

Reports

'Jeremy is Innocent': The Life and Times of Jeremy Thorpe and Marion Thorpe

Evening meeting, 6 February 2017, with Ronald Porter; chair: Michael Steed

Report by **David Cloke**

THE HISTORY GROUP'S meeting on the lives of Jeremy and Marion Thorpe was different from the style we have come to expect from the Group. And not just, as the chair and former Liberal Party President Michael Steed noted, for being its first meeting to play music ranging from Marion Thorpe's favourite composer Gustav Mahler to Sir Arthur Sullivan. Ronald Porter's talk was an illustrated one making use of a large number of photographs. Unfortunately, as I am writing up the event from the editor's audio recording, my experience of it is perhaps somewhat diminished.

The meeting was different for other reasons. Porter's style was gossipy and discursive, with possibly a little too much court intrigue for Liberal tastes, very much focusing on the tabloid headlines of his subjects' lives. It is thus rather hard to record in my usual quasi-minute fashion. Nonetheless, the evening was delivered with some style and panache and clearly demonstrated the regard in which Porter held the Thorpes. As he said at the close, he started his research believing that Thorpe deserved two cheers and by the end wished to give him three!

My personal connection with Thorpe is a rather tenuous one. I met him very briefly in 1984 whilst acting as research assistant to the Liberal peers (then, in some ways, the Thorpe Liberal Party in exile). It was the day of Lord Byers' funeral, or his memorial service, and it would be fair to say that Thorpe did not come over as the charismatic figure of report. But then perhaps it was not the day for it. In addition, what seemed like ancient history to the 18-year-old me must have felt still very raw to Thorpe.

My second connection was some twenty years later when I headed up the rather grandly named Leader's Correspondence Unit during the 2005 general election. One letter that I opened was

from Thorpe asking Kennedy to consider him for a peerage, arguing that sufficient time had now passed. I handed it on to Kennedy's team (foolishly without taking a copy) and heard nothing more on the subject!

Unsurprisingly, Porter's address was not especially critical of Thorpe nor did it argue the case for his innocence, but neither did it gloss over the events that brought him down. If anything Porter seemed to focus on them to the exclusion of most other significant events in his political career. Nothing was said, for example, about the Liberal leadership election in 1967 or about Thorpe's part in the 1975 European referendum. It was left to Richard Moore, Thorpe's political secretary from the 'day after he assumed the leadership' to the end of 1973, to highlight that the European cause had always been a major part of Thorpe's political ambitions and convictions. Much was said about Thorpe's ambition and courage but little evidence provided of what his aims were and how he displayed his courage, other than by facing his debilitating illness with resilience. Moore pointed out that Thorpe's doctor had said that he had survived longer with acute Parkinson's than anyone for whom there were medical records.

In looking back on the evening it seems to me that, of the two, Marion Thorpe had perhaps the most interesting biography. This might be because the highlights and lowlights of Thorpe's career are very familiar – and Porter did perhaps spend a little too much time on the trial that effectively brought that career to a close. On the other hand, Thorpe came over as the more interesting psychological case study – or is that itself too easy a response?

In a sense, the most revealing or thought-provoking remark Porter made about Thorpe was his description of him 'masquerading as the head of the general stores of the village in Devon where

he had his cottage.' There is almost a sense in Thorpe of life as performance art or of him needing a stage. Throughout the evening there was a succession of photographs of Thorpe with the great men of his time: JFK, Nixon, Menuhin, Trudeau, Heath and Wilson. Unfortunately, Porter seems not to have shown the classic photo of Thorpe with Jimi Hendrix.

Thorpe came from a strongly Tory background, the son and grandson of Tory MPs. His father, a prosperous and successful barrister, had been MP for Rusholme in Manchester from 1919 to 1923, being defeated by Charles Masterman, himself defeated a few months later in 1924. His maternal grandfather was a well-known right-wing Tory MP, Sir John Norton-Griffiths, known as 'Union Jack'. Thorpe's grandmother was a recurring image during the evening, as was his mother, Ursula, 'a dominating and domineering woman' whom Porter said was the only woman that Thorpe was frightened of.

According to Porter, what led Thorpe into Liberal politics was another brush with a great man – Lloyd George – when he was 6 or 7 years old and, later, at country house party just before the outbreak of the Second World War. Thorpe knew that he wanted a prominent role in British politics from this early age – there were no thoughts of being a train driver or a fireman! As an aside, it was only at this point, in describing a photograph of the country house party, that Porter mentioned that Thorpe had two sisters.

Having had his name put down for Eton from birth, Thorpe progressed to Oxford, where he read law at Trinity College. His plan, according to Porter, was to go to the bar and then use that as a platform from which to enter politics. Successful networking whilst at Oxford led Thorpe to being elected president of the Oxford Union, succeeding fellow Liberal, Robin Day. Thorpe seemed to look back fondly on those days as, according to Porter, he assiduously attended reunion dinners and was shown in the company of Heath, Barbara Castle and Peter Shore.

Meanwhile, Marion Stein was being courted by the King's nephew George Harewood. The daughter of Erwin Stein, the Austrian émigré composer and associate of Schoenberg and Berg, Marion came to England with her family at the age of 13 fleeing the Anschluss. She did not speak a word of English and was naturally upset at leaving her home and friends.



Left: Rupert, Marion and Jeremy Thorpe. Right; Thorpe at Liberal Assembly

Nonetheless, in Porter's words, she knuckled down and learnt English perfectly. She went on to become head girl at Kensington High School for Girls and then studied piano at the Royal College.

She became a concert pianist and in 1947 she met George Harewood at a reception. He was also a great music lover and later in his life ran the Edinburgh International Festival and English National Opera. Music seems to connect all three main participants in this story, with Jeremy also being a fine violinist for whom making and listening to music was a great source of relaxation. Porter demonstrated this with an excerpt from Vaughan Williams's *A Lark Ascending*.

Despite the initial opposition of Queen Mary (apparently because Marion had an errant brother who fought for the Nazis and not because she was Jewish) she and Harewood were married at St Mark's, North Audley Street, Mayfair in 1949 followed by a reception at St James's Palace with the whole royal family in attendance. Marion thus became chatelaine of Harewood House north of Leeds. There she brought up her three children and took part in the musical life of the region, including

helping to found the Leeds Piano Competition.

Possibly revealingly, amongst her closest friends were the composer Benjamin Britten and his partner the singer Peter Pears. She had first met them in 1944 when her father had invited them to tea at the family flat off Kensington High Street. She later helped them to establish the Aldeburgh Festival and, as Porter demonstrated, holidayed with them in Moscow in 1960. When her marriage to Harewood broke down, Britten and Pears took her side completely after the divorce in 1967 and cut Harewood out of their lives. This was despite the generous terms offered by Harewood which included the family's London home, 2 Orme Square.

Thorpe's life during this period followed a completely different track. Porter noted that when he was called to the bar in 1954 Thorpe was very hard up. He had only a small private income from a family trust but was, in Porter's words, a big spender and so needed extra money. A friend who worked at the BBC came to the rescue. He informed Thorpe that there was a job going as a reporter for Panorama, a job at which he thought Thorpe

would be excellent. He was interviewed by a panel including Richard Dimbleby and was offered the job immediately.

Thorpe did indeed prove to be an extremely good TV journalist, his favourite part of the job being interviewing 'top-notch politicians and heads of state' – the great men and women of the time. Among those he interviewed were the Shah of Iran and Golda Meir, the prime minister of Israel.

As Michael Steed noted at the start of the evening, Thorpe stood for Devon North in the 1955 general election in which he obtained a memorable second place, cutting the Tory majority in half. He went on to take the seat in 1959, marking the occasion with a torchlight procession through the streets of Barnstaple with his mother looking on.

According to Porter he made an immediate impact in the House of Commons and seven years later he was elected Liberal leader in succession to Jo Grimond. During his initial period in the House of Commons he met and had an eighteenth-month affair with Norman Scott, the ending of which caused great antagonism in Scott who vowed to seek vengeance.

Porter later added that Thorpe was 'quite a serious thinker in his way' and had three great principles in his life: the abolition of apartheid, the breakdown of racial divisions in the UK and the United States, and for women to play a wider role in the financial and commercial life of the country. He was one of the first advocates for there being at least one woman on company boards.

Shortly after his election as leader Thorpe met and subsequently married Caroline Allpass. Together they had a son, Rupert born in 1969. According to Porter, Caroline came from roughly the same social background as Thorpe but, unlike him, was not highly politicised. Nonetheless Porter felt that she was a good political wife and supported him wholeheartedly as leader of the party. This seemingly happy life was brought to a devastating end by a road traffic accident in which Caroline was killed shortly after the 1970 general election. Thorpe was left desolate by the news and was on autopilot for several months afterwards.

Thorpe and Marion Harewood were thus both alone when they met at a dinner hosted by the pianist Maura Lympany. Porter rather romantically put it that Marion had declared that she would remarry if Mr Right walked into her life and for her Thorpe was that man. They were married in early 1973 and followed it with a musical celebration. Later that year Marion joined Thorpe on the platform at the annual Liberal Assembly and was shown by Porter looking on approvingly as Thorpe acknowledged the applause.

The year of their marriage was followed by the year that represented the high watermark of the Liberal Party in the post-war era, 1974. The inconclusive February 1974 general election gave the surprising result of Labour winning more seats than the Conservatives despite the Tories winning more votes but with neither able to command an overall majority. Thorpe entered into short-lived talks with Heath regarding another, political, marriage. According to Porter, Thorpe demanded PR from Heath but Heath would only offer a Speaker's Conference. This went down 'like a lead balloon': 'they take minutes and waste years.' Thorpe realised that he was wasting his time and pulled the rug from under Heath. No sooner was Thorpe out the door than Heath was on the phone to arrange an audience with the queen at which he would tender his

resignation and recommend that Wilson be invited to form a government.

Porter noted that some had said that Thorpe was desperate for high office. This he believed was 'largely untrue'. Nonetheless, there had been talk during this brief period of Thorpe being defence secretary or leader of the House of Commons. Heath later told the Times that Thorpe would have been Home Secretary. Richard Moore noted at the end of the meeting that Thorpe would have been a bad defence secretary, as he didn't understand the technicalities at all well. He added that he would have been worse as Chancellor of the Exchequer as he understood little about economics.

However, these passing opportunities were not to be and a little over two years later in May 1976 Thorpe was forced to resign as a result of the scandal that engulfed him. He remained as an MP until 1979, when he was roundly defeated by the Tory candidate. A few days after that, 'he faced the scales of justice at the Old Bailey'.

Porter talked through the case in quite some detail at both the start and the end of the evening. It seems to me to be a familiar tale recorded elsewhere that does not need further repeating here. What was perhaps most interesting was that music emerges again in Thorpe's life, with a satirical song about the case, 'Jeremy is Innocent'. It deals amusingly if not subtly with the central allegations in the case. There are two versions available on YouTube and Porter regaled the room with the version recorded by Doc Cox, later famous for his work on That's

Life, under the name of Rex Barker and the Ricochets.

Thorpe left the court a free man, though with not all the country was convinced of his innocence, as evidenced by Peter Cooke's parody of the judge's summing up. Consequently, he could not return to what Porter described as the love of his life, British politics, though he clearly tried intermittently. He participated at the margins through attendance at meetings like that of the Channel Tunnel Association in a church hall on an estate in Dover, where Michael Steed met him for the penultimate time.

According to Porter, Thorpe hated his retirement life spent in 'shallows and miseries', even before Parkinson's ravaged him. Moore felt that Porter slightly overdid the misery of the retirement years noting that his friends largely stuck by him (including from other political parties, such as Michael Foot and Julian Amery), though some of his immediate political colleagues did not, and that he survived so long. In summing up, Porter regarded Thorpe as one of the bravest men in British politics and closed with a recording of Sullivan's 'He is an Englishman' despite the piece's ironic intent.

Moore, who had known Thorpe from 1952 to his death, shared Porter's view about his courage but also remarked on his humour and argued that his one weakness being that 'he was not always wise in his choice of friends'.

David Cloke is a member of the Liberal Democrat History Group's executive committee.

Who Rules? Parliament, the People or the Prime Minister?

Spring conference fringe meeting, 17 March 2017, with Professor Michael Braddick and Baroness Joan Walmsley; chair: Baroness Lynne Featherstone

THE LIBERAL DEMOCRAT History Group's fringe meeting at the Liberal Democrat spring conference in York in March 2017 focused on the issue of Parliamentary supremacy: hard won in the seventeenth century but being challenged by the government response to Brexit, placing under question whether Parliament or the executive – or the popular will, expressed through

a referendum – should have the ultimate say. Here we reprint the edited transcript of the recording of Professor Michael Braddick's talk (with thanks to Astrid Stevens for the transcription), and the paper that should have been delivered by Lord Martin Thomas; in fact he was unable to be present and the paper was delivered (in a slightly abridged form) by Baroness Walmsley.