



Memories of Martha

Martha Gellhorn, who died last week aged 89, was one of our century's greatest war reporters. To her readers she gave hard truth. To friends she gave whisky and warmth



Gellhorn in the Forties: 'The Big Picture always exists,' she later wrote, 'and I have spent my life observing how desperately the Big Picture affects "little people" who did not devise it'

PHOTOGRAPH BY ROBERT CAPA/MAGNUM

WHEN SHE was 86, Martha Gellhorn sent me a postcard from Sinai, where she had gone on a solo snorkelling expedition in the coral: 'I'm reduced to Dewar's and Egyptian beer. The food would make you suicidal. But this is the weather to live in. Life-giving. Only snag is lack of news and no chum for chat. I'm writing with my feet. How are you doing? Love Martha.' In her later years, her body creaking, she sought the sun and coral to fight off what we abbreviated to the "three A's", the curse of old age: accidie, (meaninglessness), anhedonia (joylessness and boredom), and abulia (inability to act). The discovery of these terms gave her much pleasure. And she did act when, on occasions, she claimed to feel, without self-pity, suicidal in the gloom of a Welsh winter. She only needed to go alone to "another country, sky, language, scenery to feel it is worth living, since I can go on looking."

We met 15 years ago when she was writing about her former neighbour on Lake Naivasha in Kenya, the aviatrix author Beryl Markham, whom I had also known. She summoned me to her austere flat, high up in a Cadogan Square block which contained the relics of a pull-down movie screen and a projection window to the next room, constructed to amuse her son many years ago. It was, of course, intriguing that she had been married to Ernest Hemingway, the very item of interest that irritated her most. And it was some years before I began to hear details, usually while she was talking on another subject, of that hair-raising story.

It was the first of many rituals: Martha in the same corner of one sofa, menthols and lighter beside her on a table, and a glass of Famous Grouse, ice and water in her hand. The agenda became a pattern. First, always, politics: she was outraged by current events, usually to do with armaments and hypocritical governments, but particularly by what was done in the name of her native America. When the US government gave a billion dollars to bolster Noriega's dictatorship in Panama, she wrote to me: "We hold shameful passports, you and I; you don't mind and suffer as I do. I can hardly stand the idiocy and mindless cruelty done in my name as a citizen. I wish I were a Dane. Danes never have to be ashamed." One of her exceptional qualities was that she never lost the radical-liberalism of her youth, never softened or turned rightwards in fatigue or despair. It had much to do, originally, with her parents, who instilled it early on - especially her mother, whom she worshipped.

Then, with eyes fluttering, she would ask about

By James Fox

one's general condition, leading into a discussion, if turbulence was about, on the unfathomable weirdness of dealings between the sexes. There was sometimes an interlude for eating - a desperate undertaking if Martha was preparing food, which interested her not at all. Any domestic duties she termed "the kitchen of life", and in the kitchen proper she was like a child who had wandered into a car and let the brake off. You got there just in time. "In my darkest hours," she wrote to me, "I thought of you filling my washing machine for me, and tears of tenderness and gratitude flooded my eyes." But the best part, which took one often into the early hours, was her unburdening of memory, which never faltered under the artillery of the Grouse, even at her great age.

These hours were never less than fascinating - the raw material for the memoir she never wrote.

Perhaps no one on Earth had seen so much and retained it in such extraordinary detail - the names, the places, the conversations. The memories of "Czecho", as she called it, were as fresh as yesterday. The wars stretched from the Spanish Civil War and the Sino-Japanese War to the Second World War and Vietnam, not to mention the coups, revolutions, civil wars and covert outrages beyond.

In Vietnam she was ahead of the game, and, in 1967, her government permanently banned her from the country. But she reported no more than what she saw, and her writing on the effects of the callous and hidden slaughter of civilians under US carpet bombing was devastating.

"These people have survived the Vietcong since 1957, on whatever terms, hostile or friendly, and the war, however it came to them. But they cannot survive our bombs. Even the Catholic refugees

did not leave their hamlets until the bombs fell. We are uprooting the people from the lovely land where they have lived for generations; and the uprooted are not given bread but a stone. Is this an honourable way for a great nation to fight a war 8,000 miles from its safe homeland?"

What she called the "emotional-mental necessity" of reporting drove her all her life - from the time, in 1930, aged 22, when she escaped her middle-class background in St Louis to elope to Paris without a penny - to within a year of her death.

She once told me that it seemed like "a life that now looks to me unbelievably like playing chicken with oneself - as if to see how much you could take and survive". Last year, when she was almost blind, certainly unable to write anything down, and physically, although not mentally, shaky, she revisited South Wales for a radio programme - the only reporting she could do by then - and found herself caught up in memories of the miners' strike of 1984, which had galvanised her at the time. Typically, she discovered a telling detail, a legacy of that epic struggle whose lasting pain remains only with the devastated - and forgotten - communities of South Wales. Some of the mines, she heard, had been cemented in so hastily, with sealable machinery inside, that the area was flowing with what were known locally as "rust rivers" - debris oozing from the ground. An outrage; an indecency. ("You know that woman is spooky," she wrote to me of Margaret Thatcher at the time of the strike. "All will, no vision, not a single human principle.")

Conscience was what Thatcher - and Reagan - lacked, "and conscience comes from imagination". It was heart, memory and vivid observation, rather than analysis, that informed her style - a spare, clear and powerful way of writing that got the horror stories across without sentimentality. Her advice to budding war reporters might be: beware of the gang. See and hear for yourself on the ground. Always break the rules. Not only is it a path to scoops and prizes, but it's the most reliable source of material. Those that had the story, in Martha's terms, were the people it affected most - the victims, the refugees, the displaced. "The Big Picture always exists," she wrote, "and I seem to have spent my life observing how desperately the Big Picture affects the 'little people' who did not devise it and have no control over it."

Martha was never friendly to women whom she was meeting for the first time, especially if there were men around. They usually concluded

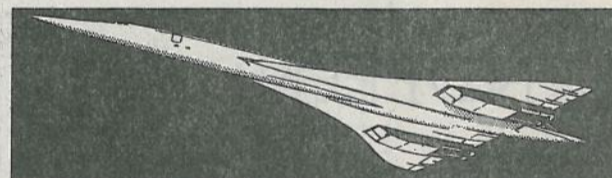
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The Martha Gellhorn Award



Truth teller: from the Spanish Civil War to Panama PHOTOGRAPH BY IAN BERRY/MAGNUM

TO COMMEMORATE the life and work of Martha Gellhorn, the *Independent* and the *Independent on Sunday* are launching an award for the best young war reporter of the year. Entrants must be 30 years old or under at the time their work was published. Three articles should be submitted. They must have appeared between 1 September 1997 and 1 September 1998 in any English-language publication. The judging panel will include Rosie Boycott, editor of the *Independent* and the *Independent on Sunday*, author James Fox, literary critic Victoria Glendinning and broadcaster Jon Snow. Closing date for entries is 15 September 1998. They should be sent to: Young War Reporter of the Year, The Independent, 1 Canada Square, London E14 5DL.



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'The only thing I really do know about is writing'

Continued from front

— smarting at the freeze-out — that she "didn't like women". She had close women friends — from Lady Diana Cooper to the editor of this newspaper, Rosie Boycott. (She and Diana Cooper were unlikely buddies. But they were survivors of a shared past — one that included an almost accidental *mondain* period in Martha's life. And they made each other laugh.)

Martha judged that for Diana Cooper she was accepted in the "protected category" of an outsider, an onlooker, flitting in and out of Britain. She was certainly happier as one of the boys, a legacy, perhaps, of her struggle to hold her own among her elder brothers in St Louis ("How to explain that I married two men who treated me badly," she said, "unless I was used to my brothers treating me like a second-class male") and what she called her "military youth" — from Republican Spain to the 82nd Airborne and the 3rd Armored Division, to which she attached herself in the last winter of the Second World War.

She struck a glamorous figure, climbing on to the tanks in her slacks and Spanish boots, so resilient and independent and knowledgeable. In later years, she collected around herself a squad of (once young) male journalists and writers whom she held on to tenaciously with loving and attentive friendship, most of them 40 years her junior. "Do not forget that we are *per sempre*," she would end a letter from some miserable hotel in Belize or Nicaragua, the weather always bad. "I miss you steadily and forever; I wish you would come on a magic carpet — the best way to travel — and drink Famous Grouse (available locally) and talk until 2, 3 or 4am." One was greeted with similar endearments and powerfully hugged in her hallway. I suspect others in the squad received messages in the same terms. She carefully kept us separate. Even with couples, she exercised her right to separate meetings "on the grounds" — a phrase always followed by a pensive inhalation of menthol — that couples made her nervous, "as they usually make each other nervous unless lost in a vast crowd".

She was always available to her younger friends for advice on romance and problems of the heart, often whether they liked it or not. The subject fascinated her, mostly because she had never been much influenced in life by the libido, the advice was rather refreshing and oddly helpful — she could see the madness of the situation with stark clarity. She once wrote to me, many years ago: "Have you tried an ultimatum?" — a shocking and novel idea in the domain of obsession. The clinical late-night analysis would be followed up by letter and telephone. The evening was judged by the laughter rating. "The only thing I really do know about is writing. If your hangover is half as bad as mine you did not write today. So I am an evil influence."

In her case, she said she had always been chosen ("pounced on with claws



Martha on the move (clockwise from above): Gellhorn with her husband Ernest Hemingway, who was madly jealous of her talent; reporting the Second World War from Italy (top) and London; in Hollywood with Gary Cooper and Claudette Colbert; and in later years



and bare fangs" by "killer men") and always gave in "until I had the desperate sense to flee". She concluded, late in life, that men weren't really interested in women: they didn't want to know them as people or separate human beings. Yet she found them on the whole "touching and funny".

Her first candidate was yourself. "Nobody can be possessed who is sane. There's always a separate part in everyone," she wrote to me 60 years later. She wasn't averse to sex, but she did consider that it belonged to a part of the body that the brain could never reach. In her own career, she had found it necessary to employ it, especially in wartime, out of compassion and friendship. The proper business of the evening, however, she saw as drinking, laughing and talking politics. Sex was the "dessert" that you had to offer occasionally to make the meal a success with someone you liked.

Loneliness, said Martha, was something she had known, but it was

"something you outgrow". She felt it most acutely not by herself, but in marriage. Her third, to Tom Matthews, lasted nine years — invaluable years she felt she had wasted, when she didn't write and thought she had lost her place in the professional queue. It was an extraordinary period, in which she had to learn to live with her husband, insulted by her disregard, was forced to hold the clues up to her face. Her aim had been to provide a secure background for her adopted son, Sandy. She built herself a house on Mount Longonot in Kenya and lived with a servant as her only nearby companion for many years, "outgrowing" solitude and getting on with writing and travelling. At Bryn Mawr, she had pinned up a line from Mauriac: "Travail, opium unique." "I must have been a comical little girl," she said.

Hemingway, her second husband, who accompanied her to two of her wars, was a taboo subject. (Her first marriage was one of elopement

convenience in Paris — a bold act, given the scandal it caused in St Louis.) She held her peace about Hemingway in public all her life, turning the other cheek as the inaccuracies and fictions piled up. She suffered badly from a "sickening" unauthorised biography, which she failed to stop; and from an appendage to his life, which would swamp her own achievements in a single phrase, and partly a result of good manners. Inevitably over 15 years of talking into the night, stories emerged. She dreaded an article like this one, but knew she couldn't talk to so many reporter friends without it coming out after she died, and she never stopped me taking notes. Many of the stories would have upset the serial plots and synopses.

SHE met Hemingway in Miami, on a trip with her mother and a brother, through a chance contact at Sloppy Joe's. He said he would help her in journalism, and she was flattered. It was



the writing and the writer she admired, particularly *The Sun Also Rises* — and afterwards "he taught me about mortars and incoming and outgoing, and he was good in Spain". Only eventually did they become lovers. She became a little concerned in Madrid when he locked her in a room at the front of the hotel,

in her relationships, that I had finally found the key after all these years; why the most serious passion of her life (she didn't mention which) had turned to "black ice": for lack of *tendresse*.

There's no doubt, from what she let out, that Hemingway was consumed with jealousy of the young and gifted reporter. She told how he had taken her *Collier's* magazine press pass for D-Day and then never left the troopship while the landings were taking place. Martha followed, stowed away on a munitions boat across the Atlantic (smoking and writing in a hidden cabin, against the strictest safety orders) then joined a Red Cross ship from where she filed the better informed

stories. Later, she discovered that he had sat on copy she had entrusted to him to send, also to *Collier's*. And in his worried competitiveness he once sent a cable along the North African military telegraph — to be broadcast in every mess canteen — which read: "Are you a reporter or my wife in bed?"

the need to make her living, and by now she was financially independent and owned half the house.

And yet she lived by the strictest rules of her husband. In the long writing periods the radio was forbidden. On the day that Paris fell in 1940, Hemingway was working on *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. Martha wanted to hear the news, anxious for her friends. Hemingway forbade it, telling her: "I've only got one book to write about the Spanish war, and France will fall again." Their marriage ended in high drama. Returning from Normandy to the Dorchester in London — which, like the Ritz, was a war reporters' billet — she discovered that Hemingway, who

had returned earlier, had taken up with the wife of the good-looking war photographer, Robert Capa. Capa and Gellhorn were close friends. Capa tipped off Martha: here was the evidence she needed to end her marriage. All she needed to do was walk up the stairs that very moment to catch them *in flagrante*. Up she went. To Hemingway's further fury, Martha simply debanked to the Ritz and moved in with Capa.

THERE were other extraordinary tales, lost to any memoir. She had, for example, the first documentary evidence of the concentration camp at Birkenau, just before the war began, smuggled out and entrusted to her. She boarded the plane out of Berlin with this scoop, the engines revved, then died as the Tannoy summoned her off the plane. A Gestapo group was waiting by the steps. Martha thought that was it. But, to her relief and amazement, all the officer wanted to know was if she knew his relation in Milwaukee, and would she take a message? In Paris, she could get neither officials nor newspapers to take an interest in the story. She would "liberate" the camps herself, in searing eyewitness reports, six years later.

Along with the steeliness in her character — to pity herself was the worst of sins — there was an inflexible, imperious side to her which helped her as a reporter, but sometimes tried her friends. We once had a shouting match on a road in south-west France, on a tour to find her a house in the sun. She insisted — and her eyesight was clear — that we drive up a no-entry road. Perhaps we were back in Normandy, with the signs turned backwards, blasting our way through cement roadblocks.

And there were blind spots that she would never concede. The Israelis, for example, were eternally noble and blameless; the Palestinians and almost all Arabs beneath contempt — an attitude formed at the liberation of the camps and the creation of Israel, and never revised with a further view from the ground. Challenged, she would merely blink her eyes. Towards the end of her life — to her bemusement and frustration — she started to find writing "like chewing cement". Where was the former fluency and certainty? Why didn't it get easier? Perhaps, like many writers, she had forgotten the earlier pains of composition; perhaps

he never forced her to give up, along with whisky. She predicted that when she could no longer read nor write, nor drink, she would sink. She became nocturnal, reading thrillers through the night — she was a big fan of Ross Thomas — and then listening to books on tape. She struggled to overcome her collapsing system.

With the help of her friends, she waged a titanic battle with the semi-computerised typewriter that could, theoretically, print letters big enough for her to read. She was the last of us to give up, in exhaustion, when the machine produced precisely, as she liked to say, "nozzing".

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LETTERS

Scant evidence of a commitment to the arts

THE ARTS community is right to feel betrayed by the new Labour government ("What a party...", 15 February). Labour are helping themselves to £200m of money allocated to the Arts Council Lottery Distributing Boards to help finance their New Opportunities Fund. In addition, £200m is being removed from each of the Heritage, Sports and Charities Boards.

The Government is diverting the money to use for projects of its choosing. These are clearly central government initiatives being funded by Lottery money.

It is without precedent for money to be set aside in this way in advance of the passage of legislation. Ministers have informed us that a voluntary agreement was reached with the distributing bodies. They have refused to publish the details.

It is hard to imagine how the arts, heritage or other boards can

request additional money from government if, without murmur, they have each deprived their sectors of £200m over five years.

The end of the Lottery as a ring-fenced source of funding for the arts, sport, heritage and charities is a tragic missed opportunity. Every treasury in the world casts envious eyes on a successful national lottery. It took Gordon Brown just six months to get his hands on the money.

Virginia Bottomley MP
House of Commons

CONTENTIOUS though this view has become, I still firmly believe there is no substitute for government subsidy of the arts, so I warmly support this newspaper's campaigning call to the Chancellor that he should exempt from tax any donations made by individuals to the arts.

But the crisis in the arts is the result of almost six years of

"stand-still funding". In this debilitating situation, all arts organisations are struggling to survive. I am concerned that, were the Chancellor to implement this measure, he might think the arts issue solved. Inevitably the big metropolitan companies would be much better placed to attract private tax-free donations than smaller companies.

Surely then, we must continue to ask for a solution to the whole problem of under-funding which is nationwide.

Trevor Nunn
Royal National Theatre
London SE1

IN LAST WEEK'S *Independent on Sunday* it was reported that I had spoken out against the Labour Party's arts policy. This is not the case; as a quick phone call would have confirmed.

Melvyn Bragg
London SE1

Children hurt more than fathers

I READ the article "When did you last see your children?" (*Real Life*, 15 February) with dismay. When I was 14 my parents separated and my father saw me as a trophy in a battle that no one else was fighting. He desperately wanted me to live with him and he and his family tried every trick they could to persuade me. My mother watched, worried, but encouraged me to make the decision that would make me the happiest. She could not offer me the material possessions that he was promising, but I knew where I would best be. I started a new life with her. From that day, 17 years ago, my father has never telephoned me. All contact has come from me.

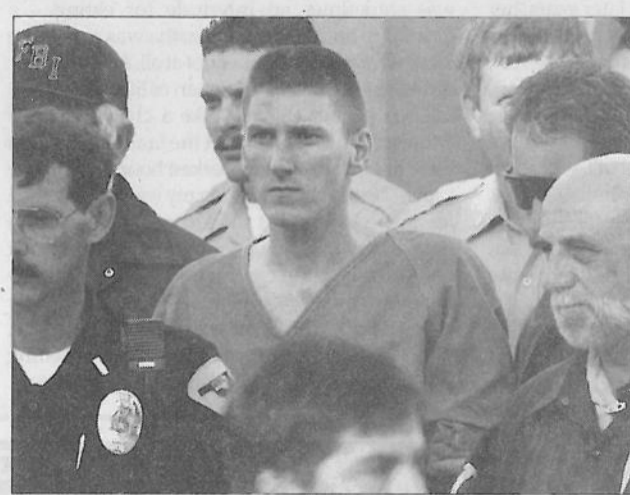
I'm 33 and, after years of support and counselling, am just about coming to terms with the fact that I truly believe that my father does not love me. I am so sorry for the families that appeared in that article but my pity for the fathers is somewhat overshadowed by the empathy that I feel for the children concerned. These men must understand that even if they lose touch, they should strive to ensure that their children know that they are loved by them, even if they cannot bring themselves to be part of their lives. Allowing a child to lose the belief in that love is the cruellest thing a parent can do to it.

Name and address supplied

Finger of blame

MICHAEL BYWATER'S column (*Review*, 15 February) tells a horrifying story. I share his feelings about human nature when I read frequent stories about child abuse, serial murderers or paedophile rings. But it happens everywhere and so why condemn a whole country? Mr Bywater implies that women are not protected by law and are easy prey for abusers in Québec. This is false. Québec has been at the forefront of women's rights protection laws for more than 25 years. Marie-Claire's story is dreadful and everyone will wish punishment for all those involved. But it is wrong to blame Québec.

Claude Girard
London W8



Timothy McVeigh: a racist terrorist, but not an anarchist

Anarchists for peaceful protest

ANARCHISM advocates a society with neither state nor government, based on individual freedom, mutual aid and voluntary co-operation. Readers of your article "Anarchy in the UK?" (*Section 2*, 15 February) could be forgiven for assuming it advocates terrorism. It does not.

The Red Brigades are revolutionary Marxists, not anarchists. The alleged Unabomber, Theodore Kaczynski, is not an anarchist but a neo-Luddite, and accepts both the existence of

governments and the use of their power to effect his proposals. Timothy McVeigh is part of the right-wing racist anti-US Federal Government Militia Movement, but neither he nor this movement is politically anarchist.

The vast majority of political terrorism has never come from anarchists but from Marxists, nationalists, royalists, fascists and other political movements seeking to seize state power.

Jonathan Simcock
Derby

Briefly

● NO wonder Calvin Klein's beautiful young things looked so pleased ("Calvin Clean", *Review*, 15 February) — they'd lifted a trailer load of potatoes from a field of strawberry plants. Will all be revealed in the gardening pages.
Geoff Shipp, Suffolk

James version, but I know a bank where the wild thyme grows" ("Shakespeare and ...", 15 February). Three cheers for the radical school that inspired Pam Gems! I learnt the King James version and "a bank where the wild thyme blows" and ended up marning computers.
Mary Wisby, Rome, Italy

Still impotent? Blame Labour

YOUR ARTICLE, "You're too old for sex at 40..." (15 February) regarding the rationing of impotency treatment for middle-aged men highlights the difficulties faced by GPs forced to ration healthcare in an underfunded NHS.

The costs of treating a man with injections for impotency (assuming sex twice a week over a year) is over £800. That some patients can obtain this treatment and some cannot, depending on where they live or who treats them, is due to the unfair system in which doctors work.

The fact is that at present individual GPs, and in the future larger groups of GPs in primary healthcare groups, will continue to make decisions about the rationing of healthcare which some sections of society find arbitrary, unfair or difficult to accept. In a fair system rationing of what the NHS can or cannot afford should be done centrally and openly. However, it is my view that the Government, having inherited convenient scapegoats for the failure of NHS funding, do not have the courage to address this.

Dr PM Spowage
Colchester, Essex

● YOU incorrectly stated that Hanover Housing Association is the largest provider of rental retirement accommodation ("Don't fear the retirement home", *Business*, 15 February). In fact Anchor Trust manages more than 20,000 rented units, more than double that managed by Hanover.
John Belcher, Ascham Trust