

The Leaflet.. by Michael Cockett

My mother used to say that my father appeared from nowhere. He arrived in nineteen forty seven in a small town near Blackburn and got a job at the Mullard's factory making valves and other electronic equipment. Photographs of the time show him to be a tall rather stooping figure almost as though he was trying to hide his height. There is no photograph in which he is facing the camera. Even the wedding picture shows him turned towards my mother making her the focus and revealing as little as possible of himself. It was the only picture of the wedding and there was no evidence of anyone else being present. When my sisters and I arrived he became the family photographer and was a presence only because we knew he had been behind the camera.

At the time we did not question the strangeness of our family – no grandparents, no aunts or uncles, no cousins but many friends.

My mother has been dead for ten years but my father died just one month ago. He had lived with us for the last two years of his life in a small apartment we had built to accommodate him. During the day he was his usual self-effacing self but at night increasingly his sleep was disturbed by recurring dreams and nightmares. Sometimes he would wake shouting incoherently. Sometimes he would scream and thrash around in his bed until we came and calmed him. It was exhausting both for him and for us.

After the war many young men returned refusing to speak of their experiences and my father was one of the most reticent. We speculated, of course. At one time I convinced my school chums that he was a secret service agent and was still sworn to secrecy. This story was given some credence by the fact that he was an absolute wiz with radios. He'd slip the back off one and fiddle with the valves and check connections and occasionally heat up his soldering iron in the fire to repair a joint and miraculously the radio would once again connect us to the wider world and the battles between those who wanted the Light Programme and those who wanted radio Luxembourg recommenced.

One time, in the fifties, he came home from work with a prototype transistor radio, a Heath Robinson device with no valves but with what we now know as semiconductors. It was remarkable in that it could pick up radio signals but it was linked to a battery bigger than itself and the sound quality left much to be desired. Earlier my credit had been sky high when he brought home a television set which he had built himself at work and we watched the now famous nineteen fifty three cup final in which Stanley Matthews gained his first and only cup final medal playing for Blackpool against Bolton Wanderers. I was only five years old at the time but the memory is vivid of a room crowded with small boys and their fathers with my mother passing round ginger biscuits and pop. No beer was ever allowed in the house, which, I presume, took the shine off the occasion for some of the men.

I am describing all this because what follows can only be fully understood if you have some understanding of how my father appeared to us, a quiet man, a loving father and husband and some said a brilliant and inventive electronic engineer. One further mystery was that it was rumoured that he had been offered promotion many times at Mullard's but declared himself happy with his inventive work and he refused any higher responsibility.

In his last months, when the nightmares began, speculation about his wartime experiences was revived. Some horrors, which could not have been associated with his post war life, were tormenting him. Although we had discounted the secret service possibilities by now there was still much room for conjecture.

He had always been an avid reader of newspapers. Right up to the end when he could no longer read for himself he asked me to read them to him. The tales of financial meltdown particularly engaged his attention. He would mutter and shake his head. I could make no sense of the muttered utterances and he would not repeat them.

I was with him when he died. He was calm at last and he indicated that he had something to say to me. His last words he whispered. I will not tell you what they were at this stage since at the time they made no sense.

The reading of the will produced only one surprise. As he had always said they would be, his assets, such as they were, were divided equally between his children to be passed on as they thought fit to grandchildren and great grandchildren. The surprise was a key to a safety deposit box, which was bequeathed to me. There was a rider. I was to examine the contents of the box alone and then share it with my siblings. My sisters were not used to being placed in the second rank but they agreed to honour our father's request.

I had never had cause to use or access a safety deposit box before and I could not help the sensation of somehow being in a work of fiction as the box was retrieved at the bank and I opened it. Inside was a box file carefully bound with an instruction on the outside in my father's hand. I was to take the file home and examine the contents in the order in which they had been placed. The mystery deepened, though giving careful instructions was actually typical of my father.

When I arrived home I found the whole family gathered, less a few grandchildren who had better things to do. I showed them my father's instructions and reluctantly they had to let me retreat to my office and close the door.

I slit the tape holding the file closed and opened the lid. Inside all was, of course, neatly arranged and I had to resist the urge to rummage through to gain a quick impression of the contents. I was going to honour my father's memory by revealing the contents in the order in which he intended.

On top of the pile was a photograph. It was of a soldier in world war one uniform in the doorway of a house and he was leaning on the doorpost and smoking a cigarette. He was looking at the camera but it was impossible to read the expression on his face. It was a blank stare. On the back of the photograph was a name, George Aldridge, nothing more. I stared at the photograph but could see no family resemblance. The next item was a folded yellow piece of paper. It turned out to be a letter from the front sent by an officer. I reproduce it here.

Dear Mrs. Aldrige

I regret very much to inform you that your husband Pte. G. Aldrige, No. 71326 of this Company was killed in action on the night of the 21st instant. Death was instantaneous and without any suffering.

The Company was taking part in an attack and your husband's gun team was one of those which advanced against the enemy. The attack was successful, and all guns reached and established new positions. Later in the night the enemy shelled our lines and one shell fell on your husband's gun killing him and wounding a comrade.

It was impossible to get his remains away and he lies in a soldier's grave where he fell

I and the C.O. and all the Company deeply sympathise with you in your loss. Your husband always did his duty and now has given his life for his country. We all honour him, and I trust you will feel some consolation in remembering this. His effects will reach you via the Base in due course. In true sympathy....".

I looked back at the photograph and was assailed by the image of that body blown so much to pieces that nothing could be recovered. If I felt such an emotion what must it have been for Mrs. Aldrige. This was my first inkling that the story contained in this box was not going to be easy.

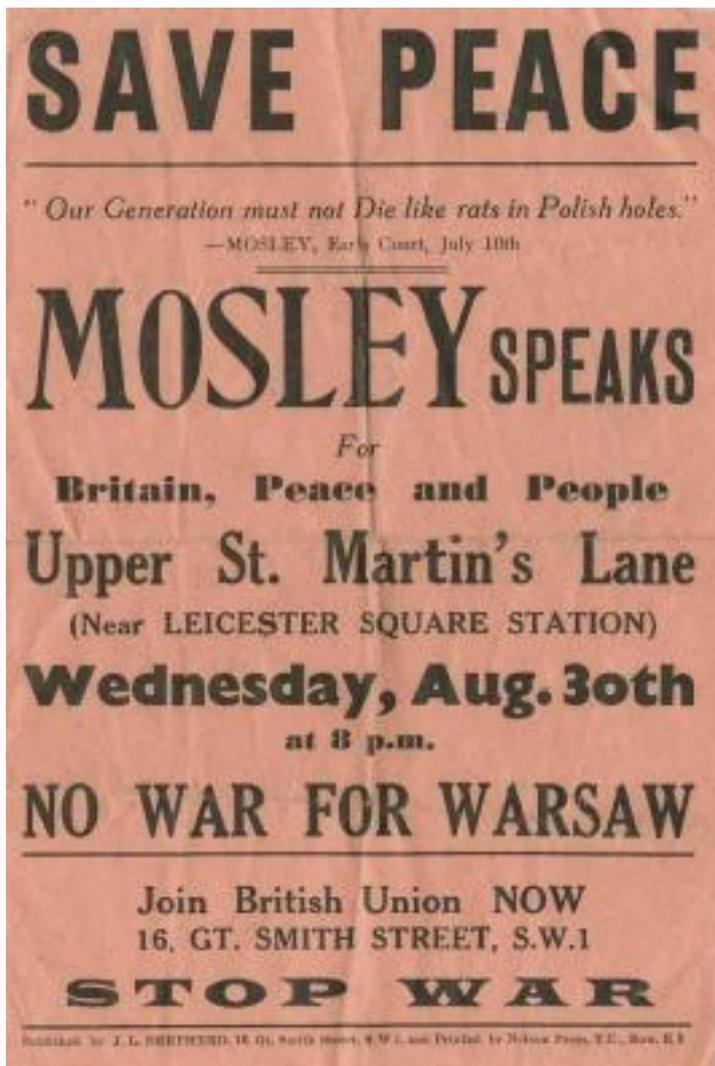
Below the letter was a plain piece of paper and I realised that it was my father's intention that the story should be revealed piece by piece. Under the paper was a marriage certificate. It was dated 1919 and recorded the marriage of Ethel Aldrige, widow, to Francis Thompson. The next layer was a birth certificate - born to Ethel and Francis Thompson, a son, Francis George, the date 21st May 1920. This was the first clue. The date was the date my father always claimed as his birthday.

Under the next plain sheet was a series of school reports. I will not go into detail but Francis George Thompson was something of a child genius. The final sheet was a letter dated nineteen thirty six from Magdalen College Oxford offering him a place the following year. He was just sixteen.

With a surge of pride I looked forward to reading of his Oxford career but the next sheet revealed a photograph of a group of women marching down the road carrying a large banner with the word PEACE emblazoned across it. There was a circle pencilled round one of the women with the label 'mother'. I had watched the programme "Who do you think you are?" on television and wondered at the displays of emotion by the subjects when confronted with an unknown ancestor. Why the emotion for someone unknown and long dead? Now I understood. I was in no doubt. I was looking into the face of my grandmother, she who had received the letter from the front, who had given birth to my father and who was now marching for peace.

When my eyes cleared I found that attached to the photograph was a faded newspaper cutting. It reported that a Mrs Elthel Thompson had been convicted of obstructing the king's highway and that she had been bound over to keep the peace - a small item and how ironic. Why I, who had had no influence on the situation, should feel proud I do not know but that was my overriding emotion.

I turned over the next page and stared. The next item was a leaflet. I have reproduced it below.



Save Peace I understood but Mosley? Oswald Mosley, the friend of Hitler and Mussolini, the hater of Jews, organiser of the attempt to march down Cable Street? All this had been part of the folklore of children in the nineteen fifties. Hate figures were plentiful and although Oswald Mosley was relatively minor he was there with Lord Haw Haw as a combined bogie man and figure of fun.

With some trepidation I removed the next blank sheet. Underneath was a photograph. As I feared, it was of Oswald Mosley marching between his henchmen giving a Nazi salute. To the left, in the foreground, were two teenage boys carrying drums. The head of one of the boys was circled in pencil. There was no caption but the implication was clear. My father had been a Blackshirt and he wanted me to know it.



It is difficult to describe the complex of emotions that assailed me at that moment. I wanted to disbelieve what I had seen but I had been left no room for doubt. The man I so admired whose calm perceptiveness I so wished I could claim for myself had in his youth subscribed to a creed, which was used eventually to justify the evil of the gas chambers. I simply did not understand.

I feel I should say at this point that I am not political in any way. Although I do so, I find it difficult to vote, finding little to choose between the various parties. I am the archetypal floating voter driven by the impulses of the time and the impact on me and mine of current circumstances. As with so many others the current state of the economy makes me angry. I have worked hard all my life and am recently retired. I have an adequate but not overgenerous pension. It is the following generations who are feeling the full impact of the financial gambles of the super rich. My eldest son at the age of forty-three has been made redundant. The flood of foreign workers has made it all but impossible for the most needy of my grandchildren to get a job. The government seems powerless to do anything except continue to kowtow to big business. As I said to my father after reading some further financial horror story from the paper, there must surely be another way.

This was shortly before he died. It was now that I recollected his final words. He had beckoned me to come close and he whispered in my ear the words "Try to understand and beware."

These thoughts rampaged through my mind as I stared at the next blank sheet covering I knew not what devastating revelation. Eventually I slid the paper aside. Under it, the penultimate item in the box was a slim volume. On the cover was a picture of Oswald Mosley in mid Hitlerian rant. Behind him was a red flag emblazoned with the fascist emblem of a lightning bolt on a blue background. Behind the image of the flag is a crowd of men and women, a number making the straight-armed Nazi salute. The title of the book was "Oswald Mosley's Tomorrow We Live. British Union Policy 3d"

It felt unclean even to touch such a book but it was clearly my father's intention that it should be read.

I lifted the book out of the box and turned the first yellowing and decaying pages. If you wish for more detail you must read it for yourselves. I read from cover to cover. It begins with an analysis of what he calls 'Financial Democracy' a democracy that does not respond to the needs of the people but to the needs of the big business and international finance. It rails at the impotence of government to take action, hampered always by an opposition that aims to delay and question all decisions. Big business, he says, is only

interested in the greatest profit and will therefore pursue the cheapest labour wherever that is to be found. The effect is mass unemployment and low wages. Free international markets oppress the workers and their families.

I need hardly say that all this came as something a shock. Writing in the nineteen thirties he could have been writing an editorial in a current national daily. Indeed I must confess that his analysis chimed well with my own perceptions of the current crisis.

So what did Mosley advocate as a solution to these problems. Here he adopts the tone of a sort of super logic. Imagine Enoch Powell if you remember him. His ideas, he implies, are so clear and obvious that the great movement of National Socialism will be swept to power and the voice of the people will at last be heard. In his utopia there will be no opposition in parliament only a government made of the most competent in each field of endeavour. Doctors will elect doctors, technologists will elect technologists, artists will elect artists knowing that the best of their professions will now be running the country for the good of all. Parliament made up of representatives of local authorities will meet occasionally to approve or otherwise the governments progress. If voted against, the government will fall and the King, whose powers will be enhanced, will invite other ministers to take over. International free trade will end. There will be a ring fence round the empire which will trade with itself, raw materials being bought from the colonies on the undertaking that the colonies will buy a quota of manufactured goods from Great Britain.

And the Jews? Well the Jewish religion will be respected but since they are usurers, the core of big finance, they have no place in the new empire. They must be found a home where they can become a nation again. Not in Palestine, of course, since that is already home to the Arabs but in some unnamed fertile place as yet uninhabited.

It seems to be such nonsense now. So how did my super intelligent father become embroiled? Can I do as he asked and try to understand? Perhaps I can see that his mother's influence and the promise of peace may have been the original drive. Perhaps as such a bright young man he saw the inadequacies of his contemporaries. Perhaps he believed the dream of a rational politics run by technocrats and, of course, it is hindsight that tells us that fascism led to one of the greatest horrors the world has ever known. Whatever influenced him at the time he certainly rejected the fascist siren call in later life. How this happened, it seems, I am not to know unless I begin to research the life of Francis George Thompson and try to discover how he became Frank Wainwright, father of four children who loved him, who must now try to understand.

There was one further item in the box. I removed the blank sheet covering it. It was their marriage certificate. Frank Wainwright had married Rebecca Levi. Though neither had shown any religious allegiance in their life together the woman he had married and whom he always called Robbie, was Jewish.

I leant back in my chair and rubbed my eyes. When I refocused I saw the scatter of newspapers covering my desk. It is one of my indulgences since I retired to take the papers into my office for a quiet read and a mid morning doze. The papers were full of stories of the current crisis and associated protests. In Italy an unelected technocrat has appointed a cabinet of unelected experts. Greece is staggering from crisis to crisis and something dangerously close to dictatorship by financiers is emerging. Neo Nazis are elected to parliaments in Austria and the Netherlands. There are images of protest movements in New York and Rome being violently dispersed by riot police. At home the City of London, that great bastion of international unregulated finance has evicted

protesters from Paternoster Square. Our father's last word was 'beware'. Yes, beware. But what can one do?

I have written this account for my sisters and for our children and grandchildren who must bear the burden.

David Wainright 25<sup>th</sup> March 2012

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