



Peter Greenfield Cocks

April 26, 1940 - January 27, 2025

In the early hours of January 27, 2025, Peter Greenfield Cocks died unexpectedly but peacefully from complications of Parkinson's disease, against which he had put up a valiant if ultimately doomed struggle.

Peter was born in Harrogate, Yorkshire, in the north of England, to Ada and Harry Cocks on April 26, 1940. As he describes it in a memoir he was writing before he became ill, "My birth and early childhood were marked by extraordinary historical events. I arrived just in time for the Wehrmacht's invasion of France in May 1940, so I must have been conceived shortly before German troops marched into Poland in September of 1939... I grew up in a universe of ration books, hand-me-down clothes, and adventurous trips in the family car, for even at night cars and trucks traveled with headlights doused, and, in anticipation of a possible German invasion, signposts had been more or less systematically torn down." Under such unilluminated conditions, Peter's family drove their belongings to Newton, a seaside village at a distance from any German bombs that might fall on Cardiff, Wales, where Harry had gotten a job as the county treasurer of Glamorgan.

Peter's love affair with America began when an area near his village was chosen as a staging grounds for the D-Day invasion of northern France. "Suddenly, there were G.I.'s dashing here and there in jeep and trucks, their attitude toward authority a good deal more cavalier than that of the privates

and NCOs of their British allies. Even as a child, I recognized that those G.I.'s were more self-confident, better dressed, and better fed than the rumped and bedraggled British soldiers I had occasionally seen in our village. The G.I.'s also were a reliable source of candies and gum, which I eagerly chewed once a friend disabused me of the notion that strands of gum would wrap themselves around our hearts and kill us.”

Hitler and Eva Braun died, not by gum but by suicide, four days after Peter's fifth birthday. Afterwards, he had to be warned not to fraternize with the German prisoners of war employed clearing the wire entanglements from the sand near his house. Otherwise, he spent his boyhood joyfully running rampant on the beach and, with his admired older brother David at the helm, taking a little boat out to sea without any parental supervision. At nine, he was sent away to be educated at Rose Hill, which he loved, and later at Rugby School, which he loved less, except when he could be outside playing games. He won his Bachelor's degree in Economics and Political Science at Trinity College, Dublin. In Wales, Peter spent carefree hours helping his best friend bale hay and mend fences. In Dublin, he gained his cultural chops as he mixed in with budding actors, filmmakers, theater directors, and journalists. Along with the Welsh farmer and so many others Peter met over the years, they became his life-long friends.

As a young man, Peter mulled over the insouciance of those American G.I.'s as well as the different kinds of freedom displayed in his two favorite art forms, Western films and African-American jazz. He decided to escape what he saw as a snobbish and stultifyingly England for a more egalitarian and free-wheeling environment. He threw a dart at a map of the United States. It landed in Kansas. So did Peter, after he had sailed across the Atlantic and ridden his new motorcycle to Manhattan, Kansas in what he hoped was the Jack Kerouac style.

While doing graduate work in Political Science at Kansas State University, “Limey,” as his Midwestern friends affectionately called him, marveled at what he believed was the typical American experience of living in a dorm under the football stadium. Once he had been awarded his Master’s Degree, he sped away on his trusty motorcycle to pursue a Ph.D. in International Relations at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, a hotbed of activism against the Vietnam War. In the heady upheaval of that era, he plunged into student politics and fell in love with Joan Steiner, an ebullient undergraduate from New Jersey. Their shared critique of the institution of marriage notwithstanding, in 1970 they married twice: once in England so that Peter could apply for a green card, and once again, to please Joan’s parents, in the United States.

Peter and Joan led independent but tightly intertwined lives. As they built their respective academic careers, they discussed ideas and books around the kitchen table, argued for hours about their minor political differences, gave each other tips on the art of teaching, and read drafts of one another’s academic work. Peter was proud of Joan’s fervent dedication to writing even though he couldn’t stay still long enough to do the same; he would go out to play a sport and then cook her a delicious meal when she emerged bleary-eyed from her study. As a cousin of Joan’s recently recalled, “My memories of Peter are memories of the two of you... A pair – tall, and slender, handsome, cool, charming, engaging, intellectual, smiling and laughing together, it was more than a double effect. And all the Steiner girls wanted their own Peter.”

In truth, Peter was the truly charming one. He combined a languid posture with an antsy athleticism. He was endearingly kind and very funny. A pied piper of sorts, he preferred horsing around with the kids whenever the adults in the room were being too serious for his tastes. His English nieces and nephew – Frances, Georgia, and Harry – pined for him whenever he left the U.K. to return to the States. His American niece, Kierie, enjoyed the antics of

this British uncle who had as rambunctious a sense of play as she did. Jarid, a young boy from Queens in the Fresh Air Program, was thrilled on his first summer's visit to the Cocks residence when Peter was laid up with a case of arthritis of the foot, for this meant he had an accommodating adult male at his disposal who would play checkers with him all day long. "If I ever see another checker I'll slit my throat," Peter would only half-jokingly say when Joan called from work to ask how they were doing.

Peter's eloquence and historical approach to economics and politics made him a legendary teacher: at the Hackney University Technical College in London; at the interdisciplinary Allen Center in Albany; at the State University of New York at Albany's Department of Political Science, and most agreeably for him at Simon's Rock College in the Berkshires. His greatest delight, he once wrote, came when students fully understood the "strengths of a given argument without being helplessly seduced by it." Students felt this delight, too. They flocked to the classes of this sympathetic and inspiring professor, even though more than a few griped about his insistence that an "A" meant "extraordinary" while "B"s and "C"s" meant "normal work." (Joan blanched whenever she caught sight of his grade sheets).

In 1983, after Peter lamented that he felt like a tourist in life, Joan came across an old farmhouse for sale in the agricultural village of Hatfield, MA. They bought the house with two friends. When the friends relocated, tenants replaced them who also became friends before moving to their own place up the road. Over the course of four decades, Peter and Joan gutted interiors, painted rooms, designed new flower beds, laid stone walls, weeded, and pruned. They traveled but led in most respects an absorbing local life.

Peter served for fifteen years on the Hatfield Open Space and Recreation Committee, ten of them as chair. Spearheading an effort to restore a neglected town park and blazing trails through the woods took up a great deal

of his time. Nevertheless, one day Joan announced that every retired person needed a dog to keep busy. A mischievous standard poodle named Sapphire soon appeared, followed by Lucy, a little red-headed girl in the neighborhood with innumerable pets. “You need to train your dog better,” Lucy would say each time animal control called to report that Sapphire had been chasing fire engines or nipping strangers. “I didn’t bargain for this,” Peter would grumble to Joan once he had placated the offended parties, but finally the bouncy poodle settled down, and, just like Joan, Peter doted on her. She died of old age as Covid hit.

At different stages of his life, this consummate athlete would go on long-distance runs, zoom up mountains on his bike, hitch a ride on a friend’s sailboat, and backpack into the wilderness with a chain-smoking colleague, whose cigarette butts would rain on them whenever they turned their canoe upside down to portage it. He was in heaven with a racket in his hand. One of his squash partners recalled, “I was often on the receiving end of Peter’s back-corner lobs, from which their notable excellence was matched by their frustrating ir-returnability and his graciousness as a player.” In his late seventies and early eighties, after suffering a stroke, pneumonia, and the balance problems of Parkinson’s, Peter exchanged squash for ping pong, which he played sometimes at an indoor club but more often in an unheated barn with another hardy octogenarian, straight through all but his last winter.

Peter’s time on earth was bookended by the rise of fascism – in Europe over eighty years ago, and in America today. In 1994 he had become a beaming citizen of the United States, reflecting later, “I was educated in the constricting atmosphere of the English private school, and my encounters with American culture have been liberating antidotes to that.” By 2025, he no longer recognized the country he once admired as an aspirational beacon of freedom and equality. In his last few weeks, he began to hallucinate about men in jackboots coming to kick him around. However, as Peter would wish any

testimonial to his life to conclude on an upbeat note, let us turn to these final, appreciative thoughts.

Some people are acclaimed for the big things they have achieved, for good or evil. Others are beloved for who they are. Peter belongs in the latter category. He will be remembered for his generosity, wry wit, solicitousness towards others, integrity, and penetrating yet unassuming intellect. As an acquaintance reminisced with keen insight, "Every time I met Peter, I was struck by his utter decency and civility. He appeared to have no need for self-exhibition that many academics have. Yet he had an intense and unmistakable curiosity ... [and] a quality which I think of as a very English way of being that is constitutionally civilized [among] the quiet internal critics of the imperial ethos. The world needs more people like him." Or, as his former primary care doctor more pungently put it, "We don't live forever, and 84 is a ripe old age. But damn it, Peter was supposed to live longer!"

Peter was predeceased by his parents and brother, David; his younger sister-in-law, Deborah Van Rooyan, and all too many of his closest friends, including his chain-smoking backpacking pal. He will be mourned, on the English side of his family, by, among other relatives, his former sister-in-law, Patricia Cocks; her children, Francis Smith, Georgia Cocks, and Harry Cocks; and his sister-in-law, Sarah Child. On the American side, he will be mourned, among other relatives, by his adoring sister-in-law Barbara Steiner, who helped care for him in Hatfield this past year; his niece Kierie Baudin, now a veterinarian in France who kept an eagle eye on his blood tests; and Jarid Polite, who long ago graduated from checkers to the performing arts. Peter will be missed by his former students at SUNY and Simon's Rock. He will be even more deeply missed by his still vital good friends on both sides of the Atlantic, too numerous to name. Tremendous gratitude is due to them, as well as to his devoted health aides, for their steadfast loyalty to Peter even when his mind

and body were failing. Most of all, the loss of Peter Cocks forever will be felt by Joan Cocks, his desolate soulmate and the author of this obituary.

If the spirit moves you, you may make a donation in Peter's name to the Fresh Air Fund in New York City or the Kestrel Land Trust in Amherst, Massachusetts. A celebration of Peter's life will be held at a warmer date.

DROZDAL FUNERAL HOME OF NORTHAMPTON has been entrusted with his care. For more information, or to leave the family a personal condolence, please visit Drozdalfuneralhome.com.

Tribute Wall



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Drozdal Funeral Home - February 18, 2025 at 11:13 AM

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Oh my God. I read thru this whole marvelous telling of this man. And then ,of a sudden, I remembered that once, so long ago, I knew this man, and considered him a friend...and visited them in North Hampton from time to time. My big deep condolences to you all. With much affection, and wonderment to have this little sweet connection come around.

Madeleine Winfield - June 08, 2025 at 08:10 PM



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