

REVIEWS

BUCKINGHAMSHIRE SPIES AND SUBVERSIVES

by D J Kelly

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This book contains a witty critique of the character of the late Joachim Ribbentrop, the obnoxious Nazi ambassador to the United Kingdom, who prior to the last war had his country residence at Fulmer Rise Manor, Fulmer. This is a worthy expression of the value to be obtained from this pleasing publication, which rolls around events and people not so much as a continuous history but more as a timeline of events from the 15th to the 21st century.

There is some excellent informative detail pertaining to the Irish independence struggle after the Great War that even some Irish historians, of which there are many, either miss or choose to forget about. Then there is the rise of fascism between the wars, which Buckinghamshire could not avoid as Sir Oswald Mosely had acquired 12th-century Savehay Manor in Denham in 1926. Then there is the formation of the Special Operations Executive in 1940 that had training camps all over the county, along with those inventive oddballs commissioned by Winston Churchill, universally and endearingly nicknamed 'The Old Man', to make strange and deadly equipment to aid the war effort, who needed places to serve as depots. This is not to forget the rapid development of signals intelligence at Bletchley Park accompanied by the invention of the first computer. This is followed not far behind by Soviet spies looking for atomic secrets in the immediate post-war period. The recent development of Islamist terror groups is mentioned towards the end, but that story is ongoing and un-concluded.

Pacifist resisters in the Great War get a mention including Milly Witkopf, also known as Milly Rocker, one of the libertarian pacifist editorial team of the Yiddish newspaper *Arbeter Frait*, who was imprisoned in Aylesbury for printing in 1916 a strong disapproval of conscription. She was

the partner of the paper's editor Rudolf Rocker, possibly the nicest man to have ever organised a strike, who had unintentionally become the principal spokesman to the British authorities for the interned German citizens imprisoned in Alexandra Palace. Ironically Rocker had been exiled from Germany by the Kaiser's government for his beliefs and had his German citizenship revoked, a misfortune that did not stop the British authorities from interning him in 1914. Rocker went on after the war to write 'Nationalism & Culture', that Sir Herbert Read commended as the best exposition of libertarian socialism ever written.

Of course, the book starts with the persecution of the Lollards or 'The Knowing Men' as they were known. Kelly retells the shocking treatments that were inflicted on these heretics to established religion, many of whom had done nothing more sinful than read the New Testament in English. This had been made illegal by the supporters of the usurper Henry IV in the hope of bolstering support from the Church. However, the principal theological objections to Lollardy were the rejection of transubstantiation in the Eucharist coupled to a call for the Church to abstain from temporal affairs. After the stupid and pointless Oldcastle Rebellion in 1414, Lollardy had swiftly become a quietist, contemplative belief of minor significance. However, its apparent resurgence in the early 16th century was due partly to raised zeal on the part of a Church confronting mainstream Protestant reformism as well as the more fundamental and subversive challenge of Anabaptism, that was starting to leak across the Channel from the Low Countries.

The development of Particular Baptism in the Chilterns during the 17th century may owe a lot to Lollardy, as there are distinct parallels between Wycliffe's heresy and Calvin's teaching. The Baptists were a significant factor in the wide support within Buckinghamshire for Parliament during the English Civil Wars, 1642–1648. Kelly makes a generous reference to the Iver Diggers,

implying to a degree that they were possibly the origin for that magnificent True Leveller pamphlet 'A Light Shining in Buckinghamshire'. It is more likely that this light was lit somewhere around the triangle of High Wycombe, Missenden and Amersham. A number of attempts have been made to locate and identify the original writers, but puritan conventicles were by definition secret gathered churches, and by late 1649 the radical puritans had become well accustomed to keeping their collective heads down.

Unfortunately Kelly kicks the foundation of the Quakers, the logical extension of puritanism, back a century or so, but then goes on to remind us of stalwart Isaac Pennington, the delightful Thomas Ellwood – a friend of the poet, John Milton, and

the economic creed of John Bellers, a man well ahead of his time. Then there is the choleric magistrate, Ambrose Bennett, who hated Quakers with a hideous and violent passion.

This is a good, informative read with an easy style which will please the average reader. The price of £12.99 may seem high but there are 300 pages packed solid with a generous supply of quality detail which can take the reader off in many, varied directions both ancient and modern. There is a list of books at the back for further reading to which I would like to add 'The Lollards' by Richard Rex, Palgrave 2002.

Nigel Wilson