

Put the record Straight!

Tenax on Tom Driberg

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Tom Driberg's posthumous autobiography, *Ruling Passions*, raised a lot of questions, but produced an almost unanimous verdict from critics of varied political and cultural persuasions. Of the exact vintage of his two subsidiary passions - left-wing politics and high church religion - there is still some debate, but no one can any longer doubt the quality of what Michael Foot, in his embarrassed Postscript, calls his "truly ruling passion", the brand of homosexuality which Driberg describes in such merciless detail. Only the maverick historian A.J.P. Taylor contends that he was "a character of almost saintly innocence".

The fact that Driberg had homosexual tendencies is neither here nor there; many honourable men have. The point was well put by, among many others, Paul Johnson, the former editor of the *Socialist New Statesman*, to which Driberg was a frequent contributor. "From first to last", Johnson writes, "Driberg was a homosexual philanderer of the most pertinacious and indefatigable kind, without the smallest scruple or remorse, utterly regardless of the feelings of or consequences to his partners, determined on the crudest and most frequent form of carnal satisfaction to the exclusion of any other consideration whatever".

Mr. Johnson describes some of the occasions when Driberg used his position to get out of tough corners with the police - and the way Lord Beaverbrook (whose hand he later bit) intervened to save him. Then he asks how it was possible for such a man to "play a part, and at times a prominent part, in Labour party politics for more than thirty years". He could also have enquired how he managed to be so prominent in Church of England affairs and to become the first layman chosen to preach the University sermon at Oxford.

Equally astonishing was the way he was accepted by much of the media as an authority, even the authority, upon Moral Re-Armanent, a movement whose people strive, however falteringly, to live a way of life exactly contrary to Driberg's own in his book. Yet it was Driberg who was commissioned to write two, perhaps even three, of the obituaries of Dr. Frank Buchman in the national newspapers and who was the only person, in spite of protests, allowed by Sir Hugh Greene's BBC to speak about Peter Howard, Buchman's successor, when he died four years later.

Driberg was, of course, the first journalist to write about this Oxford Group in a national newspaper. He now confirms that this was his first scoop which established him at the Daily Express. In three articles, he stated that "public confession of sins has been a frequent feature of its meetings" where people "hold hands in a large circle and, one by one, make a full confession of sins."

Eleven distinguished dons immediately denied this charge in The Times, and one of them, when Master of St. Peter's College, later wrote: "The articles do not state that the writer heard any such confessions nor does he give a single name of anyone who so confessed or who claimed to have heard such a confession. No doubt, as a good journalist, he would have done so if he could. He could not because such things did not happen. I was present at virtually all the Oxford meetings, and no one held hands nor were there any unsavoury or emotional confessions. Yet this story went into the libraries of every newspaper and was copied by other journalists."

It is ironic that the man who began his career by making false accusations of public confession by others should ended it by writing one of the least savoury public confessions of our time.

For nearly fifty years after these articles, Driberg initiated or was in the forefront of every major attack on the Oxford Group and Moral Re-Armament. In August 1940, for example, he four times used his William Hickey column to allege that MRA people - and the action of four hundred Mayors then working with them to build up morale - were a threat to the British War effort. That was, of course, at a time when Communists regarded the fight against Hitler as an imperialist war and Driberg was, he now reveals, still a card-carrying member of the Communist Party.

After the war till the day of his death Driberg initiated regular attacks of this kind and used his foreign journeys as an MP to plant dossiers against MRA with newspapers and public men. His book, The Mystery of Moral Re-Armament, was sent as a free gift to libraries, newspapers, embassies and public men in many countries. Who financed this operation is the real mystery of the book. The author told a friend of mine that he had "been paid very large sums to write it" - not by the publisher.

In his book, Driberg states that he joined the Communist Party while a school boy - as did many others in the twenties

and thirties - and remained a member till sometime in 1941 when he was expelled, a strange moment since Russia came into the war in June of that year. George Gale, in the Daily Express, finds this odd.

"Driberg tells us", writes Gale, "that he was expelled from the party (around 1941; the actual date is unclear) when a printworker took him for a drink and told him the news. "I protested furiously and asked why," He says he never found out. I wonder. Within a couple of years he was a member of Parliament, elected as an independent on the Left....

"He would seem to have been a most suitable recruit for the Russian secret service. My view is, on balance, that his "expulsion" from the Party was simply a device to enable him to pursue a covert life.... It is certain that he would be much more useful as an MP and a member of the National Executive of the Labour Party than he would be as a gossip columnist alone."

Some of those who saw him in action on his foreign tours came to the same conclusion. Walton Cole, when editor of Reuters, was one of those who used to say so. A senior British Communist remarked: "We ask the Russians why they employ a man like him. We have nothing to do with him". Like George Gale, I wonder.

Driberg's third "passion" was his Anglo-Catholicism. He vigorously defends himself against any hint of insincerity. "The two interests were parallel and simultaneous, and I was not a hypocrite: whether functioning as an acolyte in the sanctuary or practising fellatio in some hotel bedroom or station w.c., I was doing what I most wanted to do at that moment, and doing it with complete sincerity."

Michael Foot comments: "No one could ever quite tell how much Tom's religion was an inspiration of his life and how much it was a pose, useful for many necessary purposes...." Certainly, many churchmen were confused by it and took his opinions more seriously because of it.

Not so, Archbishop Temple. He once asked two MRA workers why Driberg attacked them so fiercely. They remained silent. Then the Archbishop said, "Of course, there is always the stung conscience. You do stand for honesty and purity".

Poor Tom Driberg, perhaps natural.J.y, developed something of a persecution complex. Thus he bitterly criticizes Mr. Atlee and Mr. Wilson for excluding him from high office because of

their "puritan prejudices". Similarly he accuses MRA of "hypersensitive vendictiveness" towards him. Actually, Dr. Buchman never once attacked him, and I only remember him speak of him once. It was after a particularly unfair attack, and, late at night, Buchman prayed: "Dear God, bless your servant Driberg". Peter Howard did mention him mildly in one book. One is reminded of the saying, "This animal is vicious. It defends itself."

I do not contend that nothing Driberg ever said about Moral Re-Armament has ever any truth in it. My suggestion is that those who have accepted him as an authority - libraries, embassies, newspaper morges and individuals - should reconsider the situation and at least ensure that, if they retain his books, they put others alongside them which balance the picture. It is time the record was put straight.

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