In the Dark Hours*

Naomi Mitchison

In the dark hours my brother, J.B.S. Haldane, then aged 21 and almost certainly a virgin, would crawl out of the Black Watch trench, through the strategic barbed wire defence until he was near enough to the German trenches. Then he pitched in the bombs he was carrying. In the immediate sharp light of the explosion, if all had gone as intended, he would see arms and legs, bits of German soldiers, shooting up and falling over. Then black night and perhaps a counter-bomb exploding close. He told me about it, back on short leave, when at last he got into a bath and began to de-louse himself, while we went over the seams in his kilt with a hot iron.

This was in 1915. In this same war, a relation of ours, then in a fairly high military position, refused to land what he called his ‘Glasgow corner-boys’ into what would have been certain death on Gallipoli. And so it went.

In the summer of 1955, Jack and Helen Spurway were staying with me in Scotland where we have too many clegs – biting gadflies – and one settled on his hand. I was going to swat it but he stopped me, saying she is going to lay her eggs and needs a drink. While he looked on, she got her fill of his blood. So, what has happened?

1915 was the year of the first poison gas. Our father was sent for by the War Office; he demanded the only fellow scientist whom he knew to be totally competent - his son - to help with this crisis which might have lost the war. They identified the gas and possible masks. My brother hurried back to his regiment but fell, wounded, before he got there. Most of his fellow officers were killed that day.

It is difficult to think of that first war without bitter anger at the top brass, military or civil. Later wars do not confine themselves to the actual fighters. But in 1916 my brother, still with the Black Watch, was sent to another edge of the war, was wounded again but this time sent to a hospital in India. Here not only did he recover, but he became deeply interested in Indian ways of facing the universe, including mankind with its pains and ignorance, wanting things so much that wanting swallowed virtue. Yes, he thought, these people have put their fingers onto ideas and stories that fit the world better than those of the west. Being near death often makes people think. It also makes them discard a lot of moral and intellectual trash. In India JBS went through all this.

A new kind of thinking may change your ideas of what one ought — or ought not — to do. Few people who went through the first war remained morally unchanged. They might, for a little, swim in the warm lake of love.

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and gratitude and the old world, but reality was war. What you had done
yourself. Or not done. This is what the survivors had to deal with.

Some did it in writing, letting their anger grow: ‘He did for them both
with his plan of attack.’ Others went deeper, beyond blaming the Generals
to blaming their own ignorance. For some, this meant digging into the secret
life of the world: scientific research.

But it was also the whole structure of morality and that, quickly, became
politics. By now we ought to understand what happens to people who go
through a modern war. The strongest turn to action of some kind, often
with enough danger to make it comparable with what they have already
experienced. JBS plunged into science, which was often, and perhaps most
sought after, dangerous, but an answer to a new question. All I can do is
try and interpret. Sometimes survivors were only glad to be among the birds
and flowers of peace and love. It was so with my husband who had also gone
through that war. Jack and Dick, the two old Etonians, both of whom had
taken Firsts in Greats at Oxford in the far off years before the war, always
got on well, though they were very different people.

But those who had killed and been almost killed themselves could only
take short holidays. For a time, working for a few years in his father’s home
laboratory with a good team, Jack often enjoyed himself, felt his strength. He
also enjoyed his love affairs and sometimes confided in me. But his eventual
marriage was not a success. Probably a bad attack of mumps in boyhood
had destroyed his chance of fertility. Underneath he envied my child-bearing.
We saw less of one another, stepped warily, exchanging publications but not
dreams. That only ended when Helen, his second wife, knocked our heads
together in India.

He had become very sensitive to other forms of life, preferring to use
himself for interesting experiments rather than trying them on other animals.
Like most of those who went through the first war, he was suspicious of all
politicians, but less if they were not rich and powerful. The great Indian
leaders could be admired because they had been persecuted. He kept contact
with India through the next war, working mostly in London and, by that
time, calling himself Communist, because of what they were against rather
than what they were for. Most of the CP leaders were singularly nice people,
do-gooders, making mistakes no doubt, but wanting deeply to help people
who were not getting help anywhere else. Probably they could have gone
wrong if they had come to power, as happened elsewhere, but when they
were fighting and suffering for others, they had great attraction.

By the end of the '30s, the politics of Europe were shaping. Events in Spain and Russia had shaken everything up. Those who had been in the first war were inevitably into politics and mostly against 'the Generals', the top dogs, politicians and moneyed classes. In science, JBS was doing increasingly dangerous things, answering deeper and deeper questions. Sometimes I thought that what he wanted was the genuine experience of death. His dealings with people he suspected of being top dogs became increasingly negative. By this time he had found Helen Spurway, as brave as he was.

But then came the disaster of the submarine and the Admiralty asked for his help. I doubt if the Army would have done so, or even would have known about him. It did not worry the Navy that he was a member of the CP. The experimental work he did on submarines left him with a strained back and pain of some kind for the rest of his life. But for many ordinary people, especially those associated with the Navy, he was a hero.

He was as lost about post-war politics as the rest of us. We saw cruelties and mistakes, but always too late. We saw good ideas perhaps being tried, or half-tried. But what Beveridge and his colleagues had worked into a solid policy during the war years was accepted, turning into a social structure which is still partly there, in spite of many attempts to get rid of it altogether. By now other countries have gone ahead of us, but we were the first.

But JBS was not happy at University college. When I visited him there, he swept me, scowling, past colleagues of whom he disapproved. Helen, meanwhile, had seen some improbable, but apparently true, happenings among small fishes. New importances arrived in biology. Also there had been the new kind of warfare, the dropping of the Hiroshima bomb. We may well consider that the alternative was an even more destructive invasion of Japan. But it left a curious sense of scientific guilt. Jack and Helen went back to India.

After all these wars, not quite knowing where we were, he and I played the dangerous game of half-believing in things like religions, as slippery as politics. In India that was very close to everyday life. JBS allowed himself to half-believe in such Indian religious ideas as fitted into his own non-religious ones. He saw there is bound to be a twist of good and bad in all human societies and their various religions. But above all, I think, what appealed to him in all religions was the throwing out of Brother Body if it was playing against Brother Soul - or Mind. He knew that all life has its own shape and
importance, although we cannot always recognise it. Meanwhile the Indian pattern included animals and Gods, not that either of them were treated any better, but they were accepted as being the same.

As most of us know, it is hard to put this into clear words, but he knew, as others do, that the usual political and social ideas are only one side of things and that power, either military, financial, or religious, interferes with the way of love which is also happiness and forces us into mistakes. In theory, democracy should be the way of love, but only, I am afraid, in rather specialised bodies, which do not yet exist.

JBS came back from India for conferences, joked with my husband Dick, his fellow Etonian, now an MP, insisted on wearing a dhoti, somewhat saffron coloured, for FRS receptions (but I had to put in the safety pins) and found what was going on in the world of science. But cancer was discovered. He was operated on but was not told that it was too late and he would die in a short time. Nor was his wife or any of his immediate family, including a doctor. None of us thought this was goodbye, nor did he. There were various scientific projects in India which he started, instead of finishing those which were already going. He died in great pain, leaving too much undone. But what he did do and become is still relevant, and so is his attitude to even the most inveterate forms of life. Including the gadfly that drank his blood.