TAVISTOCK LIVES

**ANDREW COOPER**



# BLUEBIRD

The place of death and fear of dying
in my long, good life

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This is the first book in the *Tavistock Lives* series

*Series Editors*

Kate Stratton and Jocelyn Catty

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## The place of death and fear of dying in my long, good life

***Andrew Cooper***

*Edited by*
***Heather Price***

KARNAC
*firing the mind*

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# Contents


Acknowledgements vii

About the author ix

About the editor x

Series editors' preface xi

Foreword *by Heather Price* xiii

Prelude: The 'pause' xvii

1. Journey's end: Intensive care 1

2. Journey's beginning: The rectory on the hill 15

3. Generational pasts: The unknown soldier 21

4. Loss and the reclamation of friendship 29

5. Belonging and place: 'We'll be back!' 43

6. Public service and public fears: Dead babies 51

7. Paternal love 61

8. *Memento mori*: Unbar the door 67

9. The capricious body 73

10. The dreaming mind: Lost and found 87

11. Mind and body links: The exploding water heater 103

12. And finally 113

References 117

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# About the author

**Andrew Cooper** was a registered social worker and psychoanalytic psychotherapist and Professor of Social Work at the Tavistock Centre and the University of East London. He practised as a clinical social worker in the Adolescent Family Therapy service at the Tavistock, led the Professional Doctorate in Social Work and Social Care programmes there, and worked as a consultant to teams and organisations. In addition to his books *Borderline Welfare: Feeling and Fear of Feeling in Modern Welfare* (co-authored with Julian Lousada, 2005) and *Conjunctions* (2018), he has written widely about therapeutic and relationship-based social work practice and research as well as the policy contexts that support or impede these practices. Andrew died on 5th July 2023.

# About the editor

**Heather Price** is a senior lecturer and staff tutor at the Open University, UK, and a psychodynamic individual and couple psychotherapist and visiting lecturer at Tavistock Relationships. She and Andrew were married for twenty-two years.

# Series editors' preface

*Tavistock Lives* is a new series devoted to life writing in its many forms: memoir, biography, autobiography, letters, marginalia, and other narrative traces through which lives are told, remembered, and understood. Its focus is on those who have trained or worked at the Tavistock Clinic—founded in 1920 and now part of North London Foundation Trust—and who have carried psychoanalytically informed approaches to mental health into a wide range of professional settings. The series takes its inspiration from the richness of these individual histories and from a simple conviction: that the Tavistock's pioneering contribution to mental health lies not only in its theories and methods, but in the people who have shaped it and in the stories they have to tell.

At its core is a belief that institutions are formed by the people who inhabit them, struggle within them, and carry

their ideas forward. By providing glimpses into the lived histories of those who have shaped the Tavistock tradition, the series explores how ideas emerge from particular biographies, how professional commitments grow out of personal dilemmas, and how the personal and professional influence one another. It attends to the ways in which stories of lives are selected, shaped, and interpreted, and to how these narratives inform our understanding of ourselves, our work, and the world around us.

The series launches with Andrew Cooper's *Bluebird: The Place of Death and Fear of Dying in My Long, Good Life*. Written shortly before his death in July 2023, it is the memoir of someone who knew illness intimately: diagnosed with cancer twice in his twenties, Andrew—a Professor of Social Work and adult psychotherapist at the Tavistock for many years—spent much of his life on the border between illness and health. Moving between childhood memory and adult reflection, the book traces connections between early experience and later physical and mental pain, between personal fears about death and dying and the wider societal forces that shape our response to them—and the ways in which welfare systems shield us from realities we would rather not face. Woven throughout the book is an exploration of the life-enhancing potential of psychoanalytic psychotherapy—and the cost of fleeing our fears rather than facing them.

# Foreword

Death is terrifying, and for most of us it is something banished to the future, at the hazy end of what we hope will have been a rich, fulfilling life. As a person blessed with good health, I've not had to fear for my life in the way that my husband Andrew had to when he was diagnosed with cancer twice as a young man. This experience marked him and sometimes I could be impatient with his preoccupation with death. After all, why would we need to attend to death in the midst of our work and life?

Andrew was unlucky in having a life-threatening illness at a relatively young age. If you survive cancer physically, the meaning you make of having had that experience can have a profound effect. Andrew was doubly unlucky in that he struggled with his mental health over the course