

Radical Readers: The Left Book Club in Richmond during the 1930s

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At one stage during 1936 a leaflet was handed out to shoppers in Richmond's town centre which set out the ambitious aims of a new national Book Club: 'The aim of the Club is a simple one: it is to help in the terribly urgent struggle *for* World Peace and a better social and economic order and *against* Fascism, by giving (to all who are determined to play their part in this struggle) such *knowledge* as will immensely increase their efficiency'.¹ This leaflet was produced by the Left Book Club (LBC). It also gave details on LBC membership rates and doubled up as an application form for the Club.

Some people may be surprised to learn that Richmond in the late 1930s saw regular discussions and activities organized by a local group of the LBC. The LBC was a publishing group that existed from 1936 to 1948, and it was also one of the first national book clubs in Britain. It had been founded in May, 1936, by the Leftwing sympathiser and well-known publisher Victor Gollancz, along with the prominent Leftwing politicians Stafford Cripps and John Strachey.

In many ways Victor Gollancz (1893-1967), born in Maida Vale in London to Jewish parents of German and Polish background, was key to the LBC's philosophy and general objectives. Gollancz had joined the Labour Party in 1931. He also displayed both liberal and communist sympathies, but later came to define his core beliefs as radical Christian Socialist. By the mid-1930s, with the rise of fascism in Europe, the outbreak of civil war in Spain, and the seeming spread of pessimism about the future of democracy, Gollancz was keen to help the anti-fascist cause and also revive the Left in Britain, which he felt had lost its intellectual direction. He was also interested in the emergence of 'Popular Front' forms of politics, which encouraged broad cooperation across all parts of the centre-Left in the face of Rightwing authoritarianism and the threat of war.

Gollancz had become a notably successful publisher, with lots of creative

imagination and energy. One way he felt he could aid the Leftwing cause in this country was to try and educate middle-class and working-class people in ‘progressive’ ideas by providing them with access to cheap editions of Left-of-centre books, via membership of a book club. LBC members agreed to buy at a discount specially-bound Club editions of books selected, on a monthly basis, by an LBC selection committee, which included Gollancz, John Strachey and two others. Gollancz had a real flair for the marketing and design of his publications, and ensured that all LBC publications contained attractive typography and a uniform and distinctive dust-cover design. There was also a monthly LBC newsletter called *The Left News*, which was posted to Club members.

Taken by surprise at the rapid membership growth and success of the LBC, Gollancz then decided that the Club should also give both members and any interested general citizens the chance to meet and share ideas with others in local discussion groups. In this sense, the LBC was not just a publishing business and ‘book club’, but also increasingly doubled up as an educational and campaigning organization. It was felt by Gollancz and his colleagues that a network of local discussion groups could help stimulate political debate and disseminate a range of Leftwing ideas across the country, and perhaps even pave the way for the eventual return of a Labour government. To this end, each month an LBC book would be selected for special debate at the latest meeting of any local LBC discussion group. It is estimated that there were approximately 1,500 LBC discussion groups across the country, and volumes on sale through the Club and selected for debate at local discussion meetings covered a wide variety of topics, but always from a Left-leaning perspective.

One such discussion group was founded in Richmond in November, 1936, with seven members. By September, 1937, this had grown to thirty-eight members.² An early mention of the Richmond group in the local press came in February, 1937, when the *Richmond Herald* carried a brief report on a meeting held at Haverfield Gardens, Kew, of the ‘Richmond and Kew Left Book Club’, which had discussed the LBC’s January, 1937, book choice, Stephen Spender’s *Forward from Liberalism*.

The meeting had been held at the home of the local LBC convenor, Mr. David Duncan-Jones, who lived in Haverfield Gardens. Duncan-Jones opened the meeting by referring to the value of the Club ‘as an educating influence on the Labour movement’, but also emphasised that the Club was not to be considered as a ‘Left-wing’ organisation and that any progressive view, ‘whether Liberal, Labour, United Front, or of no party at all, was welcome’. At the same time, however, it was also reported that the meeting had seen a ‘Mr. Bailey’ criticise Spender’s book ‘from a Marxist point of view’, complaining that the book was ‘too emotional, with insufficient scientific theoretical background’.³

The same edition of the *Herald* newspaper also saw the weekly ‘Argus’ column comment critically on the purpose and ‘propaganda’ of the LBC, with Argus noting that there were ‘quite a number of members in the district’. Argus also claimed that the LBC hoped that ‘young and impressionable students’ would ‘fall easy victims to its grasp’.⁴ However, precise figures on local membership are hard to find, and Argus was arguably overestimating local support for the group, undoubtedly for his own reasons.

On the other hand, by July, 1937, there was evidently sufficient local interest in the LBC to enable the formation of a separate discussion group in Barnes.⁵ Moreover, it also worth noting that, at national level, the Home Office and MI5 (the domestic Security Service) had become increasingly alarmed at the growth of the LBC, especially in London, and regular intelligence monitoring of the organisation had been initiated. There was strong suspicion on the part of Home Office officials that the LBC had been permeated by individuals with ‘subversive’ agendas. A Metropolitan Police ‘Special Branch’ report for the Home Office compiled in January, 1937, for example, noted that, while membership embraced ‘all shades of political opinion to the “left” of Conservative’, it appeared that the bulk of the membership were represented ‘by persons who could best be described as “Radicals”’. The same police report also noted that about 100 of the LBC’s discussion groups were located within the area covered by the Metropolitan Police, and claimed further that, at many of these meetings, important lectures were given by ‘well-known Communists’. The

report continued: ‘Accordingly, there can be little doubt that each discussion group can be safely regarded as a potential communist “cell”, inasmuch as the members are necessarily ‘left-wing’ in tendency and, as such, are receptive to communist propaganda of the more insidious type’.⁶

The Special Branch reports increasingly collated detailed lists of all LBC discussion groups and information on local group convenors and secretaries, together with their home addresses, and any other items of intelligence that the police felt might interest the Home Office and MI5. Interestingly, this included information on the LBC in Richmond and nearby districts. David Duncan-Jones was clearly on Special Branch’s radar (so to speak) by early 1937, while additional local references were recorded in March, 1937, to a French teacher, C.A.L. Prins, of Sheen Road, Richmond, and an architect, Richard W. Toms, of Lawn Crescent in Kew Gardens. The Special Branch detectives also noted in March, 1937, the creation of an LBC discussion group by Miss I. Clappe, of Avenue Elmers in Surbiton, and the formation in May, 1937, of an LBC ‘study group’ by Maurice Allen, of Durlston Road in Kingston.⁷

Further clues on the evolution and activities of the Richmond LBC can be found in the local press. As well as regular meetings to discuss the latest LBC selected books, the local group also combined politics with number of social activities for members. In July, 1937, for example, a ‘summer party and dance’ was held at the Princes Hall in Richmond. As well as speeches made on how ‘the world today was in a very dangerous condition’, the LBC summer party also had an exhibition in the hall, entitled ‘Fascism Destroys Culture’, while the ‘Unity Theatre Players’ (a London-based Leftwing drama group) performed a short play called *On Guard for Spain*. Stalls also offered ‘Left’ literature for sale, and a collection was made in aid of the Spanish Relief Fund: ‘Afterwards there was dancing to the music of Maurice’s Melodians’.⁸

In September, 1937, the local LBC discussion group also decided to take on a more ‘public’ political campaigning role, when a public meeting and debate, entitled ‘The Road to Peace’, was arranged for October 6th, during ‘Peace Week’, to which

three speakers were invited, each representing differing opinions.⁹ Similarly, just over a year later, in October, 1938, it was reported that the Richmond and Kew LBC had held an open air meeting in Heron Court to discuss air raid precautions, which had become a major topic of controversy in local town-hall politics. The meeting was chaired by Mr. Ronald H.T. Whitty, Richmond Labour Party's Prospective Parliamentary Candidate, who said that the 'chief purpose' of the gathering was to 'awaken public interest to the necessity for efficient air raid precautions'. He said a book on the topic, *A.R.P.* by Professor J.B.S. Haldane, and published by the LBC, showed that it was 'vitally important' that the public should have all the information available on how to protect themselves from aerial bombardment. The book, Whitty argued, had recorded 'valuable experience' gained by observation of the civil war in Spain. The meeting adopted a resolution calling on the local authorities to provide emergency shelters, and also eventual 'deep tunnel shelters', as long as fascist aggression threatened the peace of Europe.¹⁰

Interest in the war in Spain, and the frightening prospect of new forms of mass bombardment in the event of a new conflict breaking out between Britain and Germany, also encouraged the Richmond LBC to begin to sponsor the screening of documentary-style films at meetings open to the public. In January, 1939, for example, the Richmond LBC, in conjunction with the Thames Valley Film Society, held a film show at the Vernon Hall in East Sheen, at which they screened *Spanish Earth*, which had 'vivid' and uncensored scenes of the bombing of Madrid.¹¹

Another fascinating development in the LBC's activities in Richmond came in the formation of a local LBC theatre group. Founded in September, 1938, the 'Left Book Club Theatre Guild' presented their first effort later the same month, at a meeting of the local Richmond Labour Party. Entitled *With Apologies*, the play was described as 'a broad satire on the diplomatic methods of the militarist states'.¹² The dedication of the Guild to 'political theatre' was evidently successful, and, indeed, continued even after the outbreak of war. As late as March, 1940, it was reported that members of the Richmond LBC Theatre Guild had visited St. Mary's Hall, Twickenham, to present two plays 'to an audience of Left Book Club enthusiasts'.¹³

However, the main function of the LBC in Richmond lay in the discussion of the Club's monthly choice of LBC-supplied radical books of all kinds, and the encouragement of political debate based on the lessons and messages contained in the Club's selections. In August, 1939, it was reported, for example, that a discussion had taken place, led by Mrs. Joan Whitty, wife of the Richmond Labour Party candidate, of Simon Haxey's *Tory M.P.*, and what it revealed about 'corruption' and the financial interests of Conservative MPs. Significantly, at the same meeting, another contributor to the debate was Mr. Andrew Jackson, secretary of Richmond Communist Party, who used the opportunity to stress the need for a united front of the Opposition parties.¹⁴

By 1939, however, it was becoming increasingly apparent that the LBC's desire to encourage broad unity across the Left was breaking down. In fact, Special Branch secretly reported to the Home Office that Victor Gollancz had become very uncomfortable with the official policy of the Communist Party in Britain, which had supported the controversial Nazi-Soviet Pact announced in August, 1939, and had also sought to justify Hitler and Stalin's carve-up of Poland in September. Gollancz sought to disassociate the LBC from any links to the Communist Party, and even changed the Club's title temporarily to the 'League of Victory and Progress'. In 1941, though, he readopted the 'Left Book Club' title.

All the turmoil in the LBC at national level in 1939-1941 seems to have exerted a negative impact on LBC discussion groups at local level across London, with quite a few slipping into decline or closing down. This upheaval also appears to have had a serious impact on Richmond's LBC, as coverage of the group became almost non-existent after September, 1939.

Notes

1. An original copy of the leaflet is held in the author's own collection.
2. *Richmond Herald*, 18 September, 1937, p.13.
3. *Richmond Herald*, 20 February 20, 1937, p.8.

4. *Richmond Herald*, 20 February 20, 1937, p.13.
5. *Richmond Herald*, 3 July, 1937, p.4.
6. TNA (The National Archives) HO144/21529/5 (1937).
7. See, for example, TNA HO144/21529/7 (1937) and TNA HO144/21529/9 (1937).
8. *Richmond Herald*, 24 July, 1937, p.9.
9. *Richmond Herald*, 18 September, 1937, p.13.
10. *Richmond Herald*, 1 October, 1938, p.11.
11. *Richmond Herald*, 28 January, 1939, p.4.
12. *Richmond Herald*, 17 September, 1938, p.13.
13. *Surrey Comet*, 13 March, 1940, p.10.
14. *Richmond and Twickenham Times*, 19 August, 1939, p.8.