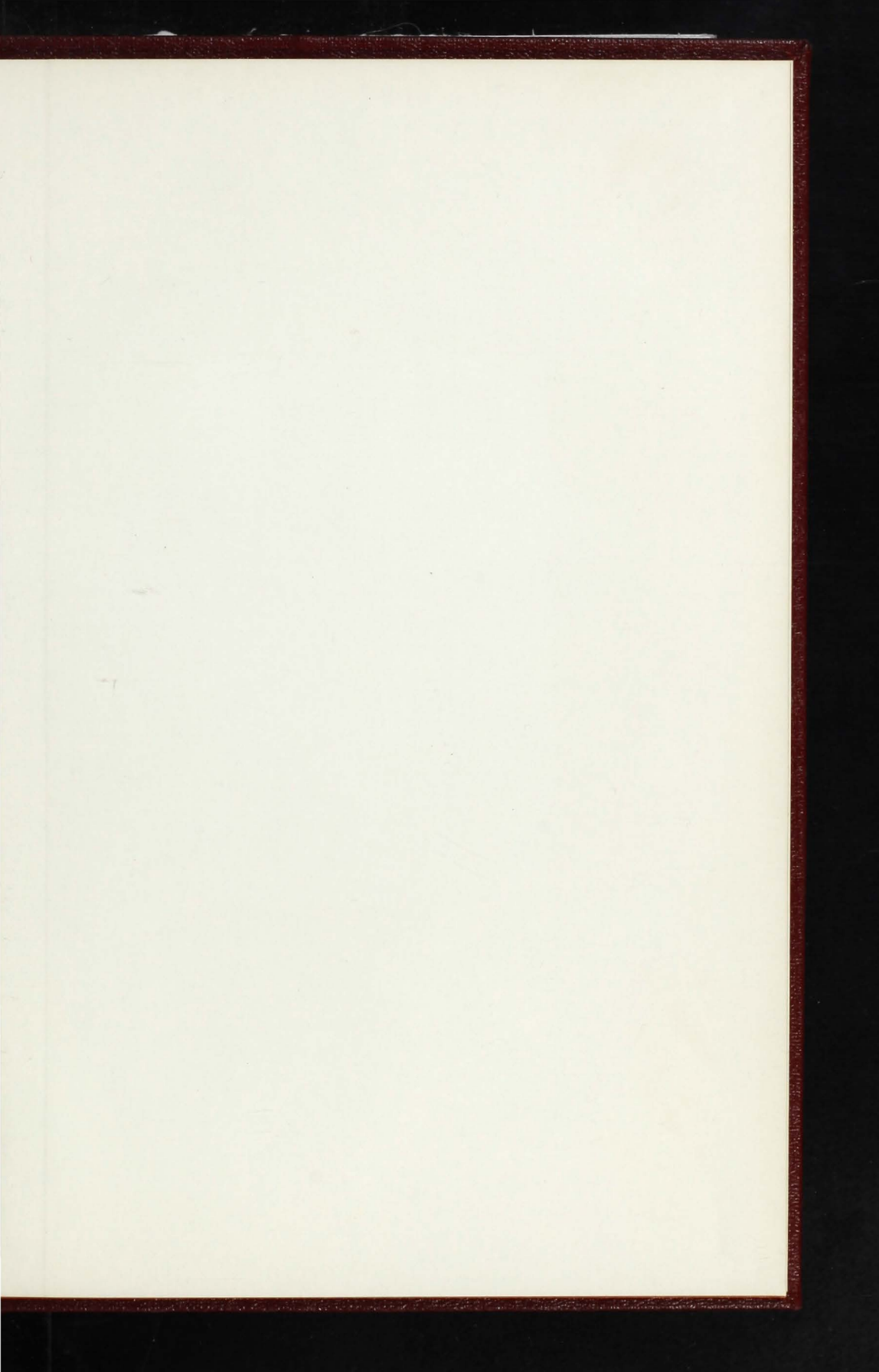




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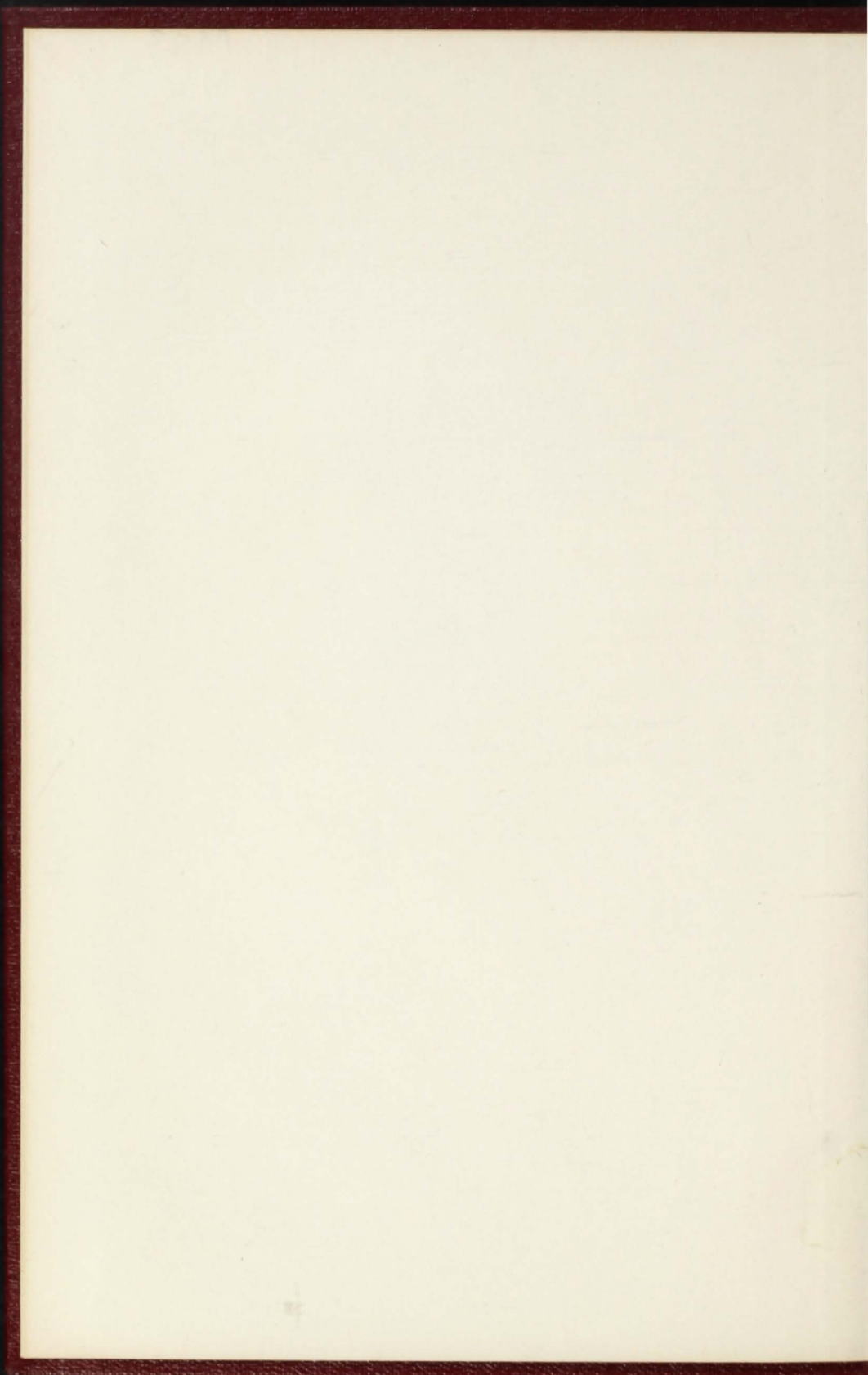


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# Margaret Cole

## 1893 - 1980

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editor Betty Vernon  
fabian tract 482

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# fabian tract 482

## Margaret Cole 1893-1980

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### Acknowledgement

The cover illustration is taken from the reproduction of a painting held by the Labour Party. The artist is unknown but the original is believed by some to have been painted by Stella Bowen in the 1930s or 40s.

This pamphlet, like all the publications of the Fabian Society, represents not the collective view of the Society but only the views of the individuals who prepared it. The responsibility of the Society is limited to approving the publications it issues as worthy of consideration within the Labour movement.

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# Margaret Cole

(1893-1980)

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## Foreword

**This is no analytical appreciation of a distinguished former President of the Fabian Society. It is a short, highly selective but, so far as possible, factual account of a remarkable woman, who for over half a century helped to formulate and further an understanding of Socialism. Margaret was a prolific, witty and stylish writer, but, as George Bernard Shaw once remarked, she was also a born teacher who understood education; and in one form or another she taught, thought about and made the history of the Labour Movement throughout her long, happy and creative life.**

**A brief tribute, therefore, by colleagues who were also her friends can not be an adequate assessment of Margaret's life and work. That will come in time, when a rounded biography, involving many others necessarily omitted here, must emerge. We offer this as a mere salute to one who helped to build the Fabian Society.**

Naomi Mitchison

John Parker

John Saville

Betty Vernon (Editor)

# 1. Growing up

Betty Vernon

**Margaret Isobel Postgate was born at Cambridge on 6 May 1893, the town she considered one of the most satisfying in the world. She came of 'reasonable mixed ancestry': her mother, Edith Allen, was half Guernseyan, her father, John Percival Postgate, was a Yorkshireman, and later Professor of Latin at Liverpool University. He was the author of a famous Latin grammar book that earned his eldest daughter 'vicarious unpopularity' and believed in the direct method of learning. Margaret, who had four brothers and a sister, had to announce family events such as birthdays, and to ask for Sunday dinner, in Latin!**

Their handsome mother was one of the earliest products of women's higher education. She attended the North London Collegiate School under the great Miss Buss, and then went to Girton. Soon after the ban forbidding Fellows from matrimony had been lifted, she married her preceptor, Dr Postgate, and became the 'unquestioned sun in the sky to all her children.' 'We were not an adoring tribe,' Margaret wrote in her autobiography *Growing up into Revolution*, (1949) 'but what we should have done without her was inconceivable'. Indeed tensions and tempers among the young were such that Mrs Postgate used to say she had to go for six separate walks a day because of the internal family rows!

The Postgates were 'not a bookish household', and played 'improving rather than literary games.' Yet books abounded in the home and Margaret read with enormous voracity 'while eating, minding the baby, washing or lacing up my boots for skating.' She once told Rita Hinden 'I'm a compulsive reader' – and remained so throughout her life.

Cambridge was a good place for the

young. It was alive and amusing, and the Postgate household was warmly happy. Margaret, who had a great sense of family, cherished all her siblings, grew increasingly close to her eldest brother, Raymond, and was especially fond of her youngest brother, Richmond.

Her formal schooling started in a small private establishment run by a Don's wife for the children of academics. Short hours there resulted in her playing endlessly 'at hospitals and illnesses,' and although she denied any desire to emulate Florence Nightingale, she did confess many years later to a long dead ambition to be a surgeon. Writing and reading were her overwhelming interests. She would tell herself endless stories and 'I "commenced author" before I could write'. Regretfully 'no one took down my effort – I wish they had, for the title of the *Melon Who Drove too Fast* excites my curiosity'. Later when Richmond followed in her literary footsteps, it was Margaret who acted the admiring amanuensis to his 'pithy masterpieces'.

At the age of ten, Margaret won a scholarship to Roedean School which she

came to detest. 'I was the wrong sort of cuckoo in a horribly alien nest'. Few girls got to university, and 'the standards achieved would have shocked Miss Buss and Miss Beale'. In particular Margaret hated the censored reading, the humourless regulations and the petty restrictions. On one occasion she was forbidden the school library because she had been found reading Macaulay's *Essays*, after she had finished her class room French! Worst of all was the lack of intellectual stimulation, although this gap was gradually filled by her own discovery of Hazlitt, Kipling and Browning, and by her smuggling volumes up to her bedroom (where reading was prohibited) in a large embroidery bag. Margaret also learnt a vast amount of poetry by heart, a skill she cherished throughout her life.

There was little either of politics or religion in the lives of the youthful Postgates. 'Our household was "non political", that is to say Tory', and this Roedean did not rectify. 'Indeed,' Margaret wrote '... schooling gave us no training or understanding of the world we lived in, or the problems which an adult creature - be it never so unpolitical - would have to face. We learned nothing of homekeeping or of boys and I came out of school the most innocent greenhorn in the world'.

The personal unhappiness which Margaret experienced at school left indelible memories. 'I have never forgotten what it was like to be well and truly pecked, and I hope it has been of some service to me as a writer and in my human relationships'.

Her world changed completely when she entered Girton on a 'middling scholarship' to read Classics. 'I can never be sufficiently grateful to Girton and the University of Cambridge for the part they played in transforming an unrepresentable tadpole into a moderately decent sort of frog', she wrote wryly. The freedom that Girton offered

was as heady as wine. '... to be where you liked, when you liked with whom you liked, ... to go on reading, writing or talking till dawn' was, in 1912, '... to creatures fresh from school, next door to Utopia'.

Margaret revelled in her studies. She delighted in classical literature, in the history of civilisation and in the great contemporary classicists. She 'discovered' Gilbert Murray, Alfred Zimmern 'whose great book on the Greek Commonwealth I sucked dry as an orange', and also 'the great teacher Dr T R Glover, whose lectures on Roman History were a revelation'. Cambridge helped her acquire self confidence and 'turned me intellectually into something more like an adult'. It also led to the reassuring discovery that her brains were above average; for 'from my father I had always gathered that I was a semi imbecile'. She left Cambridge with a clutch of life long friends, a first class degree and a sharp curiosity that was never blunted.

One cannot but deduce that Margaret's lucid writing and economy of style owed much to the classical authors she knew so well. Like her own mind, their writings were singularly uncluttered. She found, moreover, that although Classics was a limited subject it was not narrow: 'The whole of human life was its preserve, and although dealing with human beings long since dead, it dealt with them in the round'.

Her thinking reached far beyond the intricacies of classical society, and her intellectual liveliness led to her attending lectures 'which strictly speaking were no business of mine ... In those three precious university years I discovered that I was an atheist and a Socialist ... two intellectual faiths from which I have never wavered.' She came to regard religion ('sectarian intolerance') as 'at best a drag on social progress, at worst a cruel and dangerous obsession, responsible for a great deal of human misery, as no one who has read any history can deny ...'

In much the same way Margaret slipped into Socialism – the non-dogmatic, idealistic English Socialism, of the earliest years of the twentieth century – as easily as a duck slips into water. Prime influences in her conversion were J A Hobson's *The Science of Wealth*, and H G Wells' *New Worlds for Old*.

Her appointment as Junior Classics Mistress at St Paul's Girls' School gave financial independence, and increased the self-confidence of a basically shy person. Margaret discovered in herself '... an incurable didacticism ... (and) ... in one form or another I have gone on teaching ever since'. She also learned from friends in the Common Room, about Fabianism, and Free Thought ... and tales of a 'wickedly subversive young man named G D H Cole'.

The Great War broke over an England whose middle classes were largely unaware of its implications and unprepared for its repercussions. When Raymond Postgate, a militant Guild Socialist, was sent to prison for being a conscientious objector, Margaret's comfortable world changed. After Ray's sentence 'I walked out of the Oxford Court Room with Gilbert Murray ... into a new world of doubters and protesters and into a new war – this time against the ruling classes and the government which represented *them*, and *with* the working classes, the Trade Unionists, the Irish rebels of Easter Week and all those who resisted their governments or other governments which held them down. I found in a few months the whole lot which Henry Nevinson used to call the "Stage Army of the Good" ranging from the Independent Labour Party to the National Council for Civil Liberties to Guild Socialists and the Fabian Research Department (FRD – later the Labour Research Department, LRD). Once the State had taken my brother it lost his sister's vote automatically' – she wrote.

Soon after Ray's departure Margaret

became a voluntary worker in the Fabian Research Department, where the key officers were Robin Page Arnot, Alan Kaye, William Mellor, later editor of the *Daily Herald*, and G D H Cole. There she so enjoyed compiling information from endless trade union reports, and the comradeship arising, that she resigned from teaching, jettisoned the security it guaranteed, and took a job with the FRD. She was made acting secretary of the Department when Robin Page Arnot, who opposed the war, went 'on the run' (and was later imprisoned). The Fabian Executive decided that it would be prudent to appoint a woman, and on 17 November 1916 – so the minutes run – with Bernard Shaw in the chair, and Sidney Webb and G D H Cole among the executive members present, it was decided to offer the appointment to Miss M I Postgate at a salary of £104 a year. 'I had become,' she wrote proudly, 'part and parcel of the movement'.

The Movement, Margaret's 'Second University,' was a loosely formed group of highly intelligent men and women who as Socialists were almost all attached to the FRD and to Guild Socialism. Many became distinguished in the world of politics, scholarship or administration; all at the time were active socialist propagandists. And so it was that Margaret forged lasting friendships.

Her marriage to G D H (Douglas) Cole in 1918 and their long partnership was fruitful in every sense. They had a family – two daughters and one son – of whom Margaret was inordinately proud; produced over thirty detective novels (probably constructed by their writing alternate chapters, once the basic plots had been jointly formulated); produced numerous pamphlets and social critiques, of which *The Condition of Britain* is outstanding; were involved together in major political events such as the General Strike; founded and activated various bodies for Socialist research and propaganda, and were keen

practitioners in adult education. For three years, before he went to Oxford as Reader in Economics, Douglas was director of tutorial classes in London University. Margaret lectured with notable satisfaction 'to all kinds and conditions of men' in the Workers' Educational Association and in University tutorial groups (both in London and Cambridge) until 1944. They also became pillars of the Fabian Society, although Margaret was the more consistently supportive of the two, with a particular affection for local societies. She succeeded Douglas as Chairman of the Executive Committee and later as President when Douglas died in 1959.

At both national and local level Margaret guided successive Fabian secretaries, and enjoyed participating in Fabian Schools, initiated by Beatrice Webb. 'The first time I came to a Summer School was in 1920' she recalled fifty years later, 'we had a lively time ... the Fabians, the Guild Socialists and the old Collectivists put on a piece called "The Home Land of Mystery" which dramatised George Lansbury's account of his visit to the Soviet Union'. Unlike Beatrice, however, Margaret expressed neither irritation nor annoyance with the young over noisy exuberance which Summer Schools tended to generate. She *enjoyed* their enjoyment, and was often at her patient, provocative best speaking at these schools. For in spite, latterly, of a slowness of speech, she never lost her skill in making one want to learn.

The Cole partnership had much in common with that of the Webbs. Margaret, like Beatrice, possessed a phenomenal capacity for hard work, and both were much more than their husband's collaborator. Beatrice, in addition to her massive research work with Sidney, compiled her voluminous diaries; Margaret was a social historian, political commentator and book critic, and contributed omniscient apprec-

iations for *The Times* obituary columns. From 1941 she also assumed wide responsibilities on the London County Council.

In true Fabian tradition, Margaret was a martinet for accuracy. 'Always' she would reiterate, 'check your facts and identify your sources' and her pertinent terse correspondence with anyone whose factual errors or political bemusement had caught her eye, were legion. She was nevertheless generous to the ignorant, and objective in discussion. Like Douglas, she respected the quality of a student's mind even if she loathed their opinions. In his autobiography, *Experiences of an Optimist*, Lord Redcliffe Maud has written that '... G D H Cole scrupulously and, I think, successfully, combined notorious political partisanship with a complete neutrality towards academic pupils, none of whom ever alleged that he was subject to propaganda from his tutor'. The same comment could well be applied to Margaret.

No salute to Margaret, however, would be complete without acknowledging her unfailing kindness, even if sometimes tinged with asperity. One remembers her prompt rectification of one's ignorance; the helpful explanation to a new colleague or appointee, and above all her generosity in encouraging the young. Other Socialists have initiated research; lectured with scholarship, or written prolifically; few have combined these attributes with the rare ability to divine potential in the untried, or to confront such men and women with opportunity. This quality of constructive kindness was her hallmark; the special quality flourishing behind her sometimes gruffly abrupt (some would say acidulated) manner, which many recall with gratitude. For in Margaret there lay a deep conviction and acceptance that '... the poorest he that is in England hath a life to live as the greatest he'.

## 2. *The Fabian Society and the New Fabian Research Bureau*

*John Parker*

**The successful election of 1929 and the advent of the second Labour minority government aroused high hopes in the Labour Movement following the collapse of the General Strike in 1926. However, disillusionment soon set in when it became obvious that there was a lack of a plan for achieving any of its fine ideals, accompanied by almost complete powerlessness.**

In the summer of 1930 Margaret and Douglas joined a group known as 'The Loyal Grouzers', to try and reform the Labour Party. A series of conferences were held at Easton Lodge near Dunmow in Essex, the ramshackle country house belonging to Lady Warwick, one time mistress of Edward VII and an aristocratic convert of Robert Blatchford. Socialists of all wings of the Labour Movement, excluding the Communists, were invited. From these discussions came the creation, first of the Society for Socialist Inquiry and Propaganda (SSIP) and then of the New Fabian Research Bureau (NFRB). The first, in its short life, set out to revive the Labour Party's faith and drive. The second was to play an important role in Labour politics throughout the whole of the 1930s.

The older Fabian Society had been in the doldrums in the 1920s despite various attempts to revive it. Douglas and Margaret felt that a new research body should be set up to lay plans which could be carried out by a future government. To this end they approached Arthur Henderson and Sidney Webb, secured their backing and won approval from the Fabian Executive to use the Fabian name. So the NFRB came into

being early in 1931. Margaret, seriously ill with pneumonia at the time, and thus unable to assist in its creation, was co-opted on to its Executive after her recovery.

The early demise of the SSIP shook the young NFRB, but the Coles consolidated their new 'creation' with the assistance of Leonard Woolf, of its International Committee, and W A Robson of its Political Committee, plus Colin Clark, Hugh Gaitskell and Evan Durbin in the Economic field. After E A Radice, the General Secretary, resigned in 1933, I was appointed as his successor and worked closely with Douglas Cole until his resignation a year later. He was then succeeded by Margaret. Thus began our long collaboration as General Secretary and Honorary Secretary right through the period of the NFRB and of the revived Fabian Society, until the end of the war in 1945.

The thirties were a frustrating decade with the rise of Hitler, the Spanish Civil War, the Italian invasion of Abyssinia and the return of a National Government in 1935. Against this background Douglas and Margaret played leading parts in building up the NFRB. It was an exceedingly small organisation, numbering

only 158 members in 1934, slowly rising to 792 in 1938. Moreover its funds were very limited and it depended on a few wealthy donors such as Sir Stafford Cripps and D N Pritt.

Its main activities took the form of innumerable conferences and weekend schools. Research was carried out voluntarily and the drafts of possible reports, pamphlets and books were then submitted to interested parties for further discussion and comments. After they had been hammered into shape they were usually published for 'discussion within the Labour Movement' binding only the author or committee which had prepared them. The Labour Party was thus frequently led after further discussion to adopt many of the detailed policies which later were implemented by the Labour Government in 1945-1950. Both Margaret and Douglas played a large part in editing these various publications: no less than 42 Research pamphlets were published by NFRB between 1932 and 1939.

Margaret in particular edited many of the books which resulted from Fabian activities such as *Twelve Studies in Soviet Russia* (1932). This volume tried to be impartial and objective, but was certainly coloured by the powerful attraction which a planned economy had for western socialists at a time of world slump. The most critical study was made by John Morgan, an agricultural journalist, who saw the unhappy results which forced collectivisation was having in the period leading up to Stalin's purges. Other books Margaret edited included *Democratic Sweden* (1938), *Evacuation Survey* (1940), *Our Soviet Ally* (1943) and *The Webbs and their Work* (1949).

As the NFRB grew, many who were also members of the older Society pressed for an amalgamation of the two Societies. This was negotiated during the Munich crisis in 1938 and came into force in 1939 just before the war when the NFRB staff

moved from 37 Great James Street, Bloomsbury to 11 Dartmouth Street, conveniently near Parliament.

On 1 January 1940 the amalgamated Society totalled 1,715 members; about half from the NFRB and half from the older Society. The officers and committees were mainly drawn from NFRB which in effect took over the older Society.

Amalgamation presented a number of problems. The older Fabian Society had been one of the founder members of the Labour Party in 1900, to which it was affiliated. But the NFRB had never been affiliated to the Labour Party; full individual members however had to be eligible to belong to the Labour Party. All others, such as J M Keynes, became associate members. A self-denying ordinance was

#### Summer Schools

'I cannot tell you about the first summer schools because they go back too far in history (1909) ... the idea, however, recalls the compliment paid me by an Israeli journalist who, interviewing me for the Jerusalem Post wrote "... she was one of the founders of the Fabian Society ... " It was founded in 1884, so though I come to you as somebody in grave clothes I am not quite so old as that! I know through researches that the schools started with Hankey, a cubical lady, who put everybody through Swedish exercises before breakfast, made them all play in the cricket team, do the washing up, and go to bed at 10 o'clock. She clashed rather fiercely with Beatrice Webb - the correspondence survives - because she expected Beatrice to make her own bed, and Beatrice had different views on that!

(Margaret Cole, *Speech* 1972)

incorporated in the rules of the amalgamated Society to the effect that 'No resolution of a political character, expressing an opinion or calling for action, other than that in relation to the running of the Society itself, shall be put forward in the name of the Society. Delegates to conferences of the Labour Party or any other conference shall be appointed by the Executive Committee without any mandatory instructions'. This safeguard was felt by both Douglas and Margaret to ensure the essential independence of the Society's research.

More controversial was Margaret's insistence on the part of NFRB that there should be a rule in the new constitution for the election by postal ballot to the Executive of 15 members (in addition to the Treasurer) and the co-option of not more than nine others. It was felt that many of these who were most helpful in the organization or in carrying out research might not be known to the members and so would fail to secure election in a contested fight. This has certainly been borne out by the facts, but has not prevented many attempts by 'purists' to insist that all members of the Executive Committee should be democratically elected.

Beatrice Webb was persuaded by Margaret to bless the union by accepting the Presidency of the amalgamated Society. This she celebrated by giving a remarkable lunch at the LSE (where her slightest word was law) attended by Sidney, Shaw, Edward Pease and F W Galton from the older Society and the Coles, Evan Durbin, Hugh Gaityskell and myself from the NFRB.

Margaret's book *The Story of Fabian Socialism* gives an especially fascinating account of 'The Third Blooming' during the Second World War. After reading this, Attlee commented that she was extraordinarily fair to all those who took a different view over controversies in which she had taken an active part. From one who knew how keenly she could fight for her views

that was indeed a compliment.

The electoral truce which came with the war and the Churchill Coalition Government left large gaps in the political field. Margaret and I threw ourselves into organising first discussion groups and then conferences to be followed by research projects. As Honorary Secretary she became almost a full-time member of staff doing all the nitty-gritty required in building up the Society's work particularly in the educational field. A large increase in the membership of the Society began in 1941 accompanied by a rapid rise in the number of local societies. These had been limited to six in 1939, almost all in Scotland. By the end of the war there were 120 recognised local Fabian societies in Britain and a handful overseas. They not only held discussion meetings but also frequently put in hand useful pieces of local research which were carried out by their members.

Summer schools, particularly at Dartington and Frensham Heights, took on an important role in the Society's work. The Coles spent much of their holidays at the schools which were supported by Victor Gollancz, Harold Laski, Leonard Woolf, Kingsley Martin, Barbara Wootton, Dorothy Woodman, Noel Brailsford, C E M Joad and others who gave a lead to the discussions. These schools were attended also by MPs, such as Jim Griffiths, Arthur Creech Jones and Ellis Smith, while men and women in the forces came when on leave.

The amalgamated Society had greeted the war situation in 1939 by holding two conferences on War Aims, one on 'War for What?' and the other 'War on the Home Front'. These were followed by the establishment of an International Discussion Group chaired by Paul Lamartine Yates. Later in the war Margaret Cole and Rita Hinden called together a group of European Socialists for the purpose of making plans for an after-war map of Europe. They quarrelled violently not only



on nationalist issues but also within each group. It was alleged that all of the proceedings were passed to the Soviet Embassy! None the less, Fabians welcomed refugees at all their functions and made no distinction – as the Labour Party did – between ‘allied’ and ‘enemy’ Socialists.

The great weakness of the Labour Movement was thought to be the lack of knowledge of international problems and of any cohesive foreign policy. The Fabian International Bureau was created to remedy those defects. It announced that it would initiate research into international problems, promote Socialist co-operation between British Socialists and those from other countries and prepare the ground for an ‘International Socialist policy in international affairs’. Leonard Woolf remained its leading light with the help of Mildred Bamford and Doreen Warriner.

More successful was the Fabian Colonial Bureau. Arising out of discussion at the Dartington Summer School in 1940, Rita Hinden had suggested the formation of a Colonial Bureau to deal with the problems of the British dependent Empire and to establish contacts with the leaders of Colonial peoples, to ask and answer questions and to work out policies for the

couragement in the new venture which was successfully established under the chairmanship of Arthur Creech Jones.

While Douglas Cole was the moving force in the economic and industrial activities on the home front of the Fabian Society, Margaret’s attention turned principally towards the improvement of the social services and particularly education after the war – interests which were, with benefit, channelled into the LCC (the London County Council, forerunner of the GLC). In the first year or two of the war W A Robson edited a large book of essays on social security with the assistance of Joan Clarke, the Society’s research secretary. This anticipated very much what was in the Beveridge Report; in the years before publication the contributors had given to Beveridge collective evidence which greatly influenced his recommendations.

It is fascinating to try and compare the contributions to the Fabian Society of the Webbs and the Coles. First in the NFRB and then in the amalgamated Society during the war, the Coles undoubtedly led the work of the Society where they complemented one another as they also did in their wider lives. In the early days Sidney worked for the Society, while also actively assisting Beatrice with their books and particularly in her *Minority Report on the Poor Law*.

An important factor in the development of the Society in the time of both the Webbs and the Coles was that they were able to work with people with a wide variety of talent of sympathetic, but individual, views without any suggestion of domination, although they were always prepared to fight energetically for their own views.

The whole period of Margaret’s active association with the NFRB and the Fabian Society was a lively and fruitful one. The Society owes her a great debt. Rightly both the Coles in turn were honored by being made President of the Society, Margaret holding the post from 1963 until her death in 1980.

#### **The Fabian Society**

*‘The Society is, and always has been, a tiny organisation and (we knew that) the only way in which a small society can really have an influence is as people who will work hard, be well informed, and play an active part on all occasions . . . Harry Pollitt gave a good example illustrating my point in one of his books. He tells how the ILP was much excited by the Revolution of 1905, and passed a resolution that the Openshaw No 2 Branch of the ILP was behind the Duma. No doubt the Duma was very much comforted.’*

(Margaret Cole, **Speech**, 1972)

redevelopment and ultimate ‘freeing of the Colonies’. Margaret gave Rita every en-

### 3. *Education: the London County Council (LCC) and the ILEA*

Betty Vernon

Margaret loved London, which she described as a collection of villages, and had great pride in the LCC. Her special interest lay with education, partly, one suspects, because of its association with Sidney Webb, the architect of London's secondary technical structure, and partly because, quite simply, she believed in it. As Naomi Mitchison observed she was genuinely interested in children but she was also deeply knowledgeable about the processes of learning from pre-school play groups to post-graduate research.

In 1941, Margaret was co-opted by the majority Labour Group on to the LCC Education Committee, and nine years later elected an Alderman. She served as chairman of Further Education from 1951-1965 with one year's break, and then was on the ILEA as Vice Chairman of Further and Higher Education (as it became), until her resignation in 1967. Among distinguished educationists who also served with her over the years were Professor Tawney, Sir Harold Shearman, Ronald McKinnon Wood, Helen Bentwich, Hugh Franklin and Marjorie McIntosh, Barbara Castle's brilliant sister who died from overwork while chairman of the Education Committee.

As one of the most lucid protagonists of the comprehensive idea, Margaret relished the numerous wartime discussions of the Education Committee over '... planning a universal and worthwhile education for all the children of London, as well as the further education for its adolescents and adults who both needed and wanted it ...' Much of the initial argument over for-

mulating what in time became the London School Plan, took place in County Hall's stuffy wartime basement shelters, and when the theory of comprehensive education emerged from its somewhat esoteric image into educational reality to become a focal political issue, Margaret was one of its recognised exponents. Her pamphlet for the London Labour Party *What is a Comprehensive School?* written in the early fifties clarified much muddled thinking, and her later supplement 'Comprehensives in London', *Plebs*, 1967 still reads well.

Margaret's understanding of education was rooted in practical experience and common sense. As chairman of Holloway School governors during the period when it was being re-structured from a former grammar school into the comprehensive image, she fully appreciated the personal anxieties of the staff over their future professional status. The headmaster of the day, Meredith Brown, a mathematical scholar who subsequently became an LCC Staff Inspector, recalls 'needing all the

judgement and support I could get' during the agonising uncertainties of 'reorganisation' and from Margaret he obtained this in full measure. 'For although committed to the comprehensive principle herself, she was never doctrinaire and always allowed for the feelings of those who did not share her views'. She therefore won the full confidence of the Holloway School staff who realised that she would do her utmost to safeguard their interests and status. In a large measure, Mr Brown wrote, 'the successful re-organisation of the school was due to her wisdom, judgement and clarity of mind'.

After the war, the responsibilities of Margaret's Further Education Committee were vast and varied, stretching from Day Colleges, Evening Institutes and Technical colleges, to specialist centres such as the London School of Printing and the College of the Distributive Trades (then so named), and pivots of adult education like Toynbee Hall, the 'City Lit' and Morley College. Additionally – and these were Margaret's special interests – polytechnics and teacher training colleges also came within this ambit, plus the tangled web of major and non-mandatory awards.

It would be untrue to imply that Margaret knew all these establishments in detail, but there were few, if any, she had not visited, and she would always familiarise herself with any emergent difficulty, anywhere. No uninvestigated item ever appeared on the agenda of her committee, and she once claimed always *trying* to have a practical solution in her mind for any problem that was coming up. She was always interested in personal matters. From tangled worries of young adolescents at a tough North Kensington Youth Club, to innovations for children made by Mollie Harrison, Curator at the unique Geffrye Museum in Shoreditch (of which Margaret was chairman).

If Margaret had any particular preferences they were for the Sidney Webb and

Battersea College of Education (then so called), and for the old Regent Street Polytechnic. The latter, founded by Quintin Hogg, grand-father of Lord Hailsham, was eventually absorbed into the massive Polytechnic of Central London (PCL). For many years Margaret served on the governing body of the Polytechnic alongside Lord Hailsham. Both held each other in high regard and were formidable team mates. Lord Hailsham found her an admirable colleague 'with a constant fund of common sense and immensely knowledgeable in the working of local government generally . . . the only time' (he wrote) 'that she got really cross with me was when I failed to mention the Webbs at the opening of the new building in Marylebone Road' – the vast new unit of the PCL built on the site of the infamous old workhouse, Luxborough Lodge. For her part Margaret enjoyed discussing 'poly-policy' while dining with Lord Hailsham at the Carlton Club, to which (she would recount amusedly) he used to arrive on his white bicycle!

During Margaret's chairmanship of the Committee, the Robbins *Report on Higher Education* broke upon a receptive world to advocate the expansion of university places, one implication of which was a vast and speedy increase in provision for training teachers. The needs of this policy, orchestrated by the Department of Education and Science (DES) were met with alacrity by the LCC. Margaret in co-operation with her chief officers (George Mayor the senior education officer with whom she had a close rapport was later succeeded by Eric Walker) and enthusiastically supported by her Committee, decided to create one entirely new training college, Sidney Webb, in central London and a handsome extension to Battersea College of Domestic Science – Manresa at Roehampton. Both new entities catered for mature students, most of whom were entering teaching late in life and who, by

and large, proved excellent, committed teachers. Margaret was always intensely interested in their progress. For a long while she chaired the governing bodies of both colleges, but Sidney Webb had her special affection. There she served from its inception until the amalgamation with the PCL and then, at her own request, assumed the vice-chairmanship.

Before the LCC had actually decided to purchase Manresa, an elegant eighteenth century estate in rolling grounds used as a seminary, visits by Members and officers were necessary. Margaret would relate with unconcealed amusement how on occasion as chairman, and accompanied by her chief officers, she was refused admission to the building, as it was then occupied by Jesuits, and women were prohibited from entering the all-male establishment!

Sidney Webb College faced endless site and accommodation difficulties, which Margaret always helped astutely to tackle. Each new college, too, had to assemble a staff of calibre and competence, which demanded hours of wise interviewing backed by discerning judgement. In this Margaret excelled; those who have sat with her on appointment boards stress her independence of mind and sharp perception. To Rosemary Beresford, former Principal of Sidney Webb, and subsequently a pro-rector of the PCL, these qualities were Margaret's great strength in the world of educational administration, 'They made her a tremendous asset on any interviewing committee.' Even when Margaret's hearing deteriorated so that she rarely heard in precise detail all that candidates said, Miss Beresford recalls '... on my enquiring into this she devastatingly observed that "... taking facial expression into account and certain other clues" she could deduce what any adult was saying. "It's only children who say the unexpected"'.

Her analyses of problems could be biting and memorable. When, two decades back,

the Regent Street Polytechnic Court of Governors was debating whether the Polytechnic should become more selective in the courses it offered, she succinctly observed that 'the Polytechnic is in danger of becoming an intellectual Woolworths'. That settled the issue; the Court decided to restrict the range and to raise the level of courses.

Margaret recognised the value of 'participation' long before it had become a cult word. Bill Devereux, one of her senior officers, recalled how closely she kept her ear to the ground, following up awkward remarks by asking shrewdly pertinent questions. She liked to see policy evolved through discussion with teaching staff, committee colleagues and administrators rather than by imposition from above. She respected the nuances of the democratic process. No matter that more often than not she would usually know those in the top echelons of power, if deputations of protest were to be made by the Authority, she would never jump procedural moves. Permeation of ideas, in the true Fabian tradition never came amiss; her preference was almost always to hasten slowly.

One of Margaret's senior officers, Naomi Mitchison, recalled in *The Guardian* that she considered her 'the best chairman she had ever worked for'. She was as interested in and committed to, the various aspects of further education as to people, buildings, equipment and ideas; and because she liked young people so much she thoroughly enjoyed her work. Yet in her profile of the LCC, *Servant of the County*, Margaret modestly denied making any special contribution to the Education Service, although she did admit to an understanding of its working and of how the various departments of the LCC were organised. In fact there was something more important to add. For she thoroughly understood how human frailty, personal worry and lack of recognition could clog the works of the humblest as well as the highest educ-

ational establishment. Her sympathy when called for, would be as promptly penned as her demand for action on a disturbing situation was incisive. As she wrote in her autobiography

'I claim no particular credit for my educational services. What I do claim is that trying even in the most inadequate way to get a public service into tolerable order, gives one an insight into the problems, into the nature and the thoughts of those who are working in it, and into *their* problems,

in a way which no reading of books or parliamentary debates or sitting in a chair and thinking about it, can possibly do... there are some things which a humble administrator or committee member knows which the greatest philosophers do not know. It is exactly those things which traditional schools of politics at universities have tended to ignore; but they are among the things which the modern world must learn or perish.'

The County was fortunate in its servant.

## 4. Historian

John Saville

In her reminiscences written soon after the second world war – *Growing up into Revolution* – Margaret identified three questions she always wanted answered about the life of any human being she was reading or thinking about: their genetic inheritance, their social class, and the physical surroundings of their younger days. It was perhaps curious that she did not include formative intellectual influences on her list, for certainly in her own history these are of central importance, above all because in fundamentals she did not change her political and social attitudes and beliefs from those she acquired during the years of the first world war.

She had entered Girton ignorant of public affairs. Although she was living in a period of growing unrest – the triple unrest of the suffrage movement, of industrial workers and of the Irish – she was innocent of political understanding. It was J A Hobson who helped to open her mind, but it was H G Wells' *New Worlds for Old* (which she began to read thinking it was another of his science fiction tales) that made her a socialist overnight.

It is difficult for the second half of the twentieth century to appreciate the extraordinary impact that Wells had upon the pre-1914 generations. There were many others who were influential: Bernard Shaw, G K Chesterton, A R Orage of the *New Age*, E M Forster in his novels, especially *Howard's End*, Noel Brailsford and Norman Angell – the list could be considerably extended – but for many, as for the young Margaret Postgate, it was, above all, Wells. As she wrote in her memoirs:

'I was just one of the many young who over three generations at least took their hope of the world from that vivid, many-gifted, generous, cantakerous personality,

and accepted, not merely once but again and again over forty years, his eager conviction that the ideal of Socialism, which included world government, the abolition of all authority not based on reason, and of all inequality based on prejudice or privilege of any kind, of complete freedom of association, speech and movement, and of an immense increase of human welfare and material resources achieved by all-wise non-profit making organisation of economic life, both could and would save humanity within a measurable space of time.'

Since Margaret was now a Wellsian socialist, she naturally also became a feminist. What she now needed was purpose, and this the events of the war were to give her. In the spring of 1916 her life began to change dramatically.

Raymond's imprisonment as a conscientious objector switched her life to new course; one which she was never to forsake. By the Summer she had begun working in a voluntary capacity for the Fabian Research Department, where she met G D H Cole (then deeply involved with Guild Socialism). She was then twenty

three.

The significance of her new way of life was two-fold. Through the FRD Margaret became an integral part of 'the Movement', and an active participant in the trade union and Labour world. And secondly it introduced her to research work under an intellectual direction that was both demanding and rigorous. 'Our task masters were severe', she wrote in her autobiography, 'we were expected always to get our facts right, and to have, at least, the Webbs' *History of Trade Unionism*, Cole's *World of Labour*, and names (and initials) of all the principal Trade Unions at our finger tips; and though Arnot had an occasional good word for a middling sort of effort, neither Cole nor Mellor nor Norman Ewer appeared to look for anything but faults. It was a good stiff training.'

When, in November 1916, Margaret became secretary of the Department in succession to Page Arnot and 18 months later married Douglas, there began one of the most famous radical partnerships of the twentieth century.

The Labour Research Department stamped Margaret for life; she remained addicted to hard work and a meticulous attention to the facts. She had entered it knowing little about the detail of the labour movement in Britain; and she must have learned very quickly. The LRD was intimately involved with trade union problems during the war years, and Margaret's future political and historical writing was to reflect this close relationship with the political as well as the industrial movement. She was distinctly untheoretical, and the historical tradition she developed was in direct line with the radical writings of Hobson, the Hammonds, and Douglas himself. It was an approach, an attitude, that was confirmed and strengthened by her life in the early years of peace.

The Guild Socialist movement had declined very rapidly after 1920, and

Douglas and Margaret then became active in adult education: a commitment that remained with them both until the end of their lives. They were responsible for the establishment of the Tutors' Association, but it was with the WEA and the adults of the British Labour movement that the Coles were most concerned; and it was towards this audience that their writings were directed. It is important to recognise the distinctive attitude which informed all their approaches to politics as well as to history. Neither of them wrote for the scholarly world; that would have been esoteric and precious. The audience they sought was the intelligent activist who wished to be better informed; and their lucid marshalling of detailed fact and interpretation came directly out of the Labour Research Department tradition of service to the movement.

Margaret wrote relatively little in the 1920s, although quite early she began the rather extraordinary collaboration with her husband in the publication of detective novels. But this first decade of marriage was the period when she produced her family, at the end of which she finally extricated herself from Oxford, where Douglas was University Reader in Economics. Oxford she hated and was delighted when they moved to Hampstead in 1930 and later in 1935 when they bought 'Free-land', in Hendon, North London. Douglas commuted or stayed part-time in Oxford during term-time.

It was from about this period of time that Margaret began writing seriously. The thirties were years of intense political and intellectual activity. The Coles produced three large-scale collaborative works in this decade: *The Intelligent Man's Review of Europe Today* in 1933; the *Guide to Modern Politics* in the year following; and *The Condition of Britain*, a Left Book publication, in 1937. This last is an excellent example of the Coles at work; full of detailed information, very clearly

arranged and set out, and altogether a model introduction to the economic and social condition of Britain in the second half of the 1930s. It can still be read with much profit. Of her own individual writings there was the first volume in the *Fact* series (of which she was a contributing editor) entitled *The New Economic Revolution* (1937), and her 1938 book on *Marriage*. This latter well illustrated her general approach to social questions: lucid, rational and sensible. The extreme feminist position she rejected, although it was in fact rarely discussed in those years, but her insistence upon women's rights was emphatic, and vigourously argued, though always in sensible, measured terms. She was never shrill in her polemics and always addressed her audience with an assurance of their rational response to a rationally argued case.

It was after the second world war that the greater part of Margaret's historical work was concentrated. Douglas was now increasingly busy in his own account, both with academic matters at Oxford and, in the last few years of his life, with the many volumes of his *History of Socialist Thought*, the first part of which appeared in 1953. Margaret published her autobiography *Growing up into Revolution* in 1949, which apart from the vivid account of her own life is a useful introduction to certain aspects of the labour movement during her adult life. It is still an important source for the years of the first world war and offers a portrait of a left-wing intellectual during the inter-war years that is a valuable document in itself. Some twenty years later she published her last major piece of writing, *The Life of G D H Cole* (1971) which in many ways should be read as a straight extension of her own memoirs.

Her most important contribution to the scholarship of labour historiography has been the considerable amount of writing and editing she completed on the Webbs in general, and on Beatrice in particular.

Margaret had enormous respect for Beatrice Webb. In 1945 she published a good short account of Beatrice; and in 1948 appeared *Our Partnership*, a volume of Beatrice's memoirs and diaries up to 1912, jointly edited with Barbara Drake. In 1949 Margaret edited an excellent symposium, *The Webbs and Their Work*; and in 1952 and 1956 came her own editions of the Diaries, the first volume covering 1912 to 1924 and the second 1924 to 1932. Taken together, this output represented an impressive tribute to the work of the two persons who had symbolised the Fabian Society to the outside world. When it is recalled that from the middle 1940s to 1960 Margaret Cole was active on the London County Council, her energy in writing and editing was quite remarkable. In addition to the work on the Webbs she published a widely used text, *Makers of the Labour Movement* (1948); a study entitled *Robert Owen* (1953); *The Story of Fabian Socialism* (1961); and her *Life of G D H Cole* a decade later, when she was 78 years old.

Some of her historical work is now outdated. Her essay on Feargus O'Connor, for example, in *Makers of the Labour Movement*, is today unacceptable, but at the time she was writing very little new research had been done on the Chartist period, and O'Connor was almost everywhere regarded, as she portrayed him, in terms of almost unmitigated disaster. The judgement now, after thirty years of intensive research, would undoubtedly be more positive. Most of her writing, however, is still fresh. She always directed her ideas to the intelligent lay public, and the clarity of her thinking was expressed in attractive language. Her careful attention to fact made her book reviews always worth reading.

In her later years, apart from the *Life of Douglas*, her most substantial essays were written for the *Dictionary of Labour Biography*. The Dictionary originated with



### Competence and Good English

'We (the Fabian Society) have a number of advantages. One is a command of good English which derives from the presence of GBS among the pioneers. He called himself the *amaneuensis* of the Fabian Society. He produced many Tracts himself, and he worked hard on other people's efforts. Yet . . . you could not make Sidney Webb write prettily; his style sounded like an immensely long freight train passing very slowly on a level crossing; but Shaw laboured hard to make him write clearly . . .

Another advantage is a tradition of competence – which is connected with the Webbs. They were Machiavellians; Wells called them a couple of old spiders. Competence means that when you plan a thing you plan it in conjunction, thinking over what materials and people you have got . . . you don't start off with some beautiful idea of education as run by Lane and A S Neill . . . you assume that the education of this country cannot be run by archangels . . . you modify your transports by what you can reasonably expect to get. That was a very strong point of the Webbs. The London School of Economics is their biggest creation; the *New Statesman* is another – it may be going to die next week, but it is not dead yet – and the Labour Research Department. They created that, though you might say that the General Strike started it'

(Margaret Cole, *Speech*, 1972).

the Coles. When Douglas died, Margaret passed over to Asa Briggs and John Saville, who had edited a memorial volume in his honour, several large files which contained many hundreds of names with brief biographies attached. It was this which led, after more than a decade, to the publication of the first volume in 1972. Margaret herself wrote a number of entries; notably a long double essay on the Webbs, and also on her brother Raymond and his father-in-law, George Lansbury.

She continued writing to within a year of her death; contributing regularly a pithy political column for *Socialist Commentary*; articles in *Tribune* and book reviews for, among others, the *Listener*, the *New Statesman* and *Books and Bookmen*. She was also deeply interested in new movements: warmly encouraging to History Workshop (based at Ruskin) and 'an honoured figure' among members of the Society for the Study of Labour History.

Margaret Cole was a remarkable woman: her historical writing was only a part of her many-sided contribution to the labour movement in Britain. To the end, she continued to believe in the common people and in the triumph of the causes for which all her life she had striven. As she wrote in the final paragraph of her autobiography:

'To live in an age when history is being made at a great pace is not in all ways pleasant, but it is exciting, and can be exhilarating whenever one can get one's mental head far enough above the distractions and inconveniences of daily life. However thick the anxieties and clouds under which we labour at present, I still hope that, before I die, I may see this revolution working itself to rest, and the cause which I have believed in all my life triumphing over the difficulties and disasters which so few of its ardent proto-martyrs foresaw.'

## 5. *In Retrospect*

*Naomi Mitchison*

**Margaret Cole was my friend whom I came increasingly to love and admire, from the days when she was an alarming, slightly senior, intellectual wife, on through her time in Labour politics and in the LCC, when she used to take me to lunch at County Hall and sometimes lectured me a little about things which I ought to have known and perhaps done something about. Dick, my husband, and I were with her a lot during the grim days of Douglas' last illness and on into her eighties. I was with her last on the day before she died, when, I am sure, she knew fairly clearly what was happening to the body which was becoming more and more of a burden to her. She specially wanted me to thank Jane for her letters and here her voice softened. Then she had a forbidden cigarette and a little giggle about the nursing staff who were (understandably) worried about her setting the bed clothes on fire.**

During the war Dick stayed with Margaret and Douglas while I was stuck at Carradale in Argyleshire with a small crowd of Glasgow evacuated children and the farm to get going. Their house – Freeland in Holder's Hill Road, Hendon – was slightly bombed (a phrase that could be used truthfully in that war!) and Margaret of course treated it with complete indifference. I stayed there once or twice on brief visits to London.

The thirties were politically the most interesting time, though now, looking back, I cannot quite remember what all the bitter quarreling was about, nor yet how and why the Fabian Society budded into the Fabian Research Bureau and SSIP, nor, for that matter just when the United Front was formed, though I was a delegate at the Party Conference where Stafford Cripps was expelled in spite of my tiny constituency vote. All the Postgates were, probably with reason, highly suspicious of the Communist Party, but I was

pulled the other way, since my brother was a Party member and I had been deeply excited (though not totally convinced) by my SSIP visit to the Soviet Union. What I remember are pictures: Margaret speaking in 1931 to a packed meeting at King's Norton where my husband had, at short notice, taken on Douglas' constituency after it had been discovered that he had diabetes. I was not a member of the Labour Party at that time, but it was Margaret's incisive eloquence which shook me into joining.

It was in the thirties that the week-end political schools were held in Lady Warwick's house. The Coles and many another Fabian or non-Fabian socialist intellectual went there for lectures and discussions though I fear that I spent most of my time swimming in the great lily pond. I recollect Margaret was quite sympathetic and didn't scold me! But there was always warmth and tenderness in our relations, which may seem odd to those who only

knew her as chairman, firm teacher, or opponent in some matter either of socialist doctrine or LCC powers.

She was kind to the younger generation, too, though to say she loved children would be inaccurate. What interested her were growing minds and giving fair chances – or as fair as our class structure allows. She was delighted with some of the LCC playgrounds with their imaginative devices for giving children more scope for make-up games. She saw this as part of education; both she and Douglas were, deeply, educators. She would have been a great College head. Unhappily, it does not yet seem possible to combine that kind of job with being an adequate wife, mother and political hostess, as well as all the odd jobs that get thrust onto women with any ability. There were always so many people coming to see the Coles, especially when they were living at Freeland, some way out from central London, but it was in some ways easier to get about London in those days. There were often visitors from other countries, figures in the Second International perhaps. You could always be sure of exciting conversations and ideas. There was always a lot of follow-up from this and of course Margaret had masses of letters to read and answer. Genuine relaxation meant good gramophone records, classical music mostly, but perhaps they were mostly for Douglas.

Like more than you might guess of British intellectuals, she had a stream of poetic feeling running underneath the practical side of things. It came to the surface mostly in the songs she wrote for the socialist moment and the plays that sometimes got put on at Fabian get-togethers. They often went to well-known tunes of the movement or hymn tunes. Many date back to old controversies, some perhaps to pre-Welfare State days. But the bite and zing remain. She could quote too, at the least provocation, from the Belloc and Chesterton poems in which indignation touches off the perennial shout of liberty, something deep in the European consciousness. Perhaps some of these poems, whether straight or ironic, are more important than those of the more advanced and publicised poets of the period. Margaret certainly thought so.

She cared less for other forms of art, though like most of her generation she had been influenced by William Morris. Douglas collected good English glass; she looked after it and washed the glasses up herself. But there was so little time for everything. Books spilled over chairs and tables, papers and letters accumulated. In her old age she still liked a bright scarf or a brooch, perhaps a present from one of the children, and above all she liked talk, because, in the end, what she liked was people.

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## Margaret Cole 1893-1980

Margaret Cole was a major figure in the Labour movement and Fabian Society for 50 years. Appointed as Secretary of the Fabian Research Department (later Labour Research Department) in 1916 she subsequently married G D H (Douglas) Cole. The two formed an enduring and influential political partnership which produced a prodigious number of books, tracts and pamphlets on socialism, the Labour movement and Labour history. Margaret Cole contributed to the formation of the New Fabian Research Bureau and became its Honorary Secretary. Later, as an active politician she assumed wide ranging responsibilities on the London County Council and in particular its Education Committee.

This pamphlet is a biography but also a part history of both the Fabian Society and the Labour movement and records the considerable contribution to the development of socialism of the woman who was President of the Fabian Society at her death.

### Fabian Society

The Fabian Society exists to further socialist education and research. It is affiliated to the Labour Party, both nationally and locally, and embraces all shades of Labour opinion within its ranks – left, right and centre. Since 1884 the Fabian Society has enrolled thoughtful socialists who are prepared to discuss the essential questions of democratic socialism and relate them to practical plans for building socialism in a changing world. Beyond this the Society has no collective policy. It puts forward no resolutions of a political character. The Society's members are active in their Labour parties, trade unions and co-operatives. They are representative of the labour movement, practical people concerned to study and discuss problems that matter.

The Society is organised nationally and locally. The national Society directed by an elected Executive Committee, publishes pamphlets and holds schools and conferences of many kinds. Local Societies – there are one hundred of them – are self governing and are lively centres of discussion and also undertake research.



