

## Chris McAllister - a life lived

*by Sarah McAllister*

*"I thought I'd begin by reading a poem by Shakespeare, but then I thought, why should I? He never reads any of mine."*

- Spike Milligan

Born on October 17th 1936, the eldest son of Christopher "Christy" McAllister and Mary "Molly" Bates, Christopher "Kit" McAllister was soon joined by brothers Cathal (Buddy), Eamon (Eddie), Gerry and Denis. An intelligent, enquiring boy who, might he be born today, would be labelled a "geek" for his obsessions with aeroplanes, boats and other technology.

At a very young age, Dad was sent to school at Knockbeg College, County Carlow. He missed home terribly whilst there and developed a lifelong hatred of potato skins. He says it wasn't even baked potatoes that he hated; it was the daily practice of boiling potatoes in their skins and serving them unpeeled. Since then, he has eaten anything and everything except jacket potatoes, earning himself the nickname "the bin" as we didn't have a dog.

After school, Dad joined the seminary at Holy Cross College, Clonliffe where he completed 4 out of 5 years training for the priesthood. Accounts vary as to why he never returned for his 5th and final year but they all have the running thread that he fell out with Archbishop McQuaid; some say it was on political grounds, others (and the one Dad always told me) claimed that the Archbishop wasn't happy with the amount of time Dad was spending canoeing, and one account is even more salacious!

It was then that he moved to England to find work and live with the family in Ossett, where his father now lived with Eileen, after losing our grandmother Molly.

Some memories from Dad's brother Gerry:

*When I think of Kit at the time we were growing up, several images come to mind. One was his wide range of hobbies. You will know I am sure about his model aeroplane building but he had several others – bird watching, collecting birds' eggs, working with leather and tooling it, book binding, photography including doing developing. He also went sailing. He didn't have a boat but he crewed for someone else. I am sure there must be a word for someone with lots of hobbies – a poly something?*

*He was very skilful with his hands and his model aircraft were amazing. I don't know how he picked up the skill and knowledge needed. The finishing of a new aircraft and its first flight was always a great occasion. We all assembled to watch. I confess that we were hoping something would go wrong! His first models were wind up elastic band type but he had ones with mini petrol engines.*

*We used to torment him, though Buddy (Eamon) was the lead in that. To get the models airborne, he would have to run with it and then launch into the air. At the maiden flight of one aircraft Buddy and cousin Sean had laid a rope on the ground and as Kit was in mid-run they pulled it tight and tripped him up. The model aircraft was damaged and I think we all felt bad. On another occasion his model didn't follow the intended course and ended up stuck near the top of a copper beech tree. Ladders had to be fetched from the farm to retrieve it.*

*For us, his best project was making the canoe. He proposed making one if the rest of us would pay for the materials which we did. Again, I was impressed with his skill in making it and we watched it progress day by day. When it was finished we took it to the beach for the launch. We all enjoyed using it and I think we had two summers with it before we left for England. That canoe led to Kit's long interest in canoeing. When he lived in Ossett and I was spending the summer holidays there I went with him on a weekend canoeing and camping trip down the river Eden in Cumbria. I remember it rained a lot but I still enjoyed the weekend (sort of). He must have trusted me then as competent canoeist though river canoeing is very different from sea canoeing. Many years later my canoeing experience was useful when Joan and I canoed on the Dordogne.*

*I only stayed at Ossett during school holidays and then went to London after I had finished school so I have fewer memories of the period after Donabate than Denis*

*might have. But Kit was always a visitor wherever I was living. He stayed with Joan and me in London on occasions. We didn't always know he was coming. We didn't have a telephone so it was possible to answer the doorbell and find Kit standing there. Later when we were living in Scotland I remember opening the curtains one morning and seeing a tent had been pitched on the front lawn. We knew immediately who it was – Kit had come for breakfast.*

*"I'm Irish. We think sideways."*

*- Spike Milligan*

Dad's dear friend and sailing chum John Hilton remembers *"In about 1968/69 Chris was Secretary of the British Canoe Union. One day, we were in Ross on Wye at a canoe competition he had organised. A tall thin bloke came up to him and said 'Excuse me, are you Chris McAllister? May I ask about organising a canoe competition?' It was Chris Chattaway, the then Chairman of the Olympic Committee. Chris was completely unfazed and patiently explained how to go about it."*

Just three years later, in 1972, the Munich olympics saw the first four canoe slalom events in history. Dad helped coach the slalom GB team so I'm guessing that the two Chrises had stayed in touch! Looking at the medal table, though, it was an event entirely dominated by the Germans that year. Mum told stories of long days on cold riverbanks in Augsburg and some unrest between the East Germans and the West Germans.

John also recalls *"We were sailing at an open meeting on the Wirral in Dad's blue 505 called Molotov Cocktail. The name was written in big letters down the side of the boat , English on one side and Russian [we think] on the other.*

*After the race, we were coming into the jetty, lots of people watching, the Russian side to the jetty. Some people asked in loud voices if we had come all the way from Russia to compete. Chris, in his best Monty Python Russian accent had them on for ages until we started laughing."*

*Blessed are the cracked for they let in the light.*

Spike Milligan

Dad first met mum on a riverbank. He didn't tell it as romantically as mum but the gist of it was that she was a young PE teacher, leading a party of teenagers on a school trip to the Ardeche river in France and he was the quiet man running the canoeing instruction there. A man who loved dramatic music, Mozart's Magic Flute and Requiem, Beethoven, Gilbert & Sullivan etc, he was attracted to her over-dramatic approach to life. She was mesmerised by his calm indifference and ability to recite every Goon Show line that had ever played on the radio. They were married on July 5th 1970, exiting the church to a passageway of hockey sticks and canoe paddles.

Jo was born in March 1974 and Dad took some time adjusting to family life. He wasn't always around; he was often out canoeing, climbing or researching aircraft. Worse still, he would spend hours in the garage with fibreglass resin, building canoes. Jo and I both have early memories of the phone receiver being covered in blobs of fibreglass from his hands when he was called inside to answer a call.

*"My Father had a profound influence on me.*

*He was a lunatic."*

- Spike Milligan

My first memories of Dad were when he was 42. I remember being two years old and (it's hard to believe now) very shy and terrified of the world around me. My favourite place to hide was behind Dad's long legs. I have quite a few memories of the world, partially obscured by his legs; sometimes betrousered, often in tiny shorts with all his funny veins on display. It was a safe place and one from where I learned a lot about the world.

When I was a little older, Jo got big enough to join mum at the sports club at weekends. This left Dad in charge of a small, chatty, curious thing that he, initially, did not want to entertain. Sometimes, I would simply have to follow him to the places he was going and sit for long periods of time getting rather bored. This included Manchester Airport - we watched so many planes take off and land whilst I played with the cigarette butts on the floor - on boring trips to buy hardware for some of his many unique DIY projects, posting

hundreds of SDP flyers though people's doors before an election, more research for Dad's books and other dull weekend activities. Over time, Dad got used to having me around and started to suggest more adventurous ways to fill our time. We would fill our little rucksacks with sandwiches and head to boggy woodland where we'd shelter from the rain in a bird hide whilst he used his binoculars and tried to teach me the names of all the birds we saw. I wasn't interested - I just liked the adventure and the sandwiches. We went through a month of becoming avid mycophiles - collecting as many different fungi as we could then taking them home and labelling them using little stickers on Mum's sewing pins. Sometimes, we just stayed at home and made Airfix models. By the time I was finally big enough to join Mum and Jo at the sports club, I wasn't all that interested in Doing Sports anymore. Weekends were our adventuring times and I wanted to have fun with Dad.

Not the chattiest of men, Dad only really talked when he had Something To Say. I think this led me to overcompensate and do all of his chatting for him. He liked this and we got into a lifelong rhythm of me talking, him nodding and occasionally offering some wise words. No question was ever too crazy and he loved curiosity so I simply bombarded him with never-ending questions every single day.

*"Is there anything worn under the kilt? No, it's all in perfect working order."*  
- Spike Milligan

As Jo and I got older, our weekends and holidays got increasingly more adventurous. Dad would drag us to the lake district and Scotland for camping expeditions in which we were dragged up mountains. This was easier when we were small enough to be carried in the rucksack but far more difficult when our little legs were made to walk. We moaned a lot but it was always worth it for the view and the soggy sandwiches on the top. Summers saw elongated camping expeditions through France with lots of walking and sometimes a spot of river canoeing. We mostly enjoyed the seaside bits but Dad wasn't the biggest fan of sitting still. Sometimes, he would take himself off to the Pyrenees to climb a big mountain or to research a particular aircraft that was nearby. He enjoyed time with his friend Jean Marie as neither of them spoke much and they just got to walk lots and take in the views.

The most exciting addition to family holidays was the purchase of our Mirror Dinghy *Snoopy*, which he would hook onto the tow bar with his canoe strapped on top. We would spend days on Ullswater, “messaging about in boats” and it certainly was the most idyllic and laid back period in our family adventuring. Dad was never happier than when we were on water and it seemed rather perfect when he was later offered a position bringing Open Learning to Cumbria. He loved the idea of being his own boss and being able to shape a new way of learning for adults but, most of all, we would be living near the Lake District!

*He felt that his whole life was some kind of dream and he sometimes wondered whose it was and whether they were enjoying it.*

Douglas Adams

So then began Dad’s next big adventure: St. Mungo’s House, Bromfield. A big old former rectory in rural West Cumbria, Mum and Dad dedicated years to making it our home. Dad set to work “fixing” everything on a shoestring; a task he relished and this gave him ample opportunity for some of his zaniest DIY projects to date. This is the period in which the term “A Chris McAllister” was born to describe any botched homemade structure made from plywood and varnish which, whilst practically fulfilling its design brief, it was never aesthetically pleasing in any way. As a person who has had a number of creative careers, there must have been a strong influence on me from Dad’s determination to never purchase an item when you could make it yourself. Dad was very proud of everything he did for our house in Bromfield; from the brick-built barbecue to the Dual Cabbageway - a series of concrete paths running through Mum’s giant vegetable patch. He made wooden hen houses and runs to keep the chickens safe from the foxes and even erected a giant fence around the field when I wanted a pony. He loved this life but hated mowing the lawns and battling moles with equal verve. He was often seen testing some new anti-mole incendiary with a look of vindictive glee, only to find fresh mole hills everywhere the next morning.

A quiet, interesting man, Dad struggled with manic depression throughout his life. He was either up and going at super speed - out jogging before first light (before jogging was cool) then working until late - or an emotional mess quietly keeping out of everyone else's way. He was very bad at stopping. Holidays never started well but then, once he'd got into a slower rhythm, they were fantastic. He could embody a stillness so calm that he was famous for being the man that butterflies would land on. He was especially popular with Red Admirals so we often joked that he, perhaps, had been one in a previous life.

In 1992, we moved out of Bromfield to be nearer to civilisation and central heating. Our house in Wreay got the full Chris McAllister treatment; cupboards, shelves, a garage full of pulleys and some dodgy attic flooring which never looked that safe to walk on. Two years later, Dad moved out and bought a smaller house in Carlisle, which I helped him to paint and furnish. Whilst it had a number of rooms, he mostly lived in his huge study which quickly became his happy place.

*Don't you understand that we need to be childish in order to understand? Only a child sees things with perfect clarity, because it hasn't developed all those filters which prevent us from seeing things that we don't expect to see.*

Douglas Adams

Later that year, he met Rosemary. Like with Mum, he was drawn to the fact that she was highly dramatic, entertaining and did most of his talking for him. He adored her and, most importantly, she adored him. They bought a larger house across the border in Annan and he fell completely in love with her lurcher Nicky. He could be seen daily on his bike around the coastal paths with Nicky running alongside. Marrying in 1997, the first few years of their marriage were full of happiness, adventure and lots of exciting trips all over the world.

Between 1999 and 2002, Dad had an “anonymous” column in The Wigton Observer (later the North West Observer). He threw himself into the task of journalist with gusto, wittering on about whatever was going around in his head that week. Initially, he strove for anonymity but, as time went by, Rosemary and Nicky featured regularly and other old friends who became caricatures of themselves. Wiza is the name of a river that runs through the town of Wigton.

Trying to find copies of these old papers, I came across reference to the only copies being available on an old roll of microfilm in Carlisle library. I rushed to the library, excitedly, in search of it. Dad would be very excited to learn that, once I got there, I found that “it was on display in the bottom of a locked filing cabinet stuck in a disused lavatory with a sign on the door saying ‘Beware of the Leopard.’”

I have photographed every single article he wrote and made them into a PDF collection for everyone to peruse. More on this later.

In the final edition of the paper in July 2003, the editor Joe wrote:

*The author of “Wiza” has remained unknown to but a few since the second edition. His humour, sometimes well-hidden, grasp of the English language and ability to look at the work objectively on a daily basis has enabled him to provide excellent copy for The Observer. His talents have not been entirely wasted on The Observer, but I feel his column deserves better recognition, at least in a National broadsheet, but don’t tell him!*

*I can now reveal this talented writer as Chris McAllister, one-time resident of Bromfield. Chris’s writing has also been controversial with a number of apologies being made.*

*Chris was involved with The Observer even before the first edition - he gave us software training in his day job. A big thank you Chris.*

Stories of Dad and Rosemary’s adventures over the following years became the stuff of family legend, with her behaviour in public gradually worsening as her alcohol-related brain damage increased. Jo and I dreaded graduations, weddings and other family occasions as that meant that we would have to invite them both. Dad failed to see her behaviour as anything other than



amusing. He really had a unique way of seeing past behaviour, skin colour, gender and other skin-deep attributes to seeing the person within. He was a huge believer in equality and fairness.

Sadly, Rosemary's mental health deteriorated further and led to their happy little world imploding. In 2016, on his 80th birthday, Rosemary was sectioned under the mental health act and Dad moved in with us.

*"There is a time to live, a time to die, a time to laugh, and at no time are the three of them very far apart."*

- Spike Milligan

In April 2017, Dad was diagnosed with a trio of conditions, all working together to affect his memory loss; vascular dementia, alzheimer's disease and PTSD following his marriage. Some things just confused him; some he blocked out; others he simply couldn't remember and it got frustrating for him. Despite the confusion and difficulty Dad was suffering, he was never aggressive or outwardly upset; he remained cordial and polite, even when I was administering his insulin twice a day (a job I could never do well or without causing him pain).

As Dad's memory worsened, he struggled with the demands of living in a busy household and we found him a home in Carlisle where he was well cared for and very happy. He wiled away many days painting birds and other animals at his desk. He gave copies of these paintings to everyone he met and we've included a few in today's order or service for you. He loved talking about nature as it still made sense to him when everything else around him ceased to.

After a nasty fall, causing him to break his hip, followed by a stroke whilst he was recovering, Dad was unable to walk. He moved to Moot Lodge - a lovely home in Brampton where he could be nearer to me and was able to be hoisted around. Here he was spoiled by the wonderful staff and lived very happily for two years before moving to the new renovated home in Longtown when Moot Lodge closed. He was even happier here, with many of the same staff and residents.

Memory loss is cruel; cruel for the loser of memories and even more cruel for their loved ones; watching the person you loved, admired and respected so greatly lose the greatest thing they ever possessed; their mind. Dad was a wise man, a thinker. Watching him gradually lose that giant brain was the hardest thing I have ever done.

This is why I have so much to say today. So much love for Dad has gone unsaid over the past eight years as his own world shrank and my words made less and less sense to him. He was, however, always happy to sit and hold your hand and, when he smiled, there was a mischievous twinkle in his eye until the very end. He died peacefully and happily, listening to Rimsky-Korsakov's Scheherazade and me chatting to him.

*He attacked everything in life with a mix of extraordinary genius and naive incompetence, and it was often difficult to tell which was which.*

Douglas Adams

To finish, I would like to quote a little passage from Dad's second ever Wiza Wanderings. This passage, from Friday 20th August 1999, witters on in Dadspeak about the solar eclipse that had occurred earlier that week. After a number of bad jokes comparing the sun to its namesake newspaper and the sexual positions that might be optimum during an eclipse, he then touches on his views of our lives as human beings:

*But to continue on a more serious note, following an eclipse we no longer take the sun quite so much for granted. I was relieved when it rose again on the morning of Thursday last, apparently none the worse for wear. I wonder if indeed we take anything quite so much for granted. **We are fragile, short-lived life-forms inhabiting a small and fragile planet in a huge and violent universe.** It was during a total eclipse that astrophysicists decided that Einstein had got it right after all. Light did respond to gravity. A sufficiently large and heavy star would be able not only to attract everything to itself, including its neighbours - not even light would be able to escape. Hence the concept of the Black Hole. If one of them ever sneaks up on us, we won't be able to see it coming.*