

# **The Comintern, Communist Women Leaders and the Struggle for Women's Liberation in Britain between the Wars: A Political and Prosopographical Investigation, Part 2.**

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*This is the second part of an article which explores and contextualises in revolutionary theory and practice the lives and careers of a highly unusual group of women, many hitherto hidden from history, who took a leading part in the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) between 1920 and 1939. The first instalment discussed the historiography and outlined a prosopographical approach to the subject. It traced the theory of women's liberation which informed the early Comintern and its national affiliates from its roots in the work of Engels, the German Social Democratic Party and the Second International; outlined developments in CPGB policy on the question over two decades; and presented a statistical analysis of 15 of the 18 women who figured in the party leadership between the wars. This second instalment provides mini-biographies of these Central Committee (CC) members. It examines their origins, ethnicity, religion, education, occupation, previous affiliations, political attitudes and career in the CPGB. Recuperation confirms that the group as a whole embraced Communism as a break with earlier women's politics – including those with direct experience of the suffrage movement. They rejected feminism but exhibited little interest in Marxist theory beyond Comintern pronouncements. Committed to the party and the policies of the Soviet Union as it moved from Lenin to Stalin, they were practical organisers and agitators who, on the whole, respected conventional gender roles. They exercised the right to be politically active, even in the face of domestic commitments, and engaged in the general activities of the party as well as specialist work with women. But they offered no explicit critique of the family, prevailing sexual mores or the subordination of women members within the CPGB.*

*Keywords: Women; Gender; Comintern; Communist Party of Great Britain; Soviet Union; Feminism; Women's Liberation.*

## **Introduction**

Collective biography complements statistical analysis as a staple tool of prosopographical approaches to the past.<sup>1</sup> It possesses the advantages – even in small-scale exercises such as that mounted here – the group portrait enjoys in comparison with the individual snapshot.

Group biography permits comparison and consideration of similarities and differences, diversity and homogeneity between a range of subjects who shared a central experience; but

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<sup>1</sup> See on this John McIlroy and Alan Campbell, 'The Comintern, Communist Women Leaders and the Struggle for Women's Liberation in Britain between the Wars: A Political and Prosopographical Investigation, Part 1', forthcoming, pp. 13–15

it rarely escapes the limitations of its building blocks, the discrete biographies it aggregates. The problems of individual biography are well-known. There is always the danger of constructing singularity, of over-emphasising the particularity of the individual and separating him or her out from the circumscriptions of context. Alternatively, given in many cases the restricted nature of available sources, the individual may be submerged in general political accounts and reliance on inferences from the lives of similarly situated but better known protagonists. This may be especially pertinent in the case of Communists, particularly female Communists, active in a distinctive, bureaucratically disciplined party which sought to suppress individuality and curtailed ‘private life’ in the interests of service to the Stalinist states.<sup>2</sup> In what follows, we have assembled a wide variety of materials from diffuse sources which document, to one degree or another, the origins, political careers, words and actions of the 15 assertive women, unusual in their espousal of Communism and doubly unusual in rising to prominence within it, who are the subjects of this essay. What these sources record is perforce uneven and sometimes fragmented; compared with most working-class women’s lives, we learn a lot but they rarely provide us with access to the complete and contradictory woman. We have even less entry into their inner lives, private thoughts, passions and prejudices, factors which are not irrelevant to her political life. Disinterring and retelling the stories of these women, recounting something of their character and individuality, is, as the reader will readily discern, a tenuous, flawed and subjective process.

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<sup>2</sup> Authorial values inevitably intrude on assessments but no justification should be necessary for a critical stance on Stalinism informed by the humanistic values of reason, liberty and equality. Contrariwise, writing about Communists sometimes fails to avoid the pitfalls of undue sympathy with protagonists. It can display an insufficiently critical attitude towards its subjects – something similar might be said of some biographical work on feminists – and sanitisation of Communist politics. Collective biographies currently published by the Communist Party of Britain can be useful if treated with caution: see particularly the entries in the online Encyclopedia of Communist Biography created by the late Graham Stevenson at: <https://grahamstevenson.me.uk/category/commiepedia/> and Communist Party of Britain, *Red Lives: Communists and the Struggle for Socialism* (London: Manifesto Press Cooperative, 2020).

## **Communist women leaders: the foundation years and beyond**

Dora Montefiore (1851–1933) was a member of the Provisional Executive Committee elected at the CPGB first two Congresses in summer 1920 and January 1921. She did not stand at the Third Congress in April 1921 and figured in the leadership for barely nine months. She thus played no significant role in the party or its work among women.<sup>3</sup> In 1922 she departed for Australia and when she returned to London in the late 1920s, she was well into her seventies, losing her sight and inactive in party politics. Marginal to the CPGB, her significance lies in its pre-history and the journey she took to Marxism from the 1890s to 1920 which saw her break with liberalism, ethical socialism and feminism.

She was born into the bourgeoisie, the daughter of Francis Fuller, a surveyor and railway entrepreneur, and his wife, Mary Ann, the eighth of 13 children. Educated privately, she became fluent in French and German and interested in current affairs, although she traced her conversion to socialism to assisting her father with research for papers he delivered to the British Association and listening to his friends debating economic and social problems. In Australia, where she kept house for her brother, she married George Barrow Montefiore, a Jewish merchant. Their children, Florence and Gilbert, were born in 1883 and 1887. An independent streak surfaced when, on her husband's death, she discovered that her rights to the guardianship of her children were contingent on his will. She became active in the

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<sup>3</sup> Matters are confused in Karen Hunt, 'Dora Montefiore: A Different Communist', in John McIlroy, Kevin Morgan and Alan Campbell (eds), *Party People, Communist Lives: Explorations in Biography* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 2001). Hunt states (p. 43): 'She did not stand again for the executive in 1922. Indeed, no woman was elected that year although Helen Crawford was co-opted as the woman's representative'. Montefiore was not elected to the executive at the Third Congress in April 1921 or at either of the two Congresses held in 1922. Another woman, Mrs Thomas, was co-opted to the CC in 1921 and elected at the Fourth Congress in 1922. Crawford was probably co-opted before the British Commission in Moscow in Summer 1923: see John McIlroy and Alan Campbell, 'The Early British Communist Leaders, 1920–1923: A Prosopographical Exploration', *Labor History*, 61: 5–6 (2020), pp. 425–426. We have found no evidence for the statement (Hunt, *op.cit.*, pp. 42–43) that three other women, Nora Smyth, Melvina Walker and Cedar Paul stood for the executive at the summer 1920 Congress but were not elected. They do not figure in the list of delegates to that Congress and as they were all connected to the Workers' Socialist Federation which opposed unity prior to the Congress and whose successor organisation, the Communist Party-British Section of the Third International (CP-BSTI) boycotted the gathering, their candidature seems unlikely. Nor were they listed among the unsuccessful candidates in the Congress report. The CP-BSTI joined the CPGB at the January 1921 Unity Congress for which documentation is lacking.

suffrage movement in New South Wales before returning to London via Paris in 1892–1893. Unlike most women, she possessed ample time and money to take an active interest in politics. She passed from the Women’s Liberal Association to *The Clarion* and ILP circles before, in 1899, she joined the Social Democratic Federation (SDF), impressed by its goal of international revolution. She was elected to its executive in 1903, 1904 and 1908 but resigned from the committee in 1904 over its negative attitude to the suffrage agitation.<sup>4</sup>

She was active in the Women’s Social and Political Union (WSPU), and locked horns with Belfort Bax, a supporter of the Men’s Anti-Suffrage League. She worked as a WSPU organiser, pioneered propaganda among working-class women in East London, a project later associated with Sylvia Pankhurst, refused to pay fines and withheld taxes. But she developed differences with the WSPU leaders, particularly Emmeline Pankhurst, as she moved towards Marxism and resigned in 1906. Her increasing distance from feminism was strengthened by attendance at the International Socialist Women’s Conference at Stuttgart in 1907 which dismissed organisations like the WSPU, advocated universal suffrage with no property qualification, and demanded a crusade to revolutionise the position of working-class women doubly oppressed as wage slaves and the slaves of wage slaves.<sup>5</sup> She denounced attempts to restrict extension of the franchise to middle-class women as ‘a reactionary measure proposed in the interests of the propertied classes’.<sup>6</sup> A friend of Clara Zetkin and admirer of the women’s liberation movement in the German Social Democracy, her disdain for feminism was coupled with antagonism to the SDF leader, H.M. Hyndman’s jingoism. Disgusted with the British Socialist Party (BSP, the SDF’s successor) delegation to the Basle Peace

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<sup>4</sup> Hunt, op.cit.; Dora Montefiore, *From a Victorian to a Modern* (London: E. Archer, 1927); Judith Allen, ‘Montefiore, Dorothy Francis, Dora (1851–1933)’, *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, X (1986), at: <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/montefiore-dorothy-frances-dora-7626>.

<sup>5</sup> Chushichi Tsuzuki, *H.M. Hyndman and British Socialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961), p. 189; Ted Crawford, ‘Dora Montefiore, 1851–1933’, unpublished mss in authors’ possession.

<sup>6</sup> Tsuzuki, op.cit., p. 192.

Conference of the International in 1912, she quit the party.<sup>7</sup> She continued to proselytise for international working-class unity against imperialism, a revolutionary solution to the woman issue, and the advance of trade union militancy. Her initiatory role in the scheme to bring the children of Irish workers to Britain during the 1913 Dublin lockout provoked a storm of controversy.<sup>8</sup>

Generally observing conventional gender roles, she was more influenced by her father than her mother and took a greater interest in Gilbert than Florence. However, an alleged affair with the married ILP organiser, George Belt, in 1898–1899 resulted in reputational damage.<sup>9</sup> She was instrumental in creating a Women's Committee in the SDF and in launching Women's Circles to educate women in the principles of Social Democracy with a view to recruiting them to the Federation. Unlike the later Comintern initiative, the assumption was that women did 'women's work'. There were disputes as to what that entailed, and she resigned, arguing bazaars and needlework were no substitute for political education.<sup>10</sup> Travel to Europe, Australia and South Africa broadened her horizons and she opposed the war, if on an inconsistent basis. When Gilbert served in France, she organised hospital kitchens for the French military on the grounds she was helping an invaded nation.<sup>11</sup> However, she re-joined the BSP when it parted from Hyndman in 1916 and spoke at the party rally which greeted the Russian revolution and the Leeds conference on soviets. When a split developed in the new leadership, she endorsed the Bolshevik tendency led by Theodore

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<sup>7</sup> Crawford, op.cit.

<sup>8</sup> Dora B. Montefiore, 'Our Fight to Save the Kiddies in Dublin', 1913, at: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/montefiore/1913/kiddies.htm>.

<sup>9</sup> Christine Collette, 'Socialism and Scandal: The Sexual Politics of the Early Labour Movement', *History Workshop Journal*, 23: 1 (1987), pp. 102–111; Karen Hunt, 'Censorship and Self-Censorship: Revisiting the Belt Case in the Making of Dora Montefiore', *Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century*, 27 (2018), at: <https://doi.org/10.16995/ntn.811>.

<sup>10</sup> Martin Crick, *The History of the Social Democratic Federation* (Keele: Ryburn Publishing, 1994), p. 227.

<sup>11</sup> Hunt, 'Montefiore', op.cit., pp. 40–41.

Rothstein which advocated revolution and the Comintern against the group around Edwin Fairchild which continued to cleave to the Second International and a parliamentary road.<sup>12</sup>

Opinionated, sometimes domineering and high-handed, she was a formidable opponent.<sup>13</sup> But as a member of the BSP executive she campaigned constructively for a new, united Communist Party. She embraced the ideas of the Comintern and in correspondence with its Women's Department lamented the failure of the CPGB leadership to implement them, highlighting the importance of women's committees and a national woman's paper.<sup>14</sup> She was active in the Russian Famine Relief, but repression meant she went into hiding in Spring 1921. She seems to have steered clear of internal conflict and there is no record of her response to the expulsion of Sylvia Pankhurst in September 1921. Gilbert's death that June hit her hard and she also suffered illness before leaving for Australia. In 1924, she represented the Australian party at the Fifth Congress of the Comintern, delivering an address of impeccable orthodoxy.<sup>15</sup>

It is difficult to see how her ephemeral activity in the CPGB represented in any significant sense continuity with either the traditions of the politically conflicted SDF-BSP or the suffragettes.<sup>16</sup> She was a long-time critic of Hyndman and before 1916 she had little to do with the Internationalist opposition led by Rothstein and Zelda Kahn. She became part of it as it took up Comintern Marxism, which represented and was expounded as a break with the

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<sup>12</sup> Crawford, op.cit.

<sup>13</sup> As in her conflict with Emmeline Pankhurst and her taking to task of Sylvia Pankhurst many years after the event for her downplaying of Montefiore's pioneering work in the East End of London: see Barbara Winslow, *Sylvia Pankhurst: Sexual Politics and Political Activism* (London: UCL Press, 1996), p. 201, n.19.

<sup>14</sup> Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History (hereafter RGASPI), 495/100/33, Montefiore to Hertha Sturm, 22 December 1921. Karen Hunt and Matthew Worley, 'Rethinking British Communist Party Women in the 1920s', *Twentieth Century British History*, 15:1 (2004), p.7, interpret her comments as 'a prescription based on political experience, specifically what had seemed most productive for the SDF and BSP'. This is debateable. Montefiore, as we noted above, withdrew at one stage from the SDF's women's committee because she felt it *unproductive* while neither the SDF nor BSP published a women's paper. It is more logical to see her comments as based on her long-standing admiration of Zetkin and more specifically on the recent statements of the Comintern drafted by Zetkin and Sturm.

<sup>15</sup> Hunt, 'Montefiore', op.cit., pp.45–46.

<sup>16</sup> See the comments in McIlroy and Campbell, 'The Comintern, Part 1', op.cit., pp. 8, 24.

past. She had long ago rejected the feminism represented by the WSPU in favour of Zetkin's class politics. Remaking typically retains residues of the past. With Montefiore, the case for continuity is thin. In her 1926 memoir, Alexander Kollontai recalled of her exile: 'I fought in the ranks of the British Socialist Party side-by-side with Dora Montefiore against the English suffragettes for the strengthening of the still fledgling socialist working women's movement.'<sup>17</sup> Assertions that at this point Communist women activists had more in common with their counterparts in the Labour Party or ILP than with non-active Communists likewise lack evidential backing. At best such claims deal in the obvious – all were *active* – while ignoring the rather more significant *political* differentiation in the objects of their activism. During Montefiore's lifetime, the activism of Labour Party women and CPGB women had different political purposes centred on fundamental disagreements over, for example, reform and revolution, feminism and anti-capitalist work among women. Her life as a socialist was characterised by rupture and demarcation to a greater degree than continuity and ecumenicism.

Although she could not match Montefiore who had reached three score years and ten when elected to the CC, Helen Crawford (1877–1954) was a mature woman of 46. Joining the CPGB in early 1921 as a member of the ILP Left, she was co-opted to the CC to represent women and remained there until 1929. The fourth of seven children of William Jack, a master baker who ran his own business and was a pillar of the Conservative Party, she was educated in Ipswich to which the family had repaired from the Gorbals before returning to Glasgow to live in Kelvinside. A proud Scot who cherished her Glaswegian identity, she was marked by her upbringing in the Church of Scotland, reinforced by marriage at 21 to Alexander Crawford, a clergyman 50 years her senior; even as a socialist her speeches remained rich in

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<sup>17</sup> Alexandra Kollontai, *The Autobiography of a Sexually Emancipated Communist Woman* (1926) at: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/kollontai/1926/autobiography.htm>. The CPGB obituary of Montefiore makes no mention of the suffragettes: *Daily Worker* (DW), 27 December 1933.

reference to the Bible. A rebellious streak was nourished by the way Church teaching treated women and her love of literature and the theatre, particularly Carlyle, Gorky, Hardy, Ibsen, Shaw and *Uncle Tom's Cabin*; but above all by the poverty Glasgow workers endured, which led her to reject philanthropy and the temperance movement. She turned to Christian socialism and suffragism, but it was 1910 before she joined the WSPU, invading meetings and breaking windows with the best of them. She served five prison sentences and went on hunger strike on three occasions between 1912 and 1914. The death of her husband and the outbreak of war provided her with greater freedom and heightened her political consciousness.<sup>18</sup>

Opposition to the war led her to the ILP, although she later claimed she was never a pacifist and spoke alongside John Maclean while admiring the direct-action of the Clyde Workers' Committee. By 1916 she had broken with the chauvinism personified by Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst. She left the WSPU and focussed her efforts on the Women's Peace Crusade. As secretary of the Glasgow Women's Housing Association, she was a leader of the rent strikes, which convinced her that working-class women could be welded into an insurrectionary force. Increasingly discontented with the ILP's dedication to parliamentary action at the expense of workers' self-activity, as vice-president of the Scottish Division she was a leading light in the group which published *The International* and campaigned for affiliation to the Comintern.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> The main sources for Crawford are Helen Corr, 'Crawford, Helen (1877–1954)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography (ODNB)*; Lesley Orr, 'Women Vote for Peace – Shall We Not Speak for Ourselves? Helen Crawford, War Resistance and the Women's Peace Crusade, 1916–1918', *Scottish Labour History (SLH)*, 50 (2015), pp. 92–115; Jane McDermid, 'Scottish Women in the Russian Revolution, 1917–1920', *SLH*, 53 (2018), pp. 126–149; Dave Sherry, 'Helen Crawford: From Daughter of the Manse to Dangerous Marxist', *SLH*, 55 (2020), pp. 65–82; Labour History Archive and Study Centre, Manchester, Communist Party Archive (hereafter CPA), CP/IND/MISC/10/01, Helen Crawford, Unpublished Memoirs. Written in the late 1940s/early 1950s, the document was not published by the party: see James D. Young, *Women and Popular Struggles: A History of Scottish and English Working-Class Women, 1500–1984* (Edinburgh: Mainstream Publishing, 1985), p. 209. See also Scotland's People, Statutory Register of Births, 1877; Census of Scotland, 1881, Gourrock, 1901, Blythwood; Statutory Register of Marriages, 1898, 1944; ancestry.co.uk, Census of England, 1891, Ipswich.

<sup>19</sup> Walter Kendall, *The Revolutionary Movement in Britain, 1900–1921* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1969), pp. 232–277.



In summer 1920, she travelled to Moscow to attend the Comintern's Second World Congress as a delegate from the ILP left wing. She met Lenin, Krupskaya and Kollontai and the visit strengthened her enthusiasm for the revolution and its commitment to women's liberation.<sup>20</sup> In the CPGB's first years, she was drawn to 'the Scottish group' around Arthur MacManus and involved in abortive attempts to organise a National Women's Committee. She refused to confine herself to work with women; despite having been asked by MacManus to take this area in hand, she spent much of her time launching the Workers' International Relief (WIR). She did take up the cudgels against undervaluation of housewives as a revolutionary force, arguing they made better fighters than many men, and inveighing against women being allocated subordinate work inside the party.<sup>21</sup> Representing the WIR, she visited Ireland and Germany and attempted, unavailingly, to elicit backing from the Labour Party and the TUC. Also active in the International Class War Prisoners' Aid and on behalf of the *Sunday Worker*, in 1927 she again travelled to Moscow, the second of five visits.<sup>22</sup>

Her disdain for parliamentarianism intensified. She rejected nomination as a Labour-supported parliamentary candidate and worried that the CPGB had insufficiently developed a distinctive revolutionary identity. She identified the reformist parties with Fabian management of the working class and bridled at their refusal of united front initiatives: 'We have done our best to work through the constitutional machinery of the Labour Movement ... we have been deprived of rights accorded to other political organisations ... derided, suppressed, spat on ... in the eyes of the workers, the Party is neither fish nor fowl nor decent

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<sup>20</sup> John S. Partington, 'Socialist Women and Soviet Russia: Six British Observations in the 1920s', in Stefan Lampadius and Elmar Schenkel (eds), *Under Western and Eastern Eyes: Ost und West in der Reiseliteratur des 20. Jahrhunderts* (Leipzig: Leipzig Universitätsverlag, 2012), pp. 67–69.

<sup>21</sup> CPA, CP/CENT/COMM/10/2, W. McLaine to Harry Pollitt, 1 September 1956; RGASPI, 495/100/133, Crawford to Montefiore, 20 December 1921; RGASPI, 495/100/104, PB, 14 February 1923; RGASPI, 495/100/189, Committee for Work Among Women, n.d., 1923; National Archives, UK (NA), CAB24/160/2, CP 202, RRO, 19 April 1923.

<sup>22</sup> James Klugmann, *History of the Communist Party of Great Britain, vol. 2: The General Strike, 1925–1926* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1969), pp. 313, 350; Sherry, op.cit., p.75; Crawford, op.cit., p.206.

red herring.’<sup>23</sup> She welcomed Class Against Class; but she was one of its casualties. Appreciated for her work ethic and briefly a PB member, she was handicapped, particularly in the Third Period, as a middle-class, middle-aged woman and accepted the need to make way for younger, proletarian elements on the CC in December 1929.<sup>24</sup> She remained active in the Friends of the Soviet Union and pursued a hectic speaking schedule. However, her health deteriorated and she had to take a sabbatical. By 1933, ‘I was beginning to feel the strain of the arduous life I had been living – travelling through the country, changing beds and generally leading the life of one who has no abiding city. I had reached my fifty-sixth year and was a bit battered and tired.’<sup>25</sup> Active in Scotland in the Popular Front years, she was prominent in initiatives to utilise patriotic sentiment and enlist Liberals and Nationalists in a campaign for a Scottish Convention which would discuss a Federal Republic of Britain.<sup>26</sup> In 1944 she married master blacksmith and CPGB founder member, George Anderson, and subsequently retired to Dunoon where she compiled her memoirs.<sup>27</sup>

She was no theorist – ‘one has not time just to keep abreast with all the International dialectics’<sup>28</sup> – and her recollection of what was at stake in the Soviet Union was confused. This did not stop her dismissing Trotsky’s supporters as ‘disgruntled elements’.<sup>29</sup> She ‘tended to be an uncritical admirer of Stalin’s Russia’.<sup>30</sup> Her support for ‘Bolshevisation’, Class Against Class, the Popular Front and the Hitler-Stalin pact, is far from suggestive of continuity with her days in the ILP, whose politics and tradition she had rejected in 1920.<sup>31</sup> If

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<sup>23</sup> Quoted in Andrew Thorpe, *The British Communist Party and Moscow, 1920–1943* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), p. 122; Crawford, op. cit., p. 186

<sup>24</sup> NA, KV2/1180, Robert Stewart, Crawford to Dutt, 10 December 1929.

<sup>25</sup> Crawford, op.cit., p. 302.

<sup>26</sup> Harry McShane and Joan Smith, *No Mean Fighter* (London: Pluto Press, 1978), pp. 225–226.

<sup>27</sup> *Communist*, 12 August 1920; *Airdrie and Coatbridge Advertiser*, 9 February 1952.

<sup>28</sup> RGASPI, 495/100/243, Crawford to E. Brown, 20 August 1925.

<sup>29</sup> Crawford, op.cit., pp. 341–342.

<sup>30</sup> Sherry, op.cit., pp. 79–80.

<sup>31</sup> Her retrospective statement that she was never a pacifist (Crawford, op.cit. p. 129) receives some sustenance from Orr’s, op.cit., account – but cf. McShane and Smith, op.cit., p. 33, that she was ‘a very courageous and honest woman ... although she was more of a pacifist than a revolutionary’.

she utilised methods and skills she had acquired there and in the WSPU, they were now put to very different political purposes. Politically, she had little in common with women activists in the Labour Party whose policies she deplored. Her break with the WSPU was definitive. In a stab at sustaining a narrative of continuity, commonality and the affinity of the late 1920s CPGB with feminism and suffragism, Hunt and Worley observe that when Crawford stood for the London County Council in 1928, in order to appeal to workers, the *Working Woman* celebrated her life of service in organisations ‘for the betterment and emancipation of women (note the generalised “women” rather than working or working-class women)’.<sup>32</sup> The article specified her activity in the ILP and suffrage movement. Bruley refers to a number of articles in the *Workers’ Weekly* which indeed celebrated Crawford’s pre-CPGB record. However, she offers a significant qualification: ‘but the association was made with Crawford’s political immaturity and it was always stated that she soon came to the view that “the real struggle” was with the workers’.<sup>33</sup> Crawford always campaigned; the purposes and politics for which she campaigned changed; her trajectory involved rupture not continuity with feminism. Jane McDermid concluded that for the later Crawford, ‘feminism was a middle-class concern and a threat to proletarian solidarity’.<sup>34</sup>

Tall and typically attired in black, she had few illusions: ‘Communism is all right though there are scoundrels in the Communist Party.’<sup>35</sup> Nonetheless, she was a believer, a

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<sup>32</sup> Hunt and Worley, op.cit., p. 7, quoting *Working Woman*, March 1928.

<sup>33</sup> Sue Bruley, *Leninism, Stalinism and the Women’s Movement in Britain, 1920–1939* (New York: Garland Press, 1986), p. 139. A number of reasons, literary, technical, lack of care, could account for the absence of ‘working’ before ‘women’. Perhaps Hunt and Worley (p. 7) endow its absence with undue political significance.

<sup>34</sup> McDermid, op.cit., p. 128. Hardly surprising, for as we have seen, Communist women were expected ‘to renounce completely all connections with feminism and to express the view that it would be “diversionary” for working-class women to become feminists’: Bruley, op.cit., p. 88. A recent contribution, Maurice J. Casey, ‘From Votes for Women to World Revolution: Suffragettes and International Communism’, in Alexandra Hughes-Johnson and Lyndsey Jenkins (eds), *The Politics of Women’s Suffrage: Local, National and International Dimensions* (University of London Press, 2021), pp. 331–352, cites a 1929 letter from a British feminist to Crawford which the Scot commended to her party as an attempt ‘to create a link between Communist women and feminist activists’ (pp. 348–349). The purpose of the letter was to secure a Soviet delegate to attend a League of Nations gathering. The exchange hardly evokes significant connections between Communists and feminists and Casey generally affirms their mutual antipathy.

<sup>35</sup> Quoted in Jonathan Rose, *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), p. 299.

passionate crusader and an energetic organiser, reluctant to engage largely or exclusively in women's work, who excelled on the platform. Her evangelical experience and acquired knowledge of the working class combined with a down-to-earth manner to make her an effective Communist agitator. She was, a long-time comrade recalled, 'plucky, disinterested, devoted and zealous for the cause of the working class', a woman who combined 'a rare intelligence with a sense of humour'.<sup>36</sup>

Beth Turner (1894–1988) was from the younger end of the foundation cohort, and, unlike Montefiore and Crawford, had a relatively brief record of prior political involvement. She was born into poverty in Keighley, Yorkshire, the eldest child of Charles Sands, a textile engine operator, and Mary Elizabeth Sands, née Armstrong. Charles seems to have been a poor husband and father: in 1899 he was gaoled for failing to comply with a maintenance order; in 1900 he was sentenced to four months hard labour for 'neglect of children'; and in 1902 he was charged with deserting his wife and three children and gaoled for a month. He led an itinerant, bachelor existence while his family scraped by on Outdoor Poor Relief. Beth started working in local mills as a worsted spinner in 1907 when she was 13. When her mother died in 1912, the teenager became the main provider. She moved to London and worked as a housemaid and at a Lyons Corner House while an aunt looked after her young brother and sister. Radicalised by her upbringing, the jingoistic crowds thronging Trafalgar Square ignited her opposition to the Great War, reinforced when her brother Charlie volunteered for military service. On her return to Yorkshire and the mill in 1915, she joined the ILP, became active in the Bradford Women's Humanity League, a working-class organisation formed the following year, and contributed anti-war articles to the ILP paper, the *Bradford Pioneer*, under the *nom de plume* 'A Mill Girl'. She recalled her euphoria on learning of the Russian revolution, anticipating the end of poverty and misery worldwide

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<sup>36</sup> Tom Bell, *Pioneering Days* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1941), p. 258.

while walking across the moors with Fred Turner, a Bradford engineer whom she married in July 1920.<sup>37</sup> They joined the CPGB with the ILP left in April 1921.<sup>38</sup> Little is known about her activity prior to 1924 when she became the party's first National Women's Organiser, an appointment which accorded with 'Bolshevisation's' mission to proletarianize party positions. The couple moved to London, where they lived in Hendon.<sup>39</sup>

She was engaged in extending the Women's Committees, launching the *Woman Worker*, and contesting the chauvinism which impeded involvement of men in work among women, although it was prescribed by the Comintern and emphasised by Zetkin and the Women's Bureau. Campaigning in Scotland, she assailed 'one collection of primitive males who have yet to be convinced that woman is any good in the world. With their heads in the sand, they refuse to notice the invasion of women into all phases of industry and make speeches about evolution that end up with "woman is not an economic unit"'.<sup>40</sup> Politicising

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<sup>37</sup> Ancestry.co.uk, Index of Births, April–June 1894; West Yorkshire Church of England Baptism Records, Keighley, St Mary Eastwood; Census of England, 1901, Keighley; FamilySearch.org, Census of England, Keighley, 1911; *Bradford Daily Telegraph*, 12 April 1899; West Yorkshire Prison Records, HM Prison Wakefield, Charles Sands, 1900; *Burnley Gazette*, 9 August 1902; Civil Registration Death Index, June 1912; telephone interview with Mary Follain, Beth's daughter, 1-2 September 2021; World War 1 Service Records; Marriage Certificate, Bradford, 17 July 1920. Bradford, the birthplace of the ILP, was a party stronghold with a strong anti-war movement: Tony Jowitt and Keith Laybourn, 'War and Socialism: The Experience of the Bradford ILP, 1914–1918', in David James, Tony Jowitt and Keith Laybourn (eds), *The Centennial History of the Independent Labour Party* (Halifax: Ryburn Publishing, 1992), pp. 163–180; Cyril Pearce, *Communities of Resistance: Conscience and Dissent in Britain during the First World War* (London: Francis and Taylor, 2020), pp. 387–397; for the Bradford Women's Humanity League, established in opposition to the first Military Service Bill and subsequently associated with the Women's Peace Crusade, see Eve Haskins and Peter Nias, *Bradford Women's Humanity League: Anti-war Protestors, 1916–1918* (Bradford: Bradford Peace Museum, 2018), and Pearce, op.cit., p. 394.

<sup>38</sup> The Mrs Turner who represented the Rotherham Communist Unity Group (CUG) at the CPGB's founding convention the same month has been identified with Beth: <https://grahamstevenson.me.uk/2017/10/03/turner-beth/>. On her daughter's recollection she had no connection with the SLP or CUG. On balance, the hazard lacks corroborative evidence. The CUG was established by dissident members of the Socialist Labour Party but enrolled a small number of supporters of 1917 and a new party from other persuasions. See Kendall, op.cit., pp. 9, 212, 253; Raymond Challinor, *The Origins of British Bolshevism* (London: Croom Helm, 1977), pp. 243–245.

<sup>39</sup> Ancestry.co.uk, London Electoral Register, 1926, 1927. Consequent on her appointment, she was co-opted to the executive of the Minority Movement (MM). This was part of an attempt to integrate work with women into the CPGB's trade union strategy but there is little evidence it was pushed by MM leaders: Mary Follain telephone interview; Roderick Martin, *Communism and the British Trade Unions, 1924–1933: A Study of the National Minority Movement* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969).

<sup>40</sup> *Workers' Weekly* (WW), 10 August 1924.

women, she stressed, was the responsibility of the party as a whole, not the preserve of women. But in the context of collective neglect, women had to pick up the gauntlet:

Many of our men comrades regard work among women as something only women concern themselves with. The women in the party are determined that this work is going to continue with or without the assistance of the men members. It is impossible to imagine that we will ever have a real Communist Party in this country unless we include women.<sup>41</sup>

She viewed housewives through the lens of the preponderantly male industrial struggle. They could be a stimulus to confidence or demoralisation: ‘A weeping, complaining woman will drive her husband back [to work] in despair to accept any terms ... the woman who realises ... that the enemy is looking on, counting on her weakness, working for the moment when she will betray the cause ... will rather die than let a whimper pass her lips and she will be to her husband a constant source of strength.’<sup>42</sup> She favoured prioritising recruitment of women in industry but their relative absence in the party was a constraint on attracting women from the mills and workshops: ‘It may be a criticism that we have concentrated too much on work among housewives. Personally, I do not agree with that criticism because we had to make bricks without straw. We have practically no factory workers in our Party. We had to take the women we had and develop the work according to circumstance.’<sup>43</sup>

Turner had little time for feminism, although she believed the issues it raised should be discussed in the CPGB. Her credo was that of her party, ‘wage slave or mother, a woman’s interests are inseparable from the interests of her class.’<sup>44</sup> Nonetheless, in the autumn of 1927, she came under fire from CPGB leaders; the reason cited in surviving documents was that she was ‘lacking in theoretical training’.<sup>45</sup> The criticism could be applied to most of the leadership, and there seems to have been scant understanding of the predicament of a young

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<sup>41</sup> CPGB, *Report of Seventh Congress, Glasgow, May 1925*, p. 173.

<sup>42</sup> WW, 12 September 1924.

<sup>43</sup> CPGB, *Report of Seventh Congress*, pp. 119–120.

<sup>44</sup> WW, 23 January 1925.

<sup>45</sup> RGASPI, 507/3/17, Zetkin to CPGB, 19 November 1927, in possession of Mary Follain.

woman faced with daunting challenges after a brief period in the party. She was not re-elected to the CC at that October Congress and the PB was 'actively considering' her future as head of the Women's Department.<sup>46</sup> As chance would have it, she was in Moscow to attend the 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary celebrations of the revolution and was able to plead her case with Zetkin and Hertha Sturm. The minutes of the Anglo-American Secretariat state they would discuss the matter with the CPGB representatives, Gallacher and Murphy.<sup>47</sup>

Four days later, apparently sure of her ground, Zetkin wrote a letter to the party championing Turner. When she took over the department three years earlier, Zetkin judged, 'absolutely nothing had been done ... she began the work without experience of her own and has received very little assistance either politically or technically from the Central Executive Committee'.<sup>48</sup> She was unstinting in praise of the Yorkshire woman and critical of the party leaders' record:

She had to face and overcome all these difficulties resulting from the lack of ideological clearness about the necessity of work amongst women and also from the lack of activity in this work from broad sections of the Party as a whole. Notwithstanding all these unfavourable conditions, Comrade Turner has carried on the work successfully and she herself has developed politically ... It is due to her devoted, systematic and clever work that the British Party got considerable influence among working class women ... specially during the miners' strike and in the organisation of some very effective women's delegate meetings. Her work also appeared in the clear political leadership of the Communist fraction work in the women's sections of the Labour Party.<sup>49</sup>

In relation to theory, 'Comrade Turner has already made good progress, she is capable and willing to learn more and this quality of hers is a warrant she will develop further in the future.'<sup>50</sup> The main difficulty was lack of appetite in the CPGB for agitation among women; replacing the present organiser when there was no obvious successor would not ameliorate matters. Instead, Zetkin proposed a PB member should direct the Women's Department,

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid. This would have left Crawford as the sole woman on the CC.

<sup>47</sup> RGASPI, 495/72/27, Anglo-American Secretariat, Situation in Britain, 15 November 1927.

<sup>48</sup> Zetkin to CPGB, 19 November 1927.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

working with Turner as national organiser. ‘Such an arrangement by which the Executive Committee took on itself the active political leadership of the work among women would give the best chance of a great strengthening of this work.’<sup>51</sup> At this point the paper trail dries up but the upshot seems to have been that Turner was co-opted to the CC and served on the PB in a consultative capacity.

She made several trips to Russia, travelling to Moscow in June 1926 with Edith Howarth, another Yorkshire mill worker, to visit hospitals and industrial enterprises, and in November 1927 as part of a delegation of Communist women, including Rose Smith and Lily Webb. They attended the celebration of 1917 and the All Russian Congress of Women in Moscow, before travelling on to the Don Basin, Baku and the Soviet East, visiting factories, schools, nurseries, prisons and Red Army units to talk to women.<sup>52</sup> At their Moscow Hotel they were allocated ‘a magnificent suite of rooms, Louis XV gilt-legged furniture, walls hung with flowered brown satin ... and a private bathroom with a constant supply of hot and cold water and central heating. We were given the best because we were workers.’<sup>53</sup> They met Krupskaya, Lunacharsky and Rykov and had tea with Stalin who seemed like ‘a jolly uncle’. They were impressed by the conditions women enjoyed as workers and mothers, the welfare facilities, nurseries and creches attached to factories, and the extent to which they participated in political and economic life and management positions. They particularly admired the way Muslim women were being drawn into revolutionary society. Their report concluded:

We come back inspired and encouraged by what we have seen to intensify our fight against capitalism ... rally working women everywhere to organise resistance to the government attempt to declare war on Soviet Russia, and above all determined to spread among women workers whether in factory or home the message of the

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> *Woman Worker*, August 1926; *Working Woman*, January 1928; Partington, op.cit., pp. 74, 78; Beth Turner et al., *Women in Russia* (London: CPGB, 1928).

<sup>53</sup> *Women in Russia*, op.cit., p. 5.



Communist Party ... [that] will follow the example of our brother party in Russia and lead the workers of Britain to prosperity through power.<sup>54</sup>

In the aftermath of the General Strike, she was energetic in leading opposition to the intensified exploitation of women workers. With the development of Class Against Class she favoured distancing the CPGB from the Labour Party; what was seen as a failure to enthusiastically endorse criticism of the existing leadership did not endear her to devotees of 'the new line'. Her marriage was in trouble. Fred could not have children and with her increasing involvement in party activities, the couple drifted apart. Her pregnancy after an affair with the London Communist activist, Gerry Bradley, a married man although he had long left his wife, produced a hostile response from the socially conservative CPGB leadership. Pollitt informed her she could not continue in her party positions and suggested she return to Moscow for an abortion. Instead, she had the baby at the end of October and was removed from the official slate for election to the CC at the December 1929 Congress.<sup>55</sup> There was little protest and attempts to secure the intercession of Zetkin and Sturm proved futile – both had been side-lined as 'rightists' because of their criticisms of the Third Period.<sup>56</sup>

She remained active in the CPGB in Yorkshire and London into 1931, helping with the 1930 Hunger March and the WIR, working for a time in the Soviet institutions and a party

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p. 32. A handwritten report, perhaps notes for a speech, found by Mary Follain in the Russian archives, compared workplace conditions with those in Britain but mentioned very bad conditions in one workplace and communal housing, attributing them to 'the old regime'.

<sup>55</sup> Noreen Branson, *History of the Communist Party of Great Britain, 1927–1941* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1985), p. 38; RGASPI, 495100/497, CC, 23–25 March 1929; RGASPI, 495/100/617, CC, 11 January 1930; telephone interview with Mary Follain; Birth certificate, Gerald Bradley [junior], Hampstead, 27 October 1929; CPA, CP/HIST/06/03, Transcript of Interview by Sue Bruley with Katie Loeber (Cant); information from Sue Bruley. Bradley, a clerical worker active in the CPGB's Hampstead then Chelsea Group was expelled from the CPGB in 1933 and subsequently joined the Marxian League led by Frank Ridley, then the Trotskyist Marxist League of Reg Groves around 1933. He remained in the Trotskyist movement until the end of the decade: see Sam Bornstein and Al Richardson, *Against the Stream: A History of the Trotskyist Movement in Britain, 1924–1938* (London: Socialist Platform, 1986), pp. 51–52, 57, 114, 117, 220; <https://grahamstevenson.me.uk/2008/09/19/gerry-bradley/>.

<sup>56</sup> NA, KV2/1051, Ernest Walter Cant, Rose Smith to Ernie Cant, 14 December 1929, Hertha Sturm to Katie Cant, 29 September 1929.

bookshop.<sup>57</sup> In London, she lived for a period with Bradley and his new wife, Lee. She formed a partnership with their lodger and Communist sympathiser, Edward Abouaf, who came from a Turkish family in Ilkley and gradually drifted away from the party. After the birth of their daughter in 1939, she settled down to life as a housewife. A determined, forthright woman, a voracious reader and tireless worker, she died in London in 1988.

### **The leading women of the Third Period**

Lily Webb and Marjorie Pollitt were elected to the CC for the first time at the CPGB's 10<sup>th</sup> Congress in January 1929: they brought the number of women on the 30-strong committee to an all-time high of four. That figure was made up by the more experienced Crawford and Turner, both of whom had featured on previous CCs.<sup>58</sup> Yet none of the quartet were re-elected at the 11<sup>th</sup> Congress in December 1929. A possible explanation is that Webb was on a six-month assignment to Russia, working for the Comintern while Pollitt was a student at the International Lenin School (ILS). But it is worth recalling that when 'absences abroad' were employed to justify exclusion of Robin Page Arnot and Bill Rust from the CC slate, party leaders were over-ruled by the Comintern.<sup>59</sup> Moscow's demands for the entry of 'new elements, particularly comrades from the workshop' into the leadership was probably a factor in their replacement. Neither woman fitted that bill while Webb's criticism of fellow leaders may have played a part. Pollitt later stated that she had received an invitation to serve but declined to expedite renewal.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Telephone interview with Mary Follain; *DW*, 8 April, 14 August, 19 November, 12 December 1930, 19 February 1931. In early 1931, she was in Castleford, with which she had no previous connection, but which housed a depot of the Soviet company, Russian Oil Products, which frequently employed CPGB members.

<sup>58</sup> See John McIlroy and Alan Campbell, 'The "Core" Leaders of the Communist Party of Great Britain, 1923–1928: Their Past, Present and Future', *Labor History*, 62: 4 (2021), pp.7–8, 10.

<sup>59</sup> Branson, *op.cit.*, pp. 35–36.

<sup>60</sup> Closed Letter from the Presidium of the ECCI to the Central Committee of the CPGB, 27 February 1929, reproduced in L.J. Macfarlane, *The British Communist Party: Its Origin and Development until 1929* (London: MacGibbon and Kee, 1966), pp. 310–319, quote from p. 315; Marjorie Pollitt, *A Rebel Life* (Ultimo: Red Pen Publications, 2007), p. 28

Lily Webb (1897–1959) remembered in old age: ‘Revolt against all forms of oppression is in the very fabric of the bones of my family for my forebears were rebels...’<sup>61</sup> Born in Ashton-Under-Lyne, Lancashire, in the last years of the nineteenth century, she came from a long line of mill workers, miners and foundrymen. One of ten children, she quit an always sporadic schooling at 14 to work in a cotton mill. She was influenced by her elder brother, Harry Webb (1892–1962), who joined the SLP as a teenager, and the Vicar of her parish church, the Reverend R.F. Cummings, who enrolled her around 1916 in what she termed a local ‘broad left wing organisation’, the St John’s Social Crusade. Recuperating in 1920 from injuries incurred at work, she met some of Harry’s comrades and in 1921 joined the Young Workers’ League, the Young Communist League (YCL) and subsequently the Ashton branch of the CPGB.<sup>62</sup> She was the women’s organizer of the National Unemployed Workers’ Committee Movement (NUWCM) in Sheffield in 1923 when she met and recruited to the party Morris Ferguson (1899–1957). That encounter marked the beginning of a personal and political partnership which endured until his death 34 years later. From an impoverished Jewish, immigrant family, he was raised in Hull and London and joined the party with the East London Herald League around its foundation. He was never active and maintained that Sheffield represented his induction into Communism.<sup>63</sup> Within six weeks they had married, although, unlike some Communist contemporaries, she kept her maiden name, disdained the ‘Mrs’ label within the party, and spent her honeymoon fulfilling speaking engagements before the pair moved to Neath in South Wales to work for the Agit-Prop department. It was a Communist marriage but one which involved closer political collaboration than most. When Morris became district organiser in Manchester in 1925, she recalled: ‘In this appointment and those that followed it was generally recognised that I

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<sup>61</sup> CPA, CP/CENT/WOM/3/2, Lily Ferguson (Webb), ‘Some Party History’, March 1957.

<sup>62</sup> Working Class Movement Library, Salford (hereafter WCML), Biographical Files, Lily Ferguson; Lily Ferguson, ‘Some party history’.

<sup>63</sup> RGASPI, 495/198/1249, Maurice (sic) Ferguson, 18 January 1932.

would share the work and the Party secured not one but two full-time workers.’<sup>64</sup> She was not prepared to accept the role of appendage or housewife.

Things did not work out. Party headquarters decided that Morris was ‘temperamentally unsuited to handle the comrades in the district and could be better employed elsewhere’.<sup>65</sup> During the General Strike, Lily worked for the party in the Lancashire coalfield. Through 1927 – a year in which she first visited the Soviet Union with a party delegation to a women’s conference – the couple, who remained childless, worked as organizers in Cumberland, Portsmouth, Southampton and Lancashire. They moved to Tyneside, after she toured Germany speaking for the German party, where Morris became the district organizer.<sup>66</sup> The Third Period chimed with their personal inclinations; voluble advocates of the ‘the new line’ such as Rust and Wally Tapsell experienced difficulty persuading Lily they were not concealed exemplars of ‘the Right Danger’.<sup>67</sup> For Harry Pollitt, the couple were spreaders of the equally viral ‘Left Danger’. With some justice, they accused him of neglecting ‘independent leadership’ in favour of ‘making the union leaders fight’ during the Dawdon pit strike in March–June 1929 but were themselves castigated for ignoring the agitation inside the miners’ union necessary to develop ‘independent leadership’.<sup>68</sup> In autumn 1929, Lily travelled to Moscow to work for the Comintern’s Women’s Commission while Morris studied at the ILS. Back in Britain, she plunged into activity around the woollen strike in Bradford. She worked for the WIR and then returned to Moscow, accompanying a delegation of British engineers on a tour of the Soviet Union before joining Morris in Birmingham where he had been appointed District Organiser. While

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<sup>64</sup> WCML, Lily Ferguson.

<sup>65</sup> RGASPI, 495/198/1249, Maurice Ferguson.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> Branson, *op.cit.*, p. 47.

<sup>68</sup> RGASPI, 495/198/1249, Maurice Ferguson.

he worked on the *Daily Worker*, Lily helped organize the 1932 National Women's March against Unemployment and was arrested at its climax.<sup>69</sup>

She was a leftist who favoured forthrightness over finesse; outspoken assaults on fellow leaders during her CC tenure may have contributed to its brevity. Yet the couple never faltered in their faith in the Comintern and the need for self-criticism when misunderstanding its encyclicals. Morris reflected that in 1929 he had placed too much emphasis in the inner party struggle, on 'Change the leaders' at the expense of 'Cleanse the Party'.<sup>70</sup> But they continued to confuse Moscow's prohibition of pressurising the social fascist union bureaucracy to lead struggle – rather than exposing it to build a new fighting leadership – with a ban on work inside the reformist unions, work the Comintern judged indispensable to the creation of 'independent leadership'. In Birmingham in 1932 they again clashed with Pollitt over their advocacy of recruiting the Lucas strikers directly into the MM as a potential path to building a new union rather than advising they join a reformist union. Their request for guidance on the Comintern position prompted the less than devastating elucidation that the strikers' wishes were paramount.<sup>71</sup>

The end of the age of ultra-leftism found them working for the party in West Yorkshire. Exhausted by years of campaigning, by mid-decade Lily felt 'almost at the end of my endurance ... I would never be the same again. A cough developed into bronchitis and this later settled down to remain with me.' Misfortune gathered momentum. 'Party Centre was in financial difficulties and gradually reduced Maurice's pay until it ceased altogether. We were told to collect the equivalent from dues and collections. But these were not days of

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<sup>69</sup> WCML, Lily Ferguson; John McIlroy et al, 'Forging the Faithful: The British at the International Lenin School', *Labour History Review*, 68: 1 (2003), p. 122.

<sup>70</sup> RGASPI, 495/198/1249, Maurice Ferguson.

<sup>71</sup> CPA, CP/IND/POLL/3/5, Dutt to Pollitt, 4, 10, 27 February 1932; RGASPI, 495/4/173, Comintern Political Commission, 27 February 1932; Maurice Ferguson, 'Have we liquidated the Minority Movement?', *Communist Review*, October 1932, pp. 480–482.

full employment.<sup>72</sup> As Morris recalled, ‘Lily and I had to find jobs, me on the trams in Bradford, Lily back in the Mill ... By late 1936 we were completely worn out.’<sup>73</sup> Still striving to fulfil official responsibilities, she worked as a ring spinner and trained as a burler mender in textile mills. In the late 1930s, ill health forced the couple ‘to give up leading party work’; after a leave of absence, they dropped out of activity and after spells in London and Devon, bought a farm on the Lancashire-Yorkshire border, eventually acquiring 50 acres near Halifax.<sup>74</sup> She spent her final years in ill health, which prompted a temporary resignation from the CPGB in 1948. But ‘there was no happiness without the Party’ and they re-joined in 1951, maintaining their allegiance to Stalinism in the face of Khrushchev’s revelations in 1956.<sup>75</sup> Although the gender conventions of the early twentieth century plausibly influenced their relationship and the absence of children no doubt helped, it seems reasonable to conclude she took an equal, and at times a leading part in a joint venture to which they devoted the best part of their lives. If the struggle had its own rewards, they received little recognition from the party for which they had given so much.

In origins and background, Marjorie Pollitt (1902–1991) stands in contrast to the working-class Webb. She too was in a party marriage but her partnership with CPGB general secretary, Harry Pollitt, may have given her opportunities not open to the wife of Morris Ferguson, while the advent of children may have imposed constraints. She was the illegitimate daughter of Frank Bates, a graduate of Trinity College, Dublin, and choirmaster and organist of Norwich Cathedral, and Maggie Saul. Adopted in infancy by Eliza Jane Brewer, a 59-year-old pacifist widow of apparently independent means and some eccentricity, she won a free place at the elite Christ’s Hospital School, qualifying for teacher

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<sup>72</sup> Lily Ferguson, ‘Some Party History’.

<sup>73</sup> WCML, Biographical Files, Morris Ferguson to May, 7 August 1973.

<sup>74</sup> NA, KV2/3053, Lily Ferguson to Frank Jackson, 6 February 1957, Morris Ferguson to Mick Bennett, 25 June 1948; WCML, Lily Ferguson.

<sup>75</sup> NA, KV2/3053, Lily Ferguson to Jim Roche, 14 October 1951; Letter, *World News*, 4 August 1956.

training college and becoming a schoolteacher in London. Her claim she had a working-class upbringing is questionable.<sup>76</sup> Her son observed: ‘My mother was an educated, middle-class professional of unconventional upbringing.’<sup>77</sup> A member of the ILP, on her own account, she joined the party in 1923 – recalling the untidy dress habits of Communists inhibited earlier, political alignment, and became active in 1924, the year she met Pollitt whom she married in 1925.<sup>78</sup> She was victimised in 1926, losing her teaching job when her name was used as the publisher of General Strike Bulletins, and spent three months as a propagandist in South Wales during the miners’ lockout. She found employment as a secretary and stenographer but encountered further discrimination and dismissal.<sup>79</sup>

Mentioned only briefly in her husband’s memoirs but remembered by his biographer as ‘good looking, vivacious, well-informed’,<sup>80</sup> education and experience provided her with skills most working-class women lacked. She was employed as a correspondent for the Soviet press, attended the ILS in 1929–1930, and, despite the advent of two children, Jean (b.1931) and Brian (b.1936), continued to fill a variety of roles for the CPGB through the decade. She worked in the CPGB Central Propaganda Department as a party trainer, as secretary of the Organisation Committee, as a supervisor of cultural groups and as an organiser and guide for Progressive Tours which mounted trips to Russia. She does not appear to have been involved with the party’s women’s sections to any great extent. In 1938, a year in which she spent six months in the Soviet Union on a scholarship from the English Speaking Union, she worked at King Street and recorded her occupation as ‘Party functionary’.<sup>81</sup> In the 1940s she was active

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<sup>76</sup> Ancestry.co.uk, Oxfordshire Church of England Baptisms, 30 September 1903; Census of England, Islington, 1911; Pollitt, op.cit., pp. 1–7; RGASPI, 495/198/34, Marjorie Pollitt, n.d. [1938].

<sup>77</sup> Brian Pollitt, ‘Voyage round my father’, in Phil Cohen (ed.) *Children of the Revolution: Communist Childhood in Cold War Britain* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1997), p. 103.

<sup>78</sup> RGASPI, 495/198/34, Marjorie Pollitt; Marjorie Pollitt, op.cit., pp. 8–9; RGASPI, 495/198/1, Autobiography of Harry Pollitt, 6 December 1931.

<sup>79</sup> RGASPI, 495/198/34, Marjorie Pollitt; Pollitt, op.cit., pp. 9–26; *DW*, 21 March 1939.

<sup>80</sup> John Mahon, *Harry Pollitt: A Biography* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1976), p.121.

<sup>81</sup> RGASPI, 495/198/34, Marjorie Pollitt; RGASPI, 495/14/258, PB, 5 May 1938, Report on Improving Work of Departments at Party Centre; Pollitt, op.cit., pp. 26–39.

in the Communist interest in the Co-operative Guilds and the Peace Movement. She was a member of the CPGB's London District Committee and stood as a parliamentary candidate while also undertaking non-party employment.

Her son recalled that she 'worked full-time' and as Harry was rarely at home the children became self-sufficient. She was far from the typical housewife – even the Communist version – of the 1930s and 1940s and refused to sacrifice political activity for childcare, although Marjorie, not Harry, was responsible for the children's political education.<sup>82</sup> Sharing a common political purpose, the couple led substantially separate lives, certainly in comparison with Webb and Ferguson. But her dedication to Stalinism was never in doubt. In the ritualistic greetings her husband sent to party veterans on their fiftieth birthday, he declared: 'No General Secretary of a Communist Party could have wished for a better wife and comrade.'<sup>83</sup> The only time a lifelong commitment to orthodoxy flagged, she recollected, was when Harry recanted on his opposition to the Comintern's 'imperialist war' line.<sup>84</sup> Her championing of the Soviet cause survived the Hitler-Stalin pact, revelation of Stalin's crimes, Hungary, and Harry's resignation and death. She ended a long life in Australia, living with Jean and her family. Brian, who was active in the party in the 1950s and 60s, satisfied his parents' aspirations by becoming a university teacher and researcher.

Within an approach which in practice allocated recruitment of women and their development as revolutionary leaders a secondary role, the economic thrust of CPGB policy focussed on females in the workplace rather than in the home. Crawford's was a minority voice in the early years urging an enhanced role for housewives beyond the attention Communists paid them as auxiliaries in strikes.<sup>85</sup> The career of Annie Cree (1891–1957), one

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<sup>82</sup> Brian Pollitt, *op.cit.*, p. 104.

<sup>83</sup> Mahon, *op.cit.*, p. 122. In sanitized memoirs calculated to appeal to a broad socialist audience, he was more restrained, devoting a sentence to his wife: 'Feeling a turn in the air, Marjorie and I decided to get married': Harry Pollitt, *Serving My Time: An Apprenticeship in Politics* (London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1940), p. 208.

<sup>84</sup> Marjorie Pollitt, *op.cit.*, p. 49.

<sup>85</sup> RGASPI, 495/100/104, PB, 14 February 1923; RGASPI, 495/100/109, Party Council, n.d. [1923].



of four women elected to the CC in December 1929, illustrates that females married with children could play a full part in Communist activities outside the home, figure more prominently than their Communist husbands and, albeit in temporary fashion, enter the leadership. It should also be noted that despite the prevailing Third Period accent on youth, Cree was in her late thirties when elected to the CC. The daughter of a Chesterfield clerk, she married Sidney Cree in 1913. The couple moved to Sheffield where Sidney worked as a craftsman in the steel industry and became a shop steward and union activist. An unsuccessful nomination to the CC in the 1940s stated that she had been a member of the SDF which was superseded by the Social Democratic Party in 1908 and the British Socialist Party (BSP) in 1912. She may have been a youthful adherent or have been referring to the successor organisations. If Webb and Pollitt had little to do with the CPGB's forerunners and pre-1920 feminism left little mark on their politics, the record provides no indication that Cree was influenced as a Communist by any connection with the Hyndman groups. She does not appear to have joined the CPGB with the BSP in 1920, indeed she recalled being recruited with Sidney by the prominent engineering shop steward, Bill Ward.<sup>86</sup> Operating as a Communist inside the Labour Party and the Co-operative movement requires a degree of adaptation; something of the host may rub off. But her career provides little indication that Cree's politics were anything but Communist.

Her activism did not diminish significantly with the advent of children in the shape of Gordon (b.1915) and Kath (b.1918). Sheffield, a city with a strong socialist tradition, provided a supportive environment – relatively unusually, the local CPGB possessed a thriving women's committee in which she was active. Sidney responded positively to an increasing involvement in politics which in prominence exceeded his own, and their extended

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<sup>86</sup> ancestry.co.uk, Marriage Index, 1913; 1939 Register of England and Wales, Hove, Sussex; 'Kath's memoir' at: [www.spathaky.name/kath/memoir.html](http://www.spathaky.name/kath/memoir.html); CPA, CP/CENT/PERS/2/2, c.1945.

family carried some of the burdens of childcare.<sup>87</sup> ‘A pleasant, buxom woman with an attractive personality which could rally the women around her’,<sup>88</sup> she was a delegate to the Sixth CPGB Congress in 1924 and the same year was elected as a known Communist on the Labour ticket to the Sheffield Board of Guardians which administered the Poor Law. Delivering on her homespun electoral slogan, apparently coined by Harry Webb, ‘Vote for Annie Cree – She’ll fight for thee and me’,<sup>89</sup> she acquitted herself well in struggles which saw the Communists excluded from the Labour group and eventually the Labour Party and was returned to the Board of Guardians in 1928 despite withdrawal of Labour support.

The three years she spent on the CC expanded her horizons. She enjoyed exploring London and visits to the theatre, although she played little part in determining the direction of CPGB policy. Her stint in the leadership coincided with her husband becoming unemployed and she was instrumental in securing through the party work for him at the Soviet concern, Russian Oil Products (ROP). The family moved to Maidstone in Kent and, after Sid lost his job at ROP, to Brighton. She remained an active Communist. She was a member of the party’s Sussex District Committee from 1937 into the 1950s, worked on the party’s behalf in the Co-operative movement and was elected to the General Council of the Co-operative Party. She never again occupied a leading position in the CPGB but took a keen interest in the obstacles women members faced in securing parity with men. In a rare contribution to the party press in 1937, she pointed to the priority Communist wives accorded to their husbands’ activities for the party – an attitude which does not appear to have dominated her own marriage – and suggested an experiment where one day a week men remained at home on family duty while their wives campaigned for the CPGB. Gordon, who became an insurance

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<sup>87</sup> Bruley, *Leninism*, op.cit., pp. 122–123; ‘Kath’s memoir’, op.cit.; RGASPI, 495/100/155, CPGB, Women’s Conference, May 1924.

<sup>88</sup> Nellie Connole, *Leaven of Life: The Story of George Henry Fletcher* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1961), p. 139.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 139, 162, 165, 167.

agent, stood as a CPGB candidate in Sheffield Hallam in 1945.<sup>90</sup> Her story evokes the courage and determination many ‘ordinary’ and overlooked women activists displayed in the first half of the twentieth century. Those who calculated ‘it may be of course that her pleasant countenance conceals a strength and steely purpose’,<sup>91</sup> were not mistaken.

Like Cree, Ellen ‘Nellie’ Usher (1882–1969) left the CC at the CPGB’s 12th Congress in November 1932 and never served again. She shared Cree’s working-class background and cut with the grain of the Third Period conception of refreshing the leadership with factory militants. She was unquestionably a ‘new element’, having been in the party only briefly before her election to the CC but was far from a young firebrand. She was 48 years of age in 1930. Her early life disclosed few signs of radicalism. In April 1914 the then Ellen Berry married Frank Usher, a fellow Londoner who was serving in the regular army in Ireland. The marriage was short; he died in France weeks into the war. She entered the labour movement as a wartime bus conductor, joining the London and Provincial Union of Licensed Vehicle Workers and participating in a strike. After the war, she worked as an ‘upholstress’ and became active in the Amalgamated Union of Upholsterers and from 1922 in the London Labour Party.<sup>92</sup>

Her eyes were opened and her politics transformed, she recalled, when one day in 1928 she heard the party’s MP, Shapurji Saklatvala, preaching the cause of Communism in Battersea Park: ‘I thought this is it! –this is what I believe in.’<sup>93</sup> After reading party literature and attending classes she joined the CPGB a few months later and her conversion was sealed when she went on a delegation to Russia the following year. When her CC tenure ended, she

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<sup>90</sup> *Discussion*, March 1937, p. 32; ‘Kath’s memoir’, *op.cit.*; F.W.S. Craig (ed.), *British Parliamentary Election Results, 1918–1949* (London: Macmillan, 1979).

<sup>91</sup> Connole, *op.cit.*, p.165.

<sup>92</sup> For Usher, see <https://grahamstevenson.me.uk/2009/07/28/nellie-usher/> and the biographical details in *Westminster and Pimlico News*, 8 October 1948; *DW*, 4 January 1962; *World News*, 20 January 1962; *Kingston Post*, 12 December 1969; Death Certificate, Ellen Usher, Chelsea, 1 December 1969; [ancestry.co.uk](http://ancestry.co.uk), British Army World War 1 Service Records, Frank Henry Usher; Marriage Certificate, 25 April 1914, St Michael’s Parish Church, Limerick.

<sup>93</sup> <https://grahamstevenson.me.uk/2009/07/28/nellie-usher/>.

remained active in the party and unions, standing on several occasions as a CPGB candidate for the London County Council and frequently encountering and fighting victimization and blacklisting. During the immediate post-war years, she was chair of the Westminster Branch and on her death in 1969 had been an active Communist for over forty years.

Like Usher, Katharine ‘Kath’ Sinclair Duncan (1888–1954) served a solitary term on the CC. Unlike Usher, she was Scottish, middle-class and in a party marriage. The daughter of a father in the grocery business, she was raised in Kirkden, near Forfar in Angus, and studied literature at St Andrews University. She moved from Liberal Radicalism to the suffrage movement, *The Clarion* and the ILP. It is difficult to see her time in the ILP influencing her later politics in any significant sense. In a very general way, she replicated the militancy of the suffragettes but their methods were part of the armoury of radical resistance *tout court*. After a late marriage to Sandy Duncan (1893–1941), five years her junior, she arrived in London with her husband in 1924 and joined the CPGB in Hackney two years later.<sup>94</sup> In some ways, she appears the typical woman cadre who refused to restrict her activities to ‘women’s work’. But there was little typical about her. As a schoolteacher in Battersea, she was active in the teaching unions, the Teachers’ Labour League and the People’s Players branch of the Workers’ Theatre Movement. After visiting the Soviet Union, she became a popular leader of community struggles and champion of the unemployed, experiencing difficulties with the educational authorities and the police. She was involved in causes from anti-fascism to defending the rights of street traders. Within the party she spoke out at Congresses and on the CC, urging greater attention to women’s issues and arguing anxieties about capitulating to feminism should not inhibit work with Labour Party women.<sup>95</sup> In the 1931 general election she was the CPGB candidate in Greenwich, gaining 2,000 votes.

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<sup>94</sup> Scotland’s People, Register of Births, 1888, 1894; Register of Marriages, 1923.

<sup>95</sup> Anonymous, *Deptford’s Tribute to Kath Duncan* (London: London District CPGB, n.d. [1954]); Fred Copeman, *Reason in Revolt* (London: Blandford Press, 1948), pp. 58–62, 71–73; Tom Thomas, ‘Theatre for a Propertyless Class’, in Raphael Samuel, Ewan MacColl and Stuart Cosgrove (eds), *Theatres of the Left, 1880–*

It is difficult to understand why she was not re-elected to the CC the following year. In a memoir critical of Communism, the former party cadre, Fred Copeman, who knew and admired her, claims she and her husband were disproportionately disciplined over a relatively trivial issue: ‘The removal of these two stalwarts from all leading positions because of a disagreement over a demonstration to the Gas Company was absolutely unnecessary.’<sup>96</sup> He provides no further detail. Demotion of such a talented and indefatigable activist – admittedly she was neither working-class nor a factory worker and, particularly during the Third Period, may have been stereotyped as ‘a difficult woman’, has intrigued historians; but the circumstances remain unclarified. By 1932, the year she spent Christmas in gaol:

No unemployed family in the south-east area of London or in fact of Greater London itself could fail to have heard of Kath Duncan. Her enthusiasm and sacrifice knew no bounds. During the day she would be at the Relieving Offices and until late at night would attend public meetings ... both [she and Sandy] were members of the London District Committee and Kath was also a member of the Central Committee of the Communist Party.<sup>97</sup>

Nonetheless, the stormy career of this turbulent, pint-sized redhead, ‘vivacious and sociable; she loved good clothes and dancing and the theatre’,<sup>98</sup> suggested she had little in common with most Labour Party activists and she stayed loyal to Communism. She entered the posterity of the lawbooks and the annals of anti-working-class jurisprudence via the High Court case of *Duncan v Jones* (1KB 218, 1936). At an NUWCM demonstration in 1934, a police inspector ordered her to desist from addressing the crowd. When she refused, she was arrested and convicted of obstructing the police who reasonably apprehended a breach of the peace. Assisted by the newly founded National Council for Civil Liberties she appealed.

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1935 (London: Routledge, 1985); RGASPI, 495/100/588, Tenth Congress, January 1929; CPA, CI3, CC, 4–5 June 1932.

<sup>96</sup> Copeman, op.cit., p. 72. Although Copeman was considered a renegade by the CPGB, Raphael Samuel’s *The Lost World of British Communism* (London: Verso, 2006), p. 73, n. 21), commends his portrayal of ‘the working-class end of the party’ and asks readers for more information on the disciplinary action against the Duncans.

<sup>97</sup> Copeman, op.cit., p.72.

<sup>98</sup> *Tribute*, op.cit., p. 1.

Unsurprisingly, the Court of King's Bench affirmed the decision in a judgement used in later years to restrict demonstrations and picketing.<sup>99</sup>

The Duncans represent a somewhat Bohemian addition to the catalogue of party partnerships in which the woman was more prominent. However, Copeman, who lived with the couple and described them as 'my closest friends' implied they were not husband and wife but brother and sister.<sup>100</sup> While this flies in the face of the documentary evidence, Barron-Woolford suggests theirs was or became a marriage of convenience camouflaging the fact they were gay. He provides little of substance to corroborate this conjecture: the Duncans were Communists who kept 'open house' and the fact they had gay friends may just as plausibly suggest tolerance and pre-Stalinist attitudes to such matters, rather than their personal sexual orientation.<sup>101</sup> It is possible – we remain in the realm of conjecture – that subterfuge may have been employed to circumvent the regulations barring married women from teaching jobs – Copeman recalled that Sandy was a teacher at Southwark Elementary School while in 1933 London County Council attempted to dismiss Kath as a teacher. Copeman was writing in the late 1940s, but a degree of circumspection may have endured. Sandy died of cancer in 1941.<sup>102</sup> Afflicted by arthritis and TB, Kath returned to Scotland where, 'her spirit unbroken', she died in 1954.

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<sup>99</sup> See John Griffiths, *The Politics of the Judiciary* (1977; London: Fontana, 1985), p. 88.

<sup>100</sup> Copeman, op.cit., p. 59. His claim they were siblings is repeated in Thomas Linehan, *Communism in Britain, 1920–1939: From the Cradle to the Grave* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), p. 82. Cf *Tribute* where they are described as husband and wife.

<sup>101</sup> Ray Barron-Woolford, *The Last Queen of Scotland* (New York: Austin Macauley Publishers, 2019), pp. 27, 64, 66; 'it has occurred to me that the Duncan's marriage may have been a marriage of convenience between two people of gay or non-polar sexuality' (ibid., p. 27). Others have hardened this surmise, stating that the Duncans entered into 'a marriage of convenience': 'Comrade Kath: A Brief Life of Kath Duncan', *Lewisham Heritage*, 7 February 2019, at: <http://lewishamheritage.blogspot.com/2019/02/comrade-kath-brief-life-of-kath-duncan.html>.

<sup>102</sup> The rule barring married women was removed in 1935: see Sheila Lewenhak, *Women and Trade Unions: An Outline History of Women in the British Trade Union Movement* (London: Ernest Benn, 1977), p. 226. Barron-Woolford, op.cit., p.139, claims, without citation, that Sandy was expelled from the party but we have been unable to confirm this.

The lack of continuity in the leadership, corrosive of creating a Communist women's cadre, was again evident at the 1932 Congress: all four women who made their debut in 1929 were removed to be replaced by two who had never previously served in the leadership. Sara Wesker (1903–1971) was another force of nature. She shared Duncan's dedication to struggle, the Soviet Union and Stalin, but sprang from a different world. Born in Ekaterinoslav, she explained in a Comintern biography written in 1931: 'I am known in England as Russian, but I am not recognised as such by the Soviet government.'<sup>103</sup> Wesker arrived in Wales with her family in 1912 when she was 9 years of age, speaking not a word of English, and moved from Swansea to London on the outbreak of war. The father was a tailor, his son and three daughters clothing workers and the family lived in the Rothschild Buildings, immigrant tenements at the heart of Jewish East London. After only four years' full-time schooling, she started work in 1914. She learned to speak English with power and fluency and devoured Russian and English novels: she was 23 before, working as a machinist prior to the General Strike, she came into contact with the labour movement. She joined the Tailor and Garment Workers' Union (TGW) encountered Communists and was elected a shop steward.<sup>104</sup> Wesker entered the public eye during a strike at the Goodman's factory in 1926 and was an enthusiastic supporter of the Rego strike two years later, a conflict which prompted the creation of the breakaway Red union, the United Clothing Workers (UCWU). She joined it at its inception and in July 1929 became a CPGB member in the aftermath of the strike at Poliakoff's, during which, 'I clearly saw the line of the Labour Party and TUC.'<sup>105</sup> She was elected to the union executive and appointed its fulltime women's organizer. Although she experienced problems with party policy – she found it difficult to accept the

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<sup>103</sup> RGASPI, 495/198/1315, Sara Wesker, November 1931.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.; David Rosenberg, 'Rebel Notes', 29 May 2020, at: <https://rebellion602.wordpress.com/2020/05/29/alphabet-of-london-radicals-no-16/>; Jerry White, *Rothschild Buildings: Life in an East End Tenement Block, 1887–1920* (1980; London: Pimlico, 2003).

<sup>105</sup> RGASPI, 495/198/1315, Sara Wesker.

expulsion of the UCWU general secretary, Sam Elsbury, who had influenced her as a militant and Communist soon after her recruitment – she became an orthodox exponent of ‘the new line’.<sup>106</sup>

In 1929 she began a 15-year long relationship with Mick Mindel (1909–1994), 6 years her junior, who shared her East London Jewish background and acknowledged that her inspiration had brought him into the party. A skilled cutter, he became an organizer in the United Ladies Tailors Trade Union (ULTTU) and a lifelong adherent of the CPGB.<sup>107</sup> If it is almost impossible to penetrate the intricacies of personal partnerships, she appears, at least initially, to have played the leading political role – although he was equally respected in party circles. In recognition of her influence with workers and her activity as a member of the CPGB’s Women’s Department from 1929, she was sent to Moscow in 1931–1932 where she worked in the Comintern’s Women’s Department and attended the ILS on a part-time basis. On her return, she reinforced her reputation as a leading light in industrial struggles.<sup>108</sup> Barely 5 feet tall, she was a mesmerising orator who vividly articulated the hopes and fears of workers, particularly women, in the sweatshops – the fact Yiddish was her first language helped. When the UCWU folded, on one account she experienced difficulties in getting back into the TGW and through Mindel’s good offices secured a fulltime position in the ULTTU which subsequently amalgamated with the TGW.<sup>109</sup> She moved from the ultra-leftism of the Third Period to the politics of the Popular Front without apparent tensions over the turn to permeating the reformist unions and allying with right-wing leaders, Liberals and

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> Jonathan Freedland, *Jacob’s Gift: A Journey into the Heart of Belonging* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2005), pp. 107–108.

<sup>108</sup> RGASPI, 495/100/754, Harry Pollitt to ECCI, 24 September 1931; McIlroy et al., ‘Forging the Faithful’, op.cit., p. 48.

<sup>109</sup> Anne J. Kersten, *Uniting the Tailors: Trade Unionism among the Tailors of London and Leeds, 1870–1939* (Ilford: Frank Cass, 1995), p. 180.



Conservatives in abortive endeavours to halt Hitler. Some who retained reservations saw her by the late 1930s as embedded in the party establishment:

She was always the leading spirit in clothing so far as the [CPGB] was concerned. Her long membership of the Party had given her some influence even though I can't recall her doing any actual factory work since her days with Schneiders. I knew she had access to the Party leaders ... When she could not get her way, there seemed to be an early intervention of someone from the District Committee, if not from the Centre, to back her point of view.<sup>110</sup>

The Hitler-Stalin pact provoked heart-searching and she suffered a personal crisis in 1944 when Mindel left her: 'she never got over it, never married and devoted her energies to trade unionism and the CP.'<sup>111</sup> From 1941 she was in the forefront of the revived crusade against fascism and the CPGB's collaboration with the state and capital. Like her male counterparts in officialdom, she was subject to the pressures of trade unionism which demanded respect for the 'industrial legality' she once despised. In the post-war years, this prompted conflict with rebellious rank-and-file trade unionists readier to disregard constitutionalism, attitudes legitimated when the party's change of line from 1947 in reaction to the Cold War again favoured militancy. One such was Joe Jacobs: expelled from the CPGB in 1937 after clashes with Wesker and party officials, particularly over his espousal of a zero tolerance, physical force approach to fascists. By 1949 he had negotiated readmission to the party and their longstanding mutual antipathy was renewed. 'Many of the leading [party] members of the Union', he believed, 'have not yet overcome the period of collaboration with the employers which ensued during the war'.<sup>112</sup> A group around Jacobs – who had built up a strong TGW organisation in his factory – criticised Wesker and Mindel for their handling of disputes which privileged constitutionalism against strikes and alleged the party line was being discounted. Amidst allegations he had called Wesker 'corrupt' and

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<sup>110</sup> Joe Jacobs, *Out of the Ghetto: My Youth, the East End, Communism and Fascism, 1913–1939* (1978; London: Phoenix Press, 1991), p. 206.

<sup>111</sup> Freedland, *op.cit.*, p. 241.

<sup>112</sup> CPA, CP/CENT/DISC/12, Statement of Joe Jacobs, n.d. [1951].

threatened Mindel with violence, she canvassed support from the London District Committee, Peter Kerrigan, the National Industrial Organiser, and Harry Pollitt. In contrast with her approach in the 1920s and early 1930s, she insisted Communists must abide by the rules of the once-despised TGW and respect the functions of its officials:

Our people do not and refuse to understand that a trade union branch must not and cannot be turned in a party branch because the leading officials happen to be communists. That as a trade union branch, we have had to pay regard to [the] rules and constitution of our union. That in disputes both Mick and myself in particular must use the union machinery as laid down in our constitution whether we like Bernard Sullivan as the District Secretary of our union or not.<sup>113</sup>

The determination she once employed in pursuing leftism now helped deflect it. After protracted wrangling, Jacobs was expelled for a second time and three of his supporters censured for ‘tendencies to factional activity’, ‘slandorous statements against other Communists’ and ‘persistent refusal to fight for party policy’.<sup>114</sup> 1956 and its revelations brought further turmoil, but her allegiance remained intact. She had restored personal relations with Mindel before she died of a stroke in 1971. She remained childless: her family concerns were largely restricted to supporting her parents and she was a good example of Bruley’s woman cadre whose life was devoted to the party and the Soviet Union. Her nephew, the playwright Arnold Wesker, who immortalized the family in *Chicken Soup with Barley*, remembered her as ‘feisty, loyal, affectionate, generous and a vehement feminist, a dedicated Communist who thought Stalin could do no wrong’.<sup>115</sup>

Like Wesker, Rose Smith (1891–1985) spent much of her political life agitating among women workers. Elected to the CC with Wesker in 1932, Smith was the only woman drafted into the leadership during the Third Period who survived its demise. She secured re-

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<sup>113</sup> Wesker to Pollitt, 5 January 1951. She later stated the letter had not been sent but made similar claims in letters to Kerrigan. The documents relating to the dispute are in CPA, CP/CENT/DISC/12 and 16. Sullivan had opposed the formation of the UCW.

<sup>114</sup> CPA, CP/CENT/DISC/12, Jacobs to Bob Stewart, Appeal Committee, 31 December 1951; CP/CENT/DISC/16, Appeal against the censure of Comrades H. Levy, B. Schuster and D.M. Myers, 14 February 1952.

<sup>115</sup> Quoted in Rosenberg, op.cit.

election in 1935 and 1937 before dropping out at the following year's Congress, although she remained on the party payroll. The same age as Cree, she was likewise raised in Chesterfield and was also a housewife when she joined the CPGB in 1922. One of seven children, her father, Samuel Ellis, was a craftsman, a skilled potter and union activist. From him she imbibed the socialist culture of the time. In later generations her talent would have been nurtured at university. Instead, she qualified as a pupil-teacher and from 1907 prepared young hands for a future in capitalist production. She was part of 'the earnest minority' who sought intellectual and political emancipation, in her case via Hyndman's Social Democratic Party which she joined in 1909 and the local Workers' Education Association whose classes she assiduously attended. The nature of her opposition to the war is unclear. In 1916 she married Alfred Smith (1888–1975), a painter and decorator and when he was drafted, worked in the munitions industry and endeavoured to recruit women workers into trade unions.

In 1919, the couple moved to the mining town of Mansfield and in 1922, together with local members of the SLP, enrolled in the CPGB. It took 12 months, Smith recalled, before she was admitted to full membership because her role as housewife and mother of 2-year-old twins, Percy and Ted, was perceived as a barrier to activism.<sup>116</sup> If such attitudes handicapped her development, they failed to curb it. She was increasingly engaged in the Labour Colleges Movement, the Miners' Minority Movement and the party itself. Trade unionism, she urged, should be a family and feminine matter, not reserved for breadwinners, while as a student of Engels' *Origin of the Family*, Olive Schreiner's *Women and Labour*,

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<sup>116</sup> Ancestry.co.uk, Index of Births, 1891; 1901 Census of England, Chesterfield; 1939 Register of England and Wales, Wandsworth; Gisela Chan Man Fong, 'Smith, Rosina (Rose), (1891–1985)', *ODNB*; Gisela Chan Man Fong, 'Shoulder to Shoulder: Rose Smith Who Stood for "Different but Equal and United"', in McIlroy et al., *Party People*, op.cit., pp. 103–106, 110. Housewives faced similar obstacles to joining the Russian party: see Elizabeth Waters, 'In the Shadow of the Comintern: The Communist Women's Movement, 1920–1943', in Sonia Kruks, Rayna Rapp and Marilyn B. Young (eds), *Promissory Notes: Women in the Transition to Socialism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1989), p. 40.

and Marie Stopes, she took up birth control, housework and ‘the enslavement of women inside the home’.<sup>117</sup>

Facing harassment, fines and imprisonment, the family left Mansfield. She became a fulltime party organizer in 1927 and worked in Lancashire with a brief to build Communist membership among textile workers. She made several trips to the Soviet Union, attending the 1928 Comintern Congress and meetings of RILU, and the search for new blood and her enthusiasm for Class Against Class contributed to her appointment in 1929 as National Women’s Organizer in succession to Beth Turner. A combination of pressures centred on her absorption with party matters, financial difficulties and housework, provoked the breakdown of her marriage and she raised the children as a single mother supported by her extended family.<sup>118</sup> She was prominently involved in strikes during the early 1930s, particularly the textile disputes in Northern England. Attempts to circumvent the ‘social fascist’ union leaders in favour of rank-and-file strike committees and exhortation from CPGB leaders who descended on the strike areas *en masse* produced limited success. In the ‘more looms’ strike of 1930 she was sentenced to 3-months imprisonment.<sup>119</sup> Inside the party, she sought to extend its focus to women’s oppression beyond the factory, diminish specialization by gender, and combat the high turnover of female members. Success was again restricted and in 1932 the Women’s Department was suspended, and she was instructed to work to the PB. She was re-assigned to the *Daily Worker* in 1934, where she edited the Women’s Page and continued to play a leading role in Communist strategy for women.<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> RGASPI, 495/100/822, CC Minutes, 4 June 1932; RGASPI, 495/100/801, Draft Resolution. Instruction from ECCI Women’s Section and Report on Work in Britain.

<sup>118</sup> Chan Man Fong, ‘Shoulder to Shoulder’, *op.cit.*, pp. 109–110.

<sup>119</sup> See, for example, Sue Bruley, ‘Women and Communism: A Case Study of the Lancashire Weavers in the Depression’, in Geoff Andrews et al. (eds), *Opening the Books: Essays on the Social and Cultural History of the British Communist Party* (London: Pluto Press, 1985), pp. 64–82; *Party Organiser*, May 1932, p. 27, June 1932, p. 16.

<sup>120</sup> Chan Man Fong, ‘Shoulder to Shoulder’, *op.cit.*, pp. 114–116.

She remained on the CC until 1938, engaged in reviving the Women's Department and presenting the programme to revitalise its work launched at the 1937 Congress. She spent three months in Spain reporting for the *Daily Worker* and covered women's and social issues through the war.<sup>121</sup> In the post-war years she returned to her roots in Chesterfield and resumed activity in the East Midlands district of the CPGB. Her career had a final twist. Around 1960 she emigrated to Australia to live with family and came into contact with the influence the Chinese party exercised on ant-revisionist sections of the Australian Communist movement who increasingly looked to Beijing rather than Moscow. She relocated to China and from 1962 worked for the Foreign Languages Press and from 1967 the Xinhua News Agency. Her espousal of Maoist Stalinism in the Sino-Soviet rift incurred the odium of former comrades in the CPGB.<sup>122</sup> She was briefly back in Britain at the height of 'the cultural revolution' but returned to Beijing to work for Mao's regime in 1971. She died aged 94 in the summer of 1985 and was interred in the Revolutionary Martyrs Cemetery at a ceremony attended by officials of the Chinese party and government.<sup>123</sup>

Her biographer provides a positive assessment of her 'long and hazardous life fighting for social justice and gender equality' and insists that 'it was this consistent and sustained opposition of Rose Smith to class and gender oppressions that should become an integral part of the historiography of the CPGB'.<sup>124</sup> A single terse statement across two contributions refers to her enthusiasm for the Russian regime, 'any opposition or criticism of anything said or done in Moscow was a betrayal of Marxism-Leninism'.<sup>125</sup> Yet this enthusiasm – and her advocacy for China, when she decided the Russian leadership had itself betrayed Marxism-

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<sup>121</sup> Bruley, 'War and Fascism', op.cit., pp. 148-150; Malcom MacEwen, *The Greening of a Red* (London: Pluto Press, 1991), p.110.

<sup>122</sup> Fred Westacott, *Shaking the Chains: A Personal and Political History* (Chesterfield: Joe Clark, 2002), pp. 339-340; Chan Man Fong, 'Smith, Rosina', op.cit.

<sup>123</sup> *Morning Star*, 6 August 1985.

<sup>124</sup> Chan Man Fong, 'Shoulder to Shoulder', op.cit., pp.102, 118.

<sup>125</sup> Chan Man Fong, 'Smith, Rosina', op.cit. There is no similar reference to her work in China.

Leninism – was integral to her ‘long and hazardous life’. Smith’s justification of social injustice in the Soviet Union requires integration into the historiography. More than partial estimation requires remembering the decades she spent working for the brutal rulers of China, where through ‘the Great Leap Forward’ and ‘the Cultural Revolution’, Chinese women endured social injustice and gender equality meant little more than women sharing in the exploitation and oppression suffered by men.<sup>126</sup>

### **The women of the Popular Front**

Of the three women elected to the CC at the 1935 Congress, only Smith had sat on earlier committees. There were two newcomers. Jessie Eden (1902–1986) was born in Birmingham and spent almost her entire life there. The oldest of three girls born to William Shrimpton, a jewellery journeyman, and his wife, Jessie, she married Albert Eden, a skilled leather worker, in 1923. They subsequently adopted a son, Dougie. The marriage did not take and towards the end of the decade she returned to live with her parents.<sup>127</sup> Most of what we know of her involvement in trade unionism and politics comes from the Communist Party historian, Graham Stevenson.<sup>128</sup> On his account, she worked at the giant Lucas plant in Birmingham, filing shock absorbers for the motor industry. In the 1926 General Strike, she led out the small minority of women who had joined the Transport and General Workers’ Union and in January 1932 was prominent in a week-long strike against the Bedaux system, an incentive scheme based on timing work tasks.

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<sup>126</sup> See, for example, Frank Dikotter, *The Tragedy of Liberation: A History of the Chinese Revolution, 1945–1957* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013); Idem, *Mao’s Great Famine: The History of China’s Most Devastating Catastrophe, 1955–1962* (London: Bloomsbury, 2010); Idem, *The Cultural Revolution: A People’s History, 1962–1976* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017); Jung Chang and Jon Halliday, *Mao: The Unknown Story* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2005); Gregor Benton, *Was Mao Really a Monster? The Academic Response to Chang and Halliday’s “Mao: The Unknown. Story”* (London: Routledge, 2009).

<sup>127</sup> Ancestry.co.uk, Census of England, 1901, 1911; Register of England and Wales, 1939

<sup>128</sup> <https://grahamstevenson.me.uk/2008/09/19/jessie-eden-mccullough/>;  
<https://grahamstevenson.me.uk/2009/01/04/birmingham-communists-in-action-in-the-1930s-sp-91022140/>.

She joined the CPGB, was victimised and sent by the party to the Soviet Union where she may have attended the ILS and/or may have been employed on the construction of the Moscow Metro and as a ‘shock worker’ at the Stalin Automotive Plant. In a later interview, Eden described her participation in the 1932 dispute, her subsequent ousting and blacklisting.<sup>129</sup> Her visit to Russia, however, remained undocumented. Stevenson, who knew Eden decades later, remembered her stating she spent two years in Russia; he refers to similar testimony from her daughter-in-law, ‘while local anecdotal recollection certainly says that Jessie went to Moscow’.<sup>130</sup> Stevenson noted her name does not appear in the lists of full-time students at the ILS, though this does not preclude part-time study.<sup>131</sup>

A document of which he was unaware clarifies the ILS issue but leaves questions about chronology. In a discussion about cadre development with the Comintern official, Ivan Georgievich Mingulin, in 1936, Tom Roberts who, as the CPGB District Organiser in Birmingham in 1932 participated in these events – he stated elsewhere he led the Lucas strike<sup>132</sup> – explained:

At the LS we had a woman comrade who for many years was a housewife. After she came back from the school, she wanted to know how she could become a leader in an engineering factory. We placed her in a small factory and gave her instructions to keep in with the employer there ... Then, she had to get a recommendation that she knew something about engineering; she did this and we put her in Lucas’ ... They started a big campaign for trade union membership; she was given the job of recruiting to the trade union ... she became the official representative of the trade union in the factory. She was the only woman shop steward there; she is on the C.C. of the party. Now the management know who she is; they called her into the office and even told her about her visit to the LS ... They tried in many ways to get rid of her but they will have a difficult job because she has started Party work where she works.<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> R.A. Leeson, *Strike: A Live History, 1887–1971* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1973), pp. 130–131. See also Steve Tolliday, ‘Militancy and Organisation: Women Workers and Trade Unions in the Motor Trades in the 1950s’, *Oral History*, 11: 2 (1983), pp. 42–55, particularly pp. 48–51.

<sup>130</sup> <https://grahamstevenson.me.uk/2009/01/04/birmingham-communists-in-action-in-the-1930s-sp-91022140/>. While Eden was mentioned over 100 times in the *DW* between 1932 and 1955, no reference to her appeared between 20 October 1932 and 4 February 1935.

<sup>131</sup> On this, see McIlroy et al., ‘Forging the Faithful’, op.cit., pp.123–124.

<sup>132</sup> RGASPI, 495/198/884, Tom Roberts, 26 February 1935.

<sup>133</sup> RGASPI, 495/14/17, Cadres (England), 22 February 1936.

This corroborates the claim that Eden *was* at the ILS. Roberts himself attended the school in 1930–1931 and one interpretation of the above is that Eden, who is definitely the woman he is discussing although she remains anonymous in this passage, studied there as his contemporary.<sup>134</sup> Alternatively, in his phrase, ‘At the LS we had a woman comrade’, ‘we’ might refer to the CPGB. This seems more plausible. However, if Eden, like Roberts, returned home in late 1931, that would leave little time to mount the infiltration exercise he describes as she was working at Lucas in January 1932. We know that she was prominent in CPGB activity in Birmingham after the January strike, standing for the local council and with Roberts organising a school strike.<sup>135</sup> It is plausible to surmise she went to Russia and studied at the ILS in some capacity between the end of 1932 and 1934.<sup>136</sup> This would provide time for a stint at the small engineering factory, the return to Lucas and her subsequent work there for the party which fitted her for election to the CC in early 1935. Questions remain as to how she got back into Lucas when she was well-known as a militant who had been sacked relatively recently and lived near the factory. But such things have been known to happen. Recruitment at Lucas was often by word-of-mouth recommendation by existing workers and a new identity may have been successfully, if temporarily, fabricated. Finally, we cannot rule out that Roberts was indulging in an element of grandstanding to impress Mingulin with his abilities and expertise, or that he or the stenographer garbled the story.

Her contributions to the CC certainly affirmed her as a militant trade unionist, campaigner for working women and critic of the lack of attention they received from their male counterparts and the CPGB. Noting the growing strength of workplace trade unionism and the shop steward system in Birmingham, she observed:

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<sup>134</sup> McIlroy et al., ‘Forging the Faithful’, op.cit., p.123.

<sup>135</sup> *Birmingham Gazette*, 15 August, 2 October 1932.

<sup>136</sup> There was one female British student who attended the ILS 1932–1934 whom we were unable to identify in earlier research, as the lists recorded only her pseudonym, ‘Gladys Milburn’. It is possible this was Eden. See McIlroy et al., ‘Forging the Faithful’, op.cit., p.123.



... but how far do our comrades raise the question of assisting women to come into the unions and consider their wage rates? ... serious attention must be given to popular demands for women. The Party must give attention to this throughout the country. The women's engineering committees are composed of the wives of our AEU members and I do not think we should support the expanding of these committees as they are something apart from the general trade union movement. We must build in the factories and trade unions. If our comrades were concerned about this question it would result in a tremendous force and power in fighting the wage demands. Women constitute the majority in the metal and munitions factories ... There must be a discussion on the rates. Wages are as low as 16s and 18s a week in the Midlands for women doing the same work as men.<sup>137</sup>

This was a powerful plea for male workers to engage with women's problems. She had direct experience of the AEU's refusal to even admit women as members. After stepping down from the CC in 1937, she immersed herself in work among women on the municipal housing estates, agitating over inadequate housing, expensive public transport, underfunded community services and rents. The announcement in 1938 of rent increases with rebates for the severely impoverished sparked a two-month rent strike. It was organised by the Birmingham Municipal Tenants Association, established and controlled by Communists such as Eden, Billy Milner and the ILS graduate, Ted Smallbone. It was remarkably, if briefly, successful in mobilising women and the CPGGB benefitted with a significant if temporary surge in membership. When war came, she toured the country, billed by the *Daily Worker* as 'the tenants' KC', and building support for the Soviet war effort.<sup>138</sup> In the 1945 general election she stood as the Communist candidate in Handsworth, winning 1,390 votes, 3.4% of the poll. She married a second time in 1948. With her husband, Walter McCulloch, a Glasgow-born joiner and fellow Communist who had been her companion since the late 1930s, she adopted another son and spent the rest of her life as a housewife and political activist. She died in a nursing home in 1986. In 2017, a fictionalised 'Jessie Eden' appeared

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<sup>137</sup> RGASPI, 495/14/185, CC, 5 January 1936.

<sup>138</sup> <https://grahamstevenson.me.uk/2009/01/04/birmingham-communists-in-action-in-the-1930s-sp-91022140/>; Kevin Morgan, *Against Fascism and War: Ruptures and Continuities in British Communist Politics, 1935–1941* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989), pp. 280–288.

as a character in *Peaky Blinders*, the television saga of the Midlands underworld between the wars.<sup>139</sup>

Eden's career goes some way to qualifying claims that female cadres restricted their political activities when they became parents – although during her pre-war activity, only one child was involved and she was able to rely on support from her extended family. It does not sustain the conclusion that women cadres were reluctant to engage in 'women's work'. It defies the idea that with the turn to the bourgeoisie from 1935, the party leadership became more middle-class. She joined the party during the Third Period, was not discernibly influenced by pre-1920 conceptions of the woman question and showed no inclination towards contemporary feminism. Similar points can be made about Esther Henrotte (1894–1981) who joined the CPGB in 1926 and became significantly involved in its work when her children were 6 and 8 years of age. She, too, came from the working class; her father, Christopher Bargas, worked for fifty years at the Tate and Lyle sugar refinery in East London, eventually achieving a reasonably remunerated supervisory position. One of 10 children, she started work at 14 as a bag printer at the refinery, having missed a large slice of her education after a childhood accident. In 1916, she married Arthur Henrotte, a Belgian refugee, musician and electrical instrument maker.<sup>140</sup>

Her political awakening was a little more belated than Eden's. She was 32 before she became radicalised during the 1926 General Strike and became prominent in the Women's Co-operative Guild. 'The Russian Revolution', she recalled, 'completely past [sic] over my head',<sup>141</sup> but in the mid-1920s she fervently embraced the Bolshevik cause. In 1928 she represented the Guilds on a delegation to Russia and two years later travelled to Moscow to

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<sup>139</sup> Graham Stevenson, 'The Real Jessie Eden and Peaky Blinders', <https://grahamstevenson.me.uk/2008/09/19/jessie-eden-mccullough/>.

<sup>140</sup> Ancestry.co.uk, Census of England, 1911, Sarah Ann Esther Bargas; Register of England and Wales, 1939, Sarah Anne Esther Henrutte [sic]; FamilySearch.org, Essex Parish Registers, 9 December 1916.

<sup>141</sup> CPA, CP/CENT/PERS/03/03, Esther Henrotte, n.d.

work in the Co-operative Department of the Comintern as director of the CPGB's work in the London societies.<sup>142</sup> Child rearing and domestic commitments did not significantly impede activity or foreign trips.<sup>143</sup> The family moved from West Ham to Woolwich where she was increasingly busy in the Royal Arsenal Co-operative Society (RACS) and as head of 'the Central Co-operative Department of the CPGB', revived in 1930.

She was at the heart of attempts to colonise the Co-operative movement and win it to Communism through agitation in local societies, winning positions on management committees and motivating resolutions to the annual Congress. This was complemented by infiltration of the Co-operative Party and activity in the Guilds. Formally, this was the task of both male and female Communists. In practice, the burden fell on the latter: 'party members who are not active in other mass organisations should be given the task of conducting systematic activity in the Co-operative movement; this applies primarily to women comrades'.<sup>144</sup> Until 1935, the campaigns she headed entailed building Militant Groups in local societies. Assisted by the cyclostyled magazine her department published, *The Militant Co-operator*, they would link up to form a rank-and-file movement affiliated to the projected Trade Union Militant League.<sup>145</sup> At the 1932 CPGB Congress, Pollitt stressed the need to strengthen,

What is called the Militant Opposition amongst the Co-operators ... Their programme deals with the question of prices, unemployment, strikes and lockouts and conditions of Co-operative workers, and the role of the Co-operative Movement in the fight against war, and their relation to the Co-ops in the Soviet Union. At the present time, there should be organised a tremendous campaign against the breaking of the Trade Agreement with the Soviet Union ... we must not neglect the importance of this work.

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<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

<sup>143</sup> Hunt and Worley, op.cit., p. 25, quote an exchange of letters between Henrotte and the London District in which she cites domestic responsibilities as her reason for not being able to attend a meeting. Henrotte's overall record suggests it is rash to generalise about her, still less Communist women as a whole, to suggest that the demands of children and husbands were necessarily a barrier to activity.

<sup>144</sup> RGASPI, 506/1/141, Comintern Co-operative Department, Questions for Discussion with British Delegation, n.d. [1933]

<sup>145</sup> See McIlroy and Campbell, 'The Comintern, Part 1', op.cit., p. 42 and n.105, and John McIlroy, 'The Revival and Decline of Rank and File Movements in Britain during the 1930s', *Labor History*, 57: 3 (2016), pp. 347–373.

It is an enormous movement to which we can find access for our revolutionary ideas.<sup>146</sup>

With the RACS as a base, Henrotte orchestrated support for this programme. She was able to report progress at the grassroots, citing success in London, Scotland, Birmingham, Blackpool, Brighton, Bristol, Derby, Maidstone, Mansfield, Plymouth, Southend and Torquay.<sup>147</sup> The policy-making bodies proved a harder nut to crack and she lamented limited support from the party: ‘The *Daily Worker* received a short article signed by Mrs Henrotte giving all the most important issues of the Congress ... This never appeared.’<sup>148</sup> Overall, success was patchy as the Co-operative mainstream hit back with bans on Communists, and the Communists themselves changed course as the line changed in Moscow. By 1934, the Comintern’s Co-operative Department was writing to the CPGB representative in Moscow: ‘We call your attention to the fact that in the Central Co-operative Press of Great Britain a controversy is taking place on Fascism ... please call the attention of the British Party to this question.’<sup>149</sup> The Third Period was at an end, the rank-and-fileist approach became more muted, but the strategy of permeating the Co-ops continued. The Seventh World Congress in 1935 instructed the CPGB in diplomatic formulae often repeated by the party leadership: ‘The most active assistance must be rendered by the Communists in the struggle in the Co-operative Societies for the urgent interests of their members, especially in the fight against high prices, new taxes ... and their destruction by the Fascists’.<sup>150</sup>

Henrotte pursued a more accommodative, if still manipulative, approach as part of the turn to ‘unity’, ‘peace’ and defence of the Soviet Union. In these years, she became well-known in both the Co-operative movement, where she was regularly elected to management

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<sup>146</sup> Harry Pollitt, *The Road to Victory* (London: CPGB, 1932), p. 85.

<sup>147</sup> RGASPI, 506/1/148, Central Co-operative Department (CPGB) to Comintern Co-operative Bureau, 7 October 1932.

<sup>148</sup> RGASPI, 506/1/136, Report to the Secretariat on the Annual Congresses of the Co-operative Union and the Co-operative Women’s Guilds, 1932.

<sup>149</sup> RGASPI, 506/1/148, Co-operative Department of the Comintern to Bob McIlhone, 3 November 1934.

<sup>150</sup> RGASPI, 495/14/256, Materials for the 15<sup>th</sup> Congress, Report of CC, 1 June 1937–30 June 1938.

positions, and the left more generally. CPGB reports reveal its extensive efforts to turn the Co-operatives to its own ends. It was a fertile field for exploitation. In the mid-1930s she told a party conference there were 1,000 societies with seven million members, the great majority inactive but she estimated 100,000 participated in the Guilds and the movement's political bodies.<sup>151</sup> In 1936, a National Co-operative Bureau was revived and Pollitt urged 'as many comrades as possible must contribute something to help the small band of comrades who have been battling away'.<sup>152</sup> But trade union activity took precedence and Co-operative work remained small-scale; according to Henrotte only ten Communists were delegates at the 1936 Co-operative Congress.<sup>153</sup> In 1938, it was estimated that 27% or 1,500 of the party's London District were members of a society, but this often involved little more than patronising their local store. Only 50 of the 5,705 Communists in the metropolis made activity in the Co-operative movement their main work.<sup>154</sup> The major incursion was in the Guilds, characterised by a contemporary Communist and later chronicler as 'the nearest thing to a trade union for married women'.<sup>155</sup> But here again the numbers involved were small: less than 350 London Communists were active in the Guilds.<sup>156</sup>

Like Eden, Henrotte stepped down from the CC in 1937, although in contrast she served further terms in 1943, 1944 and 1945 when she took on the role of chairing the newly formed People's Press Printing Society which owned the *Daily Worker*. The evidence for her affair with Pollitt rests on MI5's recording of a conversation between Isabel Brown and Marion Jessop, in which they agreed 'he might have chosen someone better'.<sup>157</sup> She remained active throughout the war – sponsoring the 1941 People's Convention and authoring the

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<sup>151</sup> RGASPI, 495/14/185, CPGB National Conference, 11–12 October 1936, Report on Work in the Co-operatives by Comrade Esther Henrotte.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid.

<sup>153</sup> RGASPI, 495/14/180, Central Co-operative Bureau Meeting, 27 September 1936. The main issues taken up were Aid for Spain, the Peace Campaign and CPGB affiliation to the Labour Party.

<sup>154</sup> RGASPI, 495/14/258, PB, 1 June 1938, London District Report.

<sup>155</sup> Branson, *History, 1927–1941*, op.cit., p.195.

<sup>156</sup> RGASPI, 495/14/258, PB, 1 June 1938, London District Report.

<sup>157</sup> *The Times*, 12 September 1945; NA, KV2/1041, Harry Pollitt, Intercept, 16 December 1942.

pamphlet *Co-operation in the Soviet Union* – and the Cold War, extending her allegiance to Stalin and the Soviet Union to Mao Tse Tung and the new ‘workers’ state’ in China. In 1951 she attracted unwelcome publicity when she was suspended from her £800 per annum position on the RACS management committee over a prolonged and unexplained absence in Beijing as a member of a ‘Friendship Delegation’. She returned home wearing the grey-blue cotton trousers and jacket of the Chinese cadres and proclaiming China’s need for peace and trade with the West.<sup>158</sup>

It is difficult, at least this side of ahistoricity, to see committed Stalinists like Eden and Henrotte as feminists. Even if we employ the amorphous dictionary definitions of feminists as advocates of women’s rights on the grounds of equality of the sexes, any such assertion must be heavily qualified by their adherence to brutal dictatorships and sustained refusal to speak up for the millions of women oppressed and exploited in the Soviet Union and China. The same can be said of Marion Jessop (1908–1967) during her years as a leading Communist. She was the oldest daughter of a Leeds labour movement family – her father, Tom, was a fitter, her mother, Ethel, a housewife. She remembered Tom, a Labour councillor, telling her, ‘Have a go. After all, women can’t possibly make a worse mess of the world than the men have done already.’<sup>159</sup> After an elementary education she worked in a variety of jobs in tailoring and for Leeds City Council and became a staunch trade unionist, NCLC student and Labour Party activist, decamping to join the CPGB in 1932 after expulsion from the Labour Party for supporting the Leeds Committee of the Anti-War Movement. She was radicalised by her father’s unemployment and Labour’s response to the crisis of 1929–1931.<sup>160</sup> There was suspicion on the part of some Communists that she was an

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<sup>158</sup> *Aberdeen Evening Express*, 9 June 1951; *DW*, 29 June 1951.

<sup>159</sup> Ancestry.co.uk, Census of England, 1911, Marian Jessop; Marian Ramelson, *The Petticoat Rebellion* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1967), p. 9.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 10–11. Various dates have been given for her joining: Kevin Morgan, in ‘Ramelson (née Jessop), Marian, 1908–1967’, *ODNB*, offers 1930. In an interview in the *DW*, 28 March 1939, she claimed it was 1932 while *Party Organiser*, August 1939, stated that she joined 7 years earlier which would place the event in 1932.

infiltrator. But she quickly secured a reputation as an industrious organiser, efficient administrator and outspoken militant in the shop workers' union who became secretary of the Leeds Committee of the British Anti-War Movement in 1933 and vice-president of the Leeds Trades Council the following year.<sup>161</sup> From 1935–1937, she studied at the ILS, which she described as 'the most interesting and vital experience of my life. To see the actual construction of socialism is an unforgettable experience'.<sup>162</sup> On her return, she was appointed District Organiser for her native West Riding of Yorkshire.

She attended the CC in Autumn 1937, although not formally elected until the following year, and addressed it with a confidence and zeal sharpened by her stint at the Stalinist academy. Communists, she insisted, were not operating politically in industry: 'There were dozens of comrades inside important unions never bringing a single recruit into our party ... a position where comrades are not working as Communists.'<sup>163</sup> Contributing to a discussion where CPGB leaders remarked that Trotskyism 'represents the agency of Fascism', she demonstrated the sectarianism that accompanied calls for unity, complaining that in Leeds: 'The Trotskyists smashed the Labour League of Youth, the local Labour Party is in their hands and they are now ferreting their way into the Borough Labour Party.'<sup>164</sup>

She provided the PB with an appraisal of the situation in Yorkshire, where the main opportunities for Communists lay in engineering and woollen textiles. There were only four factory groups – in Burton's factory in Leeds, on the Huddersfield trams, a clothing group and a quarry group embracing in total only 50 workers, as well as two engineering 'concentration' groups in Leeds and Shipley. Clothing and Transport committees met

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The discrepancy may be explained by the CPGB practice of insisting new recruits remained as covert Communists inside Labour to convert others: Alan Campbell and John McIlroy, "'The Trojan Horse': Communist Entrism in the British Labour Party, 1933–1943', *Labor History*, 59: 5 (2018), pp. 513–554.

<sup>161</sup> DW, 18 May 1933.

<sup>162</sup> DW, 28 March 1939; McIlroy et al., 'Forging the Faithful', op.cit., p.122.

<sup>163</sup> CPA, CI8, CC, 10 September 1937.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid.

regularly but there were only 160 CPGB members and 120 YCL members in Leeds. The Leeds Labour Party was directed by ‘right-wing’ officials led by future general secretary and Governor of Mauritius, Len Williams, who as NCLC organiser in South Wales had been ‘a notorious disseminator of Trotskyist literature’. The Labour councillors followed ‘the line of Transport House’. But there were ‘some good left wing people’, such as Alderman John Badlay, J. Craig Walker and Tom Jessop: unsurprisingly, the CPGB had ‘comrades in the Labour Party’.<sup>165</sup> On the debit side, ‘an organised Trotskyist group of about 6 members’ had some influence inside Labour and its journal, the *Leeds Weekly Citizen*. She had already set up a district school, ‘exposing their line both in the USSR and other countries’. The Stalinists had ‘succeeded in making our exposure of Trotskyism so clear that they gained no support from the non-party members present’.<sup>166</sup>

She proved an assiduous component of the leadership, reporting by 1939 that the West Riding membership ‘had grown enormously in the last 12 months’.<sup>167</sup> She questioned unexpected turns in Comintern policy necessary to Soviet interests but always accepted them. When in 1938 Moscow instructed the CPGB to reverse its line of resisting conscription, she voted for the status quo: defeated, she acquiesced in the Russian *diktat*.<sup>168</sup> Russia and its rulers could do no wrong. In the shadow of the Hitler-Stalin pact, she reflected: ‘It was essential for the Soviet Union, quite correctly, to take any steps that were necessary to preserve the Soviet Union. I cannot separate the maintenance of the Soviet Union from the interests of the international working class ... any defeat for the Soviet Union would be a major defeat for the international working class.’<sup>169</sup> When Stalin invaded eastern Poland, she

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<sup>165</sup> CPA, CI16, PB, 29 October 1937.

<sup>166</sup> Quotes from *ibid*.

<sup>167</sup> Keith Laybourn and Dylan Murphy, *Under the Red Flag: A History of Communism in Britain* (Stroud: Sutton, 1999), p. 99.

<sup>168</sup> Thorpe, *British Communist Party*, *op.cit.*, pp. 247–248.

<sup>169</sup> Francis King and George Matthews (eds), *About Turn: The Communist Party and the Outbreak of the Second World War* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990), p. 256.



declared: ‘the Soviet Union moved extremely rapidly and extremely well ... The only thing I am concerned with is that there has been an extension of the Soviet territory that it now covers another 16 million people and ... is immeasurably stronger as a result of it.’<sup>170</sup> As the Kremlin alchemised the ‘anti-fascist war’ into a war between two imperialisms and liquidated the distinctions between bourgeois democracy and fascism, she remained positive: ‘the perspectives that are opened for us are something about which we can feel very happy ... it seems to me that the thesis of the Communist International that has been presented to us is a correct thesis ... it seems to me to be absolutely correct.’<sup>171</sup> The only thing she found to object to in all this was Dutt’s peremptory ‘take it or leave it’ presentation of the Comintern edict to the CC.

In November 1939, she married Bert Ramelson, an equally ruthless Stalinist from a Ukrainian Jewish family who had emigrated to Canada, qualified as a barrister and fought in Spain before coming to Britain where he worked for Marks and Spencer.<sup>172</sup> In Yorkshire, they sought to channel discontent over wages, conditions and curtailment of democracy into opposition to the war, refurbish the Soviet Union’s tarnished image and revive links with Labour. Through 1940, the CPGB attempted to exploit the presence of clandestine adherents inside the Labour Party and Leeds was a case in point.<sup>173</sup> Two councillors, Badlay and Craig Walker, were pressed into service to chair a *Labour Monthly* conference and support the CPGB-animated Leeds Committee for the Defence of Democratic Rights. Labour removed the whip from both and Badlay parted company with the Labour Party. Of the ‘good left wingers’ Jessop had commended three years earlier, only her father remained loyal to Labour.<sup>174</sup> With problems ameliorated by Russia’s entry into the war, she remained on the

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<sup>170</sup> Ibid.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid., p. 259.

<sup>172</sup> Roger Seifert and Tom Sibley, *Revolutionary Communist at Work: A Political Biography of Bert Ramelson* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 2012), pp. 527–528.

<sup>173</sup> Campbell and McIlroy, ‘Trojan Horse’, op. cit., pp. 524–528.

<sup>174</sup> John Badlay, *Over Fifty Years’ Service to Labour: Why Leeds Labour Party Expelled Me* (Leeds: n.p.,

CC until 1943, working at the Propaganda Department at King Street. She was instrumental in setting up the new Women's Advisory Committee of which she was a fixture in the post-war years. She was replaced as secretary of the new Yorkshire district by Mick Bennett who was succeeded by Bert, although she shared much of the burden, and was prominent in work with women, particularly in the National Assembly of Women and the peace movement.

In 1949 she visited China, attending the International Women's Conference in Beijing and praising Mao's regime.<sup>175</sup> She served on the CC between 1952 and 1954 but by the end of the decade, her husband, who became the CPGB industrial organiser in 1965, was the leading partner measured by party work. In 1956, the couple supported the leadership, resisting remonstrations from their friend, Edward Thompson: 'thank God there is no chance of the EC ever having power in Britain; it would destroy in a month every liberty of thought, concern and expression which has taken the British people over 300-odd years to win.'<sup>176</sup> In later years she joined The CPGB Historians' Group and studied women's struggles from the 1700s until 1918. The results were published as *Petticoat Rebellion* in the year of her death, in a broad-left narrative which hardly mentions Marxism, feminism or the CPGB. Her description of how her adulation of Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst was punctured in the post-war years raises questions about how far some Communist women cadres understood these issues during the 1930s. Crawford, Montefiore and Turner would at least have recognised her text's concluding sentence: 'The heart and core of all these problems is the speedy emancipation of all mankind including the women.'<sup>177</sup>

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n.d. [1940]). In 1956, as Khrushchev revealed some of the horror of Stalinism and the Leeds CPGB imploded, Tom Jessop became Lord Mayor of Leeds.

<sup>175</sup> Marian Ramelson, *British Women in China* (London: British Committee, International Women's Democratic Federation, 1949)

<sup>176</sup> CPA, CP/CENT/PC/02/08, Thompson to Bert Ramelson, 28 May 1956.

<sup>177</sup> Ramelson, op.cit., p.198. Ramelson recounts how, over ten years before publication of the book, her fellow Communist, Elinor Burns, referred to 'the harm' the Pankhursts had done: 'The feeling I had at that moment could only be akin to a pious Catholic seeing a holy image smashed ... I sprang to their defence only to find that the passion of my plea was far in advance of my knowledge of what they actually did. She *must* be mistaken.' (Ibid., pp. 11–12.) Eric Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times: A Twentieth Century Life* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2002, p. 266) described the later Ramelson as Bert's 'remarkable wife'.

Interviewed in old age, Mavis Llewellyn (1908–1978), the sole representative of the Communist stronghold of South Wales in our group, recalled the role women were allocated in the close-knit, mono-industrial society of the valleys. The Miners' Federation (SWMF), the workmen's hall, the pit library, even the Communist Party, were masculine preserves. With few opportunities for employment short of domestic service in the cities, it approached an ideal type of the capitalist model in which women were consigned to the subordinate sphere of childbearing, homework and welfare. There were exceptions – witness Llewellyn herself – they were few and not particularly welcome.<sup>178</sup> A CPGB report on its South Wales District, when she was taking a leading part in work among women, remarked: 'Headway is being made in breaking down the idea which is still strongly held in West Wales that women have no place in the party'.<sup>179</sup> She showed what could be done. With advantages as a schoolteacher, a respected occupation, and a relationship with Welsh Communist leader, Lewis Jones – although this had disadvantages in a socially conservative community and party – a spirit of independence, organisational ability and personal courage, she became a member of the District Committee, the local council and the party's national leadership – but almost always in a secondary role, speaking on women's work.

Her father was a miner and Welsh Presbyterian deacon, her mother a housewife. She was born in Blaengwynfi and raised in a religious home, although her uncle Fred was a CPGB member, and an aunt was secretary of the Ogmore branch of the Friends of the Soviet Union. Another uncle was warden of a Quaker-sponsored unemployed settlement. She was schooled in a tradition of social service to create a better world. At 18, she won a scholarship to Barry Teachers' Training College from which she graduated in 1928, the year she became a member of the management committee of the local Labour Party.<sup>180</sup> Earnest and dedicated,

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<sup>178</sup> Bruley, *Leninism*, op.cit., pp. 161–162.

<sup>179</sup> RGASPI, 495/14/258, PB, 5 May 1938, Report on South Wales.

<sup>180</sup> Ancestry.co.uk, Census of Wales, 1911, Mavis Llewellyn; Register of England and Wales, 1939; RGASPI, 495/198/439, Mavis Llewellyn, 1 December 1933; *DW*, 23 May 1939.

she was in some aspects reminiscent of the young women in the novels of A.J. Cronin, Winifred Holtby or Lewis Jones. Bitterly disillusioned with the MacDonald government, in 1930 she resigned from the Labour Party which she believed ‘had forsaken the ideas of its founders’.<sup>181</sup> She studied Communist literature but remained sceptical, considering that the CPGB, too, would follow the path of betrayal and ‘became wrapped up in sports circles’. She was captain of the Ogmore Valley tennis team, a member of the Porthcawl hockey team and the Ogmore Valley Golf Club – an enthusiasm which survived her Communism – and the local dramatic society.<sup>182</sup> It was only in 1931 that she ‘attended a propaganda meeting addressed by Comrade Helen Crawford, as a result I became convinced that my place was back in the class struggle, playing my part. A month later, I joined the CPGB.’<sup>183</sup>

She educated herself in Marxism, studied *Capital* and read her way through the ‘Little Lenin Library’. She continued to be active in the National Union of Teachers and as International Secretary of the South Wales Esperanto Workers League. In the CPGB, her role involved ‘working chiefly amongst women, being secretary of the Nantymoel Working Women’s League and vice-president of the Nantymoel Co-operative Guild’.<sup>184</sup> She became a member of the District Committee within a year of joining, a frequent contributor to the *Daily Worker* and popular public speaker; by 1935 she was referred to as a ‘well known local Communist’.<sup>185</sup>

It was an uphill task. By 1938, the numerically strong South Wales district enrolled only 196 women spread across 32 branches: 15 branches had fewer than three women members and 16 none at all. There were 13 Women’s Groups meeting separately from the branch but their membership was small, although women could be mobilised in numbers,

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<sup>181</sup> RGASPI, 495/198/439, Mavis Llewellyn, 1 December 1933.

<sup>182</sup> Ibid.

<sup>183</sup> Ibid.

<sup>184</sup> Ibid.

<sup>185</sup> *DW*, 23 May 1939, 11 February 1935. As well as reports of local activities, she contributed several didactic short stories to the paper’s Women’s Page; see, for example, *DW*, 5 May, 14 July 1934, 30 March 1935.

with 1,000 attending the Rhondda International Women's Day gathering while Aid for Spain proved a fertile field. Llewellyn and Irene Paynter were the leaders of the district women's committee which saw its mission as to 'increase the number of women capable of exercising political leadership.'<sup>186</sup> She gained sustenance from her relationship with the former miner, Lewis Jones. Chair of the Cambrian Lodge Committee in the early 1920s, he had attended the Central Labour College in London, 1923–1925 and evolved into 'a dazzlingly gifted platform orator and organiser of the unemployed'.<sup>187</sup> Refused permission to enlist in the International Brigades, he rejected the party's subsequent offer to send him to Spain and was replaced as its Rhondda organiser for failure to boost the membership and lack of political clarity. The scope of their partnership can be seen from her contribution to his novel, *We Live*, published after his death in January 1939.<sup>188</sup>

Jones was the first Communist elected to Glamorgan County Council and it is difficult to separate Llewellyn's voice from that of May Roberts who becomes a councillor in the novel. Local government provided an effective platform to take up what the party considered 'women's issues' and extend the CPGB's success in the SWMF: 'We mustn't concentrate the Party on one phase of the struggle but neither must we neglect any phase ... all I've been trying to do is get you comrades to see the importance of council issues to the people. It's the little things such as parish housing, child welfare and so on that affect the lives of our people in the quickest and most living way.'<sup>189</sup> In the SWMF, Labour supporters collaborated with Communists and her ambition was to extend the Popular Front: 'If we can get Labour and Communist councillors working together, on behalf of the unemployed, for instance, I'm sure the mass of the people would follow ... They are united with us in the Fed

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<sup>186</sup> RGASPI, 495/14/258, PB, 5 May 1938.

<sup>187</sup> Dai Smith, *Wales: A Question for History* (Bridgend: Seren Press, 1999), p. 175.

<sup>188</sup> For Jones, see Dai Smith's introductions to the reprints of *Cwmardy* and *We Live* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1978); David Smith, *Lewis Jones* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1982); Meic Stephens, 'Jones, Lewis Richard (1897–1939)', *ODNB*.

<sup>189</sup> Jones, *We Live*, op.cit., pp. 225–226.

... but they are miles away from us in the council.’<sup>190</sup> The basis for unity, she believed, ‘already exists in South Wales’.<sup>191</sup> Elected to the Ogmore and Garw Urban District Council in 1937, her efforts received a fillip with Russia’s entry into the war. She chaired the local committee overseeing evacuated children, became an Air Raid Precautions warden and instructor, and from 1945 campaigned on housing and the need for new industries.<sup>192</sup>

The advent of the Cold War and the decline of Communism proved a terminal setback. She stood for the Ogmore constituency in the 1950 General Election, securing 1,691 votes against Labour’s 35,836 and lost her council seat later that year.<sup>193</sup> Her life affirmed that women could be successful Communists just as much as men. It demonstrated that opposition to being consigned to working with women did not stop them from doing so while simultaneously pushing to participate in the general life of the party. As she explained: ‘Please do not think that because I am a woman that therefore my mind must run in a rut. We are members of the Communist Party and are entitled to discuss not merely our own women’s problems but the whole line of the party.’<sup>194</sup>

Like Llewellyn, Isabel Brown (1894–1984) did her share of women’s work. She was more successful in escaping segregation and stereotyping, emerging as a mainstream party figure. It was a status she owed to her oratory – she was the nearest the CPGB got to a *La Pasionaria* figure – her abilities as an organiser, and her appetite for work. At the zenith of its espousal of ‘unity’, the party canonised her in language very different from the dialects of class conflict and women’s liberation from capitalism: ‘Isabel Brown’s life and work provides one of the finest examples of what a contribution women can make to progress in

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<sup>190</sup> Ibid., p. 226; Chris Williams, *Democratic Rhondda: Politics and Society, 1885–1951* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1996), pp. 184–191.

<sup>191</sup> RGASPI, 495/14/185, National Conference, 11–12 October 1936. She additionally declared: ‘We Communists are going to do everything in our power to build up unity in the Co-ops just as it is built up in the trade unions’.

<sup>192</sup> *World News and Views*, 2 May 1942, p. 223; *DW*, 12 February 1945, 11 February 1950.

<sup>193</sup> *DW*, 11, 25 February, 10 May 1950.

<sup>194</sup> RGASPI, 495/14/185, National Conference, 11–12 October 1936.

this land of ours. She is a living reply to those people who still exist in Britain who would deny women the full and equal place they should occupy in progressive society'.<sup>195</sup>

Observing Brown a decade later, the young Alison McLeod offered a more irreverent assessment:

Who was Isabel Brown? From one point of view a fat old granny ... sitting peacefully in Alexandra Park knitting for her grandchildren with her placid husband, Ernest Brown, beside her. From another point of view, she was one of the party's leading orators who used to wax particularly eloquent on the need for mothers to demand peace. 'I have held my son's young body in my arms', she would cry, while the son, a grown man, would shrivel with embarrassment at the back of the hall.<sup>196</sup>

She was slow to reach the CC, joining Jessop and Llewellyn in 1939 on her appointment as National Women's Organiser; despite her abilities and reputation, after re-election in 1944 and 1945 she did not figure in the post-war years. From a skilled working-class background in South Shields, she qualified as an elementary school teacher at Sunderland Training College. A Sunday School teacher and chorister, reading about religion eroded her Anglican faith.<sup>197</sup> As a student in Labour College classes, she was transformed by the teaching of future Communist, Tommy Jackson: 'It was the turning point in my life. It was absolutely the spark that changed my life, my whole thinking.'<sup>198</sup> Active in the National Union of Teachers and influenced by the child poverty she encountered, she joined the Labour Party in 1918 – remaining active until expelled as a CPGB member in 1924 – and the ILP a year later. She became secretary of her local Labour women's section and a member of the constituency executive before breaking with the ILP over its attitude to the Comintern. She joined the CPGB in December 1920.<sup>199</sup>

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<sup>195</sup> CPA, CP/CENT/PERS/01/03, Isabel Brown, Tribute on her 50<sup>th</sup> Birthday, 1944.

<sup>196</sup> Alison McLeod, *The Death of Uncle Joe* (Woodbridge: Merlin Press, 1997), p. 78.

<sup>197</sup> Ancestry.co.uk, England, Select Births and Christenings, 1894; Census of England, 1901, 1911, Isabella Porter; Marriage Certificate, 28 January 1922; RGASPI, 495/198/12, Isabel Brown, 1 September, n.d. [1933]. In this questionnaire, she described her father as a 'semi-skilled labourer'. Her marriage certificate stated he was a joiner.

<sup>198</sup> Jim Fyrrh, 'Brown, Isabel (1894–1984)', in Joyce M. Bellamy, David E. Martin and John Saville (eds), *Dictionary of Labour Biography*, vol. IX (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1993), pp. 20–21.

<sup>199</sup> RGASPI, 495/198/12, Isabel Brown.

In 1922 she married fellow Communist, Ernest Brown, and the advent of their son Kenneth that December, did not impede her activity – although she later had an abortion in Moscow. She worked for the Russian government in Moscow in 1925–1926 – her husband was CPGB representative to the Comintern – as a political editor vetting materials for use in Soviet schools. The next two years saw her employed at the Agit-Prop Department in King Street. She undertook strenuous speaking schedules, particularly during the General Strike and mining lockout, and was twice sentenced to three months in prison. During Ernest’s service as district organiser in Scotland and Yorkshire, 1929–1931, she helped with the *Mineworker*, campaigned for the breakaway Red union, the United Mineworkers of Scotland, organised its Women’s Guilds, and stood as the Communist candidate in Kilmarnock and Motherwell. She spent nine months at the ILS in 1930–1931, interrupting her studies to take a prominent role in the textile strike in Yorkshire. In Autumn 1932 she became secretary of the WIR which became a launch pad for arguably her most productive work during the Popular Front period.<sup>200</sup> From 1934, she was a leader of the Committee for the Relief of Victims of Fascism, Aid for Spain, and the Spanish Medical Relief Committee. She was a driving force in building alliances and raising funds as well as a compelling voice on the platform.<sup>201</sup> She was less enthusiastic about her time as Women’s Organiser, reflecting, ‘privately it wasn’t my cup of tea’.<sup>202</sup> She was a parliamentary candidate in 1940 but her work was hampered by the war and an injury in an air raid which side-lined her for six months in 1940–1941. She stepped down in 1943 but continued to work at King Street, standing for Kilmarnock again in the 1951 general election but winding down in the post-war years.<sup>203</sup>

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<sup>200</sup> Ibid. Some couples chose abortion to free themselves for party service: May Hill, *Red Roses for Isabel* (London: May Hill, 1982), p. 14.

<sup>201</sup> Fyrth, op.cit., p. 23.

<sup>202</sup> WCML, Biographical Files, Brown to Ruth and Eddie Frow, n.d. [January 1978]. She advised women to oppose the war before June 1941 and support it after the German invasion of Russia: see Isabel Brown, *Women and the War* (CPGB, 1941), Isabel Brown, *Day of Victory* (CPGB, 1941) and Isabel Brown, *Women, Men, The Factory Front* (CPGB, 1942).

<sup>203</sup> Fyrth, op.cit., p. 24. Material in NA, KV2/3207, Isabel Brown, confirms she was Woman’s Organiser until 1943 rather than the commonly cited 1942.



She resented claims her career had been spent as ‘a paid functionary’, remembering with obeisance to proletarian morality and the breadwinner model of the family, ‘as Ernest was being paid the party wage, we felt we must only take that’.<sup>204</sup> She recollected that she refused payment for anti-fascist work and only drew a salary when women’s organiser. It was at the start of that period that her relationship with J.R. Campbell developed into an affair both did little to conceal, despite the qualms of the party leader:

Isabel and Pollitt discussed her ‘extremely funny but beautiful relationship with Johnny Campbell’. She and Johnny both wanted this to continue. The friendship was of four years standing but Johnny’s wife didn’t know nor did Ernest – that was part of the conflict. Isabel described herself as ‘a simple sort of person’. Harry told her she should either make the position permanent or finish it – he thought that any gossip about it would be bad for the party.<sup>205</sup>

Pollitt’s counsel went unheeded. But she was happy to sit in judgement on others. Standing with the party leadership in 1956, she raked over the alleged delinquencies of its critics. When it was observed that something could be dragged up about most people, ‘Isabel drew herself up and said, “Nothing could ever be dragged up about me”’.<sup>206</sup> It was certainly true politically. As one turn contradicted another, she embraced each with gusto. She identified socialism with Stalinism. Reflecting on her annual visits to the Bulgarian police state, she recollected, ‘In 1955, when Ernest and I were there we both said, “This is the kind of socialism we want”’. It is truer today a hundredfold.’<sup>207</sup> With Helen Crawford, she came closest to the ideal type of a woman cadre, determined on engagement in the general stream of Communist activity and more than the Scot represented the ‘honorary man’. But she was always ready to resort to the feminine stereotype to play her audiences and she was, with Turner and Smith, one of only three national women’s organisers across two decades.

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<sup>204</sup> WCML, Biographical Files, Brown to Ruth and Eddie Frow, n.d. [January 1978].

<sup>205</sup> NA, KV2/3207, Isabel Brown, Surveillance extract, 5 July 1943.

<sup>206</sup> McLeod, *op.cit.*, p. 242.

<sup>207</sup> WCML, Biographical Files, Brown to Ruth Frow, 20 October 1976. ‘I go to Bulgaria every year by invitation, it does not cost a farthing’: WCML, Biographical Files, Brown to Ruth and Eddie Frow, n.d. [January 1978]. Despite occasional perks and a stay at a sanatorium on the Black Sea, the correspondence suggests she spent the last years of a selfless life of service living on social security in a one-bedroom flat.

## Reflections

This essay in collective biography evokes a group of women quite distant from the turbulent engagement with ideas that characterised the Second International and early Comintern. Insight is limited by the available materials but we have been unable to recuperate anything similar to the missionary zeal on the woman question that characterised the years before 1920. Stalinism eviscerated the theory developed initially by Engels and Bebel and the practice of emancipation preached by Zetkin, Kollontai – and many more. The debilitation of the Comintern's specialist machinery in 1925–1926, the termination of the Zhenotdel in 1930, and finally, the abolition of the already desiccated Women's Department of the Comintern Executive in 1935, were institutional landmarks in the process. Despite everything, our group of 'ordinary Stalinists' continued to hold Russia and its rulers in high regard. For them, the Soviet Union remained, as it had been in the 1920s, the promised land of women's liberation. Crawford, who had lived through the early era and Duncan who experienced it, settled for the new orthodoxy. Younger members like Jessop, who had known little except Stalinism and on her own account had a tenuous grasp of history, endorsed each and every initiative that emanated from the Soviet Union. Her performance in 1939 provides a fascinating cameo of an approach to politics frequently hidden from history and there is little reason to doubt her comrades shared her thinking. Fighting oppression in a heartless world went hand in hand with validating it in Russia and China. The fight for women's liberation stopped at the 'socialist states'. It was hardly a single, indivisible struggle. Overall, the cohort bore the hallmarks of the Stalinist cadre: they were organisers and agitators for whom doctrine was settled and theory as a guide to action was to be found in the Comintern's current casuistic justification for the latest change of line. Executing it was the priority for practice.

They were not feminists and they were far from pre-occupied with oppressive gender roles. They transcended stereotyping as secretaries, stenographers and tea-makers, and apart from emotion on the platform there is little evidence they brought conventional 'feminine' characteristics to their party work. So far as we know, the struggle for women's liberation generally stopped at the door of the home. Assertiveness operated within limits. Cree and Smith apart, there was little attempt to critique the family; or conventional gender roles; or propagandise for birth control, abortion or sexual freedom. Despite domestic responsibilities, they insisted on their right to be politically active. But while the evidence is fragmentary, any consequent deficit in the burden of childcare seems to have fallen on friends or the extended family rather than their male partners. In the party they asserted their desire to be involved in mainstream activity but only rarely utilised their involvement in it to press issues such as women's second-rate citizenship of trade unions and exclusion from some. They accepted a secondary role and after the early days there was no sustained initiative to demand that men participate in work among women or educate men as to why they should do this. Silence signified and sealed it as a separate, secondary sphere.

Male communists were not inherently chauvinist. But few seem to have overcome their social conditioning and were minimally encouraged to do so. In documents composed with an eye to the Comintern and respectability, we catch only glimpses of the relations between the sexes in the party. Nonetheless, from what we know of it, the CPGB leaders' attempt to remove Turner – one of only two women on the CC – from office contrasts unfavourably with Zetkin's empathy with the predicament of an isolated, relatively inexperienced young woman operating in a male environment. Party leaders' response to her later pregnancy – have an abortion, in Russia not here, or get the sack – speaks volumes.<sup>208</sup> A

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<sup>208</sup> See also John McIlroy, 'Revolutionaries', in John McIlroy, Alan Campbell and Keith Gildart (eds), *Industrial Politics and the 1926 Mining Lockout: The Struggle for Dignity* (Cardiff: University of Wales, Press, 2004), pp. 289–290.

later conversation between the National Organiser, George Allison, and Pollitt about Brown is suggestive of the condescension and irritation assertive women could inspire in male comrades:

he did not think that Isabel was doing her work properly. She had not, for example, done anything about the Labour Party Women's Conference or the AEU Women's Conference until after they were both over ... they often had rows about the industrial side of women's questions and there was no love lost between them. 'She's a schoolteacher', said Allison, 'that's what she is, first, last and all the time' ... Burns and Robson agreed 'they could not stand Isabel' but thought she was nonetheless good at her job.<sup>209</sup>

If party leaders were familiar with Marxist theory in this area, they rarely expounded it and after 1935 discourse collapsed into reformist emphasis on 'women's issues'. Before and after 1935, Pollitt was a champion of the proletarian variant of 'the bourgeois family', established gender roles and respectability. The conventional mores of CPGB leaders dovetailed harmoniously with their determination to avoid any scent of scandal which would put the party in a bad light. Pollitt's main worry in his conversation with Brown about her liaison with Campbell related to the party not the unlikely lovers. In dealing with difficulties, his discourse was invariably that of the organisation-man: women, more often than not, were seen as the problem. There was, he observed, 'an amazing amount of domestic unhappiness in the party' but his main concern was not domestic discontent but its impact when it

becomes a definite retarding feature in the development of the work of our Party members ... It is a common thing to hear comrades declare, "We are looked upon as wife deserters, we are never at home" – and the consequence is that squabbles and strife develop and the wives of our own Party members become some of the worst advertising agents for the Communist Party.<sup>210</sup>

The leadership regularly received complaints about relationships, marital problems, even bigamy.<sup>211</sup> There seems little that was radical or innovative in terms of sexual politics in all this, indeed much of what went on would be recognisable in other political parties or

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<sup>209</sup> NA, KV2/3207, Isabel Brown, Intercepts, 30 June 1943, 10 June 1943.

<sup>210</sup> *Harry Pollitt Speaks* (London: CPGB, 1935), p. 42.

<sup>211</sup> RGASPI, 495/100/754, Pollitt to Robin Page Arnot, 27 February 1931.

mainstream organisations. But affairs, office romances and desertion of wives on the part of well-known Communists were seen as a party and sometimes even a disciplinary matter. When the Minority Movement leader, George Hardy, impregnated a confidential CPGB stenographer, Paddy Ayriss, the wife of a YCL activist in 1926, conventional outrage mingled with elements of concern for Hardy's wife. However, the over-riding concern appeared to be apprehension that the wife might take her story to the newspapers while Ayriss might reveal party secrets. With the offending pair under a cloud, matters were resolved by despatching them to Moscow but Hardy's standing in the CPGB never recovered.<sup>212</sup> In a *tour de force* of hypocrisy, CPGB leader William Rust, who had himself deserted his wife, informed Charlotte Haldane that the party would not tolerate her suing for divorce. The difference was that her husband, the celebrated geneticist J.B.S. Haldane, was a prized party asset as well as the fact that Charlotte was a woman while Bill was a man.<sup>213</sup> Despite sympathy for his wife, the philandering of the prominent party intellectual, Tom Wintringham, was tolerated until his latest partner, the American journalist Kitty Bowler, who might have been seen by some as a liberated woman but was labelled in Communist circles as 'a bourgeois tart', came under Comintern suspicion of harbouring Trotskyist sympathies. Wintringham's refusal to break off the relationship led to his expulsion from the CPGB.<sup>214</sup>

The CPGB was dominated by men but it was also a woman's world and a central part of this research is recuperation of female actors against a background where historians have uncovered too little about too many. Our survey unearthed and synthesised material on figures relatively little known, such as Eden, Cree, Duncan, Henrotte and Turner and

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<sup>212</sup> See John McIlroy and Alan Campbell, 'The Leadership of British Communism, 1923–1928: Pages from a Prosopographical Project', *Labor History*, 62: 2 (2021), p. 225.

<sup>213</sup> Charlotte Haldane, *Truth Will Out* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1949), p. 176.

<sup>214</sup> RGASPI, 545/6/216, Tom Wintringham, Report – Kitty Bowler by THW, 4 July 1937; *DW*, 7 July 1938; Hugh Purcell, *The Last English Revolutionary: Tom Wintringham, 1898–1949* (Stroud: Sutton, 2004), pp. 112–114, 123–124, 141–142, 161–162.

provided new readings of Brown, Crawford, Jessop and Montefiore. Of the 18 CC representatives who served in our period, three remained names, illustrating the problems that arise in this kind of research. Mrs Thomas, a pleasant looking woman of perhaps thirty years stared at us from photographs of the 1920 provisional committee but evaded numerous attempts to discover more about her. Miss Phillipson proved even more elusive while all that could be gleaned about Betty Jenkinson was that she was a Sheffield factory worker unable to attend what should have been her inaugural CC. Nonetheless, we negotiated Lawrence Stone's fault lines: our biographies covered more than 80% of our chosen population. They filled gaps and went beyond litanies of names to brief lives.

The study confirms that women were significantly under-represented on the CC: they never comprised more than 14% of the committee and the percentage in the leadership was usually smaller than the percentage of women in the party as a whole. Even within these parameters, high turnover militated against the continuity and assembly of experience indispensable to creating cadres. Reporting on the position in Moscow in 1937, Arnot reflected, 'there had not been a proper development of cadres' although CPGB leaders and the Cadres Committee 'had looked for women comrades in order to strengthen the number of women comrades on the CC'.<sup>215</sup> Bob Stewart, chair of that year's Congress Credentials Committee confirmed the existence of stabs at informal positive discrimination: 'with regard to women members of the Committee we are still seriously perturbed ... that we do not seem to make headway ... We cannot select women at random ... [but] this Congress should strongly recommend to the Central Committee to explore every possibility of adding at the earliest possible moment more women.'<sup>216</sup> It represented too little too late and the position did not significantly improve.

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<sup>215</sup> RGASPI, 495/14/17, Marty Commission, Meeting of the Secretariat on English Question, 26 September 1937.

<sup>216</sup> RGASPI, 495/14/228, Report of Credentials Committee, 14<sup>th</sup> CPGB Congress, 1937.

We get the sense that given existing social relations, active women themselves were often reluctant to serve or only willing to serve briefly on a male-dominated CC. On a more assertive note, of the 11 women in our group in a relationship with a Communist man, in 8 cases the woman was the more politically prominent. The party expressed pride in their activism, noting in one case: 'The advent of two children was not allowed to interfere seriously with Mrs Pollitt's public work. She is one of those exceptional women who manage to make a success of the dual role.'<sup>217</sup> By the 1930s, 'having it all' meant for the CPGB children *and* political activity.

Bruley emphasised antipathy among women cadres to work among women. The position was powerfully expressed in the sentiments of Llewellyn quoted above. Yet both at the time she spoke and during her entire career she took a leading role in activity among women. It can be said of all our subjects that at some point in their political lives they engaged in this gender-defined area. Even Brown, who participated primarily in mainstream activities, devoted a lot of time to 'women's work' in the 1930s and served as National Women's Officer into the 1940s. Whatever their discontents, their loyalty to the CPGB remained strong. Only one out of 15 quit the party, which compares favourably with the fidelity quotient of male CC members. Any calls for positive discrimination, autonomy or conciliation with feminism have left no trace. Communist women too were oppressed. Yet they have left little evidence of any deep-seated dissatisfaction with their secondary role or disillusion at the party's failure to advance the liberation of women. Discussing the situation in the Soviet Union, Goldman reflects that the tragedy was not simply that the Russian regime destroyed the possibility of female emancipation but that it continued to present itself as 'the true heir to the original socialist vision'.<sup>218</sup> Cut off from the earlier debates and ideas

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<sup>217</sup> DW, 21 March 1939.

<sup>218</sup> Wendy Z. Goldman, *Women, The State and Revolution: Soviet Family Policy and Social Life, 1917-1936* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 343.

about emancipation that had informed the revolution of 1917, Russian women ‘learned to call this “socialism” and to call this “liberation”’.<sup>219</sup> Sadly, the same went for the Comintern, the CPGB and for Communist women leaders in Britain between the wars.

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No potential conflicts of interest was reported by the author(s)

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<sup>219</sup> Ibid.