



Joseph Connolly

A monthly diary of sundry observations, brief encounters and anecdotes, local and less so, foodie and otherwise

Master of satire holds court

I've been on to the Heath lately. Been on to him quite a lot, actually, since his birthday party. Oh – this is Michael Heath I am talking about: one of our most industrious cartoonists.

His spare, spiky, always topical and bitterly satirical cartoons are familiar to absolutely everybody: he is the cartoon editor of *The Spectator*; and in addition, his work appears everywhere from *Private Eye* to the *Sunday Times*.

The Speccie threw him a surprise party (cake, champagne) which meant he was rather late for his official party (cake, champagne) at the French House in Soho. He eschewed the cake and champagne and fell upon a vodka and tonic. He was looking suitably slim, cool and street-wise – skinny jeans, Harrington jacket, gelled and spiky dark hair ... the punchline to the cartoon being that we were here to celebrate his eightieth birthday ...!

He looks thirty years younger – due, he thinks, to fags, and his erstwhile habit of a daily bottle of Scotch.

On the same evening, Frieda Hughes (daughter of Ted and Sylvia) was launching her new book of poems and paintings in a rammed gallery in Mayfair.

Frieda – despite the massive publicity surrounding Jonathan Bate's new biography of her father – was her usual humorous and rather pleasingly serene presence.

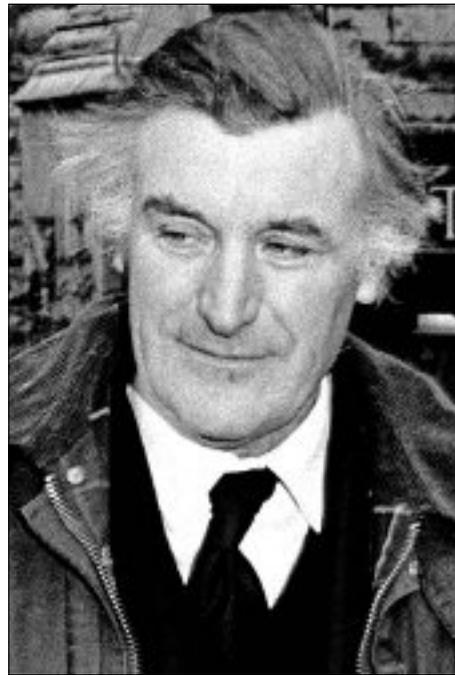


■ Cartoonist Michael Heath, main picture, and poet Ted Hughes, whose daughter Frieda was at the event

She lives in Wales with many owls and motorbikes, remaining delightfully normal under the weight of such parentage – particularly difficult, I would have thought, in America, where Sylvia

Plath is a goddess and Ted Hughes the villain. "I just smile," she says. "What else is there to do ...?"

And still on the same night (I know – I don't know how I manage it either) was the party to launch



the Frieze Art Fair at the Groucho Club. The tradition here is never to discuss culture, but only money – whereupon everybody drinks until they fall over. Ah yes – but is it art ...?



Too crude a comedy...

Local comic Michael McIntyre: is he having a laugh...? He recently applied to re-extend his £5.5 Hampstead house amid a torrent of objection. A neighbour described the plan as being 'an extension of an extension of an extension' – while the Heath & Hampstead Society reported that "the proposals display a crudeness of design that would be very destructive of the fine features of this house". So how surprised are you to learn that Camden has approved the application? Not at all, I suggest – because when ever do they refuse? Camden has become the Man from Del Monte – he says yes!



The Venice of the midlands

Michael Palin is currently engaged in a one-man stage show touring theatres everywhere. He emailed me to say that he was currently performing in Stoke-on-Trent, and that should I be passing, I must drop in. I replied that alas I wouldn't in fact be in Stoke-on-Trent that evening, which is rare for me. The town, he pursued, is bathed in dusky light: "If you close your eyes and take a lot of drugs, you could almost be in Venice".

Joseph Connolly's latest novel *STYLE* is published in hardback and as an ebook by Quercus



■ Eating oysters is a fine art

There's really only one way to down an oyster

So what have I been up to, during this season of mists and mellow fruitfulness? Well, the memory is misty, but not overdoing it on the mellow fruit front, it's fair to say – while freely indulging in other lovely things that autumn inevitably carts along with it.

Just as one is lamenting the end of English asparagus, peas, strawberries and cherries, along come oysters and grouse.

Now oysters I can take or leave – I don't mind the odd Colchester Native, but I can't down a dozen like many people I know.

What I cannot understand is why they will douse them with lemon and Tabasco. The oyster, in its slimy little way, is redolent of the sea, and you don't want to lose that: they are best just naked, and barely palpitating.

Caviar too – don't have any truck with chopped boiled egg and onions: just spoon a decent dollop on to the fleshy part of your hand between thumb and forefinger, and greedily slurp away (bone spoon, by the way – silver taints the flavour).

All this if anyone can actually afford

the stuff in the first place, of course: you can buy 30 grams of it, but that is not quite enough for a new-born baby's portion.

For any decent sort of a gathering, what you need is the tin of Beluga that Harrods is selling for close on five grand...

Grouse is something else. Grouse is the king of game, with a depth of flavour like nothing else.

There was rumoured to be a shortage of it this year – due to some or other reason beyond the comprehension of us townies: weather, or something – but London appears to be awash with it.

So far I've enjoyed grouse at the Dean Street Townhouse, Wiltons and a couple of clubs (Garrick and Savile): all wonderful, with the Garrick having the edge.

Half the fun is the liberal spooning on of all the essential trappings: breadcrumb, bread sauce and luscious gravy – these melding wonderfully with the mousse of liver and game chips.

Oh yum. And if you have claret, prepare to drink it now. Oh God... I'm absolutely starving ...

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