

DORA MONTEFIORE

IN THE SECOND PART of the record of Alastair Davidson's interview with Guido Baracchi, *The Making of a Communist*, (*ALR* No. 32), there is a question asked about a statement made by J. G. Latham, Attorney-General in the Bruce-Page Government, in the House of Representatives in 1925 about a person named Montefiore. Latham alleged that Montefiore was a representative of the Communist Party at the Communist International. In the following answer and comment there is no light thrown on the matter except that Baracchi denies knowledge of this person in the period 1924-5. Furthermore, the assumption is made that Montefiore is male.

Dora Montefiore was a woman of her time like Emmeline Pankhurst and her remarkable daughters — Christabel, Sylvia and Adela. She was a suffragette in New South Wales long before women's suffrage became a mass question in Britain, a convert to socialism, becoming a prominent member of the British Social Democratic Federation (later the British Socialist Party), for a period during Harry Holland's serious illness in 1911, editor of the *International Socialist* in Sydney, a leader of the struggle against Hyndman's chauvinist pro-war line in Britain, seconder of a motion of support for the Russian revolution moved by Ramsay MacDonald at the Leeds Soviet Convention in June 1917, a foundation member of the Central Committee of the British Communist Party and a delegate representing the Communist Party of Australia at the Fifth Congress of the Communist International in Moscow in June 1924.¹

It seems remarkable that her life should have taken this course because she was born into a family of English landed gentry, her father being very representative of that peculiar combination of land and money, which left its stamp on mid-Victorian England (he was what has been commonly called a public-spirited man, being the biggest financial guarantor of the Great Exhibition of 1915). In addition, she married into the remarkable Anglo-Italian Jewish Montefiore family which prospered in the 18th and 19th centuries through investment in the expansion of British colonisation.

Dora Montefiore (nee Fuller) met her husband, George Barrow Montefiore, when she went to Sydney in the 1870's to live with the family of her eldest brother. Subsequently, after her husband's death in 1889, she discovered something about the inequalities faced by women — even wealthy women. She records her anger when one of the lawyers, discussing her husband's will, said to her: "As your late husband's will said nothing about the guardianship of the children they will remain under your care."² Children, by law, had only one parent, the father.

Soon after, Sir George Grey, in Sydney to speak in support of the federation of the Australian colonies, urged Mrs. Montefiore, with whom he was friendly, to take up the cause of the enfranchisement of women, arguing that New Zealand

¹ Dora B. Montefiore, *From a Victorian to a Modern*, (London, 1927), pp. 32-4; P. J. O'Farrell, *Harry Holland* (Canberra, 1964), p. 42; Walter Kendall, *The Revolutionary Movement in Britain, 1900-21* (London, 1969), pp. 175, 306-7.

² Montefiore, p. 30.

and Australia would lead the way to reform in Britain. In 1891, with Rose Scott and others, Dora Montefiore helped form the Womanhood Suffrage League of New South Wales.

When her father died, Dora Montefiore returned to live with her mother in England and took an active part in the suffrage movement. Eventually, she became involved in the early stages of the more militant movement of which the Women's Social and Political Union formed the centre. Mrs. Montefiore was with Annie Kenney at the Queen's Hall meeting at the time of the 1906 general election when Annie Kenney shouted at Asquith, "What are you going to do for women?" and, before she was carried out, "Votes for Women!"

Although Dora Montefiore remained in the suffragette movement (she objected to the term suffragette, preferring suffragist), activity in the socialist women's movement became her main concern. She had become a member of the Social Democratic Federation because of a realisation that reforming the political system to provide for the vote for women was not enough to deal with the acute social problems which increasingly became her concern. She had come into contact with the dedicated women of the Russian revolutionary movement, too. In 1907, she was a SDF delegate to the Stuttgart Congress of the Second International.

In 1911, Dora Montefiore renewed her association with Australia. After a successful lecture tour of the United States, at the end of 1910, she sailed for Australia where her son had settled. In Sydney, she met the International Socialists who impressed her much more than the "flabby Labor Party of Holman". In Harry Holland she saw one of the finest fighters whom it was her good fortune to meet in a long life. When Harry's health broke down under the strain of newspaper work, public speaking and organising the movement, Dora Montefiore agreed to edit the paper until Holland was able to resume the editor's work.

After her return to England in 1912, she became an executive member of the BSP and was one of the BSP executive members who were elected to the first Central Committee of the British Communist Party of which she remained a member until 1922. She was now past seventy years of age and ill-health and a desire to see her son's widow and her grand-children took her once more to Australia (her son had died in 1921 from the after-effects of gassing in the war).

At first the Australian government refused her a visa because Communists were not allowed into the country, but when a guarantee was given that Dora Montefiore would not engage in any communist propaganda she was allowed to enter Australia. During her stay, she saw something of the various organisations of the Communist Party and renewed acquaintance with some of the socialists whom she had known in 1911. After her return to England at the end of 1923, Dora Montefiore received credentials from the Communist Party of Australia to be its delegate to the Fifth Comintern Congress.

Whether the executive actually dealt with the matter is a moot point; Baracchi says not. It is possible that the arrangement of her credentials was made in some other way. There seems no doubt, however, that she did represent the Australian communists at the Fifth Congress of the Comintern.

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