

# Born in Eshowe

by Stephen Coan

Today John Langdon-Davies (1897–1971) would likely be described as a thought leader or an influencer. He published over forty non-fiction books ranging across a variety of subjects such as politics, education, feminism, history, sex and the atomic bomb. His obituary in the *Times* described him as an ‘anthropologist, popular lecturer, author, journalist, broadcaster, sociologist,’ and a ‘born populariser, with a gift for making abstract subjects clear and simple.’<sup>1</sup>

Langdon-Davies spent much of his life in England and the United States, but it was Spain that captured his heart. He covered the Spanish Civil War as a journalist and wrote a bestseller, *Behind the Spanish Barricades*, about his experiences. He also founded a charity, Plan International, initially for Spanish children impacted by the war, that is now a global organisation.

He was born on 18 March 1897 in Eshowe, then the capital of Zululand. Zululand had been annexed by the British in 1887 and several months after Langdon-Davies’ birth it was incorporated into Natal in December 1897. He was the first child of the Reverend Guy Langdon-Davies and his wife Ethel.<sup>2</sup> His father was a ‘clergyman-schoolmas-

ter who had gone to South Africa partly because of tubercular troubles’ and also in order that he and his wife might ‘capture themselves from the marauding hosts of his own kin’ seeking financial loans they never repaid.<sup>3</sup>

According to one source Guy came to set up a ‘frontier school’ at Eshowe. By all accounts he ‘was a remarkable man; from an orthodox clergyman he had become a Huxleyan, a Voltairean, and a Tolstoyan pacifist.’ Following his death from tuberculosis in 1900 his widow Ethel was ‘reluctant to take her son back to smug suburban life in England, opened a toy store and worked as a milliner in Natal, while the boy ran wild and largely took care of himself. But when he was

seven, she was obliged to give up and they sailed for England.’<sup>4</sup> He never returned to South Africa.

Langdon-Davies first attended Yardley Park preparatory school in Kent, feeder to Tonbridge School where the ‘persecutions of other boys made his school days a hell on earth, and gave him a lasting inferiority complex.’<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, he won a scholarship to St John’s College, Oxford, to read history. During World War I he was called up in 1917 but, having inherited his father’s freethinking views, he had become a Quaker and a pacifist: he declared himself a conscientious objector and refused to wear uniform. This resulted in a short term in prison before he was given a medical discharge. Langdon-Davies intended to continue his academic career at St John’s, but one of his three scholarships was cancelled thanks to his military record. Another,

tenable only by a single man, fell away when he married Constance Scott, a history graduate from Somerville College, in 1918. The resulting financial situation forced him to abandon his university studies and after teaching for a while he became a freelance writer, lecturer and journalist. Books from this period include *Militarism in Education* (1919),

*The New Age of Faith* (1925), *A Short History of Women* (1927) – referred to (critically) by Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One’s Own* – and *Lady Godiva: The Future of Nakedness* (1928).

In the 1920s, Langdon-Davies, Constance and their two boys, Robin and Peter, moved to Ripoll in northern Catalonia, the beginning of his long fascination with the region. Later in the decade they relocated to Sant Feliu de Guíxols, on the Catalan coast, where he wrote *Dancing Catalans*, a study of the Catalan national dance, the sardana.

In the decades before World War II Langdon-Davies travelled widely, lecturing and living in the United



John Langdon-Davies

States, speaking and writing on a wide range of subjects including education, history, social issues, politics and science. He was adamantly anti-fascist and was drawn into public debate with American fascists. His books during this period include *Man and his Universe* (1930), *Science and Common Sense* (1931), *Inside the Atom* (1933), *Radio: The Story of the Capture and Use of Radio Waves* (1935), an autobiographical novel *Then a Soldier* (1934) and *A Short History of the Future* (1936). Travelling and long absences from home put a strain on his marriage and he and Constance divorced in 1932. In 1933, Langdon-Davies married Elizabeth (Betty) Barr, an American actress and ballerina. A daughter, Jennifer Dolores was born in 1937.

As a journalist for the *News Chronicle* Langdon-Davies reported on the Spanish Civil War and his book, *Behind the Spanish Barricades* (1936) became a bestseller. The following year he was back in Barcelona and though they didn't meet he and George Orwell witnessed the fighting in Barcelona in May 1937 'between anarcho-syndicalists on one side and communists on the other, in a fratricidal struggle to determine the most appropriate strategy to win the war against Franco's Army.'<sup>6</sup> In *Homage to Catalonia* Orwell takes issue with Langdon-Davies' report of these events, 'A Trotskyist revolt', published in the *News Chronicle*.<sup>7</sup>

According to his daughter, Deborah Langdon-Davies, Plan ambassador, speaker and volunteer, her father was shocked by what he witnessed during what he called 'the Spanish tragedy', especially the plight of the thousands of children on the streets of Spanish cities: 'orphaned, separated, hungry, cold, frightened. He could not stand seeing their suffering.' In 1937 Langdon-Davies came up with a plan for the Foster Parents Scheme for Children in Spain:

His idea was to set up colonies for the children to be looked after in safety, but always with the idea of a personal relationship between a child and an English Sponsor. As someone said – my father put down his pen, and picked up the child. My father's idea was accepted by the government and two large houses in the Catalan mountains were made available to house as many children as possible. He was joined by Eric Muggeridge who had been an aid worker and now helped to set up the colonies. Soon they were joined by Esme Odgers, an Australian communist who had come to Spain to help fight fascism, and Nick (Barton) Carter, an American who had come to Spain to drive ambulances.

Deborah Langdon-Davies says her father's aim was to 'Nurture the child, expand their future through

education, safeguard them and celebrate their talents.'<sup>8</sup> From these beginnings grew a global organisation now known as Plan International that, according to its website, is 'active in over 80 countries to advance children's rights and equality for girls.'

The Spanish Civil War was widely perceived as rehearsal by the fascist powers of Germany and Italy for a larger conflict and Langdon-Davies' experiences under bombardment in Spain led to him writing *Air Raid* (1938), warning that preparations needed to be made for this new form of aerial assault on civilian populations in Britain. During World War II Langdon-Davies covered the Russo-Finnish war for the *Evening Standard* and wrote *Finland: The First Total War* (1940). His wife and their daughter left for the United States, but when an initially temporary separation became permanent, they divorced.

Though Langdon-Davies remained a pacifist and a Quaker, 'he was also against several types of totalitarianism, and his experiences in Finland and in the Spanish Civil War made him understand that sometimes there is no other way than to defend himself.'<sup>9</sup> Accordingly he became an adviser to the British government on civil defence, writing the *Home Guard Training Manual*, which incorporated tactics he had learned from the Finnish partisans, and formed the basis of his work at the Home Guard Training School he founded in Sussex, for which he was awarded the MBE. He also wrote *Home Guard Warfare* (1941), *The Home Guard Fieldcraft Manual* (1942) and *How to Stalk: A Practical Manual for Home Guards* (1941).

Langdon-Davies' political beliefs were always to the left and he continued to be an anti-fascist; and though he had been sympathetic towards communism, post-war he denounced the Russian version and became an anti-Stalinist. One of his jobs after the war was as a part-time editorial assistant at the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations in London working on their publications. There he met his third wife, Patricia Kipping. In 1950 they moved to Sant Feliu de Guixols and subsequently bought and ran a small six-bedroom hotel, Casa Rovira. They had four children Nicholas, Andrew, Deborah and James.

The books kept coming, including *Gatherings from Catalonia* (1953), *Sex, Sin and Sanctity* (1954), *The Unknown: Is It Nearer?* (with E.J. Dingwall, 1956), *Seeds of Life* (1957), *Man: The Known and the Unknown* (1960), *Carlos: The King who would not Die* (1962), *The Facts of Sex* (1969) and Langdon-Davies's final book, published in the year he died, *Spain* (1971).

During this time, he also produced an innovative series of educative publications, dubbed Jackdaws, to differentiate them from Penguins, Pelicans and Puffins. Published by Jonathan Cape these consisted of different coloured linen-card folders containing collections of facsimile contemporary documents which Langdon-Davies compiled and edited, accompanied by information sheets, a summary of contents, questions and a reading list. Titles included *Elizabeth I*, *Magna Carta*, *The Gunpowder Plot*, *The Slave Trade and its Abolition*, *Peterloo* and *Radical Reform*.

John Langdon-Davies' bestseller *Behind the Spanish Barricades* was reprinted by a small press in 2007, but his book has long been eclipsed by Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia*. Nonetheless Langdon-Davies can be credited with several of the first drafts of history and he opened a window into Spain at war and peace, a country where he is better remembered than elsewhere. His enduring legacy remains Plan International.

Not bad for the boy from Eshowe.

- This is an expanded and revised version of an article published in the *Witness* on 10 September 2013.

## NOTES

- 1 Miquel Berga Bague, *Catalunya i la guerra civil en la vida i l'obra de John Langdon Davies* by (PhD, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, 1988): 287 (translated with Google Lens).
- 2 A second son, Paul, born in 1898, died on 23 March 1899 aged nine months and twelve days.
- 3 Jane Spence Southron, 'The autobiography of a lost generation Briton' [review of the autobiographical novel *Then a Soldier* by Thomas Dent, a pseudonym for John Langdon-Davies; the book was published under his own name in Britain] *New York Times*, 25 November 1934: 4.
- 4 Stanley J. Kunitz and Howard Haycraft (eds), *Twentieth Century Authors: A Biographical Dictionary of Modern Literature* (New York: H.W. Wilson, 5th ed., 1961): 787–788.
- 5 *ibid*: 788.
- 6 Miquel Berga Bague, 'The Annual Joan Gili Memorial Lecture: George Orwell in his centenary year: a Catalan perspective' (Anglo-Catalan Society, 2003): 7.
- 7 See George Orwell, *Homage to Catalonia* (London: Collins, 2021): 174–177.
- 8 Quoted in Stephen Coan, 'Fascinating man from Eshowe who left a large legacy' *Witness*, 10 September 2013.
- 9 'Patricia Kipping, vidua de John Langdon-Davies' [Patricia Kipping, widow of John Langdon-Davies] *Revista de Girona* 259 (March-April 2010): 18 (translated with Google Lens).