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Strange Journey: the life of Dorothy Eckersley

Stephen M. Cullen

Meeting in Berlin

Three days before the outbreak of the Second World War, William Joyce, the leader of the British Nazi group, the National Socialist League, was in Berlin. He and his wife, Margaret, had fled there fearing internment by the British government if war broke out. Yet as war drew nearer, Joyce was unsure whether to return to Britain or not. But a meeting that day sealed his fate, leading to years of broadcasting for German radio, notoriety as 'Lord Haw Haw', and his execution for treason in January 1946. The meeting was accidental, with the Joyces bumping into one of his English supporters – Mrs Frances 'Dorothy' Eckersley - in a Berlin restaurant. Dorothy Eckersley was surprised to see Joyce, to whom she had recently sent £50 to help the NSL find a new headquarters in London. Instead, having a far better network of friends and acquaintances in Berlin than the almost friendless Joyces, she was able to put him in touch with officials who recruited Joyce to the radio propaganda microphone. And by the end of 1939, Dorothy, and her son, James, would join the English language team broadcasting German propaganda to the UK. At 46, Dorothy had already led an extraordinary life that had taken her from the stage in America to the microphone in Berlin, marriage with one of the most gifted radio engineers of the time, and years of political activism with the radical socialist Independent Labour Party. Yet now she was a committed follower of Hitler and a national socialist.

Early life

Her early life was marked by benign parental neglect, the failure of her parents' relationship, and the political activism of her mother. Dorothy's father, Lieutenant Colonel Stevens, was a regular army officer in the West Yorkshire Regiment serving with the British Army in India. It was there that he met and married Dorothy's mother,

Lilian. On retiring from the army, Dorothy's father moved to Cannes, but her mother moved to London and became active in politics. She joined the Independent Labour Party (ILP) and became a Suffragette - political activism which almost certainly influenced her daughter's later involvement in politics. Lilian Stevens' involvement with the Suffragettes (the Women's Social and Political Union – WSPU) and the ILP brought together radical and activist elements in politics that were to attract Dorothy from the 1920s until the 1940s. Although the ILP and militant campaigners for women's rights had shared radical, socialist, origins, it has been argued that under the leadership of Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst the militant women's movement moved away from its socialist origins and became an increasingly middle-class movement representing, in Sylvia Pankhurst's view, a form of 'incipient Toryism'. Nonetheless, many Suffragettes had a strong sense of the limitations of Parliament and conventional party politics, preferring a range of direct action tactics that sometimes verged on the terroristic. Similarly, the ILP also greatly distrusted Parliament as a mechanism for bringing about social and economic change.

While her mother was taking part in the struggle for social and political rights, Dorothy attended the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art. The Great War broke out a few months prior to her 21st birthday, but she appears to have toured the United States and England with acting companies during the war. She had her first (illegitimate) child following a tour in the USA, and another following an English tour. She opted not to look after either child. Dorothy's first marriage, in 1922, was to Edward Clark, a musician, who became the Music Adviser to the newly formed British Broadcasting Company (BBC). Their son, James Royston Clark, was born the following year, but the marriage was an unhappy one. In 1928, Dorothy separated from Edward and entered into a relationship with Peter Eckersley, a gifted radio engineer, and one of the key figures in the establishment of the BBC. Peter and

Dorothy were to have an intense relationship, which eventually cost Peter his post at the BBC.

Marriage, the Independent Labour Party and the future

Peter Eckersley's life was, in many respects representative of a certain type of 'modern' man in the inter-war period. While still at school, he developed an interest in the new science of radio. During the Great War he served in the Royal Flying Corps (RFC) as a wireless officer, rising to the rank of Captain. Although he was officially a non-flying officer, in order to develop air to ground radio techniques he frequently flew and was shot down and wounded. His experience of war, in particular on the Western Front, influenced his political views in the years to come. Early in 1919 he began work with the Marconi Company. Eckersley was one of the most innovative radio engineers of the period, and, as such, was one of a new breed of technocrats. He was at the heart of the BBC's development in the 1920s, and was a key figure in the world of international radio, but his relationship with Dorothy, and his subsequent divorce and marriage to her in 1930 ended his career at the BBC.

Dorothy was already a member of the ILP when she met Peter, and her commitment to the radical socialism of the ILP was an important influence on the political views of her new husband. Together, this London-based, 'modern', technocratic couple – an actress and a radio engineer – were a class away from the founders of the ILP, who were almost all from the industrial working-class, and predominately from the north of England and Scotland. However, the ILP had a chequered existence after the Great War, being affiliated to the Labour Party, but losing members to the Labour Party's new branches, while discovering that its cherished position as the main party of the left was under threat from the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB), founded in July 1920. These pressures on the ILP led, under the leadership of Clifford Allen, to reform and change during the period 1922-25. This saw a revival in the ILP's

grassroots support, its press and activities. Allen approached rich sympathisers and supporters and was able to attract substantial individual donations. One of those contributing supporters was Sir Oswald Mosley, who gave money and helped purchase a new rotary printing press for the ILP printing works. Mosley represented a new type of ILP supporter – rich, a veteran of the Great War and the RFC, restless, impatient with the slow pace of orthodox Labour and Parliamentary politics, and a supporter of the League of Nations. There were obvious similarities here with Peter Eckersley, and Mosley and Eckersley were to have a close association during the 1930s.

Dorothy effectively ran an ILP ‘salon’ at her Chelsea home; friends and visitors included Aldous Huxley, J.F. Horabin, Raymond Postgate, John Strachey, and Oswald Mosley. In 1931, Peter Eckersley was invited by the ILP to be its parliamentary candidate for the Leeds North East constituency, but instead of accepting the invitation, Peter followed Mosley into the New Party (NP); Mosley’s response to the crisis and the impotence of the Labour government. Peter became the chairman of the NP’s London Committee, but the 1931 general election saw a massive ‘National’ government victory with the combined ‘National’ parties win 554 seats, to the opposition’s grand total of 61 seats and the total eclipse of the NP.

Stalinism and a new world

At the height of the post-Crash crisis in Britain, Dorothy became increasingly attracted to the example of the Soviet Union, which seemed to offer more than the parliamentary capitalist societies, or the failure of the New Party. She became an avid left-wing cinema and theatre-goer, a fan of Eisenstein’s cinematic genius, and a friend of the Soviet Ambassador, Ivan Maisky, who persuaded her to attend meetings of the Society for Cultural Relations with the USSR. Although Dorothy’s enthusiasm for the Soviet Union can be seen as further evidence of her personal and political

restlessness, it is also an example of many people's search for new solutions to the economic and social problems that beset western parliamentary democracies. In the context of Dorothy's membership of the ILP, her enthusiasm for the Soviet Union was illustrative of the contradictory stresses that ILP supporters were under in the period, when CPGB members infiltrated the ILP to subvert its members and the left was in disarray. For Dorothy there may also have been an element of leader worship in her enthusiasm for the Soviet Union, with Stalin as the supposedly visionary and gifted leader battling against reactionary elements towards a bright new utopia. But, in 1935, Dorothy would discover a replacement for the ILP, the USSR, and Stalin.

The attractions of Hitler and Nazi Germany

Still a member of the ILP in 1935, she experienced a political conversion during a summer holiday:

'In that year my husband and I went to Germany and we there saw something of the social benefits brought about in that country by the Nazi policy. My husband and I agreed that here we saw things being actually done whereas in England they had only been talking about it'¹.

Dorothy returned to England full of enthusiasm for Nazi Germany, Hitler, and National Socialism in general. Although it would be some time before Dorothy joined Nazi and pro-German groups in England, she busied herself reinforcing her view that Hitler was creating a society that was overcoming the economic and social weaknesses of the parliamentary democracies, and she turned her flat into a one-woman information centre on the New Germany. Dorothy's perceptions of Hitler seem to have fallen into the category of almost religious belief in the Nazi leader: 'In 1937, I think, I remember that Unity Mitford said that she had had lunch with him [Hitler] and knew where he was going to have tea. I went with her and my husband to

the restaurant and there I gazed upon him'. Her choice of words is fascinating – 'and there I gazed upon him'.

Following her 1937 German summer, Dorothy returned to England and became more involved in far right politics. That year, she joined 'The Link', and the 'Anglo-German Fellowship'. Dorothy's membership of the Anglo-German Fellowship and the Link is interesting as it shows how a keen enthusiast for Nazi Germany could be found in both a strongly pro-Nazi group like the Link, and in a more pragmatic body like the Anglo-German Fellowship. In the Link, Dorothy was not only part of a much more active, grassroots based organisation, but also met people who would help confirm and strengthen her rightwards shift. The Link was founded in July 1937 by Admiral Sir Barry Domvile, former Director of Naval Intelligence, who retired from the Royal Navy in 1936. Domvile was a believer in a supposed Jewish-Masonic plot and desired to make the Link a grassroots organisation dedicated to defeating that 'plot' and strengthening Anglo-German ties. Branches were established throughout the UK, and by March 1938 it had nearly 1,800 members rising to around 4,300 by the summer of 1939. One of Dorothy's friends, Margaret Bothamley, became secretary of the inner London branch of the Link in January 1939, and helped preside over its rapid growth to 400 members within a few months. Bothamley was an extremely active Nazi and anti-Semite, a founding member of the Imperial Fascist League (IFL), and an activist in a range of pro-Nazi groups, including the Anglo-German Fellowship, the Nordic League, the Right Club, and the National Socialist League. During the war, she went on to be one of Dorothy's co-broadcasters for German radio. Dorothy later said that it was Bothamley who did most to interest her in Nazi ideas, and probably encouraged her to join the British Nazi group, the Imperial Fascist League in 1938. In addition, Dorothy also supported William Joyce's tiny NSL, and by 1939 Dorothy was firmly ensconced in the world of ultra-right politics. Dorothy had completed her political journey from the far left to the ultra-right. There

were sufficient continuities in Dorothy's changed political perspective to enable her to make that transition. It was a transition that was shot through with an impatience with parliamentary government, a belief in radical solutions to the problems of unemployment and economic recession, hostility to international finance, often allied to a belief in monetary reform, and, increasingly a willingness, then an eagerness, to personify the faults of the liberal-capitalism system on the figure of 'the Jew', who became the hated 'other'.

Broadcasting and trouble

In the summer of 1939 Dorothy left England for Germany to attend the Salzburg festival, and the Nazi Party Rally in Nürnberg. In Germany she arranged for her son, the 16 year old James Clark, to attend school in Berlin. Dorothy had made her choice, even if she did not appreciate just how devastating, and lengthy, the coming conflict would be. Once Germany, then the USSR, invaded and quickly defeated Poland, Dorothy thought that the apparent end of 'the Polish business' would herald the end of the war. But as it became clear that this was not the case, Dorothy was faced with the problem of how to keep herself and James. Through her political contacts, she was able to find work with German radio on its English language programming. Following her first day's broadcasting on 15th December, 1939, Dorothy became a permanent fixture on the airwaves. Indeed, she was the main announcer of programmes being broadcast to Britain, and introduced Margaret and William Joyce, Norman Baillie-Stewart (the original 'Lord Haw Haw'), Jack Trevor, Margaret Bothamley, and her own son, James. For Dorothy, her radio work solved her financial difficulties, but also, particularly in the period prior to the fall of France in the summer of 1940 fitted with her ideological standpoint. She was one of the earliest recruits to the foreign language broadcasting service of German radio, but the Germans were quickly able to gather together a small team of English language broadcasters. The core of the team broadcasting to Britain was made up of over a

dozen people, including six women. Dorothy announced other broadcasters, read items herself, and took part in the playlets, and she also undertook archive and translation work.

The rapid collapse of the Belgian, British and French armies in the summer of 1940, and the subsequent Battle of Britain, caused a reassessment of his role and position on the part of Dorothy's son, James. Once the Battle of Britain got underway, then the Blitz, and the idea of a negotiated peace between Germany and the UK dissolved, it was clear that the war had entered a new phase. But, later, after the war, Dorothy made no mention of changing political perceptions in her defence, she simply reiterated that she had only broadcast to find a solution to her money problems. Indeed, her statement to British Army Intelligence that she was a member of the IFL and had not resigned seems to suggest that, at some level, she saw herself, even in 1945, in British hands, as still being a National Socialist. But one thing must have been clear to both mother and son in 1940, and that was, as James stated, they were in a 'position', and one that was shot through with potential danger.

In October 1941, Dorothy was told that she was no longer needed for announcing; instead she was reassigned to correcting the news in English. She believed that this was a result of internal power struggles among the group of English language broadcasters, who appear to have been suffering from the strains of their comparatively isolated lives, and Dorothy's previous friendship with William Joyce had not been enough for her to keep her position. Further, her new job correcting the English news lasted only a week, and she was then made redundant until February 1942, when she was moved to the German Archive Section to read, check and catalogue transmissions by the BBC, and news from British newspapers. Dorothy argued that this job was not much more than a sinecure, and although she claimed that her work was never used, MI5 later regarded it as the most serious of her roles

for German radio. But in addition to this low grade intelligence work, Dorothy continued to broadcast until May 1943, as 'Jeannette' in a series of short plays entitled 'Women to Women'. It was only after an accident, and a period convalescing that, by late 1943, she stopped broadcasting. This therefore left her, once again, with the problem of money, for although German radio sent Dorothy an ex gratis payment of 1000 marks in July 1943, she feared that it was 'so that they could have a hold over me'. Later that month, a friend of hers told Dorothy she would soon be receiving more money, this time from the Gestapo. This development may well have been the catalyst to Dorothy's failed attempt to get an exit visa to Hungary. Instead, Dorothy began to receive payments which eventually totalled 7000 marks. Matters came to a head towards the end of 1944. In October, there was strong pressure from the Propaganda Ministry to get James back to broadcasting, and in December, Dorothy paid back 8000 marks to the Propaganda Ministry. She also maintained that James was totally incapable of broadcasting due to illness. Both actions would help Dorothy's case once Germany was defeated, but, in the immediate term, they seem to have pushed the German authorities too far, and as she later explained: 'I was arrested at my house, together with my son, on 24th December 1944 by the Police and the Gestapo and taken to the civil prison at Alexanderplatz'. From there, mother and son were taken to different internment camps in Austria and northern Italy, where the British Army eventually found them, interrogated them and returned them to England.

The Reckoning and after

James was arrested by the police when he arrived at Black Bush airfield in Hampshire at 3.30pm on 31st October, 1945, while Dorothy was arrested at Croydon Airport later the same day. They were taken to London, and both charged: 'Between the 3rd day of September 1939, and the 31st day of May 1943, being British Subjects, with intent to assist the enemy, unlawfully did conspire together and

with persons unknown to do acts which were likely to assist the enemy and to prejudice the efficient prosecution of the war'. Their trial opened at the Old Bailey on 4th December, 1945. Dorothy and James each pleaded guilty to the charges of conspiracy to assist the enemy in acts that were likely to aid the enemy through broadcasting. Sentencing them, Mr Justice Humphreys made a clear distinction between the motivations and culpability of Dorothy and James. He said that there was no question that Dorothy was a pronounced pro-Nazi and admirer of Hitler, and she was sentenced to 12 months imprisonment. James, on the other hand, was held, because of his age at the time of the offences and the influence of his mother, not to have been culpable, and was bound over for two years. After her release from Holloway, Dorothy was supported, in part, by Peter Eckersley, and they seem to have met frequently, although they lived apart. There is no evidence that she re-engaged with politics in any way. Instead, she converted to Catholicism and lived near to the Brompton Oratory, eventually dying in 1971.

Further Reading

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¹ The National Archives (TNA), Crim 1/1736, C470603. All direct quotations are taken from this source.