

## IRENE MARION DESMET (née Irving), PAEDIATRIC SURGEON

*Irene Marion Desmet (née Irving) Ch.M, F.R.C.S. [1] former Senior Consultant Surgeon at Alder Hey Children's Hospital, Liverpool, and Senior Lecturer in Paediatric Surgery at Liverpool University died on 5 March 2020 at St Joseph's Hospice, Thornton, Merseyside.*



Born in Liverpool on 25 March 1928, Irene gained a scholarship to attend Liverpool's Broughton Hall Grammar School for girls. Evacuated to North Wales during the first three months of the Second World War, the rest of her war was spent in Liverpool, where she forged lifelong friendships with her schoolmates. Irene described how, during one night-time air-raid, she had nipped out from the cellar-shelter in the family home at Calderstones Road, Mossley Hill, to get a book to read. She got upstairs to find the living room as bright as day, despite the blackout, and knew immediately that an incendiary bomb had landed outside the window and would explode imminently. She fetched her father and the two of them lost no time piling sandbags on the

bomb, which prevented the house from being engulfed in flames and, no doubt, saved the family.

In 1945, Irene followed her elder brother Francis to Liverpool University, on a much-prized state scholarship. Irene and her brother were the first in their family to attend university. In Irene's case, being a woman enrolled as a medical student straight after the war, at just 17 years old, was remarkable. She described how she 'matured rapidly (and happily) in the company of many ex-service students.' Influenced by ex-R.A.F. friends – and also by her brother (an aeronautical engineer and later record-breaking glider pilot), she decided to learn to fly. She obtained her pilot's licence at just 20 years old in 1948.

She also swiftly learnt to drive and was the first of her friends to buy a car. As early as the 1950s she relished driving to Paris or for skiing trips to the Italian alps or, later, for family holidays to Belgium. Her nephew Philip, then a boy, recalls how his young 'Auntie Irene' seemed incredibly cool to him, in the early '50s, rolling up in her pale blue Austin A30 when his parents had only just bought their first family car!

Of her degree studies, Irene wrote: 'I won all the medals and prizes at second M.B. [2] and, as a result, spent an intercalated year doing an honours degree in Physiology. I qualified in 1952 (M.B.Ch.B.) [3] with a distinction in surgery and 2<sup>nd</sup> Class Honours.' She did House Officer jobs in surgery and medicine at Liverpool's Royal Infirmary and then a Senior House Officer post at Liverpool's Alder Hey Children's Hospital. Just a few months earlier, Isabella Forshall and Peter Paul Rickham had established the Neonatal Surgical Centre at Alder Hey, the first of its kind in the world. Irene found paediatric surgery, especially neonatal surgery,

fascinating and decided to make this her speciality. First, however, she had to train in general surgery and obtain her Fellowship. After a year of demonstrating in the Medical School dissecting room, plus six months' casualty work, she became registrar at Liverpool's David Lewis Northern Hospital. She was her male boss's first woman registrar – viewed with suspicion until she established her bona fides by passing her Fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons of England (F.R.C.S. Eng.) exam in 1957, followed by part one of her Master of Surgery (Ch.M.).

She returned to the paediatric surgical fold in 1958 as registrar to Isabella Forshall, first at Myrtle Street Hospital, then Alder Hey. Then fate intervened, in the form of her future husband, Louis Desmet – a Belgian oyster-farmer turned hotelier – whom she'd met at a hospital party in 1959. After a whirlwind romance, they married in June 1960 – a joyous event to offset the death of her beloved mother the previous year – and she moved into no. 5 Croxteth Road, Toxteth, Liverpool 8 – a handsome house (originally built by the founder of the Liverpool Daily Post and Echo) where Louis lived and which he had been running as a hotel for some ten years. The arrival of three children in rapid succession demanded a side-step for Irene off the surgical ladder. She moved to the post of Clinical Assistant (later Medical Assistant albeit in surgery) at Alder Hey and Birkenhead Children's Hospitals, a part-clinical part-research post, the latter including experimental research on liver transplantation. During this time Irene wrote her Ch.M. thesis on the subject of "Exomphalos with Macroglossia", a congenital condition in which a baby is born with abdominal wall defects of varying severity and an abnormally large tongue. Irene was to become a specialist in this condition, and obtained the degree in 1969. She also did the background research for Peter Paul Rickham and James Herbert Johnston's textbook *Neonatal Surgery* (published 1969).

Meanwhile, as a hotelier's wife and mother of three young children – one of whom (Anne) had a hip abnormality requiring repeated surgery – Irene was pulled in many competing directions. At weekends, she often cooked for the hotel's guests – about seven or eight mostly elderly residents for whom the hotel was home in days before sheltered accommodation had ever been thought of. There were also memorable parties for family and friends, in which Irene's heavy-on-the-sherry trifle was the highlight. She was often on hospital call at nights. Once, returning home in the early hours, she found Louis busy towelling five-year-old-Anne dry. A guest had run a midnight bath and left the taps running until the water poured through the ceiling of the children's bedroom beneath!

In 1972, Louis sold the hotel and the family moved to Blundell Road, Hightown, Liverpool, a large family home. Irene described her marriage as 'very happy, but sadly short'. Louis died in 1973 and Irene never re-married. Louis was the love of her life. With great resilience, she got on with being a single parent and professional surgeon. With a household to run and bills to pay, Irene decided to resume full-time clinical surgery and was appointed in 1974 as Lecturer (later Senior Lecturer) in the University of Liverpool with Honorary Status as a Consultant at Alder Hey in the newly formed Liverpool University Department of Paediatric Surgery, under the professorship of James Lister.

During her tenure at Alder Hey she had a huge workload, performing many complex surgical procedures on new-born babies and young children. These were pre-microsurgery times

when surgery was performed by hand and eye alone. For some 40 years, she received Christmas cards from families of grateful patients whose lives she had saved or vastly improved. She also wrote numerous papers on neonatal surgical topics as well as co-writing and co-editing the second edition of *Neonatal Surgery*. She served on the council of the British Association of Paediatric Surgeons (B.A.P.S.) and was annual guest editor of the B.A.P.S. issue of the *Journal of Paediatric Surgery*. She also served on the council of the Liverpool Medical Institution (L.M.I.) and on North Sefton Health Authority. She undertook lecture tours in Brazil, Japan and South Korea. In December 1999 she received a certificate of Honorary Membership of the L.M.I.

In 1984 she developed two separate cancers, each requiring major surgery, which she bore with characteristic stoicism, returning to work the following year. Her physical stamina was, however, impaired, prompting early retirement in September 1986, though the next two years were devoted to the production of the third substantial edition of *Neonatal Surgery*, (published by Butterworth & Co. in 1990) jointly with James Lister.

Irene wrote of her life, with classic understatement: 'I feel that my real claim to fame is that of having managed to combine the careers of motherhood and surgery'. This would have been impressive enough with a husband – yet was phenomenal as a widow. 'I hope that neither suffered too much', she added. 'My two sons both became engineers whilst my daughter is an artist; she is a wood engraver [could this be an inherited talent for precision-cutting?]. In 2011 my daughter was elected as a member of the Royal Academy of Arts (RA).'

Since 1989, Irene was a keen traveller and doting grandmother. She took up the piano, going from complete beginner to Grade 6 and bought herself a Baby Grand. She sang in a Formby choir and was, lifelong, a deeply committed Christian. She underwent, in her late 60s and 70s, surgical procedures to fuse two vertebrae, as well as hip and knee replacements. Characteristically upbeat, she wrote of these setbacks: 'I am regarded by my friends as a bionic woman.'

Irene was incredibly loving, kind, modest, resourceful and resilient. She had enormous charisma and, despite being little over five-foot tall, was a natural leader. In her last years, she suffered from Alzheimer's and moved to a bungalow in Hightown. Yet she never lost her terrific sense of humour nor her lifelong love of poetry nor her incredible facility for puns and entertaining word play, nor her delight in her family. She will be deeply missed.

She is survived by her three children, Paul, Laurence and Anne Desmet, and five grandchildren.

There was a family-only funeral on 30 March 2020 and a Memorial Celebration of her life is being held at the Athenaeum Club in Liverpool on 5 March 2022.

- 1 Ch.M. = Master of Surgery
- 2 First M.B. occurred at the end of first year with the second M.B. occurring at the end of the spring term in the third year. M.B. = Bachelor of Medicine
- 3 Ch.B. = Bachelor of Surgery