

## **Lady Edna Healey (née Edmunds, English Language and Literature, 1936)**

**1918-2010**

*Profile written by Sue Brown (Modern History, 1963)*

Edna Mary Edmunds was born on 14 June 1918 in the Forest of Dean, the daughter of a crane driver. She attended the co-educational Bell's Grammar School, Coleford, becoming the first girl from her school to get to Oxford. She arrived at St Hugh's to read English in 1936. She enjoyed her "excellent tutorials" with Ethel Seaton as well as more idiosyncratic sessions with Edmund Blunden and Neville Coghill who gave her "a lifelong passion for Chaucer." Seaton found her work "vigorous & knowledgeable & her writing lively & fluent", qualities much in evidence in her later successful career as a writer. But, as she later recalled, in the run-up to World War II "politics was all." She was active in the Labour Party and briefly the Communist Party as was her contemporary at Balliol, Denis Healey, who subsequently described her as "the Zuleika Dobson of St Hugh's." Their romance did not begin, however, until she stayed with him and his family in 1940 when being interviewed for a post at Keighley Grammar School. They kept in touch throughout his wartime service in N Africa and Italy and were married in December 1945, soon after his demobilization. Theirs was to prove a famously happy marriage lasting sixty-five years.

She continued to teach until the birth of their three children and supported her husband's political career after his election as one of the MPs for Leeds in a bye-election in 1952. She was, he would claim, much more successful at electioneering than him: while he could make his audiences think, she could make them laugh and cry. With Labour in power from 1964 Healey spent six years as Secretary of State for Defence returning for five years as Chancellor of the Exchequer in the Wilson-Callaghan governments of the 1970s. "The higher up your husband is in politics" she told an interviewer, "the more invisible you become." At Defence she regularly accompanied Healey on overseas tours helping to keep up the morale of military wives and families. The Treasury allowed her much less scope.

With her children launched on their careers she restarted her own. "I found it consoling to be visible in my own right" she wrote in her memoir, having done some WEA lecturing and a tour in the US for the English Speaking Union while her husband was at Defence. Isolated in 11, Downing Street when he was Chancellor, she began work on her first best-selling biography. Her chosen subject was the great Victorian philanthropist, Angela Burdett-Coutts, who had lived at Holly Lodge in Highgate where the Healeys had had their home. She then produced two prize-winning TV documentaries, on the great missionary-explorer of Africa, Mary Slessor, and David Livingstone's little-known wife, Mary. This led her to her next biographical study, *Wives of Fame* (1986), in which she rediscovered three able but overlooked women who had subordinated their own talents to support their husbands' careers: Mary Livingstone, Jenny Marx and Emma Darwin. Emma Darwin proved an ideal subject and in 2001 Healey published a full biography of her, based on original research and visits to the places where she had lived. Her book, which was dedicated to Denis and the family, skillfully disentangles the complex relationships between the Darwins, Wedgwoods and Allens and by concentrating on the minutiae of family life shows how Emma Darwin

created and maintained the optimal domestic environment in which her children could flourish while her husband accomplished his great work. All this, she wrote, was achieved without changing either her own admirable character (shrewd, non-judgmental, curious and calm) or her opinions.

When Denis retired from the Labour Party front bench in 1987 he found his wife in even more demand than he was. She was President of the Dickens Fellowship, sat on the Booker Prize jury in 1987, became a Trustee at Charleston and regularly appeared on TV and at literary festivals. Her final book *Part of the Pattern: Memoirs of a Wife at Westminster* (2006) is lively, humane, and particularly perceptive about the challenges of living with a hard-working, highly gifted man much in the public eye.

Edna Healey was made an Honorary Fellow of St Hugh's in 2003 and hosted memorable annual get-togethers of St Hugh's Senior Members at Pingles Place, in Alfriston, the Sussex home to which she and Denis retired. Her last years were affected by tinnitus, a sad affliction for someone who greatly enjoyed Classical music and opera but one she spoke about with her usual good humour. She died at the age of 92 in July 2010. In his five remaining years as a widower Healey took particular pleasure in re-reading her books. "My family", he wrote in his autobiography, "has always meant more to me than my profession."