



Drinking the river dry...

Sylvia Vetta meets artist, dramatist and poet Dwina Gibb

Photographs: Simon Williams

The loss of her husband Robin Gibb in May 2012 is still raw for Dwina Gibb, but the births of her first grandson Maxwell Robin two years ago and a second grandchild Theodore this year have helped take the edge off her grief.

The Bee Gees sold more than 220 million records worldwide, making them one of the world's best-selling music artists of all time. Only Elvis Presley, The Beatles, Michael Jackson, Garth Brooks and Paul McCartney have outsold the Bee Gees.

Dwina told me a lovely story about how, while driving through a remote part of Rajasthan, she felt thirsty and pulled off at a small roadside café. As she walked in through the door she heard the sound of Robin singing 'I Started a Joke'.

She said: "Robin was singing to me in the middle of a vast desert. It was such a beautiful experience and I realised how their songs had reached every corner of the world."

Like Robin, Dwina is creative and

it was her artwork that brought them together. She is not only an artist but is also, a poet, author and dramatist. Her first dramatic production *Last Confessions of Scallywag* played to sold out audiences at the Mill at Sonning for seven weeks in 2014. Sally Taylor, the director of the theatre, described it as '*Charley's Aunt meets Father Ted*'.

Dwina's interests are varied. She is a collector of objects and sculpture related to mythology. She replaced an old tennis court in the grounds of her house in Thame, with a stone circle and in the centre has grown an oak tree from an acorn.

The circle has been used for special marriage blessings, name-giving and memorials. She is vegetarian and enjoys all religious or spiritual practices that encourage peace and happiness in the world, and particularly likes the yoga and meditation in the studies of the Brahma Kumaris. She is also the Patroness of the Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids.

I wondered what strand of her life would determine what she decided to take to our desert island.

The place of her birth, County Tyrone in Northern Ireland has informed much

of Dwina's life and is the origin of her dark humour and her lively dialogue.

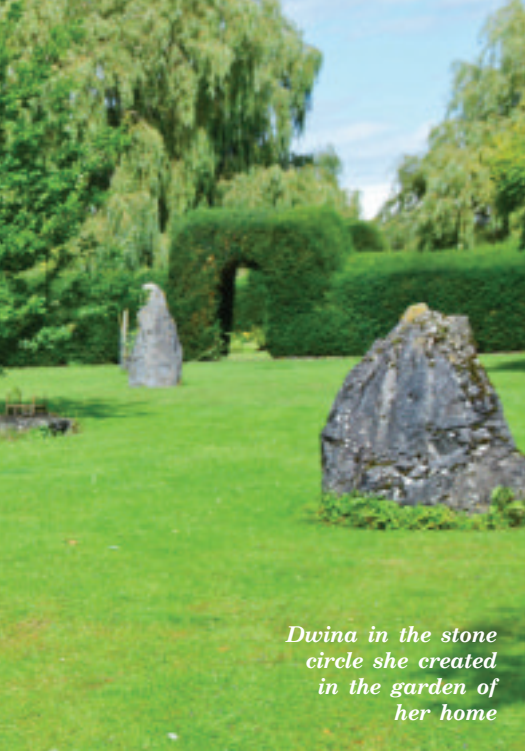
"I was brought up in the middle of what is called the 'Troubles' but it felt like a war zone. I was aware of the darkness and the fear," she said.

"My second school was the Collegiate Grammar School in Enniskillen. The school bus was diverted when a roadside bomb blew up a convoy of British soldiers and left a huge hole in the road. We never knew when there would be a bomb among civilians, and as a child, this was horrifying.

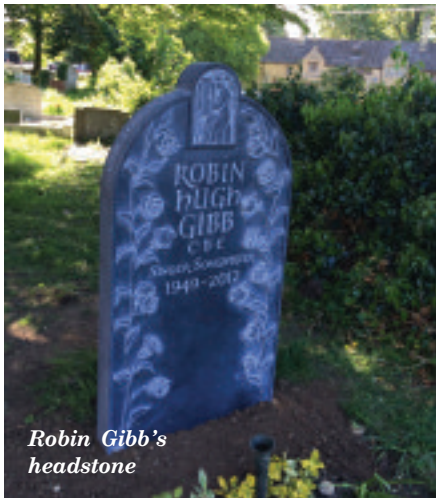
"My Uncle Ernie played the trombone in the local silver band and he expected to be with them at the November 1987 Remembrance Day Parade in Enniskillen. He was called away by the Bishop of Clogher who asked him to play *The Last Post* in his diocese - so my uncle survived the bombing."

Ten civilians and a police officer were killed and 63 were injured in what has come to be known as *The Poppy Day Massacre*.

Dwina said: "A young girl who lived near us was injured and was in hospital for two years so the conflict felt close. Lots of people became witty and used



Dwina in the stone circle she created in the garden of her home



Robin Gibb's headstone



"Robin was singing to me in the middle of a vast desert. It was such a beautiful experience and I realised how their songs had reached every corner of the world."

Dwina with bear sculpture by Michael Cooper

humour as a small light of hope. One of my choices for the island is George Frederick Watts' serene painting of Hope. She is depicted sitting on a globe, blindfolded, clutching a wooden lyre with only one string left intact."

"Edwin, my dad, bought me my first paintbox, and from that moment on, I painted portraits and landscapes. One of the first paintings I sold was of the racehorse Arkle. I loved drawing horses and swans. For many years I admired a painting of a swan on a mirror that hung in our home. I had never seen my father paint, but after our father's passing I discovered that he had painted the swan," Dwina added.

"My mother, Sarah Jane, who all her life has been called Sadie, was good at drawing, and she was the storyteller in the family. She made up wonderful stories for me and my sister, Thelma and my brother Raymond. Thelma and Raymond have stayed in County Tyrone. I am the only one who had wings on my feet."

Sarah passed on her gift to Dwina who began writing stories and poetry when she was nine years old. It was then that her fascination for

fairy tales and mythology began.

"My Auntie May had some illustrated versions of Grimm's fairy tales and other traditional stories. In her copy of Cinderella, one of the ugly sisters cut off her toes to make her foot fit into the glass slipper. A little bird shows the prince the drops of blood. It was pretty gruesome stuff."

Dwina told me how a Catholic friend described to her the magical mythological stories of pre-Christian Ireland. "I wanted to learn Irish so that I could read them. I asked my school if I could learn the language."

It was a sign of the times that instead of encouraging Dwina's interest they suspended her from school for a week accusing her of being 'subversive'.

Dwina knew that she wanted to be an artist. She had begun entering art competitions as a child and won almost every one she entered. Her first exhibition came when she won a children's art competition aged just 14. But she did not actually get to see it.

"It was held in the town hall at Eccles and I could not afford to travel there. My aunt who lived in Gloucester went to see it and sent me some photographs.

Many years later, when Robin was the subject of the BBC's family history series *Who Do You Think You Are?* we went to Eccles Town Hall to research his great grandmother and great grandfather. I noticed some children's artwork on the wall and realised that my paintings had once hung there," Dwina said.

The teenage Dwina was an admirer of Lindsay de Paul, the singer songwriter and cartoonist.

"She had trained at Hornsey College of Art and I set my sights on studying there, too. After a working holiday in London, I knew that I wanted to leave Northern Ireland. But there was a problem. Northern Irish students were only allowed to apply to art colleges in England after being turned down by two in Ireland. My art CV looked impressive and I took my A-Levels at 17 but I did not want to go to Belfast School of Art," said Dwina.

"I deliberately made a portfolio of crude awful paintings. It was the hardest thing to do. The head of department who interviewed me saw on my record that I had won first prize for art in County Tyrone and he guessed what I was doing.

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Right: Dwina with an unusual Italian accordion. Dwina said: "Robin used it to compose I Gotta Get a Message To You." Robin's Lifetime Achievement Grammy award is in the foreground

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I went red in the face but he turned a blind eye.

"Having achieved one rejection, I applied to Dublin. The application form arrived and it was all in Irish! Two rejections meant that I could apply to Hornsey where I showed my best work and was accepted. After Hornsey I studied textile design at Cat Hill in Cockfosters."

In the early 1970s after finishing at art college, Dwina set up her own business in Shepherdess Walk, Islington. She designed and made children's bean bags and chairs in novelty shapes such as telephones, apples and pears.

She said: "I sold them through Time Out, but in my free time I was heavily into the Women's Movement, and campaigning for peace in Ireland. Most weekends I was on some kind of demonstration."

"I met May Hobbs who had brought the night cleaners out on strike for equal pay in 1972. We went together to Manchester to support the women workers who were holding a sit in for equal pay at a factory manufacturing electrical parts. Even their husbands did not support their desire for equal pay for equal work."

"John Lennon sent a bunch of roses. May thanked him, saying: 'Roses won't pay for the sit in'. He responded by sending her a cheque. Rowntrees and Cadbury's also gave the women financial support."

I asked Dwina how she met Robin.

She explained: "I had not seen my cousin Ken for a number of years. He came to see me in Plumstead where I was living at the time. He arrived in a Yellow Rolls Royce. I thought he must be doing rather well. But it was Robin's car and Ken was working as his bodyguard. He was interested in my work and after lunch I gave him some drawings. He happened to be on his way to the airport to pick up Robin who noticed the drawings and asked who had made them."

"Robin asked to see more of my work

with a view to putting some of my paintings on the wall of the new house he intended to buy. The actress Sarah Miles was a friend of mine and Robin wanted to meet her. I put them in touch with each other and they went out on a date. At Sarah's place he saw some more of my drawings. So it all came back to me again," Dwina said.

"At that time Robin was living with his twin brother Maurice. He asked to meet me with my portfolio to discuss a commission. We discovered that we had the same birthday - December 22. We also shared a similar sense of humour. A shared wit helped to sustain a long partnership."

"He thought I had a good artistic eye and asked me to help him viewing houses following his divorce. He was looking at London mansions but I thought it would be a miserable experience living alone in such large houses. I chose a little cottage for him in Barnes. At the time, I had no idea that it would become my home too. When I moved in with him, he carved our initials in a heart on the door post. He did that on every house we ever lived in."

Their son, Robin John (RJ) was born in 1983 and they looked for a larger house to accommodate him and Robin's children from his first marriage. In 1985, after they moved to the beautiful Prebendal House in Thame. Robin and Dwina married at the registry office in Wheatley.

Dwina said, 'When we arrived the registrar had laid out 100 chairs. She expected crowds. She looked disappointed when there was just Robin and I with Ken and his wife as witnesses.

"We wanted a very quiet occasion. We had even forgotten about rings and ended up giving each other the ancient rings we were wearing. We spent our honeymoon in Somerset staying in Wells and visiting Cheddar Gorge. We went to Wookey Hole - where there is a paper mill - and made headed notepaper for our house. I still have it."

Dwina may have been the inspiration

for some of Robin's later lyrics. She said: "When I met him he was writing with Barry most of the songs for Barbara Streisand's album *Guilty*. He invited me to Miami. He was working on 'I am a woman in love'. One week I was working for him and the next I was a woman in love. That song has special meaning for me. We inspired each other."

We talked about Robin and Dwina's house in Miami where they famously hosted Tony and Cherie Blair and which they later sold.

Dwina said: "The house in Miami had quite a history. President Kennedy spent one of his last nights there before he was shot. Churchill painted there. Robin admired Churchill's daring."

"We have been inside Chequers," she recalled. "Another possibility for the island is the painting we saw there. It is by Frans Snyders based on the Aesop fable where a mouse frees a trapped lion by gnawing at the ropes. Churchill painted a rat over the little mouse. It was restored, but a photograph of Winston's alteration is on display beside it. We have a photograph signed by Winston given to us by the photographer Christopher Barham."

I wondered how Dwina felt about Robin's many adoring fans.

"You get used to it. I was never a jealous person and Robin's popularity meant that we travelled the world," Dwina said. "Most fans were kind and loyal. The odd one gets obsessed or overcome with emotion. When we were living in Barnes, a young girl came down from Manchester and pitched a tent on our lawn. My cousin was able to track down her parents. She left behind her interior decorating books with instructions on how we should decorate our house. She had a very artistic eye, so I do hope she used that talent later."

"Some fans never marry but try to live your life. Their whole life is the adoration of the idol like virginal

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devotees. They all love the music and the sound of the voices and harmonies so much. I have seen and felt how the music touches the soul.”

The closest Dwina came to becoming a fan herself came after meeting the poet Seamus Heaney.

“In my twenties, I met him at a poetry workshop at the Yeats Society in Sligo. This was when he was less well known – before he received all the honours abroad. He said he loved my poem Mullaghmore and made me repeat it to the class. He particularly admired ‘pinched hoof prints’. I noticed that no one had offered him a drink all day and I asked him if he would like a cup of coffee. ‘You know’, he said ‘I’m dying of the dreuth (thirst).’ I made him two cups and wrote a secret poem to him. I had observed him standing on a bridge in Sligo. I visualised him as ‘Pouring thoughts into a nameless river and I would gladly drink it dry.’ The river was nameless because I couldn’t remember which river flowed through Sligo. I slipped my poem under my own handmade doily on an improvised tray, a biscuit tin lid, and presented it to him, then ran away.”

Dwina made a delightful sketch of the future Nobel Prize-winning poet and that is another of her possibilities for our desert island. She has a lifelong interest in Irish history and social politics and is also an admirer of the poetry of WB Yeats.

“I co-founded the Yeats Club which organises poetry competitions and published a journal called *Celtic Dawn*.”

Celtic mythology has been the inspiration for her novels so far. *The Seers and Cormac: the King Making*. I asked whether that was the source of her spirituality.

“My Methodist grandmother was a big influence of me and she taught me to read the Bible and to pray. When I was eight I had an amazing vision of a tree of light with silver and gold leaves going back into the ground. It was as if I was being shown the cycle of life,” Dwina said.

“I studied the *Tree of Life* in Qabalah and in Druidry and in ancient civilisations but I felt it was symbolic. I began to believe in reincarnation and became interested in aspects of Buddhism, early Christianity and Indian religions. I found out about yoga and meditation and I love the calm and contentment it gives me.”

On one of her many trips to India, Dwina became involved in supporting outreach programmes and water projects.

She said: “The strange thing is that when I came home I was thinking about water divining. When he was little RJ had talked about an underground well being here. We brought in a diviner and he proved RJ right. There is a fast

Dwina with a piece of ancient pottery which dates from 600BC, given to her by an archaeologist friend



flowing spring 200 feet below us and it could provide 600 gallons an hour. We know where it is should there be a drought.”

“An archaeologist friend took me on digs and gave me this cup found in Austria which dates from 600BC. RJ showed me how it would have been used. He worked it out age six. That’s another possibility for the island.”

As well as her art, poetry and novels, another of Dwina’s delights is Irish inspired dialogue. In 2003 she created *The Gabby Aggies* a series of humorous dialogues between Mrs P and Mabel who provide a commentary on all kinds of events putting the world to rights. Following a performance on Manx Radio she was invited to do a one-woman show in New York.

Robin’s twin brother Maurice died in 2003 and Robin felt the loss deeply. He himself was diagnosed with cancer in 2011. While Robin was undergoing chemotherapy, Robin and RJ wrote the score for *The Titanic Requiem* to commemorate the centenary of the sinking of the Titanic.

Dwina said: “If he had recovered Robin intended to go down to the seabed to explore the wreck. The Titanic Requiem was Robin’s requiem. It was very special. He kept working and working on it with RJ right to the end.”

Robin fell into a coma two days before he was due to attend the premier of the work at the Central Hall, Westminster in April 2012.

Dwina said: “We played all kinds of music to try and get him out of the coma. We played Bee Gees music but it was the *Confutatis* from *The Titanic Requiem* which brought him out. And gave us

another three weeks with him. In his last days he wanted to watch comedies, Charlie Chaplin, The Marx Brothers, Norman Wisdom and Jack Black’s *Gulliver’s Travels* - anything comedic.”

Robin died aged 62 in May 2013.

Dwina and her son lovingly put together the album *50 St Catherine’s Drive* which contains Robin’s last songs.

Dwina still lives in the 13th century mansion near Thame which had been the couple’s home since 1985. She has spent the last two years working on a grave stone for her husband with stonemason, Martin Cook.

Dwina said: “Robin loved roses and carried a stone from the tomb of St Cecilia, the patron saint of music.” The symbolic stone is now in place.

I had to ask her that if she can only take one thing to the island what would it be? She said, “Robin’s love was this house. He loved walking in the garden with his Irish wolf hounds. I don’t suppose I can take the house and contents?”

I could see that it would be hard for her to leave behind all the works of art she has bought or made herself, the souvenirs of her travels with Robin, his awards for a lifetime in music and his musical instruments.

“If I can’t take the house then I will need lots of paper and pencils so that I can write,” she said. **LE**

• *The first of a series of concerts of The Titanic Requiem began in Taranto Italy in September. It will be coming to the UK later. For more information go to www.robingibb.com. For more information about Dwina’s books and plays visit the website www.dwinagibb.co.uk*