

Tribute to Isobel Riddoch-Gharbi



English translators and précis-writers are mourning the loss of former senior reviser and Training Officer Isobel Riddoch-Gharbi, who passed away in late August. “Isobel was a pillar of the English Translation Service and always a reliable source of advice”, says a former officemate. Her colleagues remember her as approachable, good-natured and always willing to help.

She was a Training Officer who instilled very high standards with a gentle touch – “with a velvet glove”, as Chief of Service Patricia Lecomte du Nouy put it at Isobel’s retirement party in 1994. “Isobel was without a doubt one of the finest Training Officers the English Service ever had,” recalls one of her former trainees. “She suggested changes of expression so kindly, and her own felicitous style was an unfailing inspiration. Even in later years, I would stand in her doorway with a knotty problem and say, ‘Isobel, a ruling’.” Another translator/précis-writer who started out under Isobel’s tutelage says that when she herself became a reviser, Isobel was her role model.

She had a knack for putting her finger on whatever was stumping her beginners and prescribing a remedy that stuck. “You don’t need to read through the whole report,” she would tell précis-writers returning from the conference room with stacks of documents. “You just need to find your way about it.” And if they included too much of a delegate’s speech in a summary record: “Well, you can understand why *he* would say that, but it doesn’t mean *you* have to”. One trainee says that Isobel’s nuggets of wisdom rang in her ears, word for word, throughout her career.

She took a brave and piercingly honest approach to translation and précis-writing, going with what made sense in the moment, sometimes even flouting the norms if she had to. When the word “landlockedness” took hold in the Second Committee, Isobel embraced it. Never mind that it was not in the OED; it captured the sentiment in the conference room.

Beyond breaking in her charges, Isobel watched over them – inviting them for coffee in the UN cafeteria, reminding them to take Kleenex to the conference room in case they sneezed during the meeting, and sending them off with a wink. So well-loved

was she by her trainees that when she retired, they all wanted to give her a separate gift and card in addition to the gift and card from the entire English Translation Service. She had a way with children too. When no one could draw out a colleague's shy and overwhelmed four-year-old at a holiday party, Isobel called to her, "Let's see your pearl bracelet!" That got an immediate response.

Born in Birmingham, England, Isobel earned a B.A. with Honors in French and Spanish and distinction in spoken French at the University of Birmingham. She was also awarded the university's Graeme Richie Prize for attaining the highest grades in French. She spent several years as a lecturer in French and Spanish for the Birmingham Department of Education and the Birmingham College of Commerce before going on to earn a postgraduate diploma in Translating and Interpreting at Bath University of Technology.

Isobel joined the English Translation Service at Headquarters in October 1969, became a reviser in 1978 and Training Officer in 1981. "She was very good in that role, and very supportive of me as Chief," recalls Mary Meyer, who was Chief of Service from 1980 to 1988. Over the course of her career, Isobel went to seven Latin American countries on mission and was assigned to the International Conference in Support of the Struggle of the Namibian People for Independence (Paris, 1983). Colleagues remember her as a game and fun-loving traveler.

Isobel was a top-class tennis player and was even selected to play at Junior Wimbledon. Here in New York, she followed the Wimbledon Championships, Roland-Garros tournaments and U.S. Open every year. She also enjoyed attending films, concerts and Shakespeare plays with her close friend and UN colleague, Jean Rose-Benoit, who, sadly, passed away in October.

After retirement, Isobel returned to the English Translation Service on temporary assignments and was also welcomed into the English Section of the Verbatim Reporting Service as a freelancer. Whenever she was back in the English Service, everyone felt reassured. Isobel was the go-to in whom they could place their absolute trust. Her spot-on and memorably-worded pronouncements were delivered with her usual warmth and collegiality, and an occasional twinkle in her eye. The world of translation and précis-writing feels very empty without her.

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