Book Review: A Brave and Beautiful Spirit

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A Brave and Beautiful Spirit: Dora Marsden 1882–1960, Les Garner, Portland, OR, Union of Egoists, 2019 (first published 1990), 1–486 pp., £19.95 (pb), ISBN 978-1944651-14-5

The lives of women who refused to conform to the 'Vicwardian' stereotypes of femininity took many forms, but perhaps one of the most individual was that of Dora Marsden (1882–1960), scholar, Freethinker, Egoist and militant suffragette of the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU). Les Garner informs us that Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence, long-time Treasurer of the WSPU, wrote of Marsden in 1909 that her 'brave and beautiful spirit' exemplified the disposition most valued by the leaders and strategists of the organisation. Yet before too much time had passed, Marsden had left the WSPU behind, writing in a torrent of 'hurt anger and not a little arrogance' (122) that its leaders, the infamous Pankhurst women, were insensible to her independent style of regional organisation, and that she obstinately refused to comply with what she saw as their 'autocratic' demands. It was an opinion she held for the rest of her life, which came to its close in 1960 in the withdrawn isolation of a mental asylum in Dumfries. It was a tragic end to what, in many ways, was a tragic life.

The re-issue of Garner's 1990 biography of Marsden by the Egoist Press is simply that, a re-issue. Garner writes in a new preface to the book that although it would have been 'tempting … to … re-write' (11) he chose not to, on the grounds that his current political activism would have suffered as a result of having to become 'seldom seen' (11) as he worked on the manuscript. The pun on the name 'Seldom Seen', the name of the Lake District residence Marsden occupied with her mother Hannah in the 1920s, was deliberate, but I feel the work involved would have been worthwhile, particularly in light of the excellent recent scholarship undertaken by Lucy Delap, Tanya Cheadle, Sheila Rowbotham and others on Freethinkers, Socialists and the feminist *avant-garde*. Dora Marsden is a key figure among such pioneers and a re-write, penned in the midst of new discoveries of the twenty-first century, would have been both appropriate and timely.

Marsden was not alone among early twentieth-century feminist pioneers in finding Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst's WSPU guilty of moving away from its Radicalliberal and Socialist roots. She was also not alone in pursuing a life that, increasingly, questioned the relationship between the 'personal and sexual life and social change' (161). In common with her close friend, the bright and effervescent Mary Gawthorpe (regional Organiser of the WSPU in Leeds), Marsden

rose from a poverty-blighted childhood, via the route of probationer and pupil-teacher to the role of an independent woman, earning her own living through teaching. At Owen's College where she took her degree, she was in the orbit of likeminded women, including scientist Rona Robinson, Eva Gore-Booth and Theresa Billington. It was this 'network of friends and sympathisers' which proved 'vital' (63) to Marsden, both in the period of her suffragette activism and, latterly, while working on the *Freewoman* group of publications from 1912. Following graduation in 1903, Marsden gained her first teaching post in Leeds, later moving to Colchester and Manchester before becoming Headmistress at Altrincham Pupil-Teacher Centre in 1908. Garner informs his readers that Dora's work had made her 'well aware of the vast gulf between idealized concepts of women's lives and reality' (70), and it was for these reasons she became attracted to the suffrage movement. She was courageous, exceptionally determined and held 'a strong belief in her own abilities' (70), but these qualities led her away from the WSPU after only a few years. Ultimately, she also shied away from the designation 'feminist', her evolving philosophy leading her to embrace humanism, individualism (especially that form exemplified by the German postHeliganist Max Stirner) and a 'keenly developed' (209) egoism.

Marsden became the poster-girl of the WSPU; this was after one day in 1909 in which she endured such 'rough treatment' at police hands it was like being 'in the thick of [a] battle' (102–3). But even though she and Rona Robinson had been awarded the 'Union's Victoria Cross' and Marsden had been sent to Southport as WSPU Organiser, the relationship soured between the physically diminutive Dora and WSPU Headquarters at Clements Inn. While in Southport Marsden's health declined, but she was independently minded and refused to delegate her work when she became overloaded and ill. Her style of working became heavily criticised from the centre and, when the relationship finally fractured, it surprised no-one, least of all Marsden's inner circle. In 1912, Marsden found herself bereft of employment and income and physically ill. She turned, as she always, to her mother Hannah for support, but on her recovery began to pursue the dream she had long held— to become a writer and commentator on social questions, in her periodicals *The Freewoman* (from 1911), *The New Freewoman* (1912) and *The Egoist* (1913). But her dreams of literary success turned to nightmares as her 'elitism, arrogance and … bullying over-confidence' (216) turned supporter after supporter (and publisher after publisher) away from the papers she sought to succour into success.

Mary Gawthorpe, seeking only the best for her friend, became joint Editor on the *Freewoman*, albeit with reservations about Marsden's attitude to the WSPU and to its leaders in particular. Tensions rose, but when Gawthorpe split from Marsden in late September 1912 over the latter's desire to broaden the base of the paper out from its feminist base, both were wounded. Into the orbit of the paper, however, came a unique group of anarchists, Socialists and Syndicalists— these including, most famously, Rebecca West, H.G. Wells and James Joyce, whose *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* was serialised in the *Egoist* in 1914. Actively promoting such cross-currents but having little editorial assistance, Dora Marsden was worked almost to death and her already fragile health was severely strained. It was only the arrival in her life of Harriet Shaw Weaver, who became her financial mainstay (even beyond her association with the *Egoist*), that a periodical arrived that would have a measure of longevity. Weaver became editor of the *Egoist* in the summer of 1914, and although Marsden continued an association with the periodical until 1919 (when publication ceased), she did so from a base in Southport far removed from the hub of events in London— leaving the 'normally cool' (308) Weaver to struggle with her demands, and her late copy! Increasingly psychologically fragile, Marsden and her mother moved to bleak and

uninviting 'Seldom Seen' near Ullswater in 1920 where Dora, increasingly reclusive, spent the next decade working on what she hoped would become a seven-volume philosophical *magnum opus*. Garner is likely correct that her absorption in this work 'was used to prevent her reflecting on her own life' as a woman 'with no job, no career and no income' (345).

Garner notes that to write about the last years of Marsden's life is also to share 'its sadness' (349), and Dora's intellectual genius remains, even to this day, under-researched. Only two volumes of her masterwork were published, *The Definition of the Godhead* (1928) and *The Mysteries of Christianity* (1930) and while the first sold six copies, there is no record of any sales for the second. It was a bitter blow and the effective end of Marden's literary career. She suffered a serious accident while depressed (about which there were many rumours of a suicide attempt) and her sister, on visiting her in hospital, realised that Marsden would never recover enough to live independently. It appears that Dora Marsden's focus on individualism and egoism and her abandonment of feminism drove her 'into the political wilderness' (423) and her increasingly unwieldy prose drove even the most ardent of her admirers away from her writing. Yet Marsden's willingness to understand that there was more to social justice than could be remedied simply by the granting of 'votes for women' gave rise to the brilliant and forthright publications *The Freewoman* and *The New Freewoman*. They dazzled but briefly, but they did highlight a different world view. It can be justly claimed that Marsden's personality contained within it the seeds of her own destruction, but for historians who now seek to inquire into the philosophies of the feminist avant-garde, there will always be a place for the brilliant, beautiful, but flawed Dora Marsden.

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