

Ivan James Drayson Williams

Oct 3, 1925 – Feb 2, 2001

Written in 2001

Ivan Williams was born of Chrissie Drayson and Les Williams. Chrissie was the daughter of Arthur Drayson, who made leather upholstery for carriages, and Alice Quantrill, a country girl from a large family. Drayson was brought up in Gravesend, but business brought him to London. He bought a house in the suburb of Kilburn in 1896 and installed his young wife and daughter there. When Drayson died in 1919, Alice was 50, and Chrissie was 30. Chrissie was an accomplished musician: she studied at the London College of Music, was an excellent singer, and played the piano in the (silent) film cinema on Kilburn High Road.

Les Williams, the same age as Chrissie, was born in Gravesend to a tradition of pilots and watermen, who would guide ships through the shoals and currents of the Thames estuary. He also had a fine voice. Les met Chrissie in Gravesend at a singing party at the home of her aunt, Alice Brown. As it turned out, Les was not well suited for fatherhood, and his son never trusted him, in spite of several attempts to bring together the family.

Ivan was born in 1925, when Chrissie was 35, and spent his youth in Kilburn with his mother and grandmother. At one point, Les returned to his family as the landlord of the Swan pub in Cliffe, Kent, but it did not work out. Ivan had fond memories of beer barrels arriving by horse-drawn carriage, and rolling down into the cellar of the pub. There were also visits to Chrissie's aunt Alice Brown in Gravesend, a home heavily decorated in Victorian mahogany and antimacassars, the legs of the tables decently covered. They would eat tiny Thames shrimp with bread that had the crusts cut off, while the two Alices talked about their ill-health and their "operations".

Ivan spent several summers in Holbrook, Suffolk, where his grandmother had grown up. Uncle Charles kept ferrets that were used for rabbit hunting, sending the ferret down a rabbit hole and setting snares where the frightened animals would emerge. There were picnics and boating, and a huge number of cousins of all ages. One of those was Joan Wells, five years older than Ivan, who remained in touch until her death in 1988. Another was Molly O'Neil, 18 years older, who lived in London and was close to the child until she went overseas for many years, but kept in contact until the end of his life. Molly said "he was such a gentle man".

When Ivan started secondary school in 1936, a teacher made a little joke on his name -- Ivan Williams -- asking "are you Welsh or Russian". It was taken quite seriously though, and Ivan began to use his middle name, not James but Jim. He was Jim Williams for the rest of his life, except at the end, where people would read the full name and he was unable to correct them.

In 1938 the world began to collapse. Grandmother Alice died, leaving Chrissie alone to bring up her son, with some support from the relatives in Gravesend and Holbrook. In 1939 the war broke out. There was a bomb shelter at the end of the garden, and Jim was interested in spotting enemy planes, scavenging bomb sites, and joining the Home Guard. As the war ended, Jim's mother was afflicted with ovarian cancer, and she died in 1946, leaving the house to Jim, now alone in the world except for distant relatives.

Jim joined the Army for several years, as part of the occupation forces in Germany, living in Hannover and Goettingen. He learned how to clean a machine gun, how to paint a pile of coal

white (so nobody could steal any), and how to make a profit from differential pricing of alcohol, tobacco, and chocolate in the British, American, and German army camps. In 1949 he and others took a train trip to Budapest, igniting a taste for foreign travel.

Returning to Britain, he took advantage of a Government scheme for soldiers, taking a place at the prestigious London School of Economics. There he met his lifelong friend Arnold Lovell, a man from a Nottinghamshire coal town, who would rise to high office in the British Treasury. The political feeling at the time was that communism was the best way to feed people and avoid the horror of war, and Jim was caught up in this, starting a long belief in the power of communism, even after the fall of the Iron Curtain and of the Soviet Union. Jim was a member of the Left Book Club at LSE.

Graduating in 1951, Jim began some secondary school teaching, and in the summers was a tour guide ("courier") for Blue Cars coach tours. He would meet parties of American tourists in London, and set off, with a coach-driver, through France, Germany, and Italy, for a tour of four or five weeks, working with hotels and restaurants, pointing out the sights, and solving problems. He also directed the tourists to gift shops, at which a commission was promised for the tour guide! Long after, while travelling in Europe, Jim would point out tight corners of medieval streets where coach navigation was particularly difficult, or a place where a passenger had asked a fatuous question. The rest of the year, Jim was living in London with roommates, including the Canadian John Hall, and a German refugee, George Marlow, whose parents had been killed at Auschwitz.

In summer of 1954, Jane Irvine was 33 years old and living in Chicago. She had qualified with a Masters degree in Speech and Hearing from the University of Illinois, had a good income and a car of her own. Her mother had recently died, leaving her emotionally bereft, but with a small inheritance. Jane took a coach tour of Europe with her friend Mary Lou Kelly -- the only person she knew who could afford such an extravagance. Jim was the tour guide: by the end of the tour, Jim and Jane were very close, enjoying the romantic atmosphere of the European capitals, far from the ordinary world. When she got back to Chicago, Jane had a marriage offer from Jim, a man who owned his own house outright, and was filled with practical suggestions for the trans-Atlantic move. Jim and Jane married Dec 4, 1954.

Jim continued working the coach tours in the summer of 1955, teaching at Holloway School. Their first child, Arthur Frederick, was born in 1955, and Roy David two years later. The family lived in the ground floor of the ancestral home, with the upper floors rented to students from Ghana and Ceylon, who also served as occasional babysitters. In 1959, the Williams family moved to a larger house in Colindale, further out in the suburbs, and the Dyne Road house was rented. Through the early 60's, George Marlow was buying property in south London, and encouraging Jim to do the same, converting large Victorian houses to the more modern model of self-contained flats, with money provided by what Jane had brought from Chicago, as well as by the rents. The relationship with Marlow eventually turned sour, but was replaced by a 30-year partnership with a lawyer, Roy Brien.

By 1965 Jim had a day job as a Lecturer at the City of London College, teaching undergraduates Business Studies and Economics, while spending the weekends driving to south London, and learning enough of the building trades to supervise the conversion work. The family would travel to "the Continent" in the summer, driving the familiar routes from the Blue Cars days. Jim had

enough languages to be able to negotiate prices at hotels at the end of the drive. He became interested in wine, with a small cellar at home, and enjoyed dinner at a restaurant where the waiters behaved with proper decorum. Jim was fascinated by history, especially economic and industrial history, not the history of the aristocracy. He enjoyed visiting ancient castles and trying to discover the remnants of sanitary arrangements. He believed that social and political change occurs through technology and industry.

In 1966, the family moved to Dulwich, a salubrious area of south London famous of its village-like atmosphere. Schools for the boys were within walking distance, as well as the growing property empire nearby. Owned with Roy Brien, the peak size was some eight houses split into some 25 flats by the beginning of the 1980s. Each Saturday, there would be work to do at one place or another, the maintenance alternating with major renovation. Jim, often with one or more of his sons, would set off with complex collections of keys, specifications, notes, and tools, laying out a schedule of work for several people throughout the day, all organized with military efficiency. Weekdays, Jim would take the train to London, and try to be back for a cup of tea at five o'clock.

As the boys took up their own activities, Jim and Jane would travel together and with other couples: to Italy and France, Chicago, Spain. Jim would enjoy the feeling of the open road, driving into the unknown. He never seemed much interested in British travel. Jim would take long rambles in the Kentish hills with his old friend Arnold Lovell and his dogs, stopping at a picturesque pub for a pint for lunch.

In 1985 Jim took early retirement from the College (now the City of London Polytechnic), and spent more time at the properties and travelling with Jane. He was shattered when Arnold died unexpectedly in 1990, leaving him with few close friends. By the mid 90's, Jim was beginning to lose some brain function: Jane was covering for him and he was writing down a lot rather than leaving it to memory. In 1997 his first grandchild was born (Joshua), and Jim struggled to remember the name for more than a few minutes. In mid 1998, Jane could no longer handle the confusion and turbulence of an Alzheimer's patient, and Jim was taken into care. He died in 2001.

Jim Williams was a quiet, honest man, respectful of the achievements of others, but with little time for advertising and veneer. He believed that the goodness of the world is generated by the human spirit. He was an attentive father and a good provider, and is much missed by his wife Jane, his sons Fred and Roy, and his grandchildren that he never knew well.