

Robin Fletcher OBE, DSC 1922-2016

Wartime sailor who became a leading academic and sports administrator

Robin Fletcher was the youngest of four Fletcher brothers who all served, as did his younger sister, in the forces during World War 2. He commanded a caique in the Eastern Mediterranean, working with special forces and Greek allies to resist German occupation of the islands. This led to a lectureship in Modern Greek at Oxford University, a Fellowship at Trinity College and a successful career as its Domestic Bursar. His career culminated in appointment as Warden of Rhodes House, responsible for the administration of the scholarships set up under Rhodes' will. In parallel he played hockey for England and Great Britain, won a bronze Olympic medal, and later managed the British Hockey Team at the Tokyo Olympics.

When war broke out, Fletcher was still a schoolboy at Marlborough College, academically able but outstanding at sport, particularly hockey. On sentry duty for the Local Defence Volunteers, predecessors to the Home Guard, he just managed to avoid shooting a wandering cow which had failed to respond to his challenge. On leaving Marlborough, and tired of waiting for his call up, he volunteered for the Royal Navy, joined as a rating and after training was appointed to HMS Gambia, a new light cruiser. Gambia was part of the escort for a convoy of troops bound for the Middle East in May 1941, travelling via the Cape of Good Hope, and then part of the thin screen of British ships providing vital protection for the supply routes against the encroaching Japanese navy. Fletcher recognised that he gained self-awareness and confidence at this time, but he modestly ascribed his recognition as 'possible officer material' to his performance in a scratch hockey match in Ceylon.

After training, the new Sub-Lieutenant RNVR was asked to volunteer for 'special service' and found himself in Egypt, being trained as a canoeist under the auspices of the Combined Operations Pilotage Parties, linked to the Special Boats Service. The original intention was to prospect beaches in Sicily for future Allied landings, a mission which took a very heavy toll of the first to try it. Fletcher was diverted to the Levant (later Anglo-Hellenic) Schooner Flotilla, whose aims were intelligence gathering, striking at enemy island garrisons in the Aegean, and disrupting their communications. Fletcher was first the 'Conducting Officer' of a schooner with a Greek skipper and crew. Later, at the ripe age of 21, he commanded LS 6, one of several caiques commandeered for the duration. As German troops spread through the islands following the surrender of Italy, Fletcher took part in the evacuation of Allied troops from Samos to friendly neutral Turkey, and slipped away at the second attempt from the risk of internment. He landed Greek forces on Lemnos; made a 'prize' of a German controlled caique; and evacuated a raiding party from Mytilene. He took part in the landing of forces on Milos to overcome a stubborn German garrison. This is the only time he records coming under shell fire, but his laconic style cannot disguise the risks involved: apart from the hazards of operating in small boats at night in unknown waters and of enemy action, one of his colleagues was captured and executed, with his crew, under orders from the Fuhrer. On return to Britain at the end of the war, Fletcher was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross, and promoted to Lieutenant commanding a trawler engaged in clearing mines from the Channel.

Demobbed, he resumed his academic career, going up to Trinity College Oxford to read Classics, later diverting to Modern Greek with the benefit of his war time experience. He was immediately called to the Varsity Hockey team, beating Cambridge only at the third attempt, when he captained the side, and becoming an international in 1949. Cricket took second place, but was played at a senior competitive club level for many years. He was a member of the British Olympic Hockey team at the Helsinki Olympics of 1952, winning a bronze medal. He remained a regular member of the English team for the next 3 years, winning 22 caps and was manager of the unsuccessful British team at the Tokyo Olympics of 1964. He ruefully reflected that hockey was no longer to be treated as a pastime, but, like other sports, as a highly professional enterprise. He was President of the Hockey Association from 1973 to 1983.

Fletcher felt himself fortunate that graduation coincided with the establishment of a new lectureship at Oxford in Modern Greek, which he won in competition. The Professor concerned, Constantine Trypanis, oversaw his doctorate and later a book on a key figure in the development of modern spoken Greek, Kostis Palamas. Between them Trypanis and Fletcher formed a strong team for nearly 20 years, although the Greek Civil War and later the rule of the Junta interrupted the regular visits to Greece which would otherwise have been made. Fletcher's only visit during the rule of the Three Colonels was at the request of Amnesty International to monitor the fairness of the trial of Lady Fleming, wife of Sir Alexander.

Trinity elected him first to a Fellowship and shortly after to become its Domestic Bursar. He not only maintained Trinity's high reputation for the quality of its table, but developed better links with its alumni and oversaw the refacing of its corroded stone 17th and 18th Century buildings. Major legacies made possible a significant new building for student accommodation and lectures and in partnership with Blackwell's the development of a large underground extension of their bookshop. A year as the Senior Proctor (1967/68), responsible for maintaining good order in the University, led to membership of its governing body, the Hebdomadal Council. This was at a time of growing student unrest nationally and internationally, and Fletcher served on the Hart Committee which paved the way to the reform of the relationship between the student body and the Oxford authorities. Later his interest in academic administration led to service on the Trustee Boards for a number of leading public schools.

In 1950 Fletcher had married Jinny Cornish, whom he had known since his training in Egypt, where her father was manager of the Alexandria water works. They had two sons, Clive and Denys. Clive, who entered the police service, and his wife Teresa were to present Robin and Jinny with 2 grandchildren as later did Denys, who became a nautical engineer, and his wife Pamela. But at the age of 38, Clive developed multiple sclerosis, bringing about his death at the age of 59. It was to Clive that Robin dedicated his memoir 'A Favouring Wind'.

Together Robin and Jinny were renowned for the hospitality they offered to all manner of people from their home in Trinity. And this must have helped them to settle into his last career change: appointed by the Trustees to become the Secretary of the Rhodes Trust and Warden of Rhodes House from 1980 to 1989, responsible for the administration of the Scholarships offered to nations in what is now the Commonwealth and the United States. An initial tour of the countries eligible for scholarships gave them the foundation to make Rhodes House an essential focus for the scholars

when at Oxford, many of whom have commented on how his guidance and their joint hospitality had enabled them to make the most of their opportunity. Fletcher helped the Trustees to widen the scope for women's eligibility for scholarships. Pressure on the eligible South African institutions to set aside the insidious consequences of apartheid was less immediately fruitful. The Trustees accordingly appealed to the Charity Commissioners against the provisions which in effect confined some awards to white men only; a lawsuit pre-empted by the collapse of apartheid.

It was Jinny's choice to retire to Orkney, but one which Robin supported to the hilt. Later they were followed by his son Denys and family, who provided continuing loving support to them. Jinny died in 2010. Up until his final year Robin continued to live in the home they had developed together, maintaining his interest in all his past activities and in those closer to home. The frequent visits of new great granddaughter Megan particularly entertained him. From his time at Marlborough Robin had maintained a strong Christian faith. He will be remembered by his many friends for the twinkle in his eye. He summed up his approach to life as: 'I have never seen why academic subjects should not be seen as fun provided that, as in the playing of games, it also embraces a desire to succeed and a willingness to work.' [p 169]

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