

FOR ANGUS CALDER

By Owen Dudley Edwards

A great mind has left us. Angus Calder was one of Scotland's foremost intellectuals, one of our greatest historians and most constructive critics, one of – well, in certain respects, not one of anything, simply inimitable, unique. He was, for instance, an extraordinary teacher, but unlike any teacher I have ever seen. Very early in our acquaintance I joined some post-seminar pub discussion, a couple of staff, a dozen or so students, and found myself shaken by the value, strength, courtesy, collegiality of what seemed one undergraduate in the bunch. He was good, knew he was good, but there was no showing off. His work built on others' and inspired his neighbours to take his ideas farther, run with them, play with them, kick them back into the melee. He made his subject fascinating but with permanent and beguiling entry for all listeners. At the end of our time he still seemed simply a phenomenally good student (but nobody should want to be more). When I found out it was Angus

Calder I was startled, because his humility was so genuine. He really did want to hear the others and make his ideas theirs, if they wished. Yet he could be the performer supreme if that was required. I heard him some years later lecturing on Orwell's *The Lion and the Unicorn* before a student audience. What was at stake was simple enough.

We were of a Left-wing generation to whom *The Lion and the Unicorn* was a sacred, secret text. It wasn't generally available in collected Orwell essays, apart from the extract known as 'England Their England'. It was in print, but you had to order it: I never knew a bookshop to stock it. It's readily available in the canon now, correctly included at its point of production by Professor Peter Davison in his invaluable 20-volume edition. But Orwell decreed in the last months of his life that it was not to be reprinted. It is

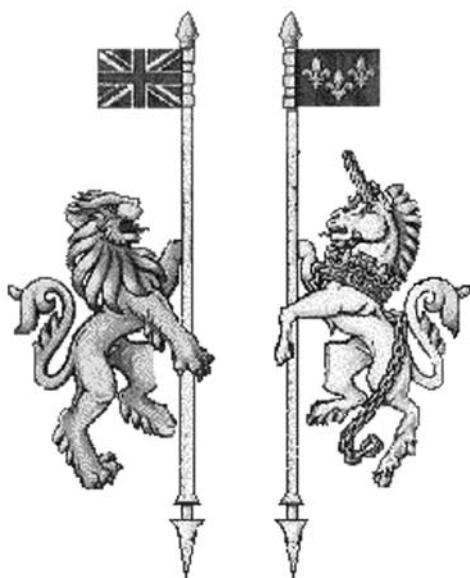
open intellectual football to work out why: was 'Socialism and the English Genius' (his sub-title) too close to what he was satirising as 'Ingsoc' in *1984*? Two trajectories seemed to collide in any attempt at its recovery. Early 1941 when it was written was in Orwell's view the revolutionary moment when England could create equality. Orwell in general was the supreme defender of honesty in speech and writing among his generation. It was a solitary eminence. I had

yet to hear Arthur Koestler described by an Israeli ambassador as 'the greatest liar I ever knew' but for all his proximity to Orwell it was clear he had lied, and the exotic elegance of his narratives gave none of the assurance of reliability radiating in Orwell's hard-bitten telling-it-how-it-was style. Koestler showed you how to think his story romantic; Orwell showed you how to think your own story realistic. And as for other ex-Communists, could one be found who did not demand to police your mind by virtue of having sought

to deceive it in the past? Orwell had not been a Communist, and belaboured nobody with a past he wished to junk while choosing 'freedom'. (He had been near-pacifist 1938-39, and was violently anti-pacifist thereafter.) But *The Lion and the Unicorn* had something of the illicit charm of Marx's economic and philosophical manuscripts of 1844, when the great man's mind had seemed less ready to police his readers.

The other trajectory was of course the 1960s in which truth was the priority, rebelling against lies from Left or Right. The Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia was not disillusioning as it – and Hungary in 1956 – were to many Communists. It was a part of the same warfare world that murdered Vietnamese.

There was nothing particularly at odds with *1984* in this reaction, any more than there was



with the sorrowful recollection of Trotsky's devoted biographer Isaac Deutscher of being told by a US Customs Officer that *1984* was the book which showed why 'we' would have to drop the Atomic bomb on the Russians. But the idea of finding the base from which Orwell's honesty had come made *The Lion and the Unicorn* a place to start, which *1984* could not be, and *Animal Farm* might be (if a little too USSR-specific) and *Homage to Catalonia* really also was (but I didn't find the idea of all those Spanish priests and nuns massacred – by bourgeois liberals, it now emerges, not by anarchists – quite as appropriate a proceeding as Orwell clearly did). So *The Lion and the Unicorn* was a security blanket for me, much as once employed by Linus in Charles M. Shultz's comic strip *Peanuts*.

Not, it appeared, to Angus Calder. He took on his target without profanation, and he was not fool enough to start knocking Orwell about in front of an audience which ought to respect if not revere him, whatever differences it might have. Nor was there any sign of elitist deconstruction of Enid Blyton, so to speak. As a foreigner by birth and upbringing, a foreigner above all to Angus's intellectually aristocratic roots, I was happily ready to be alienated from the speaker regardless of my respect for his vast breadth of learning, his courtesy in instruction, and his quite extraordinary charm (and, let me add, that he had given me the utmost satisfaction in reviewing me before we met with a compliment to my style as evident disciple of Conor Cruise O'Brien while not yet reaching the heights of the Master – he could have found no way of pleasing me more since he had correctly divined where I was and had told the obvious truth about where I wasn't). But I was hardly likely to dissent from the grounds of his controversy with Orwell. He denounced *The Lion and the Unicorn* as English nationalism. And he did it from a consciously Scottish standpoint, laying his claim at its strongest by a performance of Louis MacNeice's 'Bagpipe Music' in which he made the poem speak itself in bagpipe sounds.

Orwell spent much of his post-war descent into death living in Jura, where he purged himself of the undoubted Scotophobia with which some of his interwar correspondence stank. It was silly stuff, that Scotophobia, possibly inviting the question of what else was to be expected from a testy Old Etonian, and certainly no basis for denouncing all Orwell's works. But in some ways Angus was more critical of the reformed Orwell than of his chauvinist predecessor. Orwell himself had given us the tools of a crude but constructive literary sociology by which to deal with silly jokes about Scots, instead of finding yet another grievance. The problem as Angus saw it lay in the good book, not in the silly letters. Should I make an analogy with the Union debate as it stands now, by saying we don't blame David Cameron for being David Cameron, we do blame Gordon Brown for not being Gordon Brown, and that is the most immediate political case for Scottish independence?

Angus was certainly not making any case for Scottish independence at that point, since he didn't believe in it – yet.

But his general objection to *The Lion and the Unicorn* was deeply bound up with his sense of the implications of Empire and Commonwealth for British identity, which for this perspective would include not only Scottish and Welsh but Irish, who in many cases, spiritual as well as temporal, did very nicely out of the wicked old British Empire, thank you very much. It isn't something that is simply assimilated into the Scottish Empire, currently the battleground of the illustrious Tom Devine and the notorious Michael Fry. Nor is it simply to be chartered by division of rulers and victims or, as Lenin liked to put it, 'Who? Whom?'. All of us made this thing. What distinguished Angus Calder was that he not only wrote a profound and exhaustive study of its origins, *Revolutionary Empire*, he also felt its literature as one and as multitude, almost physically drawing life-breath from it. I knew, for I saw him in action when he organised the



great Commonwealth Writers' Conference at Edinburgh, which became an incredible expression of division and solidarity, and Angus suffered and rejoiced in both. On the one hand, it was his pride and joy to have brought together so many poets, novelists, essayists, creative writers, women, men, some new to him but so many others friends and colleagues of longstanding whether from his own days as academic in Africa, or from his Odyssean voyages across the globe, great ranges of vastly differing genius and talent, the oldest of them probably the great Indian novelist, Mulk Raj Annand, Untouchable in his own country, Olympian in ours. On the other, Angus was left in the unique situation of applauding those turning their backs, sometimes at literally the last moment, on him and his invitation, for these were the last days of Apartheid in South Africa, itself no longer in the Commonwealth since the early 1960s, but vulnerable to mounting pressure from the world outside, which now took the form of boycotting the Commonwealth conference whose writers followed their politicians' lead. I had been imported to chair a session, with (or as it proved, without) Chinua Achebe and an Irish writer, sure of participation because Ireland, the runaway midwife of the Commonwealth, had boycotted it so long ago – under de Valera from 1932 – and ultimately left it – in 1949 under de Valera's rival and supplanter John Costello, desperate to find some nationalist gesture outpatriotising the national patriarch; and so Ireland, unrivalled in gesture politics the world over, godparent of the boycott whose name was won when ostracising landlord of almost unbelievable stupidity in 1881, architect of colonial independence in foreign policy in the 1920s, mother of writers on a scale of embitterment from their own, their native land, which would leave Richter hopelessly packing his bags and leaving his discredited invention to whatever fool fancied himself for the impossible. – Ireland, so far out of the Commonwealth that her writers could attend in their usual credential of agin' the government, Dublin's, London's or – not yet. So since the Irish were triumphantly beyond the Pale (the first to define the term, by its creation in their dubious honour), they were the only absolute certainties to remain in the Commonwealth Writers'



Conference, where of course they were ready to declare passionate opposition to apartheid. And that was the genius of Angus's organisation: every defection was applauded, honoured, congratulated, and publicised, every survivor was invited to perform and testify to solidarity against apartheid as part of performance. In one dizzy moment Angus even attempted to conscript the Head of Commonwealth herself, Elizabeth by the grace of God, Queen or whatever alternative designation the relevant country might choose to acknowledge her. Margaret Atwood of Canada gallantly undertook an appeal to Ted Hughes of Wales, then Poet Laureate, asking him to ask his employer to declare herself against apartheid. I liked Margaret Atwood (we discovered we shared a common enthusiasm for L. M. Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables*) but she was finally obliged to squash both me and her partner Graham Gibson since our ideas of assistance took the form of far too much creative writing in bright speeches for Hughes to give to Her Majesty while explaining what apartheid was. So we shut up; unfortunately Hughes followed our example however unwittingly. And the great Commonwealth Writers' Conference lurched onward in passionate commitment whether present, absent or eloquently departing. India's decision was uncertain, ultimately deciding for departure.

Mulk Raj Annand slipped out of the room courteously and deferentially in response to the decision of a country whose former rulers, native and white, had collaborated in the dehumanisation of his people, and he departed from an international audience applauding him to the echo and profoundly aware that he was the greatest writer amongst us. A young Indian writer of magnificent male pulchritude strode out of the room in his wake, proud defiance personified, but he and the rest of us knew our veneration heaped itself at the retreating feet of the Untouchable. Understandably Angus grieved, and yet he rejoiced in the terrific symbolism of the oldest, greatest and most despised giving the most powerful witness against apartheid, the Untouchable in rejection of the Intolerable. In organising the great conference Angus worked himself to the bone; in facilitating its disruption he was as passionate,



superb if at moments hilarious as he conveyed that those who stayed and those who left were equally to be honoured. And what he had actually proved was that the Commonwealth was a reality, that it did exist as a bond uniting writers across the world, that their very disruption was Janus-like in a unity transcending division.

Above all it was an insistence on Scotland showing its internationalism, showing its readiness to empathise with the suffering necessitated by participation. For the first time I saw a reason for Ireland to rejoin the Commonwealth. I suspect that Angus was simultaneously beginning to see a reason to stay in it but leave the United Kingdom.

Angus's Scottishness was international, and his place in the British intellectual aristocracy initially from his father, Ritchie Calder, giant of left-wing journalism, of the fight against international starvation, of sheer good writing in the Socialist cause. But Angus's marriage to Jenni Daiches, daughter of Scotland's most famous literary critic David Daiches, the biographer and critic of Burns and Stevenson, Scott and MacDiarmid, gave him an inspirational credential within the Scottish world of literature. As a credential it would have been useless without original work of his own – the culture of 'I ken't his faither' is no open Sesame to artistic audiences, and open doors are in any case easily slammed – but in fact Angus and Jenni, as well as Angus himself, and Jenni herself, were to prove historians and critics in their own write. In any case, if Angus had the ancestry, and ancestry-in-law, he had his own distinctive attainments. Thus his Penguin edition of Walter Scott's *Old Mortality* is as good as anyone is likely to produce for that text (the Edinburgh University Press volumes under David Hewitt uses much more authenticised texts), but his realism in judging his own value is plain when he begins by telling the neophyte reader to skip his introduction and prefatory matter, and the tedious Cleishbotham, the gentle Pattison, and the rest of the mythical band of alleged editors, sponsors, executors, purveyors, publicans, lairds and the devil knew what. He

even advocated skipping chapter one, and then when the book was finished, coming to terms with all the neglected precursors including the editor. It is a very sensible piece of advice. There was a fastidiousness about Angus which may have restrained his pursuit of Sir Walter's coarser pleasantries, Cleishbotham being the snobbish, unctuous, bullying, toadying headmaster, whose instinct for corporal punishment originally earned him the name 'Flogarse'. Never mind: it is a great edition of a great book, and I would not care to be the editor who disputes its claim to be the supreme. It showed Angus to be one of the best companions for Scott and his readers, along with Andrew Hook, John Buchan, Stephen Gwynn, John Gibson Lockhart and, of course, David Daiches. And without any such question in Angus's mind, it settled very firmly the matter of his Scottishness.

That Angus should have become a Scottish nationalist made sense: but it is foolish to deem it inevitable. World War II produced some links between Nazi Germany and nationalism of the Celtic peoples (there was no 'Celtic nationalism' however much I enjoyed writing in a book of that title). The obvious was the IRA which entered on civilian bombing in Britain, programming Nazi agents in Ireland, and ultimately an abortive invasion under Nazi auspices. The great founder of Plaid Cymru, Saunders Lewis, developed intellectual affinities with sources of Nazism, but took few if any with him.



M.I.5 and similar institutions are said to have planted agents, provocative or otherwise, in Scottish nationalist wider shores, but that is not quite the same thing as unmasking Nazi agents. Several nationalists in Britain went to jail either in opposition to war *per se*, or in objection to Scotland's or Wales's being conscripted in an English war. There was actual sympathy with Nazi Germany among some Northern Ireland Catholics, obsessed by hatred of their Unionist tyrants, but it probably had no practical effect. But this mishmash record supplied British Labour with elbow-jerk condemnations of Welsh and Scottish nationalism. Considerations of British guilt over Ireland and Labour gains



from the Irish muted what would have been far juster grievances against the IRA. Hence Angus, in his early years back in Scotland, condemned nationalism among the Celts, fairly mechanically. What happened to him was, with variations, what happened to many returned Scots intellectuals or what happened to many immigrants of intellectual colouring. Above all, the Labour party supplied the impetus to join the SNP or Plaid Cymru, since these parties really resembled, not wartime Nazism but wartime Labour. Dr Gordon Brown's war against Scottish nationalism is a war against himself, or rather against the self he once was and must secretly know is where he ought to be (give or take Scottish independence, whose latest case had been firmly made by Labour's wars and Labour's weapons).

Angus's case, for all of his extraordinary intellectual powers, naturally followed the obvious fact that the nationalist parties were closer to where he was than to where Labour was going. It may be possible to trace a little of his progress through his masterpieces *The People's War 1939-45* (1969) and *The Myth of the Blitz* (1991), each of which should long survive him. Some of us may dot a few 'i's and cross a few 't's in what the first book told the world of British social history in the war – Angus encouraged me to keep writing about children's fiction in that war by deploring his own failure to use it, particularly Richmal Crompton's *William* stories – but it will remain a classic to delight and instruct all the generations left to us. Its strongest critique was probably uttered by himself, ultimately as stated in his Preface to *The Myth of the Blitz*:

I began around 1980 ... to write and talk about 'the Myth of 1940' and *The Myth of the Blitz*. I did so in a spirit of self-criticism, since I realised that many, perhaps most, readers of my *People's War* (1969) had seen the book as confirming the Myth. Looking it over again, I saw that I had accepted almost without question the mythical version of 'Dunkirk', though elsewhere I flatter myself that I wasn't beguiled.

However, as this present book asserts, the word 'Myth' should not be taken to be equivalent to 'untruth', still less to 'lies'.

He notes that time blunted his anger against the chauvinistic exploitation of the myth (in which he happily showed superior objectivity in the *Sunday Sport* than in *the Sun*). His first proof of the myth's decline into 'innocuous desuetude' (in

U.S. President Grover Cleveland's magnificent elephantiasis) was set out simply:

Most Scots have ceased to regard London as their capital – the question is whether Edinburgh or Glasgow more deserves the title.

Certainly one Scot had ceased so to regard London. Edinburgh had become his home, and so would have been his capital. In his later years he collected his 'Edinburgh poems' as *Sun behind the Castle* (2004) and I want to salute his passing with one of them, 'RLS', evoking the giant ghost who haunts us all in Edinburgh, if we have any sense. Stevenson naturally inspires elegies: the only other one I like was by a London/Oxbridge scholar whose poetry immortalised a Shropshire Welsh frontier almost unknown to him, A. E. Housman. Here is Angus's. Its rhyme-scheme and choral sounds, curiously, remind me of a source he must have known in charting British popular responses to the Second World War and measuring literary reality behind the myth: the weekly verses of 'Sagittarius' in the *New Statesman and Nation*.

RLS

Beauty and fear: the long remembered faces,
childhood nightmares, far, far ago.
Wind clatters through the streets of Embro
with the devilish horseman whose demands we know
and the lost answers of the hollow places,
wind always asking what we owe, what we owe.

Biscuit and silk, bought skin from the Grassmarket,
whores blurted out at, far, far ago.
The devil inside the achieved person
goads the child of sorrow, acquainted with woe,
who puts queer questions to the smooth faces
of Embro professors, smart, so low.

Enormous Pacific, ocean skin wrinkling
beneath vast dawn – a long way to go
to meet new devils with their different masks,
cryptic creatures whether friend or foe,
flowered maidens with barely expressible graces,
where you dream of grey Embro, long, far ago.

