

# Jane Ewart-Biggs

## An appreciation

One of the most haunting images of the 1970s will remain Jane Ewart-Biggs, distraught but eloquent, announcing on Irish television that she felt no bitterness towards the Irish people and that, somehow, good must be made come out of tragedy. Hours earlier, summoned urgently to Whitehall, she had heard on the car radio that her husband had been assassinated as he left the British Ambassador's residence in Dublin, within earshot of their three small children.

The spontaneous reaction to that broadcast was extraordinary; in response to a flood of unsolicited donations the Ewart-Biggs Prize was founded, rewarding work which encouraged peace and understanding between the people of Ireland and of Britain. The first recipients were Father Michéal Mac Gréil and Dr A. T. Q. Stewart, for their studies (respectively) of prejudice and tolerance in Ireland, and aspects of Ulster history. This set the tone. Recently an additional Community Prize was endowed, for social-work projects spanning the two Northern communities. Not without controversy, the prizes highlighted much that was remarkable in Irish culture over the last 15 years.

Jane Ewart-Biggs was the powerhouse behind this, transforming the tragedy and turning it against its perpetrators' intentions. She also transformed her own life. She was a surprising person: impetuous, passionate, outspoken and revelling in a highly-developed sense of the ridiculous. A leonine beauty, tall and stylish, she always seemed in a hurry somewhere, in her ageing (and ominously clattering) Triumph Stag. But impatience never got in the way of a huge talent for friendship and a charismatic ability to inspire devotion.

Born into a conventional upper-middle-class background, she was nonetheless — like her murdered husband — a firm Labour supporter. Severed from the Foreign Office circuit, she could follow her radical bent and become a party activist. Diplomatic experience in Algeria and France had made her a committed European; but an MEP seat eluded her. Then in 1981, Michael Foot sent her to the Lords.

Here she rapidly became prominent: not only speaking on Northern Ireland (she had remained

closely involved in the peace movement) but becoming spokesman on home affairs, overseas development and consumer affairs, and eventually opposition Whip. As President of the British Committee of UNICEF she travelled widely. But Ireland remained a preoccupation. The friends she had made there stayed close; her visits were always an occasion. I have a memory of arriving with her in Belfast; her nostrils flared as she hurried through Aldergrove en route to a community project in Andersonstown. "I love coming here," she called over her shoulder; "don't you?"

None of this came easily. Her personal and family life, devastated by the tragedy, only mended slowly. Her relationship with Kevin O'Sullivan, whom she married last month, became the cornerstone of this process. They shared interests in the Third World (where his engineering business brought him), and politics — though Jane railed against the SDP's defection and often referred gloomily to "My Poor Old Party". They also shared a great love of theatre: an early admirer of Brian Friel, while battling her last illness she insisted on getting to the London revival of *Philadelphia Here I Come*, and emerged exhilarated.

At last year's prizegiving in Dublin her son Robin stepped in with all his mother's panache. Her pleasure in this nearly compensated for missing the presentation by President Robinson, whose election had excited her tremendously. She fought cancer as bravely as she had all the other tragedies of her life; to her last days in hospital she followed Irish and European affairs with characteristic impatience, irrepressible humour and unquenchable optimism.

Though she lost that battle, her great spirit will live on in the prizes she founded, in the love of those who knew her, and in the depth of hard-won understanding she brought to life. In 1986 Frank McGuinness received the Ewart-Biggs Prize from her for *Observe the Sons of Ulster* and captured her achievement with inimitable bravura. He thanked Jane, not only for the prize, but for that inspirational broadcast 10 years before: "and for making me proud that she was English — that I was Irish — and that we were both human".