

(People who have most influenced my life, by Alan Macfarlane)

Iris Macfarlane (1922-)

It is not easy for a son to analyse the influence of a mother since it acts at every level, from conception onwards. So I will leave on one side the undoubtedly enormous influence of my mother on my early years. She must have shaped me deeply by her attitudes and treatment, even though this was supplemented by aayas or nurses who helped look after me as a little boy growing up for my first five years in India.

When I returned to England and school in April 1947 with rationing and separation from most of the time from my parents, one might have expected her to recede into the background. But the fact that she was away for four fifths of my life between then and the age of eighteen did not break the link. Iris wrote weekly; lovely and interesting letters which I still have. She constantly expressed her concern and love. And on the wonderful periods when she and my father came home on leave I remember many expeditions, picnics, trips and excitements.

Most of the time during this period I was either at Boarding School or looked after by my mother's parents. In many ways my grand-mother, Violet Rhodes James, deserves a section to herself. She was an extremely intelligent, forceful, even ruthless woman, who always treated me well. From her I learnt an enormous amount about life and work, including honesty, self-discipline, ability to organize and manage others, and a hoarding instinct, particularly in relation to papers and photographs, but even sticks and stones and other object. But to return to my mother...

I don't know when I began to realize what a remarkable woman she is. She had won an Open Scholarship to Oxford at the age of 17, but her mother, wishing to marry her off, never told her until the end of her life. This success occurred despite a very interrupted education at many schools. So this highly intelligent mind was trapped in a tea-planter's wife, married off at 18 and with three young children in war-time India by the age of 24.

Later I began to appreciate her academic abilities and over the years we have discussed many things and worked together. She has great curiosity, a brilliant eye for detail and character (a number of her short stories have been broadcast) a great love of literature and wide reading, poetic ability, and a really excellent literary style. She is also no mean linguist, learning Assamese enough to translate folk stories (published) as well as Gaelic for the same purpose.

At the age of about 55 she went to University at Glasgow to study Scottish literature and was doing well when suddenly my father died and she had to give up her studies. She took the first and second years of an Open University degree in Philosophy, but could not attend the second Summer School because of her dog Charlie. So she had to take that year over again. That and the expense put her off so she did not complete the degree. She attends lectures on Kant and others. She is also a good painter and a philanthropic and supportive person to many friends.

From childhood, when she had polio, she has had a bad leg. Yet she has with great strength of character overcome this. When she was about 73 she decided to return to India for the first time in about 30 years. Since then she had made four trips in all, twice to Kalimpong, once to south India and once to Assam, latterly using a Zimmer frame to help walk. She has another trip planned to south India in her 81st year. Her energy and pluck is shown by the fact that she learnt to drive in her later 60's and passed her test just before her 70th birthday. She learnt to use computers in her 70's and went on a course on the internet etc. just before her 80th birthday.

And almost all the time she has collected information and written books. These writings are in many areas. She wrote a 'Hebridean Journal' as a column for the *Scotsman* for some years. She wrote short stories for the B.B.C. She wrote one of the first exposes of the *Black Hole* of Calcutta. She wrote articles on Indian history and other subjects for *History Today*. She wrote on Assamese history, four or five children's books (two of which have been published as *The Children of Bird God Hill* and *The Summer of the Lambe Seagull*) translations of folk stories (*Tales and Legends from India* and *The Mouth of the Night*). Half a dozen travel diaries of her trips to India, two autobiographical novels based on her family and a book about the four generations of women down to her own generation who lived the life of Empire in the East are among her other works. Recently we worked together on a biography of the great Scottish publisher, folklorist and author of *Vestiges of Natural Creation*, Robert Chambers. We have also recently co-written a book on the world history of tea, in which my mother wrote the sections on Assamese tea.

All of this work intersected with my own at many points. We share a love of poetry, myths, and the culture and history of Asia. My mother it was who started to work on the listings of Kirkby Lonsdale, then in Westmorland, which my father had helped to uncover in the Fleming papers. She helped on much of the transcription of historical documents, including Ralph Josselin's diary. She also revised and re-wrote the rough draft of *The Family Life of Ralph Josselin* when I was on fieldwork in Nepal and she has read and commented on drafts of almost all my books.

My mother is a corrective to my academic tendencies. She writes very clearly and directly, a better stylist than I. She taught me a lot about communication. Furthermore, she has a subversive, idealistic, left-wing temperament, is a Buddhist and a vegetarian. She introduced me to Verrier Elwin and encouraged me in my dreams of returning to do fieldwork in Assam. In fact Iris was always enormously encouraging of all my academic ambitions.

There are many moments, particularly in the formative years between the ages of 15 and 25 when parental encouragement and a little bit of help can make all the difference. I never needed to justify my desire to go on to University, to take four degrees, to write books, to accumulate books and fill my room with thousands of little slips of paper. On the contrary, my parents encouraged all this. They allowed me to take over a shed in our garden in the Lake District to write my D.Phil. They lent me and my then wife Gill a house in Dent-dale to write my second Ph.D. for about eighteenth months. They lugged all my files and cards over from house to house when I was in Nepal.

So in a thousand ways I have benefited from having an extremely intelligent, sensitive and rational mother. She sacrificed much for me in giving me an expensive education, always encouraged me to believe in myself, taught me to attack pre-conceived notions. She encouraged me to be concerned with the poor and weak. Her originality and curiosity were an inspiration and I owe to her far more than I can possibly describe here. A truly remarkable person and mind.