

Blanche Louise Bingham (Corbitt)

1912-2008

Blanche Louise Corbitt was born in Paddington on 16 April 1912. It was a difficult birth, brought on prematurely by the shock of the loss of the Titanic, which both mother and baby barely survived. She was the third of five children, and was brought up, very poor, in Walthamstow, where she attended Walthamstow Grammar School. Her great intelligence was obvious, and she was encouraged to apply to Oxford. She was the first of her family ever to go to university. She was Blanche before Oxford, but became Louise, or Lulu, there.

She entered St Hugh's College in 1931 to read English, the subject she would later teach – she was a born teacher. She loved the College, loved Oxford and loved English – particularly Shakespeare. She was taught Anglo-Saxon by J. R. R. Tolkien, and in later life would imitate the speech-tunes in which Tolkien would declaim passages from *Beowulf* and the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. Women had only fairly recently been admitted to full membership of Oxford University, and both the fellows and the students then felt themselves to be pioneers, which led to a great sense of belonging and esprit de corps. Among my mother's other Oxford anecdotes I recall her telling me that in her day members of the College were allowed male guests, but were obliged to wheel the bed out into the corridor for the duration of the visit. It is hard to realize now that such things are within living memory, rather than centuries ago.

After Oxford, my mother trained to teach, at the Institute of Education in the University of London, and began her teaching career. She was teaching English at Mill Mount School in York when she met my father, Robert Llewelyn (Lyn) Bingham, in 1937. They were strikingly alike in many ways: both one of five children, both brought up very poor, both the first in their families to go to university, both highly intelligent and scholarly, both teachers (my father taught French, at Nunthorpe School, York), both politically aware and left-wing.

They saw the war coming, and married in 1939, determined to have some married life whatever happened. My mother was congratulated on her marriage, and sacked – as happened in those days, incredible as it may seem.

When war broke out that September, as many men teachers joined the forces, she was suddenly in great demand in all the schools in York, boys' or girls', to teach anything. She thoroughly enjoyed this reversal of fortune, and the experience of teaching other subjects. After the war, my mother switched to primary school teaching, first at Acaster Malbis, then at Wighill School, where she was headmistress from 1947-59, before going back to secondary teaching. In 1963 my parents were able to realize their career dream of being Senior French Master and Senior English Mistress in the same school, Dr Williams School, Dolgellau. My mother taught there until my father's death in 1972, and then in London until 1982, when she finally retired as she was turning seventy.

The marriage produced three children, Isobel Jane (1943), Nicholas Hugh (1945) and Katharine Susan (1949). Jane followed her mother to St Hugh's (1962, French), but predeceased her in 1997. Nick followed her to Oxford (1963, Trinity, Mathematics), and continued the family tradition of teaching by becoming an academic. Kitty read English at Newnham College, Cambridge, and became an English teacher like her mother, but died in 1997, a few months after Jane. Lulu died peacefully in London on 12 April, aged 95, after a short illness; she is survived by her son, five grandchildren and one great-grandchild.

On 7 June 2003 I escorted my mother to a lunch at St Hugh's for old girls, where she was the oldest person present, at 91. She was treated as the guest of honour by the then new Principal, Andrew Dilnot, who made a fuss of her, and kissed her. She loved the day, which was a fitting last visit for her to the College she loved so much.

Professor Nick Bingham, Trinity College.