

## contributors

**Iain Bamforth's** latest book, *The Good European: Arguments, Excursions and Disquisitions on the Theme of Europe* is published by Carcanet Press in July 2005.

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An exhibition of **Stephen Gill's** new work can be seen at the Architecture Association, 26 Bedford Square, London from 28 April–27 May.

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### GMS

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## James Willis

# Where praise is due ...

We had a party last week. Egyptian theme because Sonia likes dressing up. Her official retirement lunch had been the day before when the community hospital had laid on a terrific spread. Much too much food, presented on rather nice wickerwork trays, even for the huge attendance.

There were 20 or so GPs there, some retired like me — with my camera in one hand and rolled-up Chinese duck in the other. Lots of nurses and auxiliaries and admin staff. Not bad for a Thursday lunchtime. A very special lady, everybody kept saying. Not half, I kept thinking.

It was back in 1976 (we were reminded in one of the speeches) when the health authority decided to experiment with a GP ward, controversially but completely successfully mixed-sex, in a temporary war-time hut that was part of the then Alton General. Sonia was a staff nurse in the original team. I remember once when we found five of the patients had all been at school together. I remember once piling swabs onto an old lady's groin in one of our three side rooms — having shared many difficult times coping with her mentally-deficient brother who drank — keeping the blood out of sight when the secondaries finally and painlessly eroded her femoral artery.

When we transferred to the purpose-built community hospital the nurses managed to carry their warmth to the somewhat austere new ward. Little touches, which they knew were vital, like one of us always having to be Father Christmas, and Sonia always there dressed as an angel, or whatever theme they had decided upon that year.

Then her long reign as sister began. Always a superb hands-on nurse who inspired her staff by example, who would take time to sit by patients' beds and understand their problems, who befriended relations, coped with us turbulent docs, and whose standards were inviolate. I remember her amusement when I exploded with indignation (as I tended to do) on being told that she had been summoned to some course at the district hospital to be

told how to nurse. Most of all she had her wonderful, wonderful sense of humour. For years and years and years, visiting the ward (which I tried to do every day when I had patients in) was fun, with her personality transmitting itself to her tellingly-unchanging staff. And finally, in what she described in her self-deprecating little speech, as 'a wonderful way to end my career' she carried all these qualities to her years as matron of the community hospital.

In this age of empty celebrity surely this is the sort of person who deserves celebration, who we ought to be holding up as an example to the young, and thanking with all our hearts. Three weeks before she left, a new 'consultant nurse' appeared and took over 10 of her beds without so much as stopping at her door to say hello. This was the great gaffe that everybody was whispering about but that wasn't going to be allowed to spoil the occasion. It would be sad if the new way of thinking can't see any need for old-fashioned courtesy. As it can't, apparently, see any need for doctors. The plan is that in future district nurses will admit direct. Yet the funny thing is that the one thing Sonia chose to say about her doctors was that we 'always came'. She said it with warmth and love and it summed up a relationship of the deepest possible mutual respect. In an age that talks much of job satisfaction, here was a shining example of what the expression really means. 'I shall miss you all terribly,' she concluded, 'but it's time for me to go.'

