

Chancellor Dharker

"The past is a foreign country. They do things differently there". The opening lines of LP Hartley's novel, the *Go-Between*, remind us of the selective and often unreliable nature of memory. But where film and photographic records exist, people and places remain vividly alive, captured for all time through the all-seeing lens of a camera.

For more than fifty years, Sirkka-Liisa Konttinen, whom we are honouring today, has produced iconic and widely recognised images of working-class life in the North East of England. She has done so by engaging deeply and respectfully with communities, celebrating their lives and honouring their culture, whilst creating an important social record of a rapidly vanishing world.

Born in 1948, in a small paper mill town in Finland, Sirkka is the second oldest in a family of four. According to her husband Peter, Finland is noted for its gabby women and silent men. I don't know how true that is in Sirkka's case, but as the only girl amongst three brothers, I imagine she often had to fight to get her voice heard. She was attracted to photography from an early age, encouraged by her aunt. Aged seventeen, she saw a documentary film on television and instinctively knew that this was what she wanted to do. As the roles available for women in the film industry were limited to fairly menial tasks like film editing, Sirkka determined that this would be her route in. Having secured a commercial loan to fund her studies, she left home in 1968, with a single suitcase, and set off for London.

It was here, at Regent Street Polytechnic, that Sirkka met like-minded colleagues, most notably Murray Martin. Within a year, Sirkka and Murray had left to found the Amber Collective, the group which has been the primary base for her prodigious output. Everything they earned, they pooled, and in the early days, Sirkka recalls that they lived on very little - around £8 a week each. Amber was, and is, passionately committed to celebrating working class

culture, which was very poorly represented by the media at that time. They had always planned to do this from a Northern base and Sirkka tells me that she came across Byker almost by chance.

Arriving there in 1970, she found a working-class suburb very much on its uppers. The tight-knit community was under notice of impending demolition by the local Council. Whilst eking out a living from freelance and educational work, Sirkka started to photograph the run-down Victorian terraces and the people who lived in them, "I roamed around the streets by day and hung about by night; chasing my heartbeats, stumbling in and out of other people's lives, striving to share my excitement through photographs, where words would fail me." She found the people of Byker to be open, curious, and proud. They were initially puzzled as to why on earth she would want to live there, but soon took her to their hearts. Seven years later, when she left, she received a postcard which said, "not only did you immortalise Byker and its many famous characters, you were one of them."

Reflecting on Sirkka's work, Professor Vee Pollock, our Dean of Culture and Creative Arts, observes that, "she combines powerful compositional skills and artistry, - often making the everyday iconic, a critical eye and subtle political power combined with an almost palpable curiosity about people and place." Sirkka's husband Peter concurs. He told me that Sirkka is driven by curiosity, "She's always asking, what's going on here? Let's take a look." Yet her approach is never intrusive, she cares about community and relationships.

The empathy Sirkka brings to her work has led to many lasting friendships. Kiti Luostarinen, whom she met at a film festival in Helsinki in 1991, described Sirkka to me as instinctive, thoughtful, and wise; someone who has the special ability to see and respect people and engage with them on a profound level. Another friend, Irena Carlton, who met Sirkka when she was working on her second Byker book, told me how they bonded over food. As a newly qualified social worker, Irena was working with refugee women and children, mainly from Africa and the Lebanon, who had been rehoused in the new Byker.

“Every Friday, I organised an international women's cooking group. Each woman took turns to share a recipe. We all cooked together and then shared the meal with everyone, including people from the local community. Sirkka absolutely loved it, and came along to cook herself.” Irena and Sirkka have subsequently cooked together all over the world –India, Bosnia, Croatia, even in the Arabian Desert.

Sirkka's work has been widely recognised and celebrated. In 1980, she became the first photographer since the Cultural Revolution to have her work exhibited by the British Council in China. Her film, *The Writing in the Sand* won the Grand Prix at the Melbourne International Film Festival in 1992, and in May 2011, her photography of the North East of England from 1969 to 2009, together with Amber's related films, became one of the twenty items and collections to join the UK Memory of the World Register. She has been a major influence on other creative practitioners, including Lee Hall, the distinguished playwright and screenwriter, who acknowledges that, “Sirkka's work has been one of the most important influences on my writing from the moment I started...almost every frame of Billy Elliot was somehow influenced by *Step by Step*, her book about dancing in industrial Tyneside.”

What else can I tell you about Sirkka? Her talents extend far beyond film and photography. She loves repairing and refashioning clothes rescued from charity shops and creates the most amazing knitted garments without ever following a pattern. She is a gifted gardener and relishes her daily dips in the North Sea – whatever the weather. However, whilst Sirkka's ability to do the splits is a source of envy amongst her friends, her navigational skills are not. Or as her good friend Olya wisely advised me, “Follow her aesthetically, but not literally, on planet Earth.”

I am indebted to Olya for a lovely reflection with which I'd like to close my citation. She told me, “Sirkka is a self-confessed wallflower. She eschews the limelight. Her gaze is on the other.” Today, Sirkka, our gaze is on you; warmly, respectfully, and with the utmost admiration.

## SIRKKA-LIISA KONTTINEN: DLitt

Chancellor Dharker, in recognition of her profound influence on the documentary tradition and her passionate and principled celebration of working-class life in the North East of England, I present to you Sirkka-Liisa Konttinen for the award of Doctor of Letters, *honoris causa*.

*Citation by Jill Taylor-Roe, Senior Public Orator*

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