

Christopher “Tam” Wearing

5th April 1939 - 19th August 2020

Christopher Wearing died in hospital in Bath, England on 19th December 2020. He had just been making a really good recovery from having a small operation to remove a skin melanoma from his forehead, when he was suddenly taken ill with a pancreatic infection, to which, after a few days of fighting it in hospital, he eventually succumbed.

Christopher Wearing was my Godfather and to me was always “Tam”. I believe the nickname came from his schooldays, at the time when there was a well known Hollywood actor around called Tom Wearing , and to the English Schoolboy’s ear, Tom became Tam....and I suppose it just stuck. So apologies to any of his American friends reading this - but your Chris is our Tam, so I’ll just refer to him as Tam.....but to everyone he was a gentleman and a scholar. Tam was polite and well mannered to a fault, always well turned out and loved by so many people across at least two continents - Europe and North America.

Tam led a double life to some extent, and somehow managed, for 50 odd years to keep his feet planted on both sides of the Atlantic. He lived and worked most of the time in the USA, in various places including, in the early days Boston and Washington DC, but mostly in Washington State - in particular Seattle.

Tam was born and spent his early years in London (Richmond), apart from a period during WWII when he was evacuated, along with his mother and many thousands of other children from London to a rural part of the country. He didn’t talk about it much and I think he was so young - he can’t have been more than about 2 or 3 years old - that his memories of that time were quite vague. After the war he returned to Richmond, and his father Eric Wearing , who had been in the RAF and stationed in North Africa, returned home. But his father had been quite seriously ill in Egypt, suffering from “sand fly fever, dysentery and jaundice” and so after the war ended Tam was packed off to boarding school at St Augustines Abbey in Cambridgeshire at the tender age of 7, leaving Tam’s mother, Kathleen to look after his father. By this time he was a hardened a veteran of being packed off with a suitcase and took it in his stride... Sadly his father never really recovered and died not long after the end of the war when Tam was still very young, and at boarding school most of the time. He recounted that he barely knew his father, and I suppose that made him much closer to his mother, who lived to the grand age of 93.

At St Augustines Tam made some lifelong friends, including my father James. They met there first in 1946 and remained in touch for the rest of his life. After St Augustines they both went to Douai Abbey school in Berkshire together, and then they both went on to Queen’s college Oxford. At Douai they were both introduced to fencing as a sport, something which Tam was passionate about, and continued to coach to his students in America even after he had retired as a teacher. Tam was Best Man at my Parents’ wedding (1963), and then became my Godfather.

Tam's private life was pretty private. He never married, but did seem to have a number near misses. I think I only ever met one of his girlfriends: at one time he was engaged to a lady called Stephanie, and reading through a tin box of correspondence which I looked through since his death it seems that the relationship was very serious. They were engaged to be married, but for reasons I never knew it never happened. I think it was a matter of some regret that he never married and had his own children, but from my point of view it meant that he was able to be a brilliant Godfather, and from his point of view I guess it meant that he was much more free to indulge his love of travel.

From an early age Tam was a traveller....he had a gift for languages and for teaching - mostly French but he also spoke Spanish fluently, and also taught Latin. He became a modern languages teacher par excellence, (in 1985 he was invited to the Whitehouse to receive a special Presidential Award for services to teaching from President Reagan). Tam loved young people and being around them, so a career in teaching was really a very natural thing for him. To me he was the glamorous American Godfather who would turn up every the summer, usually driving something a bit fancier than anything we were used to (My siblings and I all remember the beautiful green Jaguar with its green leather seats) and he always managed to bring exciting presents that always appealed to the recipient. I remember in particular a much treasured penknife that I still mourn the loss of to this day. Not having been married or having children of his own allowed him to travel and to be the perfect Godfather - Tam used to turn up every summer and do exciting things with us that our Parents didn't really have the time for: Friends if mine remember him taking a whole car load of us kids skating in Bristol, or to the swimming pool which were memorable treats. He was very generous with his time and popular with all the kids of my age, and from the stories I have heard he was equally loved by his students and many families in the US where he spent almost all his adult life.

Tam spent a couple of years back in England in the mid 1980s - doing a Masters Degree in Cambridge - which he thought was a course run by stuffy old Cambridge academics and a waste of time - (he could be quite opinionated and outspoken) - and teaching for a while in a college in Bushey, north of London. This time allowed him to be closer to his Mother who was by then getting older and living in Weymouth, Dorset. And he took time to visit me at School, taking me out to experience such exotic delights as a West End musical - Hello Dolly (!) and even Sunday lunch at McDonalds which had recently arrived in London - after Mass at Westminster Cathedral - I guess he was balancing his educational responsibilities as a Godparent.

But America was calling him back and by 1988 he was back in the USA, this time in Seattle, teaching at Lakeside school, one of Americas finest. He remained there until he retired in about 2008 at the age of 69 (very much against his will!). After he was retired he continued for several more years teaching privately and getting his students into the Universities that they aspired to, and also coaching Fencing at Lakeside.

During these years he continued his summer visits, spending time with his mother until she died in 1999, visiting friends in England and also taking groups of his American students to France.

France was an absolute passion for him: He spoke French like a native, and was absolutely in his element there, making many many friends all over France, whom he visited and stayed with on his annual trips. He loved French cuisine (actually he was a bit of a food snob!) and of course French wine. He bought a charming little tumbledown house (he called it his château) near Albi in the mid 80's. But Tam was never really one for DIY and didn't have the funds to maintain it, so it got progressively more in need of investment and eventually he was forced to sell it, which he always regretted. Ideally he would have loved to retire there. But in compensation he was able to spend time doing things he loved - singing in the cathedral choir, and travelling to Europe to indulge his love of European culture every summer.

Being a lifelong bachelor one might have thought that Tam would have been able to afford to do whatever he wanted, without the usual encumbrance of children and mortgage. But, perhaps contrary to outward appearances (he dressed well and appreciated the finer things in life), he managed this lifestyle only by being quite careful with his limited resources: he never really had any money, and part of the reason was his generosity to others. He paid for the private education of at least one boy who was a family friend in Dorset, and there may have been others too. He believed in education, having had a very good one himself, but he was generous, perhaps to his own detriment, and there is no one who he came across in his life who would not describe him as a true gentleman. He was highly intelligent and well educated himself, and wanted others to benefit from the same things that he had.

In 2014 I received a call from Howard Strickler - he always referred to the Strickler's as his "American family" - with the news that Tam had suffered from some form of sudden memory loss and had been rescued from his car by the police. After a few weeks in hospital he was diagnosed with a specific form of dementia - brought on unfortunately by his growing dependence on whisky. Tam had been quite depressed since he was forced to retire from teaching and over the previous few summers it was clear that he was drinking far too much. My wife Kären and I were concerned and had tried to dissuade him, but he was somewhat in denial. We also talked to him a lot about where he was going to live. We felt that sooner or later he would have to choose between living in America and living in England, but he found it an impossible choice. He had his mother's house in Weymouth, but he didn't really know anyone there. We tried to get him interested in living here in Bath, but every summer the subject didn't really get resolved and the same conversation just came around again the next summer. Eventually the decision was effectively made for him by his health crisis, and he returned to England for the last time, chaperoned by Howard, in October 2014.

After a bit of searching and a couple of rather unsatisfactory short term solutions we eventually struck gold and found him the perfect sheltered housing flat to live in - The Orchard - only about a mile from our house, with access directly out into a large shared walled garden, and a good dining room for lunch every day. He lived there quite happily for the next five years, (although he complained a lot about not being able to drive) being well looked after by some lovely people, for whom he was very grateful. The staff at the Orchard all loved Tam for his cheery disposition and his perfect manners.

We'll his presence around our table on a Sunday evening.

Chris Mackenzie.

The passage below was penned by Kit Maestretti - one of Chris Wearing's Lakeside School colleagues, and provides another insight into a man that was loved and respected by so many:

We first met Chris when he was teaching at the Cambridge School of Weston in Massachusetts. My mother Preb also taught there, and soon Chris became a frequent visitor to our home nearby. My father and brothers delighted in conversations with Chris over supper. Brother Dan recalls they would look out the window and see Chris arriving, and quickly come up with a topic of discussion. Their goal was to see if they could get Chris to make a 180 degree turn in his position over the evening. Clearly, for Chris, it was the eloquence and rhetoric that mattered in a debate, and he was a master at both.

There was an interim after Cambridge School when Chris spent a couple of years back in England, teaching at a boarding school, if memory serves.

In 1980 I was living and teaching in Seattle, and we recruited Chris to come join the languages faculty at Lakeside School. He taught there until around 2004 [he retired the year his mother died]. Chris taught French, Italian, and a course in Romance Languages for advanced students. He was famous for his "map" of the grammar of various languages. This was a large page [14 by 17 inches] filled with tiny type showing how the tenses were related and formed, from the basics of the present tense to the intricacies of the past imperfect subjunctive. This latter would, of course, only ever be used in speech by Chris himself.

Chris also delighted in coaching fencing. On any sunny day, one would see Chris somewhere on campus, decked out in his white fencing togs, working with a student on correct form with an epee.

My husband often said that Chris was a true Renaissance man: he knew volumes about history, literature [he even wrote sonnets!], art, music - and more recently film. But he didn't have much interest in how practical things worked, and once proclaimed that Newton was a mere mechanic. If Chris's car didn't start when he turned the key, he called a garage to come and deal with it.

Words that describe Chris to us: francophile, polyglot, Epicurean. He was quite the chef: we will never forget the Beef Wellington he prepared for us. But at the same time, his kitchen was a wreck after each meal prep: every pot, pan, and utensil had been used and he even caused a kitchen fire or two. Another friend, Nicola Sykes Drilling, recalls that he "burned the Christmas goose".

Chris used to buy his clothes at Value Village, which is a chain thrift shop here in the Pacific Northwest. He made us laugh when he said it was cheaper to go buy a new pair of slacks than to send the ones he had to the cleaner. Later in life he bought himself a blue blazer and put a crest on the pocket. We were never quite sure if it was the crest of his university or his family?? But he looked quite dashing in any case. As he did at Lakeside graduations where he enjoyed wearing his university robe and colours.

Another favourite image of Chris, unfortunately not witnessed first hand but described to us by Chris himself, came from his summers at the house he bought near Albi to satisfy and extend his enjoyment of the French and the French countryside. One hot summer he bought himself a blow-up kiddie pool that he had pumped up at the local service station and which he transported tied to the roof of his car. He would go back to his courtyard or down by the river, fill it with water and sit in it through the hot afternoons. I'm sure he would dream of nymphs and nereids frolicking nearby. He said the locals all knew about the eccentric Englishman.

Chris was a devoted son to his lovely mother Catherine. She visited him in Seattle on several occasions, and could hold an audience in thrall with her tales of tea dances and other festivities from her youth. One could see that the "gift of gab" ran through the generations in her family.



