

## Lives of 1911

This talk originated in an attempt to get a flavour of the lives and thoughts of my parents, as they were before I was born or when I was a small child. What did they believe in? They were born just before the outbreak of the Great War, were at school during the 1920s, entered upon adult life in the 30s against the background of the slump and the rise of fascism, came to maturity during the second war, and brought up their family during the early years of the welfare state.

I went to the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* and extracted the entries for all those born in 1911, the year my mother was born. There are 199 men and 39 women on the list. Of course these are not representative ordinary lives but somewhere in these 238 life-stories I hoped to find traces of the ideas that guided my parents, and the challenges that they faced. With some exceptions, such as Randolph Churchill or the seventh earl of Warwick, socialite and actor, they are on the whole a progressive lot, not necessarily left-wing, although many of them were, but conscious of belonging to a new generation in a new world where things would be done differently – where inequality would be softened, market forces tamed by social purpose, and individual talent and enterprise channelled towards collective goals. This optimism was in many ways frustrated by the turn of events, and often tinged with anxiety, doubt and melancholy – and in all this I can recognise my parents.

Don't worry, I'm not going to try to cram all 238 lives into this talk, but will highlight just a handful.

One the highlights is the Gaelic poet Sorley MacLean. He grew up on Raasay with an inherited insight into traditional songs and stories, inherited anger over the Clearances, and a strong dislike of the Elect of the Free Presbyterian church, whose preoccupation with salvation he regarded as a sort of careerism. He graduated from Edinburgh with a first class degree in English and became a teacher, the career he pursued until his retirement in 1972, interrupted only by war service which ended when he was invalided out after el Alamein. In Edinburgh his vocation as a poet was confirmed by friendship with Hugh MacDiarmid. He believed that for too long Gaelic poetry had been rooted in the past, in past griefs and sufferings, and in the sentimentality of the Celtic twilight, and he was determined to make it a medium for addressing the political issues of his time and of the whole world. As a young man he was torn between his impulse to fight fascism in Spain, and his personal and family motives for taking a job. His disgust with himself for staying at home, and the tension of 'a poet struggling with the world's condition', (in the words of his poem 'The Selling of a Soul') are evident in his pre-war writing. After the war his poetic output was limited by his commitment to teaching – he ended as headmaster of Plockton High School, where he had a heavy teaching load as well as administrative duties, not to mention training the shinty team. In retirement he was in great demand as a reader of his own poetry, which reflected both the immediate appeal of his work, even to those reliant on English translations, and also the high regard in which he was held by fellow poets, including Seamus Heaney.<sup>1</sup> His poetry has been described as bold, harsh and tender, always exciting, 'totally engaged ... [making] the blood run faster'.<sup>2</sup>

In an interview shortly before his death in 1996 he gave this summary of the century, in five phases:

For ill, but perhaps not absolutely for ill, the Great War. For bad, the Great Depression. For sheer amount of misery, the second World War. For good, the government of Attlee, which was continued to a certain extent by Macmillan and people like that, which did an awful lot for the good of the country, and which was undone by the government of Thatcher.<sup>3</sup>

The Great War is 'not absolutely for ill' presumably because it saw the end of three empires and the weakening of a fourth, the British, of which he was no lover – he did not follow fellow Scots in refusing to fight for the British Empire, but only because he understood that Nazi Germany was the greater evil. As for his overall verdict on the five phases, the judgement of history may not be quite as clear-cut, but he was speaking for many of his generation.

---

<sup>1</sup> MacLean himself produced English versions of many of his poems. Heaney doubtless expressed his admiration many times, but I am relying on Pete Jarvis's report of hearing him say that Sorley was at the summit while he, Seamus, was still in the foothills.

<sup>2</sup> Ronald Black in the notes to *An Tuil*, his anthology of twentieth century Scottish Gaelic verse, p 766.

<sup>3</sup> *The Scotsman*, 24 October 1996, a month before his death, quoted in *An Tuil*, p 766.

We'll go from a Gael to a lowland Scot, the economist Alec Cairncross, who called his memoirs (published in 1998) *Living with the Century*, which would not be a bad title for this talk. His talent took him from his father's drapery and ironmongery shop to the very heart of the country's governing elite as Turfholm village school, Hamilton Academy and Glasgow University led him to Trinity College Cambridge and the circle of brilliant economists around Maynard Keynes.

In 1935 Cairncross left Cambridge and went to lecture at Glasgow University, and also to teach evening-classes of trainee accountants, an experience that contributed later to the success of his *Introduction to Economics* – the standard textbook in the 1950s. During the war he served in the Cabinet Office, the Board of Trade and the Ministry of Aircraft Production, where he acquired a formidable reputation for his ability to handle large bodies of information, analyse complex practical problems and devise workable solutions. After the war he remained in government service until becoming Professor of Economics at Glasgow in 1951. He served on a variety of committees and commissions on subjects as varied as old age and the monetary system, anthrax and crofting. He advised on the post-war settlement in West Germany and, through the World Bank, took an active interest in the economics of development. For most of the sixties he was at the Treasury, one of his last duties being to confront the Chancellor with the necessity of devaluation in 1967 – eighteen years after he had been involved (as economic adviser to Harold Wilson at the Board of Trade) in the previous devaluation crisis in 1949.

Cairncross stood for the belief that complex problems can be addressed by intelligent and imaginative measures based on comprehensive knowledge. This creed, inherited from the great Victorians, sharpened up by new techniques in statistical analysis, and confirmed by the successes of scientists during the war, was shared by others of his generation. In some of his contemporaries this bred arrogance, but Cairncross was always modest. Of his wide-ranging activities he wrote: 'People seemed to lie in wait for me to find some new abyss of ignorance into which to tempt me. Again and again I fell into the temptations spread before me.'<sup>4</sup>

We might note that through his family Alec Cairncross was connected with one of the recurrent stories of the post-war era: his younger brother John, a brilliant linguist, was the fifth man of the Burgess and Maclean spy ring.<sup>5</sup> Guy Burgess himself was born in 1911, as were the atomic spies Alan Nunn-May and Klaus Fuchs.

The same path from grammar school to the top table in government, academia and industry was followed by several others on our list – the historian J H Plumb, for instance, the industrialist Frank Kearton and the geneticist Kenneth Mather. Many (Plumb pre-eminently) succeeded in transforming themselves so as to become, on the surface at least, indistinguishable from those born into the elite. Kearton and Mather were what Plumb's slightly older friend C P Snow (like Plumb Snow came from Leicester, their fathers being employed at the same shoe factory) would call 'new men' – of humble origin, grammar school boys, rising through merit, scientifically trained – that is to say, accustomed to argue from evidence – and often, though not invariably, based in what were patronisingly referred to as 'the provinces' – outside the magic triangle of Oxford, Cambridge and London. Mather, for example, spent his career almost entirely in Birmingham, building up his department there to become a major research base.

Frank Kearton's career could well have come out of a novel by Snow. The son of a bricklayer, he obtained a first class degree from Oxford and was with ICI until the war, when he was seconded to work on the British atomic bomb. After the war he joined Courtaulds, where he remained until 1975. In 1962, after leading the opposition to takeover by ICI, he became chairman. At the same time he was, to use another phrase associated with Snow, moving in the corridors of power as a government adviser on transport (he had a hand in the Beeching 'reorganization' of the railways) and on manufacturing industry. As head the Industrial Reorganization Corporation in the 60s he was responsible for a wholesale restructuring of the motor and engineering industries through mergers and takeovers. In 1975 he became head the British National Oil Corporation, where he was one of the architects of the North Sea Oil industry.

---

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in his obituary in the *Economist*. 29 October 1998.

<sup>5</sup> John Cairncross confessed to MI5 in 1964, but although his name was associated with Blunt and Burgess from the 70s onwards the full range of his activities was not public knowledge until the publication of a book by Christopher Andrew and Oleg Gordievsky in 1990 (*KGB: the inside story of its foreign operations from Lenin to Gorbachev*). A review in the *Times* (15 October 1990) describes Cairncross as the most effective, after Philby, of all the Cambridge spies. He supplied the Russians with transcripts from Bletchley Park which were important in the prelude to the Battle of Kursk.

I remember hearing Lord Kearton on *Any Questions*, when he always came over as a fairly genial sort, so it came as a surprise to read of his autocratic management style. Perhaps he found a certain new-broom abrasiveness necessary at Courtaulds which, when he joined the firm, prided itself on preserving among its senior personnel the atmosphere of a gentlemen's club – an attitude which was all too prevalent in British boardrooms. Even the unabrasive Alec Cairncross was critical of the lack of professional management in Glasgow ship-yards.

From the moment I began to take an interest in 'current affairs' I remember recurrent grumbling about the uncompetitiveness of British industry, for which various causes were given: inept and unprofessional management, the restrictive practices of the trades unions and a snobbish bias in British society at large against the new men of science, technology and industry. None of the established civil servants on our list was trained in the natural sciences – apart from the economists there were historians and linguists. This brings us to a third phrase associated with Snow, the *two cultures*, and his complaint that too many of the British elite did not understand scientific procedures and ways of thinking.

It won't have escaped your notice that I've been referring to new *men*, and that the scientists I've mentioned so far are men. Among those scientists in the *DNB* who were born before 1911 the proportion of women is roughly 8%; if we look ahead to those born between 1912 and 1940 it rises to just over 10%. It would be a long time before science was accepted as a natural field for women. The two daughters of the Glasgow biochemist Norman Davidson both became in their turn eminent scientists, but one wonders how easy it was even for him to guide them in that direction – the *DNB* considers the fact unusual enough to be listed among Davidson's achievements. The cleverest child in my year at primary school was the daughter of a scientist, and I remember hearing that he found it hard to find a girl's grammar school in South East London with what he considered suitable facilities. 1911 was particularly barren in this respect with just one woman scientist out of 27 born that year. But she was quite someone.

Mary Barber was the daughter of a physician, and herself qualified as a doctor in 1940. She worked as a pathologist and in 1947 was appointed lecturer in bacteriology at Hammersmith Hospital. She observed an increase in resistance to penicillin among staphylococci, and was the first to identify the cause.<sup>6</sup> To combat this she imposed a regime requiring use of anti-biotic combinations. There was some opposition to her views, but her policies proved effective in reducing the levels of infection. Later, when methicillin was promoted by Beechams (as Celbenin) as a wonder-solution to the problem she insisted that it wouldn't work, that only by strict hygiene and by using multiple antibiotics could resistance be overcome.<sup>7</sup> MRSA is still with us. Mary Barber's work on the problem was recognised in 1965 when she was appointed to the Royal College of Physicians, but her career was cut short that same year. A devout Christian, she was a passionate opponent of the Cold War and nuclear weapons; she was killed in a car accident on her way to a CND meeting in Lincolnshire.

The options open to women born in 1911 were not very different from those identified by the early nineteenth century social reformer Priscilla Wakefield: writing, the visual arts, music, needlework, gardening, accounting, education and acting.<sup>8</sup> Wakefield might have been surprised by the female politicians (Connie Monks and Margaret McKay) and by Myrtle Maclagan (cricketer and soldier) and Yolande Beekman (shot in 1944, one of twenty or so women agents in occupied France listed in the *DNB*<sup>9</sup>), but most of the women on our list followed lines that would not have shocked her. Things undoubtedly changed during the twentieth century and there are some 'female firsts' amongst those born in 1911 – Jane Drew, for example, is described as Britain's first leading woman architect, and the pianist Rita Lawrence was the first black woman to lead a major instrumental group, the Havana Sextet – but even among the high-performers who make it into the *DNB* we can see some familiar problems holding women back. The ecclesiastical embroidery artist Beryl Dean, for example, had to curtail her career in art education in order to care for elderly parents, and the case of Connie Monks is also suggestive.

<sup>6</sup> That germs were bound to develop resistance had been recognised at the time that penicillin was first discovered and introduced.

<sup>7</sup> See <http://www.histmodbiomed.org/sites/default/files/44862.pdf> p10 (retrieved 29 December 2014). MRSA originally stood for Methicillin-resistant Staphylococcus Aureus; as more and more antibiotics were tried it became Multi-drug Resistant Staphylococcus Aureus.

<sup>8</sup> Priscilla Wakefield, *Reflections on the Present Condition of the Female Sex with Suggestions for its Improvement*, 2nd edition, 1817. She noted that women did well in the theatre, although she believed the profession was 'unsuitable' for women.

<sup>9</sup> She was shot along with three colleagues at Dachau in 1944

Connie Monks was an outstanding pupil at the grammar school in Chorley, went to teacher-training college and taught until her marriage. She returned to teaching while her husband was in the army, but left at the end of the war to join him in running a small shop. Taking up local politics, she was mayor of Chorley in 1959 and the town's MP from 1970-74, but despite these successes there is a melancholy feel to her entry in the Dictionary, as though after all her life ended in failure. She made little impact in Parliament, her interests being exclusively tied up in her town, but even there her achievements were overtaken by local government changes and the economic decline of the area, the closure of the mills and the mines. If there is here an unfulfilled promise it's hard not to contrast Connie Monks with the brilliant grammar-school boys of her generation whose success at school led them not to teacher training college but to university, which projected them onto a wider stage, opening new opportunities and providing useful contacts. My mother was not allowed to go to university, and carried the sense of inferiority and resentment into her old age.

This graph (taken from an article on Women in UK Universities between the 1920s and 80s) shows that it was not until the early 80s that the proportion of university students who were women even got close to half, and the quotation from the Robbins Report, as late as 1963, shows the vicious circle that limited first the expectations and then the opportunities of women.

The arrival of grammar school boys like Cairncross and Kearton in the corridors of power did not signal the end of elitism in British society. If anything it strengthened it, because to the elitism of birth and wealth was added the elitism of intelligence. The reputation of scientific planning was enhanced by wartime successes, and there was a widespread belief that similar success could be achieved in solving peacetime problems, in particular by avoiding the well documented mistakes of the pre-war years. This confidence had two faces: one was evident in the energy and optimism of the post-war Attlee government as it set about regenerating a society ravaged by both war and the mistakes of the 30s, but on the other side we see exaggerated reliance on centralised economic planning and the arrogance of many slum-clearance programmes, the attitude summed up at the time, and since, as 'Whitehall knows best'.

It is clearly the first, positive aspect of the spirit of 1945 that Sorley MacLean was remembering in his 1996 interview. A number of modern historians have set out to expose the second, negative aspect of the post-war settlement.

Two men born in 1911 are invoked by these revisionist historians – Fritz Schumacher and Tom Harrisson.

Fritz Schumacher (one of the 46 lives of 1911 who was born outside the UK) was a German refugee from Nazism whose career as an economist began in much the same way as people like Alec Cairncross, only to take a very different turn later on. He was briefly interned as an alien, and then had a spell working on the land, before becoming part of a team applying statistical analysis to problems of strategy and war production. After the war, like Cairncross, he advised on the revival of the German economy, but his concern for issues of equality put him at odds with fellow economists. Back in Britain he was for twenty years up to 1970 the economic adviser to the National Coal Board, in which capacity he was an early critic of the new Nuclear industry, being one of the first to point out the problems of waste disposal.

At the same time an interest in Asia took him into the field of development economics. While he was still at the NCB, and more particularly after his retirement, he became a critic of the accepted wisdom that the road to development was through heavy industry, centralised planning and urbanisation. In India, he argued, massive industrialization would make the elite rich but do nothing for the millions of rural poor. He advocated *intermediate technology* as the proper development path for economies such as India's. These views found more support outside the economics establishment than within – British governments, aided by industrialists like Lord Kearton, went on trying to impose national plans on industry, and believed that a similar prescription would work in developing countries. In 1966 Schumacher established the Intermediate Technology Development Group, publishing his influential book *Small is Beautiful* in 1973. His Gandhian economic doctrines sat well alongside Schumacher's concern for the environment. He was an early advocate of organic cultivation and for six years was President of the Soil Association.

Schumacher's work therefore offers a philosophical basis for criticising the reliance of post-war governments on large-scale redevelopment and collective planning.

Tom Harrisson was a brilliant and charismatic organizer. He showed this soon after leaving school when he organized 1300 volunteers to conduct a census of the great crested grebe. He dropped out of university and joined a series of expeditions to Lapland, Borneo and the New Hebrides, originally as an ornithologist, but soon developing a new interest in observing people, starting with the cannibals and head-hunters of Borneo. In late 1936 he turned to observing the poor of his own country and Mass Observation was born. Numerous survey-takers and anonymous observers and diarists were recruited. The idea of 'anthropology at home' began as a Surrealist project, but its reports on public reactions to events were taken seriously by the government as indicators of the state of wartime morale. Towards the end of the war Harrisson's knowledge of Borneo was employed in support of the special forces on the island, and he recruited a band of head-hunters to harry the Japanese with blow-pipes. Mass Observation fizzled out in the 50s and 60s while Harrisson was abroad, but interest revived in the 70s and he handed the entire collection to Sussex University, where it forms the core of a growing archive of diaries, memoirs and letters fulfilling the original ideal of giving the ordinary person's view of events as a counterweight to the official story. Larger than life, troubled, unreliable in his private dealings, and dismissed by many academic anthropologists and sociologists, Harrisson nonetheless has left a lasting monument in the Mass Observation archive.

Some modern historians have used Mass Observation results to support their case that after 1945 a small number of progressive 'activators' foisted their vision of a collective and communitarian future onto an unwilling populace. Whatever we might think of this case, Mass Observation's surveys and interviews undoubtedly provide a corrective to our folk-memory of a nation that was single-minded in its support of the war effort and confident about the prospects for post-war Britain. As early as 1942 plans were being made for re-building, and Mass Observation was warning planners that the population was not united in its hopes for the future, that many were disenchanted and simply wanted to get out, to emigrate. The findings of a 1943 survey were still more worrying for the 'Whitehall knows best' brigade, making it clear that contrary to what some architects and town-planners seemed to think, people held strong views on what sort of houses they wanted, and the majority strongly disliked the prospect of the blocks of flats which were part of most urban regeneration schemes.

It is the common fate of progressives to be overtaken by social change and to find themselves in the position of the old guard. So it was with many of the new men of 1945 when confronted by the upheavals of the late 1960s. Kenneth Mather, for example, was extremely unhappy and unsuccessful when, as a senior academic, he was forced to deal with student unrest at Southampton – he quickly went back to his research in Birmingham. But not all progressive figures end up enrolled in the establishment, as is illustrated by the career of the other woman MP on our list, Margaret McKay.

Margaret McKay's political journey had not been straightforward. At the age of 16, as a member of the Young Communist League, she was part of a Trades Union delegation to Russia. She was convinced of the success of the first ten years of the Revolution, and later spent time in Moscow working for Comintern. Back in England in 1932 she turned her energies towards supporting the Labour Party and the Trades Union movement, becoming general secretary of the Union of Domestic Workers. Her union activities were diverse, including work with refugees and writing fashion notes for the magazine of the shop-workers union. In 1959 she tried and failed to be selected as parliamentary candidate, but stood in 1964 in Clapham, and won, holding the seat at the 1966 election. At first she concentrated on bread and butter domestic issues, but following a visit to Teheran she became increasingly sympathetic to the Arab cause, which at that time was not popular with any section of the British political class. She engaged in what looked like stunts – setting up a replica of a Palestinian refugee camp in Trafalgar Square, for example, and attending Parliament in Arab dress. Her outspoken support of the Palestinians and denunciations of the Zionist lobby led to accusations of anti-semitism, while her frequent visits to the Middle East lost her the support of her constituents. She did not stand for re-election in 1970. In 1971 she emigrated to the United Arab Emirates, where she remained for the last 25 years of her life.

Tam Dalyell, writing Margaret McKay's obituary in the *Independent*, quoted from her autobiography:

I did not want to be a rebel. ... I just wanted to live with all my being and to the full extent of my capacities but this was denied me. Therefore, in sympathy with the spirit of those years I

was possessed by a frenzy for change ... The Communist Party embodied and symbolised that great change, appeared as the instrument of it, pointed the way ...<sup>10</sup>

Dalyell recalled that before entering Parliament she was a 'great force on the Left'. 'I hope New Labour has room for latterday Margaret McKays,' he concluded.

Of the British MPs born in 1911 only Willie Ross was a politician of the first rank, but two Commonwealth prime ministers are on our list, Eric Williams of Trinidad and Tobago and Borg Olivier of Malta, not to mention the long-time military leader of Burma, Ne Win.

But parliament and the civil service are not the only centres of power, as from the 60s onwards the single issue pressure group became more important. We've noted the Soil Association in connection with Fritz Schumacher, and among other early advocates of its principles were the farmer Dinah Williams and the gardener Lawrence Hills. Two other major pressure groups emerged under the guidance of figures born in 1911: The Consumers' Association and Oxfam.

Eirlys Roberts was a journalist who worked in military intelligence and, after the war, in public information roles for UNRRA and the British Treasury. In 1957 she was one of the founders of the Consumers' Association. For 15 years she was editor of the Association's magazine, *Which?* expanding the range of products covered and building an effective pressure group. Eirlys Roberts was described as 'the most considerable figure thrown up by the British consumer movement.' She summed up her attitude to consumer choice like this: 'there are ... spheres in which it is proper that emotion, and not reason, should operate – such as love and aesthetics – but ... buying a refrigerator is not one of them.'<sup>11</sup>

Leslie Kirkley was a local government officer in Manchester until he was sacked in 1940 under the council's policy of not employing conscientious objectors.<sup>12</sup> After the war he was employed as general secretary of the fledgling Oxford Committee for Famine Relief, and during his 24 years in the post he built up both the fund-raising and educational activities of the organization.<sup>13</sup>

The second war had its effect on all the lives of 1911. Four on our list were killed in action. Apart from the secret agent Yolande Beekman, these were Kenneth Farnes (said to have been the fastest bowler in England), the submarine commander David Wanklyn VC, and the SOE officer Arthur Nicholls.

Some, such as Sorley MacLean, were injured, while others were imprisoned, such as the avant garde artist Roger Hilton who was captured on the Dieppe raid. Bill Williams escaped from Stalag Luft 3 in Silesia and wrote a famous book, *The Wooden Horse*, about it. Leslie Audus (who lived to be nearly 100) used his knowledge of plant physiology to extract yeast from maize, and later from a mould fungus, to provide vitamins to counteract beri-beri in his Japanese prison camps. Jersey schoolmaster Harold le Druillenc was among those liberated from Belsen, where the Germans had held him for sheltering an escaped Russian prisoner on Jersey, his sister Louisa having died in Ravensbruck for the same offence. The short-story writer G F Green was sentenced to two years in military detention by the British in Ceylon for homosexual activity – under the pseudonym Lieutenant Z he wrote a horrific account of the sadism of the troops entrusted with running the prison camp.

The novelist Mervyn Peake was sent as a war artist to the newly liberated Belsen, and produced both drawings and poems expressive of the suffering that he witnessed. He felt that his own activity in recording what he saw was itself a kind of cruelty. The Nobel prizewinning novelist William Golding served with distinction in the navy throughout the war. Some twenty years later he wrote this of his experience:

---

<sup>10</sup> Quoted in the *Independent* 6 March 1996, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/obituaries/margaret-mckay-1340565.html> (retrieved 1 January 2015).

<sup>11</sup> In her book *Consumers* (1966), quoted in her DNB entry. The comment on her contribution was by Michael Young, co-founder of the Consumers' Association, quoted in the *DNB*.

<sup>12</sup> Kirkley took a conscious decision not to join the Quakers at that point because he did not want to gain his exemption on religious grounds, but on the grounds his principled commitment to pacifism. He became a Quaker later. (See the *Quakers in the World* website: <http://www.quakersintheworld.org/quakers-in-action/267> [retrieved 9 March 2015].)

<sup>13</sup> Among the honours he received was the position of Head Shepherd of the Greek village of Livardon – Greek refugees having been the first beneficiaries of Oxfam's relief fund at the end of the war. The 1954 earthquake in Greece was the first occasion when Oxfam moved into disaster relief.

Before the second world war I believed in the perfectibility of social man; that a correct structure of society would produce goodwill; and that therefore you could remove all social ills by a reorganisation of society ... but after the war I did not because I was unable to. I had discovered what one man could do to another ... I must say that anyone who moved through those years without understanding that man produces evil as a bee produces honey must have been blind or wrong in the head.<sup>14</sup>

It's hard to disagree with Golding's pessimistic verdict. A succession of events after the war caused many to fall out of love with the particular reorganization of society represented by Soviet Communism – it was, for example, the Soviet-backed coup in Czechoslovakia in 1948 which drove the *Daily Worker* journalist Douglas Hyde out of the Communist Party into the Catholic Church. Another reorganization, the independence of India, was overshadowed by the appalling bloodshed that accompanied the partition of India and Pakistan documented by the Bombay journalist Dosabhoj Framji Karaka in his pamphlet *Freedom must not stink*. Here then are three men whose attitudes to life were changed forever by what they witnessed during and after the war: Dosabhoj Karaka and Mervyn Peake, and the journalist James Cameron, who was marked for ever by witnessing the explosion of an atomic bomb.

And yet there were some, no less intelligent and perceptive than Golding, who remained determined to remedy social ills by securing political change. But often it's for their lesser achievements that we remember them. Lifelong Communists like John Gollan and the Welsh miners' leader Dai Francis never saw the transformation of society that they hoped for, but their comrade Benny Rothman of Manchester was celebrated in the 1980s for the part he had played fifty years before in the campaign to open up the countryside. In 1932 he was one of the leaders of the mass trespass on Kinder Scout in the Peak District.

But it's time to leave politics and turn to the many artists, musicians, writers and actors who were born in 1911.

The controversy over flats versus houses was one aspect of the tension between the architectural elite's commitment to modernism and the traditional tastes of the bulk of the population. The same divide was evident in other branches of the arts, nowhere more so than in the visual arts. The painter and stone carver Sven Berlin was part of the St Ives artists' colony before and after the war. He wrote the first biography of the primitive painter, and St Ives rag-and-bone man, Alfred Wallis. As a figurative artist, a traditionalist, Sven Berlin found himself on the losing side in a bitter conflict with the champions of abstraction, such as Barbara Hepworth and Ben Nicholson. After leaving St Ives (in some style, on a horse and cart) he settled in the New Forest, working in his own way, and also writing a novel, *The Dark Monarch*, about disagreements in an artists' colony. When his former colleagues recognised themselves in the characters of the novel they forced the publisher to withdraw it. But in the 1990s Berlin went back to St Ives and was welcomed as a survivor from the heroic post-war days.

Music is the only field in which women on our list outnumber men. They include the composer Phyllis Tate (whose formal education came to an end when she was expelled from her primary school for singing a bawdy song) and the pianist Phyllis Sellick, one of the early performers on television, and later on well known for playing pieces for three hands with her husband Cyril Smith, who had lost the use of one hand.

We've already mentioned another, pianist Rita Lawrence, who was the daughter of a well-to-do trader from the Gold Coast. Although she made her living playing in night-clubs she was classically trained (in Germany). She mixed in left-wing circles after the war, and frequently accompanied Paul Robeson in concerts and on records. After retiring from her musical career she worked as a telephonist at the British Museum. She lived to be ninety, and in old age gave concerts in old people's homes and to raise money for charity.

Clare Deniz was another pianist who played in London nightclubs before, during and after the war. She came from Cardiff's Butetown, one of the oldest black communities in Britain and home to an extraordinarily diverse and fertile musical tradition, fed by influences from West Africa, Portugal, Spain, the Caribbean, and North and South America, and of course Wales – it's the tradition which, a generation later, would produce Shirley Bassey. Clare's husband, the guitarist and bandleader Frank Deniz, became a professional musician as a way of escaping his life as a merchant seaman –

---

<sup>14</sup> Golding in his essay 'Fable' (1965), quoted in *DNB*.

his father had died in Odessa while working as a donkeyman (engine-room sailor) on a tramp steamer.

Another entertainer from the same area was Don Johnson. His father was from the West Indies, his mother was Welsh, and he was brought up in what his parents hoped was a more respectable part of Cardiff, but he was drawn to the musical life of Butetown. Determined not to go to sea he became a boxer, and then a singer and guitarist. He went to London in the late thirties, working in clubs and broadening his musical range until he became the main vocalist with Ken Johnson's West Indian Dance Orchestra. He served in the army, appearing in 'Stars in Battledress' productions. After the war he had a varied career as singer, instrumentalist and actor on stage, film and radio and television. Then he left London and returned to South Wales to work for five years in a steel works, injuring his hands and becoming unable to play the guitar.<sup>15</sup>

It's easy to see in the careers of these black musicians clear signs of the limited opportunities open to black people in Britain in the mid-twentieth century (not least in the fact that when they gave up performing the likes of Rita Lawrence and Don Johnson were forced to take quite humble and low-paid jobs). Visceral colour-prejudice also operated in the life of the film-star Merle Oberon. When she was in Hollywood her mother, who was Singhalese, was described as her maid in deference to American disapproval of the mixing of the races.

Merle Oberon was a star, though perhaps not one of the first rank. The same same might be said of London-born Kay Walsh. Despite her star quality she quickly turned to playing 'character' parts – her acting was perhaps too realistic, even too intelligent, for starring roles. From stories of how she contributed to the films of her lover (and briefly her husband) David Lean it seems likely that she might well have become a director if such a career had been open to women at the time.

Among other actors born in 1911 two, Michael Hordern and Thora Hird, went on appearing well into the 1990s. Another, Terry-Thomas, still turns up when favourites like *I'm All Right Jack* are re-played on television. Thora Hird is probably the only one on our list whose activities in the first world war get a mention – she appeared at the age of four in a show to entertain the troops.

We come back to writers born in 1911. I've already mentioned three giants, Sorley MacLean, William Golding and Mervyn Peake. Had I been giving this talk in the 1950s I'd almost certainly have said that the most important British writer born in 1911 was the playwright Terence Rattigan, who dominated the London theatre from the mid 30s to mid 50s. But then, after *Waiting for Godot* (1955) and *Look Back in Anger* (1956) new voices and new subjects were brought onto the stage, and Rattigan's upper-class accents and well-made plays went out of favour. He had a revival in the 70s and now his lasting importance is recognised. But these ups and downs remind us that even an apparently authoritative reference work like the *DNB* is, like any other bit of historical writing, subject to changes in outlook and even fashion. I can, for example, think of at least one writer born in 1911, influential in his day, who has sunk so completely below the horizon that he has not made it into the Dictionary. But this might change: I notice that at least one of his eight novels has recently been re-issued.<sup>16</sup>

My task of looking at everyone born in an arbitrary year had at least one chastening effect. I rather prided myself on my familiarity with the novelists of the mid-century, so was mortified to come across two significant writers who had completely passed me by, Gerald Kersh and Rosemary Manning. Kersh was very prolific, in several genres, his most famous novel, *Night and the City*, being a hard-boiled account of the seedy world of pre-war Soho; it has twice been filmed, once starring Richard Widmark, and more recently with Robert de Nero. Rosemary Manning's best known novel is *The Chinese Garden*, based on her experience at a girls' school where she was

---

<sup>15</sup> The *DNB* entries for a number of Butetown musicians are written by Val Wilmer, a white British journalist and musicologist who has specialised in uncovering and preserving these stories, which might otherwise have been lost. If I had not set myself the arbitrary task of looking at all the lives in the Dictionary from a particular year I would never have come across Butetown.

<sup>16</sup> This is Rayner Heppenstall, who died in 1981, and whose novels, vilified when published, are said to have influenced younger avant-garde writers like B S Johnson – although the 2004 biography of Johnson makes no mention of him. His 1939 novel *Blaze of Noon* was re-issued by One-world Classics in 2012.

sexually abused (as we should now say) by one of the mistresses.<sup>17</sup> It may be that her novels are less interesting than her two books of autobiography, *A Time and a Time* and *A Corridor of Mirrors*.

In reviewing the life of the twentieth century it is hard not to be gloomy, dwelling, like Sorley MacLean, on the creation and subsequent disintegration of the welfare state, or like Golding, on the evil produced by mankind. But the treatment in the 1940s of Lieutenant Z reminds us that there have been unqualified advances, including the liberalisation of attitudes (and laws) on social and sexual issues. There were several strands in this process, including the work of liberal lawyers like Lord Scarman and the academic jurist Glanville Williams<sup>18</sup>, and the outspoken, revolutionary, common-sense of journalists like Marjorie Proops, of whom Katherine Whitehorn wrote that she embodied 'the best of the liberal spirit of the second half of her century'. (Marjorie Proops was one of two giants of British journalism born in 1911 – the other being James Cameron.)

The magazine *Picture Post* made its contribution to a more open attitude to sex with a series of articles on 'Sex and the Citizen' in the autumn of 1951.<sup>19</sup> The Archbishop of Canterbury objected to the atheistic and amoral colour of the articles, and was not impressed by the fact that the ninth article was by a Church of England clergyman, Chad Varah – who would go on to found the Samaritans.

One belated beneficiary of the slow transformation of attitudes towards gay people was Rosemary Manning. She kept her lesbianism a secret until 1980, when she 'came out' in the course of a television interview. After a difficult if not unhappy life which included two suicide attempts, the second very nearly successful, in her final years she was welcomed into the feminist sisterhood where at last she could be herself and feel at home.

Which life am I to choose to end my survey? For the 20th century it has to be a scientist, but not one belonging to the science of industry or the atomic bomb – or even the rarefied world of the laboratory. Ernest Neal was a schoolmaster and wildlife photographer whose initial interest was in butterflies and moths. One night when out observing moths he was captivated by the chance sighting of a badger. From then on he devoted his time to badgers and their habitat, observing and photographing them. He made films of badgers in 1949 and 1954; in 1977 he was responsible for the BBC's *Badger Watch* series of five live transmissions from a sett. By then he was the acknowledged authority on badgers, regularly lecturing on them, and producing a number of publications, both popular and academic. His interests widened, and in 1953 he published a school book called *Woodland Ecology*, and was a founder member and long-time chairman and president of the Mammal Society of the British Isles. He also contributed to the study of wildlife abroad, notably in East Africa. But it is with badgers that he will always be associated – his autobiography was called *The Badger Man*. For fifteen years from its inception in 1975 he was a member of the government consultative panel on badgers and bovine tuberculosis. His public education work led to the two Badger acts of 1973 and 1991, the first protecting badgers from hunters and farmers, and the second extending protection to cover their setts.<sup>20</sup>

One reason why I chose to end with Ernest Neal is that it enables me to show his Pelican book on Badgers, which takes me back to my parents and to the days when I would gaze at their collection of Pelicans, wondering if they might make me as knowledgeable as my father. What did my parents believe in? They believed in socialism, nuclear disarmament, racial equality, the liberal spirit, the welfare state. But more than any of that, they believed in books.

---

<sup>17</sup> Manning said that the activity left her troubled and confused, but without any sense of the pleasures of sex; the woman would have done better, she said, to have 'gone the whole way'. Her main complaint was that the mistress was intellectually shallow and taught her a very limited version of history.

<sup>18</sup> Glanville Williams was a conscientious objector, and when later he was offered a knighthood in recognition of his contribution to the law he turned it down on the grounds that it would not do for one who had refused to wield a bayonet to be in a position where, at least in theory, he would have to wear a sword.

<sup>19</sup> *Picture Post*, under its editor Tom Hopkinson, had been a progressive standard-bearer among the popular press throughout the 1940s. It fell from grace when, in November 1950, Hopkinson was sacked by the proprietor for trying to publish reports from James Cameron on events in Korea.

<sup>20</sup> These acts apply to England and Wales. The laws protecting badgers in Scotland (2004 and 2011) are more far-reaching. See <http://www.rspca.org.uk/adviceandwelfare/wildlife/inthewild/badgers/law> and <http://www.scottishbadgers.org.uk/legislation.asp> (retrieved 29 December 2014)