looking very bashful: "Will you please put up our banns as well, Sir? It's a bit of a sudden like but we've been talking it over and we shall both be a bit lonesome when my darter and her son leave us, so we thought 'twould be best to get married too and make a tidy job of it."

TALES OF FILTON 'EDDARD'

There was an old man Eddard whom my father used to visit and I often, as a young girl, went with him. On one of these visits the old man, after listening to a short prayer: "Do you ask the Almighty to let I get well, so as I can get up to the village again."

So my father did so and asked as well – "and give strength, we beseech Thee, O Lord, to Eddard's legs so that he may stop at the church on his way to 'The Plough' just to give Thee thanks."

Which request met with a fervent Amen from the old chap.

THE BEST PARTY I EVER WENT TO

Marcia wanted to have a midsummer night party when I was staying with her. Goose Hill was the name of her little Somerset manor house.

It was 200 years old and was floored with yellow slabs of local stone and lay in a garden with orchard and paddock and a wood all round it, always scented by outside flowers which seemed in the summer to be wanting to come into the windows.

It was to be at 8 – 2. There was a good deal to do before the day came. The barn was turned out and cleaned and white-washed, the floor put in order, and in the middle was a grand piano and fiddle stand and a few easy chairs at a suitable distance from it, with one pillar of blue delphiniums only as decoration against the white-washed walls.

The drawing room floor was made ready for dancers, with more flowers.

The dining room was for supper sent down by Rumpelmayer that day by car. The drinks were in the garden and matched the food.

It was that wonderful summer after the first world war and it was June.

The perfect midsummer night for such a party. The soft air was like velvet, the women had no need of even the lightest of wraps, and we all wandered off with friends to look at the beauties of the place by the light of the moon and watch the moths on the flowers. One heard the sounds of music coming from the dance room, and some played Bridge in the study.

But the attraction was the barn. Marcia had a French girl over who played the violin like a master and we did not let her stop playing for long.

She said after, that the whole surroundings were an inspiration, the music sounded so round and the tone of both violin and piano were heard in their fullest beauty in the empty stillness of the tall and high ceilinged barn.

More and more people brought their chairs silently in to listen to some of the finest violin music which came floating out of the open doors, till the daylight made artificial lights look garish, and then the guests left unwillingly hours after the invited time was past.

Yes, it was a perfect party.

Another thing I shall remember always about Marcia's party was:

The man with whom I danced and sat out was a doctor just back from the war and was telling me of some of his experiences with his first line casualties and he made this remark –

“What struck me was that in almost every case the dying men asked for their mothers to come to them, when they were at the end – a few wanted their wives or girl friends – but only a few.”

“I think”, he said, “that the physical cord between mother and son is severed at birth but the invisible spiritual cord is eternal.”

ONE OF THE LOVELIEST THINGS I EVER SAW

When I was in Fontresina in Switzerland I went to climb a slope to get used to the height, after living on Severn bank all my life.

The path was narrow, the trees were almost like a closely woven fretted arch, dapples of sun making gold patterns of light in the strong sun on the pathway of dead leaves. At the end was the vista of white snow-capped mountains.

Suddenly, as I walked, there was a rain of what I thought was petals of delphinium. They were blue butterflies, hundreds of them, fluttering and settling over my path, and alongside was a bank of sulphur anemones. It was breath-taking.

GENTIANAS

We came to Fontresina a little late for gentians which were scarce and rather past their prime. But we went climbing up to the high slopes one day and as I looked round, glad to take rest, I saw we were in a small rocky valley between the mountains.

It was carpeted with gentian acaulis and just as buttercups are yellow – in our fields – so the acre of flat turf was an intense blue, and every flower seemed to be a trumpet of thanksgiving.

THE HAUNTED HOUSE

Muriel Green Armytage asked me to come in and look over a house in Clifton which had been empty for some time as it had a reputation of being haunted.

We got the key from the agent who seemed surprised and had some difficulty in finding it.

It was 11 o'clock and a sunny winter day. I had some difficulty in getting the key to turn in the front door, it was rusty.

When at last it opened, there was the empty hall, the air full of the dust which had been disturbed by the wind of the open door, and the sunlight was lying in patches on everything – like snuff coloured snow an inch thick, I should think.

As we stood in the hall and looking at the desolate scene – I looked at the staircase mounting up to the bedrooms above and there I saw a single pair of small footprints on each step, the impress of a woman's shoe impressed in the thick dust, but they were all with toe and heel going upstairs – none came down again – and there were no footmarks anywhere else in the hall.

We both looked at each other and decided not to go on with our investigation, we felt that there was something evil around in the atmosphere of the place and we shut the front door and took the keys back so quickly that the clerk smiled but said nothing, neither did we.

ANOTHER HOUSE IN BATH

Edie Guilbert was interested in an old house in Bath and we went to see it. It had been inhabited by an old lady for many years and was badly in need of repairs. It was a most attractive old Regency small town house at a corner of a terrace with a fine view and two old balconies of beautiful design iron rails leading out from up and downstairs windows right round the house.

The old lady had made the top floor into the kitchen department and maids' rooms. The former kitchen was in the basement.

We were both struck with the possibilities of the house and while Edie was upstairs measuring for her furniture I went to see the basement. It was a sinister place, so long disused that the whole air was damp, with toadstools of orange in the corners and the iron range one mass of red rust. The kitchen led out into a stone passage under the street which was reached by a flight of damp stone steps broken and full of water.

As I came back into the stone flagged kitchen the light fell on the hearth composed of one huge stone and I saw that the cement by which it was fixed was only just drying out. Just then Edie came to find me and to say she should buy the house, it was just what she wanted.

I pointed to the stone and said: "Have that taken up first, look at it! Smell the air of the room, I would not live in this house for any money."

How cross she was with me! But the more she thought, the less sure she was, and we came away to return the keys of that house. Not very long after this it was destroyed in the Bath blitz, so she was wise to change her mind.

THE UNSUSPECTED WELL

In the yard at the back of the old home there was a pump, rusty and unused for thirty years during our tenancy.

For some time the paving stones had been cracking and sinking in places but that had not caused one any surprise as heavy loads of coal and goods had been carried over the ancient paving for a century past.

One day I thought that the cracks seemed larger and resolved to ask the local builder to come and advise what to do about it.

Weeks passed and I forgot all about the matter and the man came with a workman to report and I left them to their investigations.

They called me to come and “see something”. I went and found a wide black circular chasm with a pile of broken rough rotten timbers on one side of it and eight or nine pieces of flag stones alongside.

I peered down, with weak knees, hanging on to the man’s arm and saw a circle of sky reflected in the depths below – forty feet of shiny circular black wall hewn out of rock. It was so wide that the builder said three men must have worked back to back to hew the space out of the rock. There was sixteen or seventeen feet of water at the bottom – very thick and muddy and evil smelling.

The wood beams were like touch wood and broke into bits when they were thrown away as they were lifted off, with long ropes of black slime clinging to them.

The man who brought my coal came in and stood struck by the sight and said: “Gosh, to think I was going to carry twenty hundredweight of coal over that”.

The cavern was covered with three garage doors till it was laced across with steel girders and the area covered with cement. The builder said: “That was a lucky escape for someone, I don’t think that well cover would have lasted another week.”

A SERMON

**Preached on August 30th (1953) in Thornbury Church by the Vicar, "Bobbie"
Rawsthorne,
Rural Dean of Hawkesbury**

If we accept the Christian interpretation of life and see it as a School and a training ground for Character – above all and most important of all – as an opportunity to learn to know and to love God and to serve Him – then one has no right to grieve when someone long past their three score years and ten crosses that narrow sea which divides the visible and invisible worlds – sure in the faith of Jesus Christ.

Many of you will have your own special memories of Chris Mackie. Several of you have shared the stress of decisions and the disappointment that her long months of lying up proved of no avail, and shared the suffering of her last hours.

The last picture I have in my mind – for it is the last time I saw her – was one of utter thankfulness and peace. I had visited her earlier that week and we had had the usual stimulating talk which she delighted in – and then two days later we partook of the Sacrament together – and few words passed between us. But it was by those words, in which she expressed her realisation of the peace of God which came to her through the Sacrament of the body and blood of our Lord, that I shall above all remember her.

She lived and she died in the Faith of Jesus Christ and in her life she ever sought to live by the ideals and the inspiration which she gained as a member of a large family in a parsonage house.

During her latter years she was sorely tried by her illness and her disability – but she accepted it all, the hard with the smooth – as further lessons to be learnt and fresh experience to be gained, and she allowed no taint of bitterness or complaining ever to sully her soul.

We cannot grieve for her – but we cannot fail to grieve for ourselves, for many of us have lost a true and trusted friend. For Chris Mackie had the capacity for making and retaining friendships with people of all ages and not least with the young.

During the few years during which I have known her, I remember her best in her public work as a Manager of the Council School – deeply interested in the welfare of the children, with an amazingly keen insight into the character of the staff – anxious always to see that the things which matter most had their rightful place.

But perhaps nothing gave her greater pleasure and happiness than her work as Justice of the Peace, which she discharged so conscientiously and so faithfully, and it was a great sorrow to her when advancing years compelled her to retire from this work.

And the, lastly, I think of her as a faithful member of the Church upon whose loyal support one could always count.

And so, as today we mourn – and we cannot fail to mourn – the passing of a true friend – we have so much to give thanks to God for in her life and in her example – above all her cheerfulness in circumstance which cannot have been easy - and in her deep interest in all that was going on around her.

She loved Thornbury – for she understood Thornbury – and I think Thornbury, or at least all of Thornbury that knew her, loved Chris Mackie. The words of Isaiah read in our first lesson this morning were surely fulfilled in her when he wrote

“Thou shalt be like a watered garden and like a spring of water whose waters fail not.”