

PAPER 1

TRIBUTE TO MAMIE O'KEEFFE

- Denise Sweeney

First I have to thank the Committee for asking me to make the Society's tribute to Mamie tonight. We were both foundation members in 1984, but Mamie has been part of the spectrum of my life for much longer than that; for almost as long as I can remember. Her Uncle Mick Donnollan, her mother's brother, was my Uncle Mick Donnollan, married to my father's sister, so we were not blood-related, but we were cross-related. And the Donnollans had no children, so everybody's children was theirs. When Mamie was explaining this relationship to people she would say as only Mamie could, 'Denise and I have a mutual Uncle Mick and Auntie Cissie. We can't very well call them our common Uncle and Aunt, so we call them our mutual Uncle and Aunt.' I feel tonight as I have felt while I have been preparing this tribute, that they and the entire tribal connection, would be delighted that I am doing this for a Society which contained the both of us, and which they all would have held in the highest regard.

I am only sorry that their prolific progeny, like that of so many tribes of similar calibre, do not show a more active interest in the Society. I wish I had, or that we had, every \$20 that has been offered to me over the years with the throw-away, although no doubt very genuine line, 'Remind me to give you \$20 for that History Society. I should belong to it.' Well, of course they should. It is their story. We are only putting it together.

The Historical Society was only one of the many societies and areas of academic and community life, where Mamie backed what she could do with what she did. She was everywhere she ought to be, be it a high profile or routine occasion: funerals, school reunions, charity functions, meetings generally, and of course, family functions.

At her funeral, Justine Simonds, a friend from her All Hallows' and university days, gave the eulogy. She said that after much thought she had decided not to talk about what Mamie did, but about what she was. She highlighted her sustained

interest in life, and in her courage, both of which were with her to the end, with the chilling reminder that the latter was something we might all need in the not too distant future. Both of these qualities were evident to those of us who did not see much of Mamie in the last years. She was so sick that, except for her birthday parties, we left it to people like Justine and Kay, Mamie's sister, who is also not well, and to Rita McIvor, and a few of the people who were very close to her, and they kept us all informed of her condition and of her activities.

Her courage and interest are evident in one of the first purchases she made when she went to the nursing home. This was a computer, to finish the history of Moreton Bay, which had been in process for some time, at first as a side-line, and then on her retirement she applied herself to it consistently. Her sickness took over soon after she retired, however, and she was not able to complete it.

On her last birthday, the 25th of May last year, Justine questioned whether she should arrange the usual party because of the state of Mamie's health. The Matron soon disabused her mind of any doubt. She said on no account to cancel it, that she looked forward to it for weeks, and always enjoyed it immensely. Yet on that last occasion, her participation had to be very minimal.

When I was asked to do this tribute I thought I would try the opposite approach from Justine's, and talk about what Mamie did. But what she was kept intruding. I suppose this is so for most of us. What we do is what we are. I hope I'm not skirting around a heresy or making a massive psychological error in that statement.

The thing that most struck me about Mamie, was her interest in the ordinary, in spite of her own extraordinary qualities, particularly her academic standing, and I think that is what we can call humility. Her funeral was on the same day as a funeral at West End, and I was later told that the West End community had split their energies and some attended the local funeral, while a contingent attended Mamie's at Cavendish Road. Now her term in West End was comparatively short. She went to the Blue Nurses Units there, above their administrative centre, because she knew that it was inevitable that one day she would have to go to the nursing home. West End was also the parish of Kay, who was also very well thought of, but in the short time that Mamie was there she obviously made an impact on that community.

At her funeral there was a good representation of her school friends, those from the university and various libraries and organisations that she had belonged to, and a number of Cavendish Road parishioners wearing the scapular of the Third Order of Carmel. This was Mamie: never too big for the community, never too big for the parish, never too big for the family.

Paul has said he would like a record of this tribute. I feel that it is somewhat fragmentary and I think that Mamie deserves a full paper. We have had some excellent papers on some of our Catholic laymen: G.W. Gray, Neil McGroarty, T.H. Fitzgerald and Tim Moroney and there are a few more we could well do. Sister Assumpta is not here tonight, so I can say this. I think that while we have such a data base alive and well among us, we should start preparing for a lecture on Denis O'Flynn. Peter Scott is another that should be recorded in detail. I am not sure if Tim is with us tonight, but he has a most valuable folio on his grandfather which he has very generously made available to me.

To this point we have not had one of our own generation and we have not had a woman. I hardly think that it is necessary to say that I am not dedicated to the cause of gender equity, but regardless of gender, or of anything else, I cannot think of anyone more worthy to represent the Brisbane Irish Catholic community of her time than Mamie O'Keeffe. Her family reflects the migration patterns shared by all of us, the occupational patterns, the mobility, and the inter-marriages, all encompassed in the deep and abiding faith that made that community the cohesive force that it was.

Mamie was very conscious of the dignity of her heritage and its place in the development of Brisbane. I think our tribute should be to put her 'between covers'. She is between them in numerous folders at the University, on other people, but I think that she would be delighted if we recorded here, for herself, and I would say that this Society represented more closely than most of the organisations to which she belonged, everything for which Mamie stood.

All that we can say now for Mamie, and to Mamie, is that we rejoice that she is enjoying the eternal peace that she so richly deserves and is sharing it with those that she loved so well.