

# GEORGE AND INGE AND DORIS AND ME

*Jack Shadbolt\**

**H**OW IT CAME ABOUT that the Woodcocks and ourselves became immediate friends when we first met in 1953 has been described by George in the second part of his autobiography, *Beyond the Blue Mountains*; how they came to live in the little cabin in the woods next to our evolving house on Capital Hill; how they lived with us for a period of time when George was refused re-entry into the United States because of his stance as a philosophical anarchist; and how we found we shared so many common interests. It didn't take long during those early periods of close contacts when the friendship was forged to find out many fundamental things about George: his quiet brilliance and impressive erudition; his extraordinary ranging curiosity; his strong scholarly inclination but also his rootedness in physical contact with the world; his capacity to observe and to analyze resulting in a mind that is a bottomless well of stored information while his memory is a dipper ready to bring to the surface without hesitation whatever facts might be required. In those early days we heard and saw him at his work, the steady and apparently untroubled sound of his typewriter having to do, we assumed — apart from his finely honed skill with words — with that reliable well-stocked memory and his quiet strength and easy temperament, qualities which made him so comfortable to be around. We sensed at once the moral firmness which underlies all his words and actions and which make him in his full maturity a person of great ethical stature.

I suppose the bond which began and happily continued between George and me has been primarily based on our rooted belief in the efficacy of the creative life, George as a writer and myself as a painter, each interested in the commonality of the creative process as well as in the differences between our respective disciplines. There has always been so much to learn. But the equations of friendship are numerous and beyond analysis. The fabric of friendship grows not only out of philosophic accord and respect but also out of experiences shared on the simplest and most mundane of levels. And so it is that inevitably in speaking of George, I must also speak of Inge and Doris because it is in the context of this foursome that

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the fabric of friendship has developed the enduring texture that it has acquired. And increasingly as the years have rolled along that context has consisted of evenings together, dinner in their house or ours, over lingering drinks (martinis, scotch and wine) and then the delicious meals Inge or Doris had prepared, all the while talking about the things that mattered in our lives, serious or frivolous, consequential or prosaic.

**A**MONG THE INTERESTS shared, travel has always loomed large, the idea not only of feeding one's curiosity about the look and feel of other parts of the world but of challenging oneself with the shock of cultures other than that in which one has been locked. The Woodcocks — with the added motivation and direction provided by their mutual humanitarian concerns and by George's writing interests — have been infinitely more venturesome and seasoned travellers than we. We shared one expedition into the B.C. interior in the 1950s but we have never been able to bring off the frequently projected trip to Europe with them to explore mutual old haunts and to be introduced to some of their favourite places. Both our houses reflect the directions in which our travels have taken us in the collection of objects of ethnic art and craft which crowd them — African carvings, New Guinean, Tibetan or East Indian masks, fabrics, drums and all the rest. Many of them are the result of our gift exchanges.

It is in the realm of travel that George's keenness of perception is so apparent: his knowledge of history, his grasp of political and social situations, his openness to sight, sound, taste — he misses nothing and nothing is irrelevant as he enters the new experience, and his later recall is total. And so when they are home once again we become the greedy consumers of their adventures, the accounts of which have enormously informed and stimulated our own more limited travel. Many conversations about their travels throughout India finally led us to a three-month trip to the near east on our own. They had told us of the richness of the Indian experience we could anticipate but had also warned us of the cultural shock we might well undergo. Innocents that we were, during our first few hours in New Delhi, we lost five hundred dollars to a pick-pocket and had our first shattering encounters with beggars. Considerably depressed that evening in the seclusion of our hotel we turned for help to the notes of their advice which we had jotted down in Vancouver prior to our departure; there we encountered the words of — (I think it was Inge) — “If desperate, go to Singapore!”; it was just what was needed to snap us out of our mood of paralysis and into the rewarding experience of the trip ahead. Those words, first uttered in an atmosphere of friendship and the tone of amused and good-natured high irony we had come to know so well, have remained familiar to us, often returning to cheer us on in a moment of low spirits.

**T**HEN THERE IS the Woodcock's love of animals. It has nothing to do with the common sentimental relation to pets, but is rather a passion for the whole range of living creatures who represent that ever fascinating and mysterious link between our human selves and the larger natural world. For them the feeling is deep and respectful, expressing itself in active concern for the abuse and suffering of domestic or other animals or, closer to home, in the regular feeding on their Kerrisdale back porch of a family of territorially displaced racoons. There is as well, of course, the personal satisfaction of sharing a household with a member of the feline species and in the process being rewarded with a glimpse into another creature's mode of being. And so it is that cats (theirs and ours) have always been a not unimportant point of focus in our friendship. We have been on intimate terms with all their cats as have they with ours, for many years each of us looking after this or that pet when either of us was away from home — an expression of mutual trust that all cat devotees will understand. After having survived several generations of cats, our respective households decided that the next pet would probably outlive us and that our fascination with cats should take a more abstract form. But now there is Tiger, a needy stray who found his way without too much trouble into the Woodcocks' hearts and happy home. More often than not these days when we come to visit, it is he who starts off the conversation with his particular form of small talk, and he returns from time to time during the course of the evening when he feels the conversation is getting too philosophical.

**E**SPECIALLY IN THE springtime there is the renewed delight in the world of plants and gardens. George's botanical knowledge is prodigious and minute and he is especially attracted to native flowers, those he finds in this province or that he remembers from England or other countries. Our own garden includes a 'bosky bit' where offspring of his special white violets and other woodland treasures find a home.

Whether the evening is an ordinary get-together, or a birthday celebration, or the New Year's Eve which seems to have become a yearly ritual, we soon get down to other areas of conversation. We are all interested in art and artists, we are all respectful of the creative spirit and of the craft that lies behind its products. George has always just finished a book and has one or more on the way, themselves enough to engage us in a year of talk. As an artist who spends most of his thinking time painting, I cannot begin to tap the resources of George's mind, except possibly in my own territory of art where I know enough to ask provocative questions. Like George an omniverous reader, Inge is apt to be probing some fascinating theory concerning human behaviour or the history of the universe — that is in the time

she permits herself to take off from whatever is her latest project for helping needy people in some part of the world, projects which George equally shares and into which their bottomless compassion has led them. And so ideas flow.

Common interests there are, yes, but it is more likely some underlying agreement as to what things are important — the simple life, the life of the imagination, a connection with the natural world, human dignity (attitudes largely unarticulated but tested and proven over the years) — that has kept our friendship alive and enabled us to be simply humanly at ease when we are with each other. We sip, talk, laugh, recall anecdotes, admire, gossip, discuss our advancing years and the ironies of life with a warm-hearted affection that defies time and binds us closer. We think our own lives are fairly busy but theirs is one of constant engagement, for their humanitarian consciences and George's writing activities have made for them a circle of friends, personal and professional, that literally encircles the globe. And so there is a reasonable interval between our meetings. Underneath friendships one can usually detect complementary needs. Perhaps we provide an element of stability in the Woodcocks' restlessly searching lives. Our pattern is solid. We live where and as we have lived for nearly forty-five years and it looks as though we shall continue to do so. Perhaps we are small fixed stars in their intellectual galaxy. We are here where they have made their home, part of the home base. Doris and I could not imagine life without the sustenance and joy we receive in being part of their more intimate lives.

