

***Dulcie Yelland, 1907-1987. A Socialist of Our Times***

**Charles Yelland**

**Gipton History Group, Leeds, 1988, pp143, £2.50**

This is an affectionate personal tribute by a retired printer to his late wife. It tells with wry humour and rich irony many reminiscences of their personal and political lives from the 1930s onwards. Here the picture is not of the Leeds working class deferentially accepting its lot, but of struggle in the labour, trade union and co-operative movements, centred on those past decades during which Labour could still hope to govern. Dulcie's friends will not forget her humour and liveliness, of which the writer gives numerous reminders.

Yet, does not a book which opens with a foreword by Denis Healey, immediately followed by Dulcie's favourite quotation from Trotsky ('Civilisation can be saved only by the proletarian revolution') suggest unresolved problems?

Historians will do well not to overlook this unpretentious account. The author tells how Dulcie sympathised in the late 1930s with the Trotskyist view of the USSR as a degenerated workers' state. But that is not the whole story. Dulcie was one of the early recruits whom Mary Archer won to the local cell of the Militant Group, which was then made up almost entirely of industrial workers, few of whose names history has recorded. She denounced the Moscow Trials when you needed courage to do so. But she understood that they raised political and not exclusively 'moral' questions, and campaigned as a Trotskyist, in the Labour Party, to ensure that the independence of the working class was not undermined by supporters either of 'official' Labour or of the Popular Front, or harnessed to the war aims of British imperialism.

Chapter Four does indeed describe, with relish, how during the Second World War, she organised into the trade union movement a series of engineering workplaces in Leeds, how wage rises were won and victimisations blocked, and how a notoriously anti-union boss had a heart attack. Her reputation as a shop steward lived on for many years.

But it omits to mention how she became a target for the Communist Party's historic pamphlet, *Clear out Hitler's Agents*, which in the event did not in the slightest weaken her support among her fellow workers.

She joined the Revolutionary Socialist League in 1938, supporting the leadership of Denzil Dean Harber and Starkey Jackson and, in the fusion of Spring 1944, joined the Revolutionary Communist Party, where she continued her mass activities.

Dulcie's understanding of workers' lives and minds contributed much to her immediate circle of comrades. After the war she tended, like many women militants, to turn back to family life after the separation and hardships; and, at the same time, the struggles among the Trotskyists for theoretical clarity in the largely unforeseen conditions of the late 1940s were going down channels where she could not follow.

Unswerving in her sympathy for Trotsky's ideas, she refused to be uprooted from the activity of her local Labour Party, in which she became absorbed for the benefit of the advancement of others in the apparatus rather than that of her own ideas. How often was she to hear that she could have commanded eminence - had she but had the 'right' rather than the 'left' ideas!

Chapter Six is a lively account of how Dulcie supported Vyvyan Mendelson's motion at the 1957 Labour Party Conference. This sought to pledge a future Labour government to refuse to test,

manufacture or use nuclear weapons, and took on not only the traditional pro-American right, but Aneurin Bevan and the Stalinists as well - but the book does not mention that the motion, from the Norwood Labour Party, was initiated by the 'Healyites', or that its attempt to place the workers' movement in the leadership of the struggle against nuclear weapons was quickly followed by the interposition of CND.

It must be said that Dulcie, like her women comrades, did not let herself be over-impressed by leaders of either gender, however eminent or pretentious. There was no petty-bourgeois feminism among them. They took particular notice of the struggles of women workers, and they did not let men dominate them. But they saw the main enemy in the capitalist class and not in men as a gender.

On this political basis, Dulcie contributed frequently to the *Newsletter* in the later 1950s. The 'turn' of the Socialist Labour League (SLL) in 1964 out of the Labour Party was incomprehensible to her, but she continued to help the local comrades until the exclusion of close friends associated with Alan Thornett led her to distance herself from Healy's apparatus. She had already become increasingly suspicious, not merely of the sectarian evolution of the SLL's politics, but of the fabricated accounts of the history of Trotskyism in Britain on which he based his claim to predominance. From personal experience, Dulcie knew that these accounts were false, because they wrote out of history both the Workers International League (WIL) majority and all the experience of the tendency to which she had belonged.

Dulcie has been greatly missed by many, not least among militants far younger than herself. In 1983 she was one of the principal speakers at the memorial meeting in Leeds for Mary Archer, who had been her close personal friend for 45 years - and at least half of her audience were under thirty!

Charlie's book is interestingly written, well produced and very reasonably priced. It is not merely a piece of local working class history 'from below'; it raises questions which some may find at first disturbing and may feel moved to follow up. Dulcie may have relied heavily on her precious gifts of intuition and imaginative sympathy, which, alas, by themselves are no substitute for Marxism. But the spark which was ready in 1937-38 for Trotsky's ideas to light, never burnt out.

**John Archer**