

REMEMBERING FANNY STEIN (NÉE HILL)

A personal memoir
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I was very pleased to be invited by Clare Stein to talk about my cousin Fanny at the short memorial service that was held for Fanny and her mother Inez at the Jesus Pobre cemetery on Wednesday 11 June 2014 at 6.00pm.¹ I spoke without notes but have reconstituted the following text as a fair approximation of what I said – while expanding it slightly on the subject of our Hill grandparents.

Everyone: I want to talk about Fanny Stein (1944-84) in her youthful days. It's something that I have been waiting to say to the family for a long time. Because she died suddenly, I was unable to attend her funeral and never had a chance to say a proper goodbye. Now, I am not the person who knew Fanny best. (Of course, that's her husband John Stein). But I am, undoubtedly, the person amongst us all here who knew her longest – in fact, all her life.

She is my first cousin; we were born within months of each other; we saw a lot of each other when we were children; and we always loved each other. At one stage, as you'll hear, Fanny (at about the age of four) came to live with myself and my younger brothers and sisters. She greatly enjoyed being part of our tribe of Corfield kids; and I've always thought that it was a great shame for her that she never had the regular companionship of siblings. (Her half-brother Andrew and half-sister Dinah were born when Fanny was in her teens and busy launching herself into adulthood.)

What was Fanny like to meet as a young girl? She was very sturdy, very healthy, very attractive and engaging, with lots of blonde curls and large blue

¹ This account was originally written (2014) for circulation within the family, now (2019) slightly updated for web-publication in tribute to her vital spirit.

eyes, and always bags of vitality. She was very intelligent, very quick – indeed, it could be said that at times she'd have done better by thinking things through more slowly. But her effervescent quickness was part of her vitality and charm.

From very young, Fanny had a laughing, chaffing, teasing style of speaking. Her father, the eminent Marxist historian and Oxford academic Christopher Hill,² could seem outwardly a somewhat remote figure. Yet, among friends and family, he too loved bantering wit and repartee, with which Fanny could more than hold her own. Later, she turned out to be a great mimic. She also had great empathy, being very quick at picking up other people's moods. And she was fond of finding apt nicknames for people and things, which was something of a custom in our family.

The result was that conversations with Fanny were always laced with laughter. Indeed, throughout all the times that I knew her well, in her youth, I never saw her cross or sad.

All of you who knew her at different ages and stages in her life will recognise a lot of this pen-portrait. People do change as they grow older, but not out of all recognition. Fanny was at heart a very warm and generous person. Never deliberately unkind or mean. That's not to say that she didn't get into scrapes and mischief. She did.

As a young child, she had very little parental supervision and she was always 'pushing the boundaries' in search of attention and guidance, as child psychologists of a later generation would say. That attitude got her into lots of trouble, which got more complicated as she got older. Yet her flouting of rules was always done in a spirit of fun, not in anger or spite. I'm really talking about Fanny as she was from a child (as far back as my memory goes) to a young woman in her early teens, before she discovered the temptations of adult life.

² In *Family Portraits*, see also PJC on *Christopher Hill: The Marxist Historian as I Remember Him* (2014).

In a moment I want to tell you about my mother's view of Fanny – my mother being Christopher Hill's younger sister, Irene Corfield (née Hill), always known as Bumper.³ She saw a lot of Fanny when young. But, before that, I'll recount one episode of naughtiness that I shared with Fanny. It must have been sometime *circa* summer 1955, when Christopher and Inez were divorcing.

I was invited to accompany Fanny and Christopher on a seaside holiday at Weston-super-Mare. It was a role of proxy sibling that I played, very happily, whenever Christopher needed to find company to amuse his lively daughter. We stayed in a simple boarding house, with lots of abutting buildings. On one occasion, Fanny woke me from sleep to climb, with her, out of the bedroom window onto the roof. It seemed the most natural thing at the time. In our pyjamas, we slithered down a pipe, crossed a low sloping roof, levered ourselves upwards onto a neighbouring roof, and climbed up to the ridge-line. We sat there for some time, in the mild summer night. In retrospect, I guess that the scenario really called for horrified adults on the ground, calling urgently for fire-engines to rescue us. But nothing happened. After a while, I asked Fanny rather meekly if we could go back to bed. We returned and, once safe, laughed a lot. Next day we certainly did not tell Christopher; nor did I ever tell my parents. So this is the first confession of our escapade. As it ended safely, it bonded us as shared kid's adventures often do.⁴

Well, there are lots of anecdotes about Fanny's multiple escapades, so I won't add any more but will talk instead about my mother's view. Bumper was a staunch advocate for Fanny and always maintained that a lot of Fanny's later problems (not all, but a lot) could be traced back to seriously defective

³ In *Family Portraits*, see also PJC on *Irene Corfield: Memories* (2014).

⁴ Climbing onto the roof at night: I wonder how many children do this and get away with it? At our home in Sidcup, my siblings and I sometimes climbed out at night, from one first floor window onto a sloping roof and back via another, some five or six feet away. It was like asserting our territory. Years later, when I told my mother of this occasional pastime she was suitably aghast, not only that we'd been risking our limbs (rather than our lives) but also that she and my father (vigilant and loving parents) had never known.

parenting on the part of both Christopher and Inez, Fanny's mother. When Bumper told me her own assessment, it tallied with things that I witnessed as a child but then didn't really understand.

I do remember Inez in later life as a very charming person, who sang a lot and was rather fey. She was more interested in the company of men than of women, whilst always remaining involved with and rather competitive with her daughter. But as a mother, when Fanny was very young, Inez was damagingly inconsistent. I saw her smothering Fanny with kisses and petting her, but then angrily pushing her away and ignoring her for long periods. According to my mother, this inconsistency was the norm from Inez. It's not hard to recognise how hurtful and confusing that behaviour was for a young child.

Equally, the bookish Christopher Hill was not good as the father of such a lively daughter. He certainly was fond of Fanny but was rather nonplussed by her demands. Above all, he was completely unable to show physical affection to his children. In later life, he talked to me about this state of affairs, which caused him sadness (something that he saw more clearly in retrospect than at the time).

His own parents, who were Yorkshire Methodists, were sincerely fond of their son and daughter (especially the brilliant older brother Christopher, in my mother's view). Yet the Hills senior were physically remote, in the accepted Victorian style. My mother considered herself to have had an unhappy childhood, mainly caused by a complete outward lack of physical affection and the imposition of stifling religious rules, dictated by my grandparents' Methodism.

I may say that I was rather resistant to this claim from my mother. To me, the Hill grandparents were delightful – especially Grandpa Hill. He was very

gentle and sweet with us kids, full of little jokes and innocent fun. But that was not how he seemed, most of the time, as a father.⁵

Both Christopher and Bumper intended their style of parenting to be much more physically loving. Bumper, aided by the more outgoing Tony Corfield and her own strong maternalism, managed it. Christopher didn't. He was too shy (not really remote, but reserved) to break out of Victorian physical reticence within the family, even though in all other ways he broke from the Methodism of his youth. He was deeply admirable as an uncle and I was proud of our later friendship. Yet, sad to say, Christopher was not good as the father of young children. The result was that Fanny's skittishness was like that of an untamed little sprite, without a proper home.

Bumper's own pronounced views about Fanny came especially from the time when Fanny lived with us for a while, when the Corfields were still in Oxford. I'm not sure exactly for how long, but it was probably something like 9-10 months. And Fanny must have been about four years old (so sometime in 1948-49). It was certainly at a time when Inez was seriously unwell. Bumper, who was a wonderful mother, considered that she was really getting to grips with calming Fanny's waywardness; and, when Inez reclaimed her daughter, Bumper pressed strongly to keep Fanny for a longer period. I do remember that we kids all wanted her to stay, as did Fanny. After that, my mother and Fanny remained devoted to one another but saw each other more and more rarely.

John Stein told me just recently that Bumper was the only person of whom Fanny was in awe and even slightly afraid. In response, I laughed, and thought: *well done, Bumper!* What she did as a mother was to give us lots of fun, but also clear rules and boundaries, plus the absolute certainty that we were deeply loved, physically, emotionally, and mentally. Fanny had no trouble in

⁵ Bumper did recall that on one occasion in her youth, when she was in serious pain after a fall, her father sat up all night with her, holding her hand and telling her little jokes and stories to distract her. But the fact that she remembered this episode so well was because such physically tactile behaviour from him as a parent (not as a grandparent) was so rare.

generating fun on her own account; but she never had, from either of her own parents, the other certainties.

Even their choice of her birth name, Frances Hill, shortened universally to Fanny, seemed to take the form of a sly parental joke, potentially at her expense. Not everyone has the panache to live up to the reputation of the eighteenth-century's most notorious heroine of bawdy literature, John Cleland's *Fanny Hill* (1748) – a work long banned in Britain.⁶ In fact, our Fanny did have the personality and looks to cope with her name. It might have crushed a less confident child. And even Fanny found it prudent, in her teens, to carry official documentation with her, so that when challenged by police or other officials to give her name, she had an answer to the guffaws which invariably greeted her truthful reply: 'I'm Fanny Hill'.

I'm not saying this to blame anyone retrospectively. There's no point now; it was all a long time ago. Ultimately, Fanny made her own destiny, as we all do. But it's good to have a chance to put my memories (and Bumper's view) onto the family record. The young Fanny had a disturbed upbringing; and it showed in the adult woman, lovely, lively, beautiful, brilliant as she was.

So how to end? I don't want to be sad. Fanny was a very loveable person and we Corfields loved her: that is, especially Bumper, who saw her as the missing child; myself as closest in age to Fanny (rather like a twin); and my next brother Adrian,⁷ who had a sunny and mischievous personality that was very like Fanny's.

She was the spirit of life, even if, as we know, life rarely comes without some problems in its train. So my overriding memories of the young Fanny Hill are of love and laughter, always lots of exuberant laughter ...

⁶ John Cleland's bawdy novel, *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure* (1748) is generally known by the name of its lead protagonist Fanny Hill. For many years, the book was circulated only clandestinely; but in 1963 it was published openly in the UK, resulting in a successful prosecution in 1964 for obscenity. Fanny, at the age of 20, thus had to live with a publicly sensationalised name. She generally found it fun but sometimes the repetition was boring.

⁷ In *Family Portraits*, see PJC on *Adrian Corfield: Memories*.