



GORDONSTOUN
Plus Est En Vous

Michael Rennie (1917-1940)

Gordonstoun House, 1937

Recognised for a selfless act of bravery, sacrificing his life for the children in his care during WWII.

Michael Rennie was a devoted Christian, ready to embark on a career in the Ministry when his life was cut short by an act of immense courage and sacrifice.

Born in Lancashire in 1917, Michael was largely educated at Christ's Hospital, but moved to Gordonstoun for Sixth Form, perhaps due to the fact that he much enjoyed engineering, sport and community pursuits. Leaving Gordonstoun in 1937, he went straight on to study engineering at Keble College, Oxford and - with his mind firmly on obtaining Holy Orders - then secured a place to study Theology at Cambridge.

In October 1942, aged just 23, Michael chose to volunteer as a children's escort on the ship SS Benares, bound for Canada. On the evening of Tuesday 15 October, the ship was navigating a violent storm when it was struck by a torpedo from a German U-boat and began to sink with over 400 people on board, including 90 evacuee children.

Michael immediately helped the children into lifeboats, using his own pen knife to cut a snagged rope away as they were lowered into the sea. Moments later though, the boat tipped and they all fell into the stormy waters in the dead of night. Despite quickly being rescued and against numerous warnings for his safety, Michael repeatedly dived back in saying "There are still children in the water, I must get them." Eventually he managed to get all on board but by this time he was completely exhausted. Despite this, Michael continued to cheer and encourage the children as the seas got rougher, preparing them for when help arrived. Hours later, a ship was sighted and despite the danger he stood on the seat to wave it down. At this point he succumbed to his exhaustion and he collapsed, dead, into the water-logged lifeboat. His last words were "Hurrah! Here comes the destroyer, thank God".

Today, his efforts are commemorated in a giant mural in the Church of St Jude on the Hill, London, where his father was vicar. One of his only surviving relatives, nephew (and namesake) Michael David Rennie vividly remembers his moral legacy.

Michael was a tough and determined hero through and through, knowingly risking his life for others till the very end.

There was never any bitterness within the family about his life being cut so short, however - just tears and immense pride. He was a sportsman, big and strong, and with such Christian convictions, there would have been no question in his mind about the risks he was taking. To me, he was a martyr.

I think Gordonstoun amplified all his existing character traits.

Michael loved rugby, tennis, sailing - all the sports really - and he was also an enormously talented engineer. A beautiful example of his craftsmanship still exists in the twin hulls of a catamaran he built which may be a legacy of his time at school. But his commitment to the Church was completely watertight from a young age, so I think Gordonstoun echoed his interests and reflected his internal moral code with its diverse education and absolute commitment to service.

His death was a testament to the sort of man he would have gone on to become.

There was an enormous moral stature that we all had to live up to in the Rennie family. Personal actions were always evaluated in terms of Jesus' example of self sacrifice and if you think about it, Michael paid the ultimate price. I think he consciously put himself into God's hands that night, knowing he was the right man for the job. In a letter from Louis Walder, one of the only children to survive from Michael's boat, he tells us that he "died in helping others, right to the end."

Plus Est En Vous

