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A TRIBUTE TO JEAN LANGMORE KIRBY

1 OCTOBER 1915 – 24 AUGUST 1998

by her son

MICHAEL KIRBY

Wednesday 26 August 1998

## JEAN LANGMORE KIRBY

### A TRIBUTE

by her son, Michael

My mother was born Jean Langmore Knowles on Friday, 1 October 1915. On that day, Australia was in the midst of a great War. General Allenby, whose troops were entering Damascus, ordered them to dismount and walk reverently on its ancient streets.

My mother was born in Berwick, Victoria to William Spotswood Knowles and Margaret Rushe Knowles. Her parents had migrated to Australia from County Antrim in Northern Ireland. They were a gifted couple: he a journalist, she a lover of poetry. He came from a noted family which sprang from Fennagh near Cullybackey, in turn near Ballymena. A few weeks ago I walked between those towns. I met members of the Knowles family and saw the great beauty of the land.

My mother's grandfather was a prosperous scholar. He was recently described, in a review, as the "Father of Ulster Antiquaries". His two daughters were specially gifted. Matilda Cullen Knowles was to become one of the leading botanists of Ireland. Margaret Knowles was a noted painter and illustrator. I often thought that my mother's love of gardens brought together, in composition, the talents in botany and painting of her two aunts. What propelled William, and his brother Hugh, to come to Australia at the turn of the century is unknown.

A few years back, with my mother, I visited Berwick, the place of her birth. We saw the very house in which she had been born. It had belonged to Dr Langmore, who delivered the child and after whom my mother took her middle name. Her immediate family comprised her parents and four sisters: Marguerite, Elizabeth ("Bessie"), Catherine and Winsome ("Winnie"). My mother was the second youngest child. When Marguerite married a Roman Catholic engineer named Flynn, who went to work in Tanganyika, in the ways of that time, Marguerite was virtually cut off from the family. Her father was a true Orangeman. Whilst she was proud of her Ulster origins, my mother often protested against the prejudices of Ulster. She adored her father. Whereas he was serious and had the steady gaze that she inherited, her mother was poetical and demonstrative. My mother inherited, in happy mixture, these sometimes conflicting characteristics.

My mother grew up in Sydney in a house called "Ballymena" in South Dowling Street, Kensington. She attended Sydney Girls' High School and gained the Leaving Certificate. However, on St Valentine's Day, 14 February 1932, an event occurred which was to change her life. My father had made arrangements to meet a young lady at Maroubra Beach. But four times his feet took him back to St Martin's Anglican Church in Kensington. He was late for the service. My mother was there. He was a week short of his sixteenth birthday; she but four months older. Having caught sight of my mother, and having waited to walk her home, my father rather ungraciously forgot about his beach companion. He walked my mother home. From that somewhat unpromising and flirtatious

beginning they went on to become engaged in October 1936. They were married on Saturday 27 March 1937 at St John's Church, Darlinghurst. The Celebrant was Canon Lucas. In times of Depression, they could not afford a big ceremony or large wedding breakfast. They went with their closest family friends to a café in Kings Cross. My father warned her "It will be hard". She said "I don't care". And she did not. Love conquers every hardship.

The few romantic notions that had invaded my mother's expectations about domesticity and marriage were soon dispelled when she was presented by my father with the job advertisements. She soon secured work sewing. The marriage was concealed by her and her co-workers for in those hard times, in such positions, married women were generally dismissed. The disguise ultimately broke down two years later when what was thought of as a severe cold turned out to be me. Save for problems of disguise at work, the pregnancy was uncomplicated. However, the delivery was extremely difficult and almost fatal. My mother was rushed by ambulance from the War Memorial Hospital, Waverley to Crown Street where I, her first born child, appeared on 18 March 1939.

Two years later my brother Donald William and his twin, David Charles were born. My mother was not told to expect twins. She could not understand why so many nursing sisters came to listen to the multiple heartbeats. The twin boys were the joy of her father's heart, her mother having died before any of us were born. The War was then upon us. Fear of shelling from the sea led my father to take his growing family from Coogee first to South Dowling Street and then to Concord where we were to grow up. Eighteen months

after the twins were born one of them, David Charles died of pneumonia. It was a tremendous blow to my parents. They never really got over it. David Charles is buried in this cemetery, not far from here.

In their grief, my parents, still only 28 years of age, planned a new birth. It was to be my brother David. When, years ago, I harboured ambitions for him I tried to give him a middle name after Richard Brinsley Sheridan, a family ancestor on my mother's side. However, my parents called him simply David. Rightly, he has reverted to that simplicity.

Whereas her father wanted sons, my mother always wanted a daughter. One more birth, the fifth, produced Diana Margaret. Although all the sons became lawyers, Diana most honourably, works as a nursing sister on the 11th level of the Royal Prince Alfred Hospital. She spends her life in the heroic world which we saw at close hand in the last fortnight. It was one level below the place where Diana works with tenderness and skill. Her profession, dealing everyday with cancer, made last week's ordeal specially fearful for her; for she knew all.

After the last birth, my mother's health, never strong, was repeatedly troubled. She underwent a major operation in 1947 and would have died but for the skill of her surgeon Dr McGuire. That skill spared her for 51 years of life with us. As two of her sisters had died and then her father, we in Concord became a close-knit family with loving support from my father's wonderful grandmother (Annie Elizabeth Gray), his mother (Norma) and his aunts, especially Lillian,

Anne and Gloria. Having lost virtually all of her own family save for a cousin Hugh, it was fortunate that my mother got on so well with my father's maternal side. His grandmother (GaGa, as she called her) taught her skills in bringing up children – a vocation in which my mother truly excelled.

She was not specially competitive. But she was proud of her children's school attainments. She always gave us encouragement; never censure. She had marvelous comprehension. All of us remember her listening to our efforts and hearing our songs as she was cooking or ironing, explaining figures of speech, correcting our spelling. Throughout her life, she was marvelously intelligent. But also, as David said at his ceremony just two weeks ago, "passionate and compassionate".

The challenges to her health continued to trouble my mother during our schooldays. She suffered excruciating pain with dermatitis of various kinds until she found a compassionate specialist, Dr Geoffrey Finley, who helped find a cure. Following an all-too-brief time of domesticity, she returned to work. It was not the work her intellect would today command. She worked as a sales woman at Grace Brothers and as a clerk in the Australian Broadcasting Commission. She did this to help pay for our education, to buy (by careful saving) items for the home and later antiques which reflected her admiration of beautiful things. Her work at Grace Brothers was, for a time, in the toy department. Our family always turned on the best fireworks display in Concord on Empire Day: thanks to staff discounts and the prudent deployment of her savings for our happiness. It is no exaggeration to say that

throughout her life she was completely selfless where her husband and her children were concerned.

In the 1980s, two further complications in her health arose. She suffered a heart attack at home. It was only the swift intervention of Dr Bede Muller, taking her forthwith to Concord Hospital that saved her life. A bypass operation was performed by my university friend, the late Professor Doug Baird. He was supported by Professor David Richmond who also visited her in her closing days. She was spared for a further twelve years. It is a tribute to their work that her heart beat so strongly and, despite everything, would not give up until Monday morning.

The second complication was the discovery of a lymphoma and enlargement of her spleen. This was very slow growing. It was kept under vigilant care by Professor Doug Joshua. It is not an especially unusual condition in the old. It was the reason why my mother, over the last years, lost weight and became small and, in the end, gaunt. But she never lost her spirit. Never. We, her children, would visit our parents virtually every weekend. Sunday dinner with them both became almost a religious ceremony for Johan and me. They delighted in all of their grandchildren. Though they grieved in the loss of Marie-Line, their lives were recently brightened by the arrival of Susanne and Judith and Jessica and Patrick. Julie, Diana's oldest child, moved in to live with my parents at Concord. Sadly she is in the United States and cannot be here. All her other grandchildren (Sam, Nicolas, Elisabeth, Donald and Daniel) knew what a special person she was.

She had, and kept, long-term friends, including Marie and Gordon McLean and Bruce Bond. In earlier years, the Ulster reserve made it difficult to cross her threshold. But once you were admitted, there was no more loyal and trustworthy confidante. In the past year, she and my father befriended Rama Yoo, met in this cemetery not far from here, lost and alone after the death of his mother. My mother still had it in her to accept another child which, in her eighties, was somewhat astonishing. But it was there.

A great irony of her life was the special friendship formed in recent times with the Dominican Catholic Sisters who came to live opposite my parents' home – Sisters Carmel, Mary, Maureen and Marie. They showed unswerving love to my mother which she reciprocated and for which we are grateful. On Sunday last, at their suggestion, a Catholic Chaplain, Father Brendan Quirk, visited my mother's bedside at Royal Prince Alfred Hospital. I alerted him, in her presence, to her provenance. But when he pointed out that his father had been Presbyterian and that all our prayers go to the same God she nodded in agreement (for she could not speak). She put her hands in the position of prayer though that was difficult for her. He led us through a Roman Catholic service for the visitation of the sick. Even at the end, my mother's mind was open. She had no prejudice. Only intellectual curiosity and bigness of heart. Her life is a metaphor for reconciliation and love – which are at the heart of all religions and of human rights.

It is far too painful to tell of the last few weeks. But on Sunday, though she could not speak, she took her leave individually of each one of us by gestures and loving smiles. My father and I



were there at 6.30 in the morning on Monday when at last she found peace. A passing she had truly wanted and prayed for came quietly to her. It was not without suffering. But, as always, she set an example of dignity, persistence, courage, practicability and care for others. She was a noble spirit. And now that spirit continues in us who are left.

It would take books to tell the tale of my mother's enduring qualities. Some day we may try to do so. There were many, many days of joy and laughter amidst the pain. On behalf of my father and my brothers and sister, I honour her memory. We honour our father for his fierce loyalty and devoted care to her. We thank Professors Joshua and Lickiss and the medical and nursing staff in Ward E10 North for their skilled and devoted attention to her. And Drs Muller and Raffel for their care over many years. Canon Barton Babbage for leading us through this Service of Thanksgiving. And we thank the other friends who are here, and who are not here, for helping us at this very hard time.

Some people may say that she lived to a great age. Eighty-two, nearly eighty-three is, it is true, a long life. But every year uncovered a new layer - revealing new facets of my mother's character and personality to enrich the lives of those who knew her. For those who love her, like us, eighty-two years was not enough.