

## Francis Joseph Charles Rossotti

Francis was born on the second day of 1927 to Carlo Guiseppe Luigi Rossotti, who had migrated for economic reasons to London from the northern Italian cathedral city of Chieri, and Elsie Anna Caterina Perona, daughter of an Italian father and an English mother. Francis always spoke with particular affection of his maternal grandparents, who lived in the top floor of the family's home in Acre Lane, Brixton. He retained a lifelong nostalgia for the Italian cuisine of his childhood, including regional delicacies like *gnocchi* and *osso buco*.

At the same time, he always loved London, and staple British dishes like bread and dripping or steak and kidney pudding also resonated powerfully in his emotional memory throughout his life. He looked back fondly on Saturday morning trips to the cinema as a child, which evidently helped to foster his life-long enjoyment of films. Carefree holidays with cousins on their small farm outside Peterborough also anticipated breaks later in life devoted to walking in the Breckon Beacons or Yorkshire Dales.

His father Carlo worked as a waiter at the Savoy Hotel on the Strand, rising by his late 30s to the positions of Second Butler and Head Waiter at the Savoy Grill. Francis seems to have been profoundly influenced by the exacting standards of discipline, application and efficiency set by his highly respected father. Each year till the outbreak of the Second World War he accompanied his father across Europe by train to holiday with his Italian uncles, aunts and cousins under the summer sun of the Piedmont.

The war years must have been devastating for Francis, his parents and younger sibling, Roy, who would later work as a highly regarded fashion photographer and eminent cinematographer collaborating with David Lean on such iconic films as *Lawrence of Arabia* and *Dr Zhivago*. Carlo was interned in 1940 as an 'enemy alien' and then deported for Canada by boat. It was overloaded with four or five times the number of people that it had accommodated when it had served as a

cruise liner. It had no naval escort, its anti-torpedo system had been removed, and it had not been marked with a red cross as it should have been. Seventy-five miles west of the Irish coast an ambitious German U-boat commander, keen to secure the monthly prize for tonnage sunk in the Atlantic, struck the *Arandora Star* with his vessel's last remaining torpedo. British servicemen then shot holes in the lifeboats. Carlo was assumed to have been amongst 682 passengers to perish at sea.

So at the age of 12 Francis lost his father and assumed weighty responsibilities on account of his widowed mother's chronic ill health when he returned for the holidays from the boarding school to which he had won a scholarship from Santley Street Primary School in Brixton. At the same time, Francis' elder half-sibling Kenneth, who subsequently became a senior hospital administrator and local councillor, exercised as supportive and stabilising an influence as his own war service allowed. His Perona-Wright descendants continue to bless us with their love to this day.

Family mythology has it that the family home was bombed on at least a couple of occasions in the course of the London blitz, and that possessions were repeatedly looted from storage facilities. It would have been surprising had these events not had a profoundly traumatising effect upon Francis as well as his mother and siblings. He seems to have led his subsequent life in such a way as to minimise risk and optimise security, objectives he came to realise with a high level of success.

Francis was immensely fortunate to have access to inspirational teaching and mentoring at Christ's Hospital, Horsham, in particular from his Chemistry teacher Hettie Barber, mother of the celebrated bandleader Chris Barber. Thanks also to the formidable work ethic modelled by his father, Francis finished his secondary education by securing a Postmastership to Merton College, Oxford. Despite the challenges involved in attending school as a dual national of Italy and the United Kingdom when the two countries were at war, Francis developed the character and resilience to flourish as an all-round sportsman, Grecian (or

prefect) and scholar. He felt so grateful for the opportunities his schooling provided to transform his circumstances in life that when he was in a position to do so many decades later he enabled another young member of a family of modest means to go to Christ's Hospital in his turn.

Before going up to Oxford, he filled the position of Physical Training Instructor during his national service with the RAF regiment between 1945 and 1948, having passed out with the Sword of Honour on account, he led us to understand, of having committed the laws of sporting codes to memory more accurately than his hundred-or-so contemporaries, many of whom were actually better exponents of the relevant practical skills. His period in the armed services included a memorable tour of duty in Palestine during the final years of the British mandate immediately prior to the creation of the state of Israel, during which time he served as PA successively to Air Officer Commanding, Levant, and Commandant General, RAF. Francis shot a photographic record of terrorist atrocities from the period that he shielded from our eyes as children.

We imagine that Francis found enormous happiness and fulfilment at Merton in the late 40s and early 50s, and he certainly formed close friendships there with his contemporaries Nigel Crease and Paul Ledger, each of whom became our godfathers and retired as Headmasters of well-known schools, that brought him enormous pleasure throughout his life. He renounced his Italian citizenship at this point in order to accompany them to Italy on holiday one summer without the risk of conscription for a second term of national service for another country.

At any rate he thrived under the tutelage of Courtenay Phillips at Merton and graduated with First Class Honours, embarked on a Doctorate of Philosophy supervised by Bob Williams, and married Hazel Marsh, an Exhibitioner from St Hugh's College and a fellow member of his research group. Though she was his academic contemporary, she was three years his junior in age, on account of women not having to complete national service prior to matriculation. Successful completion of his D. Phil. was followed by eighteen months as Research Fellow at the Royal Institute of Technology, Stockholm, under the aegis

of the charismatic Lars Gunnar Sillén. He then spent five years as Lecturer in Inorganic Chemistry at the University of Edinburgh, before returning to Oxford in 1961 as Fellow and Tutor in Inorganic Chemistry at St Edmund Hall, a role he would fill till retirement in 1994.

Francis came back to Oxford as father of two toddlers, born only fifteen months apart in 1957 and 1959. Hazel always took the view that he was particularly good with us in our early infancy. I have memories of his giving me 'angel rides' on his shoulders during walks on Shotover but being in fear of toppling off, of completing a sticker album of futuristic forms of transport with him in the bathroom as he shaved, and of walking back with him from the local store with chocolate coated vanilla ice-creams on warm summer days. Heather recalls with fondness his encouraging her early interest in stamp collecting and demonstrating the capacity of science to dazzle through the dramatic sound effects and spectacular colour changes of particular chemical reactions. I remember his arriving home from work in grey flannel trousers and cycle clips, tweed coat and cap, and cleaning a pipe or lighting a cigar. In those days he would never even visit the local library or greengrocer on a Saturday morning without wearing a tightly knotted woollen tie. Hazel had fallen in part for his jet-black hair, and to our eyes he looked very dashing in *sub fusc* and evening dress, but he always declined to grow his dark beard on account of its accentuating his Mediterranean heritage. While he defended jealously his hard-won status and position in the country of his birth, he could also reveal a passionate Italian temperament, for all the emotional guardedness inculcated by his early upbringing and experiences in London and the Home Counties.

By this time Francis and Hazel had jointly produced a substantial book in the field of Inorganic Chemistry that they had embarked upon together in their doctoral research. *The Determination of Stability Constants and other Equilibrium Constants in Solution*, published by McGraw-Hill in 1961, was widely admired for its ground breaking scholarship. It continued to yield a small but steady stream of royalties for many years after publication. Its status as required reading in the 60s was confirmed by the fact that a Russian edition appeared within a few

years, though I understand the Russians did not cable royalties to the west during the cold war, despite sending the translator to stay with Francis in Headington to resolve the linguistic difficulties he had encountered.

As a member of his university sub-faculty Francis would lecture, demonstrate, examine and conduct research, while as Fellow and Tutor he played his part in the entrance, tuition and administration processes of his college. Membership of Governing Body also carried obligations like dining at high table and taking one's turn to read the lesson at evensong. It has been very moving to read condolences from his former colleagues reminiscing about the distinctive loyalty and dedication with which Francis served St Edmund Hall. His contributions are recalled as having considerably enlivened and indeed extended discussions at Governing Body meetings. One former colleague even went so far as to write that he 'was utterly pivotal in turning the college around to facing the mid-twentieth century in its attitudes and orientations' and that 'it is hard to overestimate his importance in its emergence from relative obscurity.'

Correspondence also makes it clear that the courtesy, consideration and support he displayed towards numerous younger colleagues elected to the Governing Body in the years and decades after he himself became an established figure in the college were much appreciated. Former pupils as far back as the 60s remember him with deep affection as a kind, concerned and helpful – even 'brilliant' as one writer put it – tutor and supervisor whose assistance, more than one has been kind enough to confide, changed their lives in ways for which they will be for ever grateful. He was steeped in the academic literature, and he set exacting standards of accuracy, logic and rigour in thought and expression alike. The warmth and spontaneity of his sense of humour seems to have been universally appreciated, as was the sherry he served at the end of early evening tutorials. I am very proud that in the estimation of a former Principal 'he is one of the "greats" when one looks at the Hall tutors of the past.'

Meanwhile, Francis pursued and developed leisure interests. Whether as a result of his marching band experience at Christ's Hospital, or his international

travels on the academic conference circuit, he acquired a love of listening to a growing collection of recordings of Russian orchestral music, some of it bought in Russia itself. He also developed a deep knowledge of Japanese woodcut prints, and over the years he bought a number of portraits and landscapes, each of them making such elegant use of line and form, blue ink and white paper. He read widely in his preferred genres of historical fiction, the Western, spy thrillers and adventures. He was happiest living frugally and setting resources aside for rainier days, and once his mortgage was repaid and his children were self-sufficient he enjoyed delving into the arcane worlds of savings and investment. He walked recreationally in the national parks of England and Wales each spring and autumn, and basked in the clear waters of the Aegean, especially those off Tilos, on at least one trip to Greece each year. A highlight in more recent times has been his Easter trip to a village on south coast of Western Crete, where he much enjoyed the company and hospitality of Basil Kouvaritakis, a close friend of later years from St Edmund Hall, and his wife Sheila.

No account of Francis would be complete without acknowledging the interest he took in wine. He served his College and university in so many and various ways over the years, filling the roles of Vice-Principal of his College and Chairman of the sub-Faculty of Inorganic Chemistry as the occasion arose, but by his own self-deprecating account he worked even more assiduously for the College as a member of its Wine Committee than he had in previous stints on the Buildings, Investments and Bursarial Committees, and in his decade as Library Fellow. Incidentally, the college library was situated by then in the former church of St Peter-in-the-East where Francis and Hazel had been married some thirty years earlier.

In any event St Edmund Hall also made an enormous contribution to Francis' knowledge and appreciation of wine. Wine Committee duties seem to have involved frequent tastings, both in term and in the vacation, hosted by leading shippers from London, Bristol and elsewhere. Francis most likely offered his recommendations in forthright language with an eye on optimising value for money, cash flow and profit margins from the expanding conference trade in a

context of restricted scope for cellarage. We are deeply indebted to successive chairs of the Wine Committee for including Francis amongst its number so many years into his retirement, because by giving so much he naturally received even more himself. He came to enjoy a wide variety of grapes and countries of origin, and took particular pleasure in matching wines to Hazel's wonderful cooking of game meats and wild fish. He also produced fabulous sparkling wines and dessert wines to celebrate the visits of his children and Nicole, his French daughter-in-law whose love he reciprocated so warmly.

Francis sometimes met the insecurities of the present with tenacious commitment to the hierarchies and orthodoxies of the past. He was a passionate advocate in some of the great debates of his times – the expansion of tertiary education opportunities, recalibration of the balance of rote learning and experiential understanding, shifting attitudes towards gender equality and cultural diversity – and was not always an early adopter of developments that appear progressive from the perspective of today. A lifetime of dispassionate critical appraisal and a visceral aversion to downside risk could bring out a contrarian streak in him. He delighted in the playful contest of ideas and was unconcerned about holding a minority view. Outspoken as he could be – 'Francis by name, frank by nature', quipped one condolence message – he was fine company. His ready wit, twinkling eye and affable laughter are among the qualities that his friends found most distinctive and engaging. He grew very fond of colleagues whose company he had shared and enjoyed over many years, irrespective of ostensibly irreconcilable intellectual backgrounds, approaches and values.

He passed his ninetieth birthday at the start of 2017 with a little discomfort in his joints but otherwise still in relatively good health, after which he managed the challenges and frustrations of diminishing capacities with patience, dignity and grace. He is survived by Hazel, who did so very much to nurture and sustain him over the best part of seventy years; and by his two children and his daughter-in-law, as well as many precious nephews, nieces, great-nephews and great-nieces and their families. Francis was much loved and deeply respected, to

the point that his benevolent example may even have helped to influence one great-niece to follow in his footsteps as a Postmaster at Merton, and another to follow an academic career as a research scientist. Heather and I are grateful beyond words for the wealth of opportunities for enjoyment, learning and growth with which he provided us throughout our lives, neither expecting nor demanding anything in return.

Ian Rossotti  
October 2019