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The British People and the League of Nations; Democracy, Citizenship and Internationalism, c.1918-45

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Helen McCarthy writes of a 'recent groundswell of scholarly interest in the League [of Nations]', which was surveyed by Susan Pedersen in a 2007 review essay.(1) To this she adds my own 2009 book (2), which came out in time for her to notice, but not to use. Her own book is another valuable addition, along with Ruth Henig's general survey, Daniel Laqua's edited volume on interwar internationalism, and the 40-odd papers from some 15 countries presented at last August's conference at the Graduate Institute at Geneva.(3)

McCarthy's title is slightly misleading in that her book is not about the League, but rather about the British League of Nations Union and how it 'inspired a rich and participatory culture of political protest, popular education and civic ritual...' (p. 1). She sees this as an important part of 'the larger history of the democratisation of Britain's political culture between the wars' (p. 2). Hers is very much history from the ground up. It does not challenge the main conclusions of Donald Birn's pioneering 1981 study (4), but does broaden and deepen it. McCarthy finds that 'the LNU's gospel of universal participation was belied by the sociological reality of its membership, dominated as it was by middle-class branch officers or super-wealthy patrons' (p. 156). The participation of the middle-classes in the Union suggests that accounts of their retreat into suburban domesticity have been exaggerated. Yet, middle-class dominance at the grass roots was a matter of fact rather than aspiration. The LNU was not intended to 'shore up middle class anti-socialism' (p. 157). Socialists such as Philip Noel-Baker were prominent in its leadership, and trade unionists were actively encouraged to join. But workers who did join often felt patronised and talked down to. One trade unionist on an LNU deputation to Downing Street found his colleagues 'a poor babbling crowd with all the traditional courtesies, gratitudes and sophistication, so that I felt quite out of place and unhappy' (p. 169). Workers had their traditional forms of sociability, many of which, such as the public house, were male oriented. The LNU, as McCarthy brings out, was to a quite remarkable degree based on church and chapel congregations, which were predominantly female. This imbued 'the grassroots movement with a distinctly religious flavour…' (p. 3), but may well have been off-putting for working men. Moreover, the Union appealed much more to the reclining Nonconformists than to the members of the Established Church, and hardly at all to the still expanding Roman Catholics.

The Nonconformists, of course, had been one of the mainstays of pre-war Liberalism. All writers on the LNU have stressed the degree to which it carried on the traditions of liberalism at a time when the Liberal

Party became fragmented and marginalised. McCarthy pushes this further in arguing that ‘the wider diffusion of those values, in part accomplished by the diaspora of Liberal personnel into new institutional homes, was integral to the political realignment of the interwar years’ (p. 55). Education was a key liberal value, seen as a means of socialising mass democracy. The editor of the Union’s journal *Headway*, which had a circulation of some 100,000 at its peak, saw its purpose as ‘primarily to instruct, and only secondarily to entertain’; reading its more difficult articles was ‘a duty any man or woman of serious purpose ought to be ready to carry out’ (p. 25). Schools were a particular concern of the LNU, partly because of the involvement of the historian H. A. L. Fisher, a Liberal who had been President of the Board of Education in the Lloyd George Coalition. LNU speakers gained easy access to the classroom. Iris Murdoch would recall that ‘she and her fellow students used to carry a copy of Article 16 in their pockets at all times’ (p. 112), though McCarthy accepts that such zeal was likely confined to Badminton. While teachers largely accepted the Union’s internationalism as part of the general turn away from the jingoistic masculinity of the late Victorian and Edwardian periods, they worried about the possible intrusion of ‘propaganda’ into the classroom. This would significantly restrict the ability of the LNU to act as a campaigning organisation.

The League of Nations Union saw its job as ‘fostering intelligent citizenship and developing enlightened patriotism’ (p. 132).(5) It did not challenge the idea of Great Britain’s central role in the development of a better world. It expected to support governments of whatever party in promoting a widely accepted national policy. In discussing this, McCarthy does not always get her tone right. She tends to see Conservative and traditional élite backing of the League as a concession to public opinion, and perhaps amounting to little more than lip-service. I have argued that British political leaders and senior officials wanted a League not out of subservience to popular pressures, but because they believed that it would provide the desired basis for post-war stability. The LNU was not asking them to go in a direction where they did not want to go. Lord Robert Cecil, the Chairman and effective leader of the Union throughout, in government or out, characteristically tried to contrast his zeal for the League with the alleged indifference of other Conservatives. His largely self-serving rhetoric has too often been taken at too close to face value by historians. McCarthy is therefore misleading when she speaks of the LNU’s ‘appeasement’ of the right (p. 162) and its concessions to ‘popular militarism’(pp. 137–41). Certainly, as a critic pungently put it, the Union’s leadership did include a surprising number of military figures, ‘disgruntled generals, and disappointed admirals’.(6) It did establish links with the British Legion, and recruited heavily on Armistice Day. But 11 November was about commemoration, not celebration, and the Legion was hardly a militarist body like the German Stahlhelm, far less the SA or the SS.

Like most historians of the inter-war period, McCarthy’s focus is more on the 1930s than on the 1920s. She is particularly weak in outlining the origins of the League of Nations Union in the earlier League of Nations Society, which was very much an intellectual élite group initially unwilling to proselytise for fear of being seen as a stop-the-war movement, and the League of Free Nations Association organised by David Davies and several others connected with Great Britain’s 1918 propaganda offensive, who urged the immediate creation of a League among the Allied Powers which would control the world’s resources and force Germany to pay a high price for admission. It may be argued that this deserves only a couple of paragraphs in a book whose focus is elsewhere, but it may also be argued that those paragraphs could and should have been better.(7) Origins matter in another respect. Revulsion against war and the desire for ‘Never Again’ undoubtedly did much to turn the LNU into a mass popular movement with a membership of more than 400,000 at its peak in 1931. The war and the immediate post-war period was important also in that the governments were coalitions, traditional party divisions seemed decreasingly relevant, and all men of good-will were expected to work together for the national good.(8) The centrism of the LNU was a reflection of the times in which it emerged. While Cecil was one of the first to break away from Lloyd George, his intention was to create a different centre grouping of politicians of higher moral tone and ethical commitment. Although Cecil was premature, and his political schemes came to nothing, the Union followed his centrist vision. Although party politics eventually reasserted themselves, Baldwin succeeded because he offered the same moral leadership that Cecil had promised. The Corfu crisis, the revulsion against Lord Birkenhead’s call for sharp swords, and the apparent revival of Liberalism in the 1923 election, made it clear

that support for the League of Nations could not be challenged in British politics. Not even Neville Chamberlain in the late 1930s was ready for an open break with the LNU.

As McCarthy clearly shows, the League was both a popular cause and a national one. While it appeared to have triumphed internationally in the mid 1920s, Susan Pedersen has argued that public opinion both in France and in Germany turned away from it as the fruits of Locarno appeared to be slow in coming.(9) While McCarthy does not make an international comparison, the development of British public opinion clearly followed a different path. Support for the League peaked in 1931 just as it was ebbing on the continent. The crisis for Great Britain would come in 1935–6 with the Peace Ballot and the Abyssinian War. McCarthy examines the Peace Ballot in some detail. Her most interesting point is that, as something to be filled out at leisure at home, it reflected a feminised approach to politics, and, indeed, women played a major role in organising and carrying it out. Partly for that reason it has faded almost completely from public memory. What appeared to have been the repudiation of the League with the Hoare-Laval Pact largely destroyed the credibility of Geneva. The centrist policy of the LNU was to a large degree abandoned as Cecil moved the organisation sharply to the left, aligning it with the International Peace Campaign and functioning as part of the Popular Front. Others, particularly the Secretary, Maxwell Garnett, had reservations, but Cecil was convinced that the IPC was ‘almost the last hope for peace in Europe … If it fails, I do not think the League can go on’(p. 223). McCarthy earlier emphasised how far Cecil had transcended his earlier establishmentarian Anglicanism to gain acceptance by Nonconformists as an outstanding Christian statesman. Salvador de Madariaga famously described him as a ‘civic monk’. However, as Asquith had once noted, he could be a ‘ruffian’.(10) He was a Free Trade Tory who had put himself at the head of a mass popular movement. He now admired the Campaign for its youthful vigour. McCarthy shows how his choice undermined the LNU, which came to be seen as propagandist rather than educational. By 1939 its membership had halved, and only 9,000 still bothered with *Headway*. On the other hand, Cecil aligned himself with men like Attlee, Dalton, Noel-Baker, Lloyd George, Sir Archibald Sinclair, and Winston Churchill in support of the League and collective security.(11) In retrospect this would not seem a bad cause or bad company.

In her conclusion McCarthy quotes the reflection of a Branch Secretary: ‘Let us be honest with ourselves. Very few of us who were in the Union heart and soul considered the Covenant absorbingly interesting. We found it difficult to thread our way through the Optional Clause, Technical Commissions, Voting Procedure and so on…’ (p. 242). She has the same problem herself. She does not know enough about the League and the issues confronting it. Her claim that the Geneva Protocol of 1924 was ‘milder’ than the Treaty of Mutual Assistance of 1923 (p. 22) is unsupported by evidence or analysis, and is simply incorrect. She refers several times to the Four Points of the International Peace Campaign, but she never gives them, even though whether to grant dispensation from the third point (calling for ‘Strengthening of the League of Nations for the prevention and stopping of war by the organization of Collective Security and Mutual Assistance’ (12)) was a matter of considerable importance within the Union. Particularly shocking is the complete absence of any discussion of the Optional Clause. Getting London to sign this provision for the compulsory jurisdiction of the International Court in justiciable disputes was seen as a key issue for the LNU in the second half of the 1920s. It is the subject of an excellent but rather neglected book by Lorna Lloyd, of which McCarthy seems quite unaware. Lloyd provides a careful and incisive analysis of the failure of the Union to shift government policy on this matter. Many of the tensions between the centrist and the campaigning approaches and the intrinsic weaknesses of the LNU are clearly brought out. The Union’s failure prefigures its failure in the late 1930s, though in the earlier case it abandoned its campaign once it became clear that the government would not budge. Lloyd’s conclusion is trenchant: ‘the hope that British public opinion could play an important role in the making of foreign policy had proved to be ill-founded’.(13) This contrasts sharply with the bland, almost feel-good statement with which McCarthy ends her book: the League of Nations Union ‘succeeded … in persuading Britain’s quiet citizens to recognise foreign affairs as their own intimate concern and international government as a cause which deserved their support, and perhaps even, on occasion to break their silence in order to say as much’ (p. 253). McCarthy’s strength is in her attempt to ask new questions and to try different approaches to the development of a popular movement, but other

historians' questions about issues and high politics are also still worth asking. It is certainly right for her to try to go 'beyond the Senior Combination Room or the steps of the Foreign Office' (p. 7), but those places remained important, and usually decisive. The League and the LNU can be understood only if both sets of questions are asked and answered.

Notes

1. Susan Pedersen, 'Back to the League of Nations', *The American Historical Review*, 112/4 (October 2007), 1091–1117.Back to (1)
2. Peter J. Yearwood, *Guarantee of Peace, The League of Nations in British Policy 1914–1925* (Oxford, 2009).Back to (2)
3. Ruth Henig, *The League of Nations* (London, 2010); *Internationalism Reconfigured. Transnational Ideas and Movements Between the World Wars*, ed. Daniel Laqua (London and New York, 2011); The Graduate Institute Geneva, Department of International History, Conference on the League of Nations, 25–26 August 2011. I thank Stephen Wertheim for having provided me with copies of these papers. Back to (3)
4. Donald S. Birn, *The League of Nations Union 1918–1945* (Oxford, 1981).Back to (4)
5. The quotation is from *Headway* (August 1927).Back to (5)
6. Major E.W. Polson-Newman, 'The League of Nations Union', *The English Review* (May 1929), 579, quoted in Lorna Lloyd, *Peace through Law; Britain and the International Court in the 1920s* (Woodbridge, Suffolk, 1997), p. 88. Major Polson-Newman pointed also to 'doctrinaire professors' and 'a miscellaneous collection of visionaries and elderly women'.Back to (6)
7. For generations the standard work on the League movement during the First World War has been recognised to be Henry Winkler, *The League of Nations Movement in Great Britain, 1914–1919* (2nd ed., Metuchen, NJ, 1967). Its continuing relevance was recently reaffirmed by Martin Ceadel : 'The origins and Covenant of the League of Nations: a corrective to two standard simplifications', Graduate Institute Conference, Geneva, 25 August 2011.Back to (7)
8. For centrism in the early post-war period see Kenneth O. Morgan, *Consensus and Disunity: The Lloyd George Coalition Government 1918–1922* (Oxford, 1979).Back to (8)
9. Pedersen, 'Back to the League of Nations', 1096–7.Back to (9)
10. Asquith to Lady Venetia Stanley 12 March 1915, in *H.H. Asquith, Letters to Venetia Stanley*, ed. Michael & Eleanor Brock (Oxford, 1985), p. 477.Back to (10)
11. Save the League: Save Peace' issued at the beginning of 1937. The other signatories were Mrs Corbett Ashby, Lord Lytton, the Duchess of Atholl, the Archbishop of Canterbury, and Gilbert Murray. Viscount Cecil Robert, *A Great Experiment* (London, 1941), pp. 289–90.Back to (11)
12. The Points are given in Cecil, *Great Experiment*, pp. 284–5.Back to (12)
13. Lloyd, *Peace through law*, p. 89.Back to (13)

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[1] https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/12817