

Morrison, Walter, 1924–2004

Stuart Christie

2004

Born 20 March 1924, died 6 February 6 2004

The milieu in which the anti-nuclear Scottish Committee of 100 flourished no longer exists, its activists having long since adopted other agendas. However, its brief flowering will always be associated with the dynamic figure of Walter Morrison, who seemingly at birth had signed up for life as a private extraordinaire in the Awkward Squad.

Morrison, who has died in his eightieth year, fought courageously against the wrongs in society, proudly wore the badges of non-violence and libertarian socialism, and spoke his mind fearlessly no matter where he was or in whose company.

Angered by the Clydebank blitz in 1940, the 16-year-old Morrison lied about his age and joined the army. He wanted to fight fascism, but in less than a week, he found little difference between this enemy and the bullying attitudes and practices within the British army. From then on Morrison's war was fought on two fronts. Considered a difficult case, he was shunted from the Royal Scots Guards to the Black Watch, then on to the Parachute Regiment. During a visit by King George VI, the king politely asked him how he was being treated, to which the good soldier Morrison replied: 'Terrible.' He was sent to India on the first available troop ship.

Morrison's pacifism grew from his army experiences in India. During the Gandhi demonstrations in 1942, the troops were briefed that they would be facing women and children protestors. The 18-year-old asked what they would be expected to do if they refused to halt. 'Open fire,' was the curt answer. Walter promptly stood up and said he would be the first to open fire: he would personally shoot any soldier who turned their gun on a woman or a child, and he would then shoot the officer who gave the order. His feet scarcely touched the ground on the way to the glasshouse.

Morrison was placed in solitary confinement and singled out for sadistic treatment. He told his superiors that unless the NCO responsible backed off, he would kill the next man who entered his cell. Morrison won the case but was wracked with guilt over the moral quandary that he would have had to kill the first person — friend or enemy — who entered his cell. It was that incident which started him on his lifelong commitment to non-violence.

Although charged on a number of occasions with incitement to mutiny, he never faced a full court-martial; his sentences were always confinement to barracks, 30-days loss of pay or down-gradation. He ended his army career and returned to Glasgow in 1946, without a war pension.

(Walter's army experiences are told in Peter Grafton's book, 'You, you and you – The people out of step with WWII) Pluto, 1981.)

The arrival of the US Polaris submarine fleet in the Holy Loch in 1960 turned Glasgow into ground zero for any Soviet pre-emptive nuclear missile strike. Morrison was involved from the start in the campaign to stop US Polaris missiles being based in the Holy Loch. He became a leading light of the Scottish Committee of 100 and was in the thick of all the demonstrations from the day the submarines arrived. A man of deeds as well as words, Morrison was drawn to the more libertarian and action-oriented Scottish Committee of 100, rather than the passive, celebrity-and-politician-dominated CND. The personal example Morrison set to others, coupled with his fame as a rebel, gave him considerable status among the young militants on the committee. My memories are of him standing single-handedly in Glasgow streets and at demonstrations around Scotland, surrounded by menacing and hostile opponents while arguing his case against the bomb. His tenacity and fortitude in going out in all weathers to demonstrate in the most hostile locations, often alone, was truly inspiring.

Protest was a family affair around the Morrison household. Walter's wife, Agnes Lygate, whom he married in 1953, and neighbour in Govan, Eleanor Hinds, wife of writer Archie Hinds, both early feminists, were founders of Women Against the Bomb and Youth against the Bomb. Betty Campbell, his later partner was, his constant support in the Corkerhill Community Council to which Morrison dedicated his life from 1976 to 2002.

On one occasion Morrison was setting up his tent on the foreshore of the Holy Loch, near Ardnadam pier which serviced the Polaris submarines and their support ships – it being illegal to camp on the land – when he was called over by someone waving to him from a large American car by the roadside. In the rear of the car were three men who addressed him by name, two from the Ministry of Defence's 'Psychological Warfare Group' in Dundee and the third an American of uncertain military or security provenance. They proceeded to warn Walter and his friends that they were out to get the so-called Scots Against War, a group who at the time were involved in publishing official secrets plus carrying out sabotage and other forms of direct action against military installations throughout Scotland. One of the MoD men pointed to the dark waters of the loch and told Walter that he was involved in a dangerous business and that it would be so easy for people like him to disappear, never to be found. Walter was a hard man, but this personal threat was something quite new and alarming to him.

A week after I was arrested in Spain in 1964, having been caught playing a part in a plot to assassinate the country's dictator, General Franco, Morrison hitched-hiked from Glasgow to London to hold a fast and a picket the Spanish embassy – having first telephoned Scotland Yard to ask permission. No sooner had he settled down on the pavement when a police van drew up and four policemen jumped out, bundled him into the van and drove to an unidentified London police station. Instead of being charged and taken to the police cells, he was escorted to what seemed like a large gym hall where three men sat at a table, one in police uniform and the other two in civvies. Morrison was then aggressively questioned about his relationship with me, about the Committee of 100 and again about the Scots Against War group, who had recently set fire to Ardnadam pier in the Holy Loch. Walter was an old hand at being arrested and locked up, but the sinister and surreal events of that night shook him up so badly that he resigned for a time from the Scottish Committee of 100.

After the Committee of 100 petered out a few years later, Morrison and Betty Campbell became pivotal figures in the Corkerhill Community Council, campaigning for improved housing, safer

roads, play parks and improved people integration. Walter and his team brought international recognition to Corkerhill, a tiny housing scheme on the south side of Glasgow with just 1,300 tenants. When it received a World Health Organisation award, the only community in the UK to qualify. When the award-winning community centre was closed after a long-running dispute with Glasgow City Council, Walter refused to bow out quietly, defiantly holding a flag-lowering ceremony as a final protest. On the last day, a large crowd turned out to see the flag of the WHO solemnly lowered over the centre. When the M77 carved through the south side of Glasgow, it was Corkerhill, led by Walter Morrison, who led the way organising resistance and winning major concessions.

Corkerhill was also the very first community in Glasgow to house the Vietnamese Boat People.

In 1998 when Morrison was at Buckingham Palace being awarded an MBE for his services to the Corkerhill community, the Queen's corgis had been running around the room unchecked and generally intimidating everyone. He said to HM: 'You know, Ma'am, if those dogs ran around like that in Corkerhill where I come from, I'd shoot the lot of them.' With a twinkle in his eye, of course.

He is survived by his partner Betty Campbell, his daughter Leigh and his son Grant.

Walter Morrison MBE, community activist, born March 20, 1924; died February 6, 2004.

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