

HENRY WILLIAMSON AND THE B.U.F.

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THE RELEASE LAST YEAR of the Home Office files on Sir Oswald Mosley's British Union of Fascists has prompted me to reopen a subject that members may consider as having been laid to rest.

Henry's political views have been expounded by Diana Mosley in Journal No. 3, and David Hoyle's provocative piece 'In the Monkey-House' appeared in No. 4. Correspondence about both was published in No. 5. Since then, not a word.

The declassification of the Mosley papers, as they have come to be called, has brought to light the names of well-known personalities of the period who backed or were connected with the B.U.F. However, Henry's name does not seem to be among them, which reflects the small role he played in the organisation.

Henry joined the B.U.F. in 1937 shortly after taking over Old Hall Farm at Stiffkey. At the time the B.U.F. had made extravagant claims of progress in Norfolk which had prompted the Board of Deputies of British Jews to make special investigations. Their report, published in 1937, showed that the B.U.F. claims were unfounded, despite the fact that the B.U.F. had three prospective parliamentary candidates in the area.

One of these, Dorothy, Viscountess Downe, a prominent Conservative, who it was said by Mosley "had left the Conservatives in disgust", was a neighbour of Henry's and introduced Henry to Mosley and begged him to join.

By this time the B.U.F. was in decline and the 'Battle of Cable Street and the Public Order Act (banning uniforms) had done much to lose it support. The number of active members seems to have remained extremely low - just over 5000 in October 1934 and 3000 in 1938, the inactive members in 1938 numbering 15 000. At the beginning of 1939 the B.U.F. was finding difficulty in hiring halls for meetings but secured Earls Court in London in July 1939 and January 1940. A photograph of Henry at a B.U.F. meeting dated 1939 would indicate that he attended the Earls Court meeting, if no others.

As a popular writer and broadcaster of the time, it was reasonable to assume that Henry would be asked to use his skills on behalf of the B.U.F. In 1938 Henry gave permission for extracts from *Goodbye West Country*, which had been published in the September of the previous year, to be published in Mosley's weekly tabloid *Action*. They appeared in the 7 May and 12 November issues.

Action was the third regular publication launched by the B.U.F. and was first published on 21 February 1936, and replaced *Blackshirt* and *Fascist Week* which had been published since 1933. Despite low member-

ship figures of the B.U.F. *Action* claimed weekly sales at 2d a time of 25 - 30 000 copies. *Action* continued to be published until 6 June 1940, the last issue coinciding with the evacuation of the British Army from Dunkirk and the round-up by Special Branch of B.U.F. members and sympathisers, including Henry, under Defence Regulation 18B.

Henry was taken to Wells-next-the-Sea police station, where he was held overnight for questioning, but was released and was put under an Alien Order for an unspecified time restricting him to a five-mile radius. Little had been found by the two police officers who searched Henry's house. They did take away a few photographs of the Nuremberg rally but, failing to look under the carpet, they missed the copies of *Action* that Henry had hidden there.

The themes of the two pieces from *Goodbye West Country* published in *Action*, farming and war, reflect to some degree why he admired Mosley and supported his policies. Both issues of *Action* in which the pieces appear carry other articles on these subjects. Assuming Henry saw both issues he must have read the headline COMMUNISM IS JEWISH in the 7 May issue. Whether Henry was anti-Semitic has been explored in David Hoyle's 'In the Monkey-House'. If he was not and chose to ignore it, it did not prevent him from allowing a further extract in November.

The Armistice Day piece is quintessential Williamson and epitomises everything Henry believed, what drove him and haunted him. This is what spurred him to write as he did, every word "chipped from the breastbone".

Despite his plea to the Old Soldiers, and to the spirits of the fallen, for a new order, a new world, Britain was at war again with Germany less than a year later. Oswald Mosley and many of his followers were locked up and it was only when Mosley's life was endangered by a grave deterioration of his health that he was grudgingly released by the Home Secretary in November 1943. He could never have been brought to trial as Special Branch failed to discover a single unpatriotic act on his part, let anything which would have made him liable to prosecution.

Mosley's dream had come to an end and Henry's did, too. The farm of his ideal did not materialise and his marriage to Loetitia became a casualty. In 1946, after a decade of frustration, Henry returned to Devon to the hut at Ox's Cross to work on the novel he believed it was his duty and destiny to write. The one novel became the fifteen volumes of *A Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight*.

Despite his literary merit, Henry was never honoured by the Establishment and to this day the word traitor is formed on the lips of most whenever Mosley or Williamson are mentioned.

Patriot would be more fitting.