**Mother, Mister McLardy and the ‘low dishonest decade’.**

Here it is! I knew I had it somewhere. I’ve got drawers full of these family snaps and Victoria keeps nagging me to sort them out and put them into an album so they won’t get damaged. I should of course, she’s quite right. I was never one for bossing my children around but she seems to have picked up the habit from somewhere. ‘Mummy you can’t manage in this big old place any more, why don’t you get yourself a nice little apartment?’ ‘Mummy, you can’t go out in that cardigan. What will people think?’ ‘Mummy, why don’t you put these photos in a nice album so we’ll know who everybody is once you’re gone?’ That’s really the function of daughters isn’t it? To nag their mothers once they’re no longer in a position to fight back.

Actually, it’s perfectly clear who this photo is of. My father wrote it on the back in faint pencil and you can still make it out. ‘Hetty & Sarah 1933’. Hetty, my mother, was born in 1908 so she’d be 25 or thereabouts and there I am, about eighteen months old, sitting on her knee. My father had taken the photo of course. He made his living, such as it was, as a photographer. He did portraits, weddings and so forth, but the irony is that although we have an unusually good collection of family photographs, he isn’t in any of them. This one of mother and me is one of his typical portrait types, probably getting us to sit for him while he got his lighting set-up ready for a paying customer. Mother is holding me on her knee as I say, and it looks like I’m a bit reluctant, although maybe that’s just me projecting my present feelings onto the picture in front of me. She has a black beret on her head and is dressed in a long black skirt and what looks to be a man’s shirt, also black, buttoned up to her neck. I can’t be sure about the fashions in 1933 but at first glance there’s something definitely odd about the shirt. If you look a bit closer however, all is explained.

Of course the photo’s in black and white and it’s a bit grainy after all these years, but there, quite visible on mother’s upper left arm is an arm band, slightly lighter in shade than the black shirt. It’s red actually, and there’s a white circle in the centre with a sort of zig-zag lightening flash device, in darkish blue, standing out against the white background. Got it yet? Yes, my mother was a member of the British Union of Fascists, proud supporter of Sir Oswald Mosely and proud mother of yours truly. She’s looking at me rather than at the camera, although motherly pride doesn’t really come into it. She’s looking at the back of my head as if something’s wrong with it and she was probably fed up of being dragged away from Jane Austen or Georgette Heyer.

She was far from stupid, my mother. I think I should make that clear otherwise this might look like a bit of a hatchet job on the poor woman. It’s just that, as the youngest of three, her parents and her older brother and sister expected very little of her. She was considered ‘delicate’ and although she did very well at school, she was marked down as ‘highly strung’ and it was thought better if she avoided the pressures of the dreaded School Certificate so she left, much to her disgust, at the age of fourteen. At home, she was wrapped in cotton wool a bit and things like getting a job or helping out around the house were just not for her. Her mother had died in the flu outbreak in 1918 and Hannah, the eldest of the three, looked after their father, dealt with all the housework, cooked all the meals and more or less everything else thereafter. Mother meanwhile drifted around the house, often with a book in her hand, getting in Hannah's way and, so Hannah’s daughter told me years later, frequently claiming to be ‘exhausted’ and collapsing back onto the sofa with her eyes closed. I know nothing about how or when she met my father, although it looks a bit improbable from this distance in time.

But again, trying to be fair, she was well read, she took an interest in what was going on around her and held some strong views, which got her on the move and out of the house from time to time. As a teenager she had been active in the campaign for women’s suffrage, not in violent protest or hunger strikes or anything like that, but she went on marches and did quite a lot to get the Conservative Ladies Committee to talk about the subject. Because that was her second great passion – the Conservative Party. You might think that traditional tories wouldn’t be that keen on the suffragettes, but I was surprised to learn when I got older that there was strong support among women of all political persuasions. Our local Conservative Association had its Ladies Committee and it had passed lots of resolutions calling on the local MP to support the campaign to give women the vote on equal terms to men. Mother and Hannah were members of this committee for a while, although I always found it hard to imagine mother getting worked up enough to make rousing speeches on the subject *à la* Mrs Pankhurst. The local MP, Colonel Masterson, was a Conservative, and pretty sympathetic to the cause apparently. He certainly voted the right way when they changed the law in 1928 and reduced the voting age for women to twenty-one, the same as for men. Now I think about it, and setting aside Masterson's political views, mother’s enthusiasm for the Conservative cause was probably down to the fact that she fancied him like mad. He sounds like a smooth bastard, because all the women thought he walked on water.

And then, sometime in the early 1930’s, just before this photo was taken I suppose, someone told mother about a public meeting organised by local supporters of the British Union of Fascists, who were reported to be very sound on women’s rights. Mother doubted that they’d have anything to say on that subject that wasn’t already accepted wisdom among the Conservative Ladies, but she was tempted because she had read something in the Daily Mail about this new party and its charismatic leader that rang a different bell altogether with her. She followed the editorial line of the Daily Mail pretty slavishly in those days, feeling that the country was going to hell in handcart and that a lot of it was down to a lack of robust patriotism among certain sections of the community. While things like equal rights for women were important, the paper argued, so also was the need for people to defend British values and fight those who sought to slacken the country’s moral fibre. There was even some sort of “keep fit” message that went along with this apparently as we were all getting physically as well as morally flabby. Most notable however, was the suggestion that Herr Hitler was not far wrong in pointing out the debilitating and corrupting influence on his country of the Jewish members of its population and that there may be a lesson in this for the rest of us.

Now while mother was a big fan of Colonel Masterson, she felt he hadn’t spoken out enough about the country’s decline. Strikes at home, the Dominions showing us less respect abroad, small businesses (like her father’s) going under all the time, who was to blame for all this? Mother was pretty sure she knew the answer. She was certainly not alone in her attitude to the Jews during the 1930’s, although it wasn’t the done thing to talk too openly about one’s prejudices in that matter. But looking back, I find it a bit odd because there weren’t many Jewish people around our way when I was a child, and they mainly worked in shops or ran little businesses that everyone used quite happily, without giving any thought to race or religion. I think mother’s objections weren’t related to racial or religious differences particularly; she simply thought that Jews must have divided loyalties, rather like Roman Catholics and Communists, about whom she also harboured dark suspicions. If you professed any sort of allegiance to Rome, or Jerusalem, or Moscow of course, you couldn’t possibly be a patriotic British person. In Mother’s scheme of things patriotism required straightforward, unquestioning loyalty, in descending order of importance, to The King and Queen, the Conservative and Unionist Party, the Church of England and Lord Rothermere, who owned The Daily Mail.

The Daily Mail and its noble owner, and indeed many of its readers, were right behind Sir Oswald Mosely. His movement had got off to a flying start in London and was looking to grow in other parts of the country. Sir Oswald, another handsome toff by the way, like Colonel Masterson, announced that he was going to attend a series of rallies in ‘our great northern cities’ later in the year, and people were invited to organise groups of like-minded patriots in their localities and arrange fund-raising events to whip up some support for the great man. Some local head-case named Frank McLardy answered the call in our neighbourhood and posted handbills everywhere, featuring a flattering photo of Sir Oswald, staring in ‘Man of Destiny’ fashion into the middle distance and inviting all those who loved their country to attend a meeting. Yes, that was his name, McLardy. You can look him up if you want, he was quite a character as it turns out. He ran a small chain of chemist shops and when the war came along he quickly joined up, then deliberately got himself taken prisoner-of-war and offered his services as a spy to the Waffen SS. I think he just avoided being strung up as a traitor after the war.

That came much later of course, so back to mother. She found herself on the front row of the audience in a room over a pub, where they all sang ‘God Save the King’ and McLardy spouted some guff about our Hebrew friends and ‘This Sceptre’d Isle’ before asking everyone to turn towards a big picture of Moseley on the wall, alongside pictures of the King and Queen, and shout ‘Heil Oswald!!’ I may be making that last bit up, there’s something a like it in one of Wodehouse’s books I think, (‘Heil Spode!’ comes to mind), but in any event mother signed up in a fit of patriotic fervour. The armbands were handed out and then McLardy invited ‘the ladies, and any gentlemen over the age of forty’ to withdraw to the lounge bar in the pub below, while he had a separate word with the younger, fitter male contingent. He needed to alert them, he said, to the likelihood of having to defend the cause with fists and perhaps the odd cosh or knuckle duster, if anyone should happen to have such a thing about their person.

On her way out of the pub, mother was given a box of leaflets and told to hand them out and organise meetings for anyone who might show an interest. In her innocence she took a few of these flyers along to the next meeting of the Conservative Ladies and while everyone gave her the silent treatment publicly, three or four crept up to her afterwards and said she was on the right track – country in the shit, (although I suppose the Ladies might have phrased it differently), the need for the smack of firm government, Hitler not as bad as he was made out to be, all that sort of thing. This emboldened her to organise a meeting in our house and the rest of the family, taken aback by this sudden, untypical burst of energy I suspect, were roped in to help. Hannah was press-ganged into doing the catering and felt sufficiently sorry for mother that she agreed to stay and hand out the tea and biscuits. She told father to take me to her brother Bob’s place and leave me there overnight, which he eagerly agreed to do. Seeing a chance to avoid the meeting, he insisted that he should stay overnight with me so that he could bring me back the following day. My grandfather, also frantically making arrangements to be otherwise engaged on the night in question, printed off some slips of paper on his hand-cranked press in the basement, giving the address, date and time for mother’s catchily-entitled “*What Next for Britain?* Discussion Group” and inserted them into McLardy’s leaflets. Before the Depression forced grandad to shut up shop, he had had a little printing business and the fact that he was now reduced to printing the odd wedding invitations, raffle tickets and whist drive scoring cards for church socials was a national scandal in mother’s eyes and proof positive that the country was going to the dogs. Did Sir Oswald and Frank McLardy have the answers? she wondered.

Now, reports differ about what happened next and I had to dig very hard to get mother and Hannah to spill the beans, but apparently some very rough-looking characters showed up to her meeting, along with a handful of genteel but demented folk from the Conservative Association, and things very rapidly got out of hand. There were clearly - how shall I put this? – some social class differences on show, leading to a’robust’ debate about what do to about the country’s ills. In fact, it was pretty obvious why the meeting had descended so quickly into chaos: some of those who turned up had done so with a view to disrupting proceedings and, with a bit of luck, giving one or two fascists a good kicking. When the pushing and shoving started, mother and Hannah had to hide in the kitchen with the digestives and the catering-sized teapot, before the action spontaneously spilt out onto the street. When this happened, mother managed to slam the door on it all and retreat to the living room, where she broke the habit of a lifetime and tried to clear up some of the mess. Meanwhile, one of the neighbours ran around the corner to the police station, bringing two bobbies back with them who managed to shoo everybody away without too much difficulty. At least that was mother’s version of events for a long time. What she didn’t mention was that the same two policemen came around the following morning and arrested her for ‘causing an affray’.

It was years before I got mother to talk about this properly as the whole family had obviously taken a vow of silence on the subject in the hope it would just go away. Grandad, my father and Hannah rallied around of course and when her case came up before the magistrate they all went with her. She sat in the well of the court, tearful and mortified with embarrassment, while the police argued that she had set the whole thing up with the intention of starting some sort of pro-British, anti-everyone else riot. Mother was dreading have to stand up and explain herself but, as it turned out, the magistrate who was also the Borough Librarian, just happened to be a close friend of my grandfather and told mother that unless she actually wished to say something, she could stay in her seat. I think we can agree that there was a bit of a conflict of interest going on here, but it didn’t seem to bother anyone. I suppose people just took a more relaxed view of these things in those days. Anyway, unsurprisingly, but not unreasonably in the end I think, she was let off with a caution.

Huge relief all round of course, but then as mother, Hannah and her father were coming down the front steps of the court building, there was a reporter from the local paper standing there, alongside Frank McLardy with a gang of, let’s call them ‘associates’. They all had their black shirts and their armbands on and one of them was waving a BUF flag. McLardy grabbed mother’s arm and brusquely pushed a BUF armband up over the sleeve of her coat before forcing the journalist in front of her and shouting at him, “Ask her how it feels to be dragged before the courts for organising a perfectly peaceful exercise of free speech! Ask her what it feels like to be treated like a common criminal because she brings patriots together to defend their country against its enemies!” Predictably enough, mother fainted. Hannah and my father carried her back inside, while the Blackshirts started chanting something outside on the steps. This is turn attracted a few passers-by who didn’t like the look of McLardy and his pals and started hurling insults and then things that were somewhat more tangible than harsh words. One of them threw half a brick at the fearless leader and he had to retire hurt. The skirmish that followed did get a mention in the local paper apparently.

Meanwhile mother was collapsed with her eyes closed on a settee in the office of the court clerk. She came to pretty quickly and was ushered to the door straight away, as everyone was anxious to get her off the premises a.s.a.p. but grandad insisted that they be allowed to leave by the rear entrance to avoid the unpleasantness going on outside. The staff warned them that this would involve passing through the corridors where defendants awaiting trial were located in the holding cells and mother fainted a second time at the sound of the word ‘cells’. While they were hauling her back onto the sofa, the Borough Librarian materialised, wanting to know what all the fuss was about. He nodded to my grandad and quickly told the court clerk to install everyone in the “Magistrates’ Retiring Room” where the justices withdrew to consider their verdicts and, more importantly, have their tea breaks. Hannah and my father picked my mother up again and half-carried her to this little haven where they stayed, drinking the JP’s tea, until the coast was clear.

I had been dumped once more on my uncle Bob while all this was going on, but I got all the gory details out of mother and Hannah in the end and I dined out on the story for years. My college friend Marion was always asking me to tell everyone about “my mother the Nazi”. Not that any of that nonsense lasted very long. McLardy’s attempts to make a free-speech martyr out of mother came to nothing when it became clear that whatever her or his political views might be, she found him “common” and wanted nothing more to do with him. She quietly ditched him and his pals and the Conservative Ladies drew a discrete veil over her fling with the Blackshirts in the interests of good taste. Her career as a stormtrooper for the British Union of Fascists quickly petered out, a victim of snobbery and a misguided trust in the judgement of Lord Rothermere and the Daily Mail.

So this photo may do mother a bit of a disservice, showing her in her Blackshirt uniform. It might well have been the only time she ever wore it. For all I know. She did share some of their prejudices, but she certainly didn’t endorse their way of going about things. She returned gratefully to the embrace of the Conservative Ladies just in time to join them all in the popular pastime of abusing Wallace Simpson for leading the Prince of Wales astray and she played a discrete part in organising the retirement party for dear Colonel Masterson. He was replaced by a rather hard-faced, factory-owner type whom she didn’t take to at all. As for my father, I really don’t know what he made of mother’s flirtation with the Fascists. I was only nine when he died during an air raid in 1940 and mother didn’t talk about him much afterwards. At home, she drifted around as usual, reading, staring out of the window, lying fatigued on the sofa with her eyes closed, watching Hannah clean the fireplace or peeling carrots, just assuming her help wasn’t needed.

I can’t say for sure how her views on Jews and Catholics changed during and after the war, but I think in her later years she learned to keep her opinions to herself and just tut quietly if the Pope cropped up on the TV. She was also, when I started noticing these things a bit more, charm itself to the gentlemen who ran a furniture shop at the bottom of our street; Mister Goodman and his father (“Old Mister Goodman”) had fled from Austria in 1938 after the Anschluss and were very well-respected locally. As I said, she was not a stupid woman and as events unfolded she was prepared to see that things were more complicated than her younger self, or the Daily Mail of that period, had realised. I’ll give her the benefit of the doubt and assume that Roman Catholics also benefitted from this broadening of outlook on mother’s part. I do remember though that I was sitting on the bus with her on one occasion when the local Catholic priest got on and sat on the seat immediately in front of hers. She made a sort of “humph!” noise and murmured to me “Next stop, the Vatican.”

 Here's a surprising thing to end on though – Grandad died at the age of eighty-five in 1951 and in her late forties, mother got herself a job! In a shoe shop! You could’ve knocked me down with …a shoe horn! She said it was because she couldn’t make ends meet without his pension coming in, which is fair enough I suppose. On the other hand, poverty must have been hammering pretty insistently at the door to force mother into the world of work. I was off her hands as I was at college and had my grant by then, but in the end I have to say I take my hat off to her, especially as she worked in a shop, where customers can be a trial at times. I would have thought that her ‘interpersonal skills’, (as my daughter always calls them when she’s nagging me about anything), would have left a lot to be desired in that line of work, but the amazing thing is, she loved it! She was considered a very good saleswoman and the customers thought very highly of her. I suspect her accent may have had something to do with it. You could tell pretty easily where she came from, but the Conservative Ladies had knocked some of the rough edges off her accent and when she said something like ‘Would madam like to try these in a larger size?’ people responded very positively, thinking they were dealing with someone who had a bit of class about them. That’s my guess anyway.

Victoria tells me I haven’t quite lost my accent either and that the older I get the more I turn into my mother. Absolute rubbish obviously. Daughters, honestly! What do they know?

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