



Obituary of Mary Cronk, 1932-2018

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[AIMS Journal, 2019, Vol 30, No 4](#)



Mary Cronk's family announced that Mary had passed away on the morning of 21st December 2018. She was known nationally, and internationally, as an expert midwife and breech birth specialist. I first met Mary at an Association of Radical Midwives (ARM) meeting about 18 years ago. I was impressed then that this famous midwife was very down to earth, and had faced similar challenges to all of us in her long career. I was also privileged to have later worked with Mary as an independent midwife, and taught workshops with her over a 9-year period. What set her firmly amongst the greatest midwives of our time was not just her 50 years' experience as a midwife, but who she was as a person.

I often wondered what made her such a great midwife, and I am sure her formative years were instrumental in moulding the strong woman I knew and loved. Mary was born in a time when formula milk was being sold to mothers as "The Food of Royal Babies". Mary told me how her own mother had informed her midwife that she would certainly not be using formula milk, and she would be nursing her baby (Mary). Mary grew up with stories about her mother's midwife, who must have made quite an impression on Mary as she remembered her by name. At this time all families had to pay for services from

a midwife or doctor. Mary's father was a Clydeside ship worker. In her chapter in Mavis Kirkham's book "The Midwife-Mother Relationship"¹, Mary says,

"My father had great difficulty paying doctors' and midwives' bills and welcomed the NHS. I have often wondered what he would have thought about the changes in the relationships between professionals and their clients since its inception."

She described midwives as 'professional servants'. This was an idea she knew would not be popular with many midwives, because a servant may appear to have less power over a woman, but Mary was no stranger to people disagreeing with her. In The Midwife-Mother Relationship, Mary goes on to say,

"I believe that our assumption of power over the women for whose benefit we practise at the beginning of their parenting can begin their disempowerment as parents and take from them the feeling of responsibility for their children on which good parenting depends."

Mary had had a period of very ill health in her youth meaning she spent a long period as a patient in hospital. Her experience of being on the receiving end of care must have given her great insight into the nursing profession. Mary embarked on a nursing, then midwifery career, which spanned a period of five decades. Even when Mary retired from clinical practice (she worked well into her 70s) she continued to share her skills of breech birth using the oral and visual traditions of storytelling and sharing pictures of the women she'd cared for.

Whilst a nurse, Mary suffered a back injury and spent the last half of her first pregnancy in hospital on traction. She was separated from her baby but demanded that he should be brought to her immediately. The love of her family further emboldened her spirit, and in a blog by Midwife Gloria Lemay she described the fierce protectiveness that parenthood can bring.²

Mary's strong independent spirit was echoed by her love of sailing. She and her beloved husband, Joe, built a boat in which they sailed the Mediterranean with 3 young children.

Mary says she learnt to be assertive at the very first ARM meetings in the 1970s, through roleplay, 'sharing the skills' sessions, and through solidarity with a sisterhood of likeminded midwives and students. Her assertive phrases are now well known by women and midwives alike. Mary's strength as a midwife enabled her to encourage other midwives and service users to find their own inner strength. Filmmaker and former midwife Bernadette Boss captured Mary talking about her assertiveness phrases.³

With the advent of the NHS Mary went from working autonomously as a community midwife to working "under the hospital" and sometimes struggled with hospital policies. She describes her training, and how she reconciled a hospital policy of performing an episiotomy on every woman, with her own experience of helping women give birth with an intact perineum.⁴ We can learn a great deal from stories like these.

Mary was a feminist, an activist, who fought tirelessly to improve maternity services through her work

with ARM, AIMS, the RCN and the NMC. She educated families as well as her sister midwives, so they could make informed choices. As an independent midwife she cared for many families that NHS care failed to serve. Women expecting breech babies, planning VBACs or twin births, at home and sometimes in hospital. Whenever her clients needed to give birth in hospital Mary ensured they got the very best NHS maternity care, because as she put it “Women shouldn’t have to give birth at home to give birth in peace.”

Mary Cronk is perhaps best known for facilitating, and teaching about, physiological breech birth. Her article published in 1998 by AIMS⁵ helped equip a new wave of midwives with the skills to safely support vaginal breech births. She taught workshops called “A Day at the Breech” and “Once More unto the Breech” in venues across the UK. She also shared her skills with the midwives who were lucky enough to work with her (myself included). She made me promise to share the skills of breech birth, and I’m sure she made other midwives to promise likewise. Mary loved sharing her stories and was a great story teller. This oral tradition deserves to be valued much more than the much-maligned anecdotal evidence. So many midwives have gained confidence to safely attend breech births because Mary’s stories and photos provided solid evidence that breech babies can be born safely.

What made Mary a great midwife rather than just a good midwife was her integrity, compassion and her humility. Her ability to stand with women and their families even in the most difficult of circumstances, by freely sharing her midwifery knowledge, and answering queries from midwives and members of the public well into her final year of life. We can all learn lessons from Mary’s way of being with-woman, and pass on the legacy of her work through story-telling, as well as the written word. It is our job now to take up where she left off in the fight for human rights in childbirth.

Mary is survived by her husband Joe, her two living children Maggie and Peter (Mary’s other son, John, sadly predeceased her), four grandchildren and two great grandchildren. She will be sadly missed by all who knew her and her work.

Joy Horner RM.

Further reading and other materials:

1. Kirkham, Mavis ‘The Midwife-Mother Relationship’ (2000) [Palgrave-Macmillan] and also see AIMS’ Book Review of Mavis Kirkham’s book, “The Midwife-Mother Relationship”:

<https://www.aims.org.uk/journal/item/book-reviews-22-3#2>

2. Gloria Lemay’s blog with Mary Cronk. “The first time that the iron entered my soul”

<http://wisewomanwayofbirth.com/the-first-time-that-the-iron-entered-my-soul-by-mary-cronk-mbe/>

3. Mary's Phrases:

<https://www.bing.com/videos/search?q=you+tube+mary+cronk&&view=detail&mid=34D8652845F9B91FCC2234D8652845F9B91FCC22&rvsmid=77B56CABDC5969682AE877B56CABDC5969682AE8&FORM=VDQVAP>

4. Mary Cronk and hospital policies: <https://youtu.be/zkssfpuVjpAJoy>

5. "Hands off the breech": <https://www.aims.org.uk/journal/item/keep-your-hands-off-the-breech>