

CHRIS FARMAN 29 May 1937 – 29 May 2020



Chris Farman was born on 29 May 1937 and died on his birthday last Friday, a victim of COVID-19. He was brought up in what was then the largely working-class area of Fulham in south-west London. There he forged a twin-track career in politics and journalism that carried him rumbustiously through his whole life.

He started work as a reporter on the *West London Observer* and was to be found wherever a march or demonstration took place. In 1968 he was caught up in the anti-Vietnam rally that turned violent in front of the American Embassy in Grosvenor Square. A life-long member of the Labour Party, he was a socialist with Anarchist leanings, who liked nothing better than to join a Levellers' Day

march in Burford and listen to Tony Benn commemorating the men who were executed in the churchyard by Cromwell's troops in 1649.

After stints on *The Illustrated London News* and other magazines, in 1973 he joined the staff of Time-Life Books, working as an editor on *The British Empire*, a partwork history published jointly with the BBC. Following the formula established on Henry R. Luce's *Time* and *Life* magazines, this was a publication where much if not most of the writing was done in-house, researched in the panelled reading room of the London Library, in St James's Square. Chris Farman showed himself to be a true historian with an unquenchable drive to uncover the truth and to portray it objectively and clearly. In search of the right structure to support an argument and a telling phrase to capture the significance of a story, he would often work all night in order to produce a perfectly honed piece.

He had just published, in October 1972, a full-length study of the *General Strike, May 1926*. 'It lasted only nine days,' he wrote, 'but in that time it shook the country's political and economic structure to the core. Echoes of the class bitterness it aroused reverberate to this day.'

At the Time-Life offices, variously in Oxford Street, in a dark basement in Portland Place, lit by oil lamps during the miner's strike, in a town house in Conduit Street and finally in the main Time & Life building on the corner of Bond Street and Bruton Street, he worked on a series of books including *The World's Wild Places*, *The Great Cities* and *World War II*. For this last he commissioned and edited some excellent introductions by, among others, Major Pat Reid, one of the very few prisoners-of-war to escape Colditz Castle. He invited Major Reid to an expense-account lunch, as was the Time-Life way, and brought him into the office

to regale the staff with racy stories about female resistance agents and trysts in broom cupboards.

After Time-Life Chris continued to write for *The Guardian*, *History Today* and other papers on British politics and another of his pet subjects, the Spanish Civil War. He was one of the founding members of a campaign to erect a memorial in Oxford to the volunteers from the city and county who fought in the International Brigade in Spain and co-wrote the book *No Other Way – Oxfordshire and the Spanish Civil War 1936-39* with Valery Rose and Liz Woolley, launched with a round of speeches in Oriel College. He became Chairman of his local Labour Party and, despite declaring that Jeremy Corbyn would be a setback for the party no less severe than Michael Foot, he continued to campaign tirelessly for Labour in recent elections including that of 2019.

Chris Farman was the life and soul of every party, whether a dinner for a small group of friends or a wider gathering such as the walking group he founded with fellow writers and journalists. He was responsible for christening it BUFAC, which elicited horror among the politically correct, since it stood for British Union of Fascists Automobile Club. Chris had noticed an enamelled badge carrying this name at an antiques fair and was tickled by the concept. It was of course the antithesis of everything he believed in, but he was drawn to extremes. At a party thrown by Chris, you might find yourself sitting next to an ex-member of the British Union of Fascists whom years before he'd fought in the street, courteous and debonair in retirement but sharing something of that same political pugilism that drew Chris into politics and writing.

Chris had a musical-hall flair for the *bon mot* and was a master of Bren-gun-swift repartee. He called it badinage. 'Every one a gem,' he liked to say. A master of ceremonies and fount of political knowledge, he will be fondly remembered by his friends and deeply missed, most desperately by his wife Mary, a midwife of formidable ability and herself a prize-winning writer.

Simon Rigge – June 2020