

## Remembering Jane Mace (1943 -2022)

Ursula Howard

A pioneering and widely-respected adult educator with a lifelong commitment to adult literacy, Jane Mace has sadly died aged 79, following a stroke. Jane tirelessly practised her beliefs in equality of access to learning for all, especially for women, in social justice, democracy and peace. She promoted participative group teaching and learning, developed innovative curricula for adults and invented a new field of research. To capture it all, she wrote and published. All this was done with a blend of the local and international, engaging with everyday lives lived all across the world. She wrote prodigiously and leaves a powerful legacy through countless newspaper and journal articles; and several books. Her first, *Working with Words*, was published in 1979, followed by book after book on literacy and motherhood, literacy in community writing and publishing and the role of scribes past and present - and in the literary imagination.

Jane brought her deep insights from literacy practices to the Quaker beliefs she embraced in later life. Ground-breaking books were the outcome: *God and Decision-Making: a Quaker Approach* (2012) and *Passions and Partings: the dying sayings of early Quakers* (2020). In all she did, as readers will already have gathered, words mattered to Jane - spoken as well as written - and she used words to tackle prejudice and indifference with friendly openness and respect, even at times when she spoke out against, and to, power. She loved to play with words, poetry as well as prose. Her success as a writer of how adults best learn was fuelled by her curiosity, listening to and hearing from other people with a sometimes impish smile that made people - interviewees or friends - want to be part of her world. One friend called her direct way of questioning 'intellectually tough, but emotionally tender'.

Growing up with three siblings in a middle-class family in Bristol - her mother, Mary active in the community, her father, William a solicitor - Jane Sommerville went on to study modern languages at Oxford in the 1960s. Her talents as an actor shone, including performing in the influential musical revue

which campaigned against capital punishment '*Hang Down Your Head and Die*' – a show which started the careers of several actors and comedians. Jane moved to London and lived there for 35 years. She married Rodney Mace in 1967; they divorced in 1999. Later, she met John Geale through Quakers, and they married in 2017. My memories of Jane's children, Jessica and Joe, as they grew up in 1970s Camberwell, exemplify the spirit of those times. Jane was working full-time, juggling motherhood, communist politics and work. I lived round the corner, a single parent with two children. They all went to school together, and each week for two years, my children would play at Jane's and sleep over. Two days later, Jess and Joe came to us. She took us on outings and holidays in her old London taxi-cab. Jane's feminism was about reaching out, extending family life into the community and challenging norms for women and families.

Jane came to adult literacy learning through a classic route. Volunteering as an adult literacy tutor, in south London, she quickly became Director of the Cambridge House Literacy Scheme, an innovative project founded in the 1960s. Adult literacy work was hardly born, but a national campaign in the early 70s, launched by the British Association of Settlements, resulted in the BBC launching a TV series to raise awareness. An influential independent inquiry into reading, chaired by Alan Bullock, '*A Language for Life*', published in 1975, included adults in its remit. Deep-seated educational problems across the lifespan were laid bare. Cambridge House, led by Jane, found itself at the forefront of a high-profile national campaign...or movement, as Jane and colleagues preferred to call it. Literacy for Jane was about addressing the issue of inequality, newly rediscovered. Poverty, poor housing and educational disadvantage were tied to social class and the legacy of colonialism which had brought many immigrant families to Britain from the Caribbean and elsewhere: needed for their labour but neglected in their own and their children's schooling. A campaign simply to improve technical reading skills was not the answer. A movement to radicalise adult learning was needed. So in literacy work, writing became key: the active literacy which gave voice to the voiceless and fostered human agency. Jane, with others, founded a national magazine, *Write First Time*, which published literacy students' writing, which in turn became reading material, at a time when adults' only texts were children's readers. Pamphlets proliferated across the country. Adult literacy learners spoke out about the system, and this proved too much for many policy makers and funders. After ten years, in a draconian political climate and cuts to education, the magazine was shut down.

Jane's work in community publishing grew from literacy. She was a co-founder of the Federation of Worker Writers and Community Publishers (FWWCP) in the early 1970s. Ken Worpole, a fellow founder spoke of Jane as someone who

was 'formidably efficient as Chair of the FWWCP during its most dynamic years and should be remembered for that alone, though it was just one of her many endeavours'. She moved next to Goldsmiths College, as head of their community-based Lee Centre in the 1980s and 1990s, and became senior lecturer in adult literacy education at South Bank University in the late 1990s-2000s. She was a visiting lecturer at Lancaster University's Literacy Research Centre, co-founding the journal *Research and Practice in Adult Literacy* in the 1980s. Research and practice were always interwoven in Jane's educational philosophy. The utilitarian terminology of Basic Skills, which came to dominate policy discourse, was alien to Jane.

Jane never sought status or acclaim. She lived democracy at work, and in relationships. At Cambridge House, she abolished hierarchies in our five-strong team and made all roles equal, including my own as a clerical worker. There was no vertical division of labour. As a stubbornly principled democrat, she considered diplomacy in her external facing roles as not her priority. She clashed with funders if she thought learners were not at the centre of a research and development project, publishing what learners wrote rather than what funders wanted to hear. She had an ear for what she saw as phoney and, in the 2000s, ticked me off gently for inviting literacy learners to speak at a big policy and research conference in a way that she felt exposed them to condescension. Soon afterwards, we ran a literacy students' writing project together and the publication was, happily, launched by Tony Benn.

When Jane joined the Society of Friends, her commitment to action was ambitious: on local, national and international issues. Living in Stroud, she ran a successful fundraising campaign for the Women's Refuge, wrote and spoke about conscientious objectors, learned to play the cornet; visited sick Friends and campaigned for refugees. She dedicated time and love to her grandchildren. She worked in Palestine and Israel as part of the Quakers' Ecumenical Accompanier Programme (EAPPI) - and wrote extensively about it. Jane could be conflicted and despondent. She was never complacent, always loving and determined to move forward positively. Her humane inquisitiveness, activism for change and loving ways will be much missed by colleagues, F/friends and family.