

Eulogy for Hamish Johnston

My dad, Hamish Haig Johnston, lived a life shaped by thoughtfulness, principle, and a deep sense of responsibility. He was a husband, father, grandfather, loyal friend, and a man who believed strongly in doing things properly - whether in work, family life, or the causes that he cared about. He didn't seek attention, but he made a lasting difference to the people and institutions around him.

Hamish was born on 22nd May 1945 in Devonport, where his father was stationed during the war. Although born in Devon, he always considered himself Scottish. He grew up in Dundererry, Cornwall, the son of Douglas Johnston, a naval surgeon who had served on the Arctic convoys and later became a GP, and Yvonne Callander, a chemist who became a teacher, and later helped to run her husband's practice. Education, service, and curiosity about the world were part of Hamish's life from a young age.

He described childhood in Dundererry with his sister Helen as idyllic. Their garden backed onto the beach, where they swam, had barbecues, and caught butterflies - a pastime considered quite appropriate in the 1940s and 50s. When a badminton net appeared in the garden, Hamish became village champion - though only he knew the rules, and somehow they seemed to change with every opponent!

Hamish was educated at two boarding schools: Durlston Court in Hampshire, and then Blundell's School in Tiverton, where he won a scholarship. Boarding school was not always easy for him, but he made lifelong friends there.

From 1963 to 1967, he studied French and German at St Andrews University, a place which held special significance: several family members had lived and studied there, and his great-great-grandfather, Matthew Forster Heddle, who we will return to later, had been Professor of Chemistry. At university, he formed close friendships, joined societies, and threw himself into campus life - sometimes a little too literally. On one occasion, after what I'm sure was only a small amount of alcohol, he hurt his back falling from street level into a basement while attempting to put up a poster on a window!

This anecdote is a glimpse of his student life but not really representative - he applied himself to his studies, achieving an honours MA, and he treasured the friendships and growth he

experienced in St Andrews.

After university, when applying for jobs, he proudly made sure a prospective multinational employer knew all about his fluency in French and German - only to be left deflated when he was told: “of course, Mr Johnston, you do realise that all of our affairs are conducted in English?!”

He joined the NHS National Administration Training Scheme, and began his career in Oxford, first at the Churchill Hospital, and then the Radcliffe Infirmary, before moving to Edinburgh in 1972 as Hospital Secretary at the Western and Northern General Hospitals. During the 1970s miners’ strikes, when power cuts threatened, Hamish bought out the entire stock of a candle factory in Musselburgh to ensure that the hospitals would remain lit. He campaigned successfully for safer pedestrian crossings on busy roads outside the hospital grounds, and he introduced artwork onto otherwise blank hospital walls, never losing sight of the human side of the system. In 1974 he became Assistant Area Personnel Officer for Lothian Health Board.

At this time his personal life held both great joy and deep loss. In January 1974 he married Briony Headon Smith, who died very suddenly the following year in March 1975 at just 27.

After her death, he was introduced to hillwalking by a close neighbour and friend. The hills quickly became a huge part of Hamish’s life, offering him both joy and solace. He became skilled at navigation and hillcraft, and would go on to complete all the Munros in 1988, most of the Corbetts, and undertook long walks such as the Cross Ross Walk and an overnight traverse of the Lairig Ghru. He developed encyclopaedic knowledge of the hills - not just the names of distant peaks, but also somehow the nearest and best pub to each one!

In 1980 he met Jill McMutrie while they both worked for Lothian Health Board. Dad at the time was undertaking cookery classes, and wooed Jill with a French Onion Tart left on her desk - it worked, and he never made one again.

In 1982, he moved to a senior post with the Southern District of the Highland Health Board, necessitating relocation to Inverness. Jill and he married shortly before the move. Dad liked to joke that it was a marriage of convenience - the relocation allowance being significantly larger for a married man!

This, of course, was Hamish: practical, observant, and pretending to be far less romantic than he really was.

His working life continued in NHS management until retiring in 2006 as Director of Human Resources for the Highland Acute Hospitals NHS Trust.

Jill and Hamish, in their nearly 44 years of marriage, shared a life full of hillwalking, travel, skiing, and gardening. He supported her sport – her squash and tennis – sometimes to comic effect. During one Counties Week ladies' tennis tournament, he crawled through bushes with his camera to find just the right angle for a photograph of Jill playing. This drew a rather sharp gesture from another player - Judy Murray, Andy's mum - who had misinterpreted the intentions of the man she had spotted lurking with a camera in the undergrowth!

Hamish was known for his diplomacy, but even he wasn't immune to the occasional test: as a line judge during an important club tennis match, the men's final, when asked if a ball was in or out, he replied, "Well – I'm really not sure - it might have been in, or it might have been out."

Needless to say, he wasn't invited to do that again.

In 1987 and 1989, Peter and I were born. Dad was the ever-present patriarch of our family. He was gentle and kind, and worked very hard. Weekends were for making the most of: often involving hills, castles, culture, or dog walks in our local woods. Some mornings he would wake Peter and me early to go by torchlight to try and spot badgers together in the forest. Every feature and path in our woods had a name that we gave it – Mrs Tiggywinkle's Pond, Badger Loop, The Knoll... There was a field where we would fly our kites after harvest, and a mound Peter and I would clamber up to call out: "I'm the king of the castle", before smiling at Dad and delivering the punch line.

Along with Jill, he introduced us to hillwalking, and later to skiing. Friday evenings in our house would routinely involve telephone conversations between him and various friends, poring over forecasts and plotting the weekend's hillwalking expedition.

When I really took to skiing – and was prepared to do it in weather the family sensibly avoided - he would drive me to Cairn Gorm and patiently wait in the car all day reading his

newspaper while I skied. The quiet generosity behind those long, patient hours reveal so much about his character.

Family holidays, often based around a caravan that doubled as a base for hillwalking, were rarely without incident. My grandmother once remarked: “I wonder what will happen to the Johnstons this year?!”

At best, dad might have remembered to pack just one single hillwalking boot for my mother to wear - and you can imagine the reaction to that. At worst, over a particularly unfortunate run of luck, the family experienced a caravan crash, a helicopter lift off Scafell Pike, a yacht capsizing - and the time when dad, warned to watch out for a telegraph pole when reversing the car, carefully acknowledged this before proceeding to drive - hard - straight into another one!

Dad was practical – skilled at DIY – but also keen to pass on his broader range of abilities whenever the opportunity presented itself. I’m reminded of the occasion when he decided to teach me how to sew a patch onto a holed pair of trousers. “It’s an important life skill to learn competently”, he told me. His demonstration, however, wasn’t a success, and saw him sew in two enormous creases to trousers which didn’t previously have any creases at all! This did NOT impress my mother, who was called upon to undo and then redo his handiwork, but his heart - as ever - was in the right place.

His intellectual curiosity was seemingly boundless. He read newspapers and non-fiction books voraciously, and loved music, theatre, art, and history. He became fascinated by family history, and projects related to this became a defining feature of his life over the past 25 years.

Amongst his many projects, Hamish tracked month-by-month the 50-year career of an ancestor in the Royal Artillery in Europe and America during the 18th century, and who ended up as officer in charge of the artillery garrison at Fort George.

In 2015, the National Museum of Scotland published Hamish’s comprehensive biography of his great-great-grandfather, Matthew Forster Heddle, widely regarded as Scotland’s greatest mineralogist. Through this work, and the significant number of talks, presentations, and associated papers in academic journals that followed, Hamish brought back into light not only Heddle’s scientific legacy, but also Heddle’s long-forgotten but hugely significant role in Scottish mountaineering during the 19th century.

Hamish's research into his step-grandfather's war service with Force K6 - an all-Muslim unit from undivided India - led him to author "A Corner of Pakistan in Scotland". This shone a light on the important contribution of these Commonwealth soldiers during the Second World War. His work drew him into close involvement with the Colourful Heritage charity, and he was proud to be recognised as one of the instigators of the first Memorial currently being built at Kelvingrove in Glasgow to commemorate the four million South Asian soldiers and labourers who fought in both World Wars. He participated in television programs, presentations, and last year the VE Day 80 celebrations, where he helped deliver talks to more than 250 young people and elders. Hamish believed deeply in education and in the power of shared history to bring people together. His work on Force K6 and with Colourful Heritage embodied those values and mattered a great deal to him.

In recent years Dad developed a cruel lung disease which became advanced, and which was compounded by chronic sciatica and chronic back stenosis. This ended his hillwalking in 2019 – his final outing being when he managed to join us on the occasion of my last Munro that May. It was joked by my brother Peter then that it could be Hamish's last Munro, too, and so it proved to be.

In time, Hamish became reliant on 24 hour oxygen support, and was left with severely limited mobility. In 2024, with declining health, Hamish and Jill embarked on what they jokingly referred to as his 'farewell tour' of friends and family across Britain – and so it turned out. They only wish they had the opportunity to see more friends, and more family, on that trip – but they always intended to do another one.

Even in declining health, Dad's determination never left him. Last August, sensing that his inability to be in the hills had taken away some of his spark, we arranged a trip to the remote Loch Coruisk climbing hut on Skye - an isolated building without electricity, tucked into the heart of the Cuillin mountains. These mountains meant so much to Hamish: decades of happy days spent there, and the knowledge that our ancestor, Professor Heddle, had made the first recorded ascent of one of the peaks.

Getting dad there was no easy feat. With the 7 mile approach on foot impossible, we chartered a private boat and ensured all

his life-support equipment would run continuously. We brought two enormous lithium power banks, a petrol generator, jerry cans of fuel, and two oxygen concentrators. The 90 metre walk from the landing stage to the hut took Dad 30 difficult minutes. But his true goal lay the following day: to walk the 300 metres from the hut to stand at the head of Loch Coruisk, right in the heart of the amphitheatre of peaks, and to be able to look upon them once again.

With his oxygen machine strapped to a pack frame carried by Jill, and a folding stool deployed every 15 metres or so for him to rest, it took Hamish one and a half breathless, painful hours to travel the 300 metres to get there - and the same again getting back. But he achieved his essential objective - to be at Coruisk once more, and to see the ridge one final time.

Just being there, he said, gave him such a lift.

Dad wasn't loud or showy. He led by example: with integrity, curiosity, kindness, and persistence. He showed us how to keep going, how to care deeply, and how to find joy in the simplest of things – a day on the hill, a well-earned pint, or even just a tasty pudding.

So – it is time to say goodbye, dad.

We miss you enormously. But we are so grateful for the life you lived, for the values you passed on, and for the memories that will remain with us – on every hill, and in every quiet moment.

Goodbye, dad, and thank you.