Skiing uphill

by Kate Ewart-Biggs

Britain and Ireland Lives Entwined

Kate Ewart-Biggs leads the British Council's Global Network providing strategic leadership to our overseas network of offices around the world. Responsible for representing our work and offices overseas on the Senior Leadership Team, she ensures that the organisation has a connected network. Kate is also responsible for managing strategic relationships with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and other Whitehall partners with a geopolitical focus.

Prior to her current role, Kate was regional head covering the Middle East and North Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia regions. At the heart of developing the British Council's response to the Arab Spring, she worked on how the British Council could best respond to the needs of young people in that region in terms of access to education, skills and the opportunity to participate in the new democratic processes emerging in their countries.

Kate also ran the British Council operations in Uganda and Tanzania and has worked in Egypt and in Central and Eastern Europe. Before joining the British Council, Kate worked for organisations working on behalf of street children in South Africa, Brazil, Indonesia and Eastern Europe. Kate is passionate about giving young people, whatever their circumstances, the opportunity to engage actively in their communities.

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I remember vividly when I first heard about a place called Ireland. I was eight when I was told over the dinner table that we were moving there. I was given strict instructions not to tell anyone, but at the first opportunity I announced the news to my friends at school. Fully bilingual at a French school, in many ways I felt more French than English. At the time, my father was number two in the British Embassy in Paris and we had spent five happy years in Paris as a family. My parents had loved their time there. My mother called them the golden years.

I had no idea where or what Ireland represented, but as an adventurous eight-year-old I was up for the move. A few months later, in July 1976, we arrived in Dublin; a heatwave was overtaking Europe and Dublin basked in what I found out later was rather rare sunshine. We had taken the overnight ferry and I remember the excitement of being shown round by the captain and the feeling that my father was somehow someone vaguely important. He was taking up post as British ambassador to Ireland at the very height of the Troubles.

My father was a gentle, clever man, a pacifist who had lost his eye in the Second World War, five minutes into his first active duty as an 18-year-old officer in El Alamein. He had not wanted to fight but always said he was not brave enough to be a conscientious objector. I think those early experiences of violence and the horror of war had built in him an abhorrence and hatred of violence. He saw his posting to Ireland as an opportunity to make a real difference, to use his position in all the ways he could to progress peace in Northern Ireland, to build the bridges that led so many years later to the Good Friday Agreement. He had already in early interviews expressed these views strongly. In an interview with the British-Irish Association he said: ‘I have one

prejudice, acquired during the Second World War and reinforced again in Algeria: a very distinct and strong prejudice against violence for political ends'.

On 21 July 1976 I woke early in the big embassy residence that was now ours on the outskirts of Dublin. It was an ugly house, but to me it was the perfect abode, with huge gardens and a resident donkey. We had been in Dublin for only two weeks and the night before my mother had travelled overnight to London to buy some material to make new curtains in the residence. I padded into my parents' room, feeling a bit lonely and spent the morning with my father, as he had breakfast reading the papers, and getting ready for his day ahead. I remember choosing his tie and feeling sad that he had to go to work. I held on to him tight as he left in the Jaguar with his driver, a visiting senior civil servant, and his young private secretary. I wandered outside to find Owen, my new friend, the driver's son, and we set about a game in the garden. We were very soon stopped in our tracks as we heard a large bang and felt the ground shake – we looked at each other for a minute, shrugged our shoulders and carried on playing – I learned later that the noise was a mine being detonated underneath my father's car. It killed him and the private secretary instantly and injured Owen's father, Brian, and the visiting colleague. Brian went on to be one of the people in my upbringing who I always felt close to – the person who had been with my father in that last moment.

Although now so long ago I remember every detail of that day. I only learned of my father's death when my mother arrived home much later on. My sister and brother, 15 and 12, were told beforehand, but I was not. I remember knowing there was something going on and being cross that they wouldn't tell me. I came to the conclusion that my mother had been killed in an aeroplane accident, and after a long day of pitied looks and hushed tones, took myself outside to ride my bike. As I did, a cavalcade of black cars filed down the drive and my mother emerged from one. She picked me up and took me inside where we were greeted by a line of staff, all of them crying, and I knew in that moment without anyone having to say anything that my father had died.

My mother was a very remarkable woman. She must have trusted her instinct on what path to take in those moments and days after my father's death. She was no doubt traumatised; I witnessed that late at night when she couldn't sleep and when her raw loss would take grip. But she knew she needed to do something positive and was determined to live by my father's ideals. A few days after his death she did a television broadcast from our sitting room.

I watched it the other day and she begins by introducing the three of us: my sister Henrietta, 15 and desperately self-conscious, wanting to be anywhere but standing in front of the camera; my brother Robin, who, having turned 13 five days after losing his father, had to look like he was now taking on the responsibility of this family; and me desperately striving to look positive with a little shy smile.

My mother then goes on to speak about forgiveness and tolerance and peace and reconciliation. There is no anger, no calls for retribution and hunting down the perpetrators, no damning of one side or another, but instead words of unity and trust building. Those words and her demeanour in those days were so critical, as she shone a light on the possibility of hope prevailing over violence, not just for my family but for two nations. As Garret FitzGerald said at the service in St Patrick's Cathedral a week after the murder in words which fully bear repeating:

> *No doubt the perpetrators calculated that relations between us would be severely weakened, perhaps permanently damaged by such an atrocity. That the opposite has been the case is now evident to all. Our two peoples, whose pasts have been so closely linked for ill and for good throughout eight centuries, have confounded our common enemy by responding to this tragedy with a deepened sense of our close interdependence, and of our common interest in combating violence and averting anarchy.*
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> *Politicians, press and people in our two islands have instinctively understood the trap set for them by evil men and have been drawn closer together in the aftermath of this murder. Christopher Ewart-Biggs could not have conceived that within two brief weeks of his arrival, he would have made, at the cost of his own gallant life, a unique contribution to the aims he fought to serve, a contribution which, had he lived, he would have dedicated himself to achieving by the slower process of diplomatic action.*

My mother went on to commit herself to the life of service which was living the ideals of my father. She devoted her life to campaigning for peace and reconciliation in Ireland. It remains a striking paradox that both my parents, who were so completely and quintessentially English, ended by devoting themselves to Ireland and the betterment of British–Irish relations.

Growing up

There is little doubt that my mother's stance has shaped my view of my role in the world. She created in me no ability to hate, to bear a grudge, or indeed to participate in the distancing of a next generation from a country that had so affected my future. My mother could have instilled in all of us a sense of betrayal by the people of Ireland, a hatred of all those associated with the conflict. But in fact the opposite was the case. Over the years after my father's death we visited Ireland and Northern Ireland often, we felt loved by those we met, who wanted to try and make our loss better. They had a sense that my mother loved Ireland. As Mary Holland, who received the Christopher Ewart-Biggs Memorial Prize in 1989, said: 'She didn't turn away from us.'

It was only as an adult that I really understood what she had done for me; that she had created in me an ability to transcend a personal loss to see something good and positive. She had taught me the value of individual relationships across the divides. When I watch scenes of the Troubles, listen to voices of the IRA or nationalists, and meet others affected during the Troubles, I can disconnect from my own loss and be aware of the responsibility all of us have when we react; the responsibility of creating spaces for interaction rather than distance. I stood with my mother on so many occasions on the divided streets of Belfast and understood the notion of the generational perpetuation of hatred and violence.

So, from a young age, I have felt intimately the power of connections and divides between countries, but I have never felt very British. I think I always preferred mainland Europe, the sophistication of life that I had tasted in those years in Paris, the smell of southern France, the food and the language. I spent the first eight years of my life in francophone countries, first in Belgium and then Paris, and was educated until secondary school in the French system. This gave me and my siblings the ability to communicate in two languages,

shifting in and out when one word feels better. Before we returned to London, I had felt the comfort in being English but also French when I wanted to be.

As the child of a diplomat you are brought up with a sense that the country that your parents are representing in is a wonderful haven of all things good, while you are also surrounded by reminders of what it means to be British. Even in the gastronomic capital of Europe the British Embassy had a 'commissariat shop' and we used to go there to buy marmite and tea bags. I still hate tea to this day having been forced to drink it as a child. My mother loved and embraced all things French – having been taught French by a series of French au pairs during her own childhood, she spoke beautiful perfect French. But at the many dinner parties in our embassy flat she would often serve British traditional dishes to amuse the French guests – spotted dick, apple crumble and shepherd's pie were all on the menu. Unlike many diplomatic families, my parents both created a very French environment for us at home – we all went to French schools rather than boarded and all our friends were French.

So, for me, it was something of a romantic mystery what the real UK really was. Three weeks after the death of my father, we arrived in Dover in my mother's Triumph Stag, which my father had given her just before he died. When we were taken aside by Customs, I thought this was part of the attention we had got used to in Dublin, and some sort of welcome to Britain. It was not. Rather my mother was handed a stiff tax bill for importing her car. She lay down on the floor next to the car and sobbed.

Indeed 1976 London was not quite the place I had imagined: it was grey and drab, with power strikes, rubbish collecting in the street and a grimness about it all. Our little house had been unloved for many years and was dark and cold. The wonderful Britain I had been envisaging was not at all what I experienced. I felt I didn't really belong, and that I had only belonged in embassies, or in Ireland where we had a role and an impact.

The years after my father's death were not easy, but for my mother they held great purpose. Her way to deal with her own loss was to channel it. Together with Thomas Pakenham and supported by Garett FitzGerald and others, she set up the Christopher Ewart-Biggs

Memorial Prize. This is a prize which recognises literary work that promotes and encourages peace and reconciliation in Ireland, a greater understanding between the peoples of Britain and Ireland, or closer co-operation between the partners of the European Community. My mother also launched a community prize alongside the literary one. She joined the Irish Peace People campaign founded by Mairead Corrigan and Betty Williams. She toured the US to try and halt the flow of US funding for the IRA. To pay some of the bills she joined the Women's Institute lecture circuit, taking her 'wife of a diplomat' speech on tour. I went with her a few times. I would sit in the back of a church hall, the youngest member of the audience by about 80 years, and listen to the stories of our previous glamorous life in embassies. Deep in her heart, she really wanted to be a Labour MP, but her background and posh voice got in the way and she never got past the selection process. In 1982, however, she was asked by Michael Foot to join the House of Lords as a life peer. She dreamed that night that she was skiing uphill.

Resilient young women

My nephew recently found a brilliant interview my mother did in the late 1980s where she talks very unemotionally about how she dealt with her personal loss by focusing on the values that my father had held and on how to live those. To many on the outside, the story of my family was perhaps one of how hope and purpose can transcend tragedy. This was so in many ways. But I feel strongly that it is really important to recognise the impact this kind of loss and trauma wreaks on so many across the world who have suffered in ethnic conflicts. It is important not to lose the stories of that impact.

Because we did not emerge unscathed. We all suffered and continue to suffer from the events of that day – we have experienced ongoing loss throughout the generations. I lost my wonderful mother when I was 22 and it was then that all the trauma of my childhood really hit me. She was at a stage of life just when she was beginning to feel calmer and happier and given the platform she needed in the House of Lords, to raise all those issues close to her. She had given me a sense of what it was to be in this world, and just as she was finally able to feel some peace perhaps and I was embarking on my own life as an adult, she died. I felt anchorless and lost and had to build a purpose for

myself. I found that anchor abroad. I left Britain and took off to Sub-Saharan Africa where I lived for many years. There I was able to find a warmth I craved, a place where life is precious because it is often threatened. I was lucky to have friends in the UK and across the world who helped me to recover from her loss, and as I have got older I have been able to sit back and reflect on how I wanted to continue to live her values.

For me that found its form in how people connect to each other across societies. A degree in social anthropology prepared me for no obvious job, but as a student I landed myself a voluntary role in a programme working with street girls in Recife, north-east Brazil as part of my ethnography degree. The girls there, all of whom had suffered terrible abuse at home, were brave and powerful. The project had been set up by a feminist lawyer and rather than rescuing the girls from the street, it gave them the tools to leave it themselves. The violence and prejudice directed at them as girls was astounding, but the whole ethos of the 'passage house' was dedicated to empowering them as women to take control of their futures.

I worked for the next five years in projects in Indonesia, South Africa, Eastern and Central Europe and learned so much from the young people I encountered. In a girls' project I worked in in Cape Town, I found the same power and resilience among those young women. South Africa of the mid-1990s was a deeply divided place and I inhabited two distinct worlds. With black women and women of colour in the project by day and in the evenings, I would return to a very white world, living in a flat with white friends on the coast and enjoying all the nightlife Cape Town had to offer a young white person. I experienced indirectly the racist and bigoted attitudes so entrenched in South African society and I felt a constant personal guilt that I couldn't do more.

Proud citizens of the world

I joined the British Council soon after and lived and worked across East Africa and Eastern and Central Europe. The work we do is at the heart of the real practice of cultural relations. In Uganda where I worked for five years, we built a programme focused on giving young people skills for the workplace of the future. Our school-linking programme gave Ugandan headteachers, teachers and students the

chance to partner with schools in the UK. Part of the challenge was to confront the old paternalistic assumption that the UK schools were there to provide a model for the Ugandan ones. We found that when teachers and students visited Uganda all their preconceived views of capability were thrown out of the window. They would find in Ugandan schools hugely skilled teachers and dedicated students committed to getting the best out of their poor educational resources. The Ugandan group I know who came back from a visit to secondary schools in Slough similarly had their preconceptions challenged. They were rather shocked by the standards of behaviour and commitment they found, and rather than envy the resources available, went home valuing their own systems more.

The power of connections across cultures is so powerful and it has at its foundation person-to-person interaction. It is most challenged in extreme situations like conflict and ethnic divides. I have met young people in our programmes in Syria and Lebanon who have had a glimpse of what is possible if you take a personal stand against following the patterns laid out for you based on your religion or ethnicity. I watched my mother do that in 1976 and I met hundreds of street kids who had done it by leaving their homes to get away from abuse. Every day now, I see people across our programmes in the British Council who are making this same journey.

But it is not easy to challenge and to step out. I have had to confront my own understanding of difference through seeing the world through my daughter's lens. She is half-Ugandan and as a mixed-race person is having to navigate a world which is still very focused on race and what it means. When she was very little and living in Tanzania where I was running the British Council, she started saying that she didn't like her 'brown' and that she wanted to be 'pink' like me. I pointed out the irony of my spending years sunbathing to look more brown like her. But at the age of three, despite being in a very black environment in Tanzania, she had somehow absorbed that unfruitful desire. She now lives in a very diverse part of London and as a teenager is still grappling with identity, nationality, class, intercultural living. We have constant discussion about her experience, what helps and what doesn't, to make her feel part of all the component parts of society which she fits within. In very culturally and ethnically mixed

schools she is actually much more defined by her class than her race. Both sides of her family have educated and internationally minded backgrounds and it is those groups of friends she has gravitated towards.

Yet I have found that it is very difficult to have a real conversation about race in my white community where people don't really want to accept that racial prejudice still exists in our liberal worlds. I get a lot of 'well my daughter has red hair' as if it is the same as not being white. When I was visiting secondary schools for my daughter I always asked about the data on ethnic mix and was often met with the answer that the school was colour blind and that there was no racial bullying. When I tried to explain that my daughter does see colour because she has to and it is of interest to her what mix there will be around her, I get blank looks or a defence of the policy on bullying.

Despite the gauntlet thrown down by our last prime minister, who famously said – 'if you are a citizen of the world you are a citizen of nowhere' – there are so many young people now living in the UK from mixed heritage who straddle worlds and who are indeed global citizens. My daughter and I found this deeply offensive as it went against everything that we both feel about our place in the world. We are proud citizens of the world.

Engagement and co-operation

As I reflect on my background in the world and where we are in the UK in the current post-referendum environment, I have a deep sadness. It feels very personal to me that we are risking our position in the world, and going against the principles of engagement and co-operation that my parents both stood for. I have spent my adult life living and working internationally, looking for ways to link and partner and learn from others. In a post-Brexit Britain it will be ever more important to give our young people the chances I had to explore and inhabit many worlds and identities and to challenge all forms of intolerance and prejudice. Prejudice is always personal – as I learned as a child, it does not happen to someone else so that you can walk away from it. The UK's departure from the EU is about more than just staying part of a trading and security union: it is about who we want our young people to be in the future.

There is much research that shows how one personal interaction with a country through learning the language, one course or one visit, significantly increases the trust in that country. Trust pays. The British Council is all about providing that bridge and link for millions of young people around the world, through an English course, a British exam, skills programmes, art workshops and exhibitions, all of which give young people a glimpse of a new idea, a different way of looking at the world and the possible chance to influence their societies for the better.

I feel privileged to have had the chance to find a form of belonging which has straddled so many communities across the diplomatic world in Ireland, Europe, Africa. I have learned something in each of them that has enabled me to always seek more connection. In the dry cleaners this morning I learned about carpets from a northern part of Afghanistan where the shopkeeper comes from. Together we shared a moment transported away from west London to a home to which he cannot return because of the conflict which has assailed his country for so long. I have told you a little of my story and I will continue to try to tell the stories of others all around the world who step beyond themselves to create newer, better narratives for their children of how we can connect across boundaries worldwide. My mother did this for me, and I can only hope that I am doing the same for my own daughter.

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