

Extract from:

Iron Curtain: From Stage to Cold War

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5. Margaret McCarthy's Dream – from chapter 17

Some apostates gave up on the cause without escaping the polarized logic of the iron curtain. Love became hate as they leapt from one side to the other: the one-eyed communist transmogrifying into a one-eyed anti-communist and, in some cases, including that of Freda Utley, going on to adopt a zealously McCarthyist perspective in the 1950s. But there were others who managed to remove the iron curtain from their thinking altogether.

Perhaps the most sympathetic British record of this recovery of mind was provided by Margaret McCarthy. Having travelled through Russia with the Young Communists attached to the British Workers' Delegation of 1927, McCarthy had resumed her labours in the Lancashire weaving sheds, dreaming of what she had seen and felt in Russia and imagining that the straps driving the deafening looms were 'pouring forth the magnificent strains of the "Peer Gynt" suite as I had heard it at the Leningrad ballet'. She started speaking for the British Communist Party, launching her platform career in Accrington market place in December 1927, and going on to tour Lancashire with the 'Messianic Mission of bringing the truth about the Soviet Promised Land to the Lancashire cotton operatives'.

In 1931 she had returned to Moscow to work and study for a year as a 'practicant' with the Red International of Trade Unions. Though she resisted it at the time, her disenchantment began in Russia. As an ordinary and unpampered foreigner, rather than a visiting delegate, she had seen and also shared the terrible conditions of the Russian workers: sacrificed to the first Five Year Plan, while the Party bureaucrats enjoyed special shops, capacious flats, and dachas – the latter ornamented by luridly 'made-up' wives and serviced by exploited servant girls from the country. She had seen the vanity and sexual opportunism of the Comintern's visiting stars, including the odious Bill Rust, whom she had known as the Comintern-backed secretary of the British Young Communist League.

She had been dismayed to discover that the typists employed by the Red International of Trade Unions did not benefit from trade union conditions, and she had watched the gathering persecution of old Bolsheviks including Zinoviev, Bukharin, Rykov and Tomsky, whose heresies were already being denounced in lectures she attended at the Lenin University in 1931. She noted the disappearance of Russian comrades, and saw through the lies of the British Daily Worker, which had obediently denied the existence of the prison – Solovetsky – in which they were probably held. Perhaps, like another British Communist who gradually came to his senses while studying at the Comintern's International Lenin School in the late twenties, she visited the Museum of the Revolution and realized from the 'gaps in the display' that history was being rewritten there too. Her dissatisfaction was increased by the utter indifference shown by Harry Pollitt, by then the obedient chief of the CPGB, as members of Communist Parties of China, Bulgaria, Greece, Germany, and America were denounced as renegades. Many of these accused leaders were effectively already prisoners of Stalin, having found refuge in Russia and, in some cases, being under sentence of death in their countries of origin.

Together with a rising sympathy for the arguments of the now beaten and dispersed left opposition, these doubts had failed to break through her resistances by 1932, when McCarthy returned to Britain. However, she found herself being loudly condemned by British Communists when, in the course of speaking at meetings, she mentioned some of the difficulties faced by the

citizens of Stalin's Russia. Finding herself increasingly out of favour with a party that refused to countenance the thought that anything could be less than perfect in their promised land, she repressed her worries partly out of loyalty to the international friends with whom she had shared the cause in Moscow.

So strong was her habit of denial that she only realized she had finally broken with Communism when a doctor in Clitheroe helped her understand the significance of a recurrent dream in which she found herself back on the Soviet side of the division. She was standing on a sea-coast like the one she had enjoyed when sent for a month's convalescence at a party rest home at Gagri on the Black Sea.

Yet the mood of the place had changed – the air was heavy, the sea torpid, and she felt 'an all-pervading atmosphere of fearful, hopeless despondency'. She stood silently on the beach, aware of a 'deathly silence' and yet not feeling alone thanks to 'a sort of presence, a melancholy, gloomy spirit' that emanated from 'a smoothly red, massive obelisk of rock which jutted upwards from among the mountains dominating the bay.'

Suddenly, and without any warning, 'the great obelisk fell forward with an overwhelming crash across the bay, plunging from its stupendous height to lie broken on the beach.' When silence returned to the shaken scene, McCarthy was assailed by a sense of 'sudden nothingness' and 'unexpected loneliness'. 'The bay was dead; it had been haunted and dark, and suddenly it was dead, the spirit finished, the darkness empty. It would have been less terrifying if there had been sounds, alarms, screams, but there was no other sound – just the brooding stillness, the sharp rending crash, and then a black void. Every fear and horror were more endurable than the nothingness which at once, implacably and utterly, descended.'

In Margaret McCarthy's dream, nothing would improve after the obelisk fell. The sea would congeal, and hordes of menacing crab-like creatures came crawling out of its greasy depths. Margaret McCarthy had lost her world, her perspective, the struggle she had shared with many friends. But she had also freed herself from the excruciating rigs of her time: the unending equivocation, the self-imposed censorship, the lie of so much redemptive politics, the habitual use of a promised future to excuse and obscure monstrosities in the present. The polarizing deadlock that earlier investigators had named the iron curtain no longer dominated her mind.