

Setting the Record Straight on John Langdon-Davies: the Joan Gili Memorial Lecture 2002.

In the course of his lecture on Orwell to the Anglo-Catalan Society, Dr Miquel Berga makes a number of references to John Langdon-Davies which misrepresent his thinking and his work. We thank the Anglo-Catalan Society for offering us this space in which to state our objections. These are not a matter of ideology, but are directed at Berga's incorrect and unsavoury portrayal of Langdon-Davies, to the extent of associating him with the persecution suffered by political dissidents following the events of May 1937 in Barcelona. For reasons of space it has not been possible to cover every point, so we hope readers will consult the linked documents where they can see the facts for themselves.

Although Berga has always been over-fascinated by Langdon-Davies's relationship with communism, he appeared at the time of his doctoral thesis and the biography (*John Langdon-Davies (1897-1971): una biografia anglo-catalana*) to share his subject's awareness of the confusion of factions and ideas surrounding the events under discussion, a muddle which has not been sorted out to this day. Langdon-Davies, except for his hatred of fascism, stood as far apart as possible from this ideological conflict.

Many people today do not fully understand the concept of fellow traveller. In Langdon-Davies's case, as in that of thousands of intelligent and concerned people, it could be taken to mean 'a left-wing intellectual with Marxist leanings who is not a member of the Communist Party'. In the thirties, as Langdon-Davies saw it, there was nowhere else to go. He was a fellow traveller before, during and after the civil war, which he saw as a fight, ideally a united fight, against a fascist uprising. Although he admired the spontaneous response by the workers' organisations to this uprising, he very rightly foresaw that international fascism posed a serious threat for the whole of Europe and felt that this was not the moment for social revolution. This was his personal conviction and had nothing to do with any blind adherence to a party line; he was perfectly capable of thinking for himself, which is why he was a fellow traveller and not a party member. If everyone with similar convictions qualified as a Stalinist, we would have to include such unlikely candidates as Companys, Montseny or even Azaña himself.

Orwell took a different stance from Langdon-Davies, and it could be argued that he was influenced in this by his connection with the POUM. In defending this organisation from the widespread attacks and ultimate repression it suffered he systematically rejected anything in the least critical of it, including Langdon-Davies's account of the *fets de maig* for the *News Chronicle*.

Out of this difference, Berga has built up a 'polemic' which he uses as a pivot in his homage to Orwell. In fact, he gives it more importance than the two writers themselves did. What is more, he presents matters entirely from Orwell's standpoint. But a polemic involves argument, or discussion, whereas in fact the 'textual battle' Berga mentions did not extend beyond a few lines. It is noticeable that when writing in defence of the POUM in the

*Socialist Forum* in August '37 Orwell makes no mention of Langdon-Davies or his article. Neither did Langdon-Davies make any further significant reference to Orwell. So there was no 'polemic', no 'wounds healing slowly' and certainly no 'political and literary victory' such as Berga claims for Orwell against Auden.

Berga's faith in Orwell's infallibility seems to exceed the latter's own. In *Homage to Catalonia* Orwell warns his readers that he may be mistaken, a warning which is repeated and extended in a letter to Frank Jellinek in December '38:

'I have no doubt that I have made a lot of mistakes and misleading statements, but I have tried to indicate all through that the subject is very complicated and that I am extremely fallible as well as biased...I entirely agree with you that the whole business about the POUM has had far too much fuss made about it and that the net result of this kind of thing is to prejudice people against the Spanish government...Actually, I've given a more sympathetic account of the POUM "line" than I actually felt, because I always told them they were wrong and refused to join the party. But I had to put it as sympathetically as possible, because it has had no hearing in the capitalist press and nothing but libels in the left-wing press...'

In a lecture on Orwell in Catalonia, this illuminating passage would have added a lot. But instead Berga chooses to fill his lecture-space with false conjecture about Langdon-Davies which add nothing.

Berga's bias is all the more surprising since he previously gave the impression that he had discovered in Langdon-Davies a more reliable observer than Orwell and one with a first-hand understanding of the political situation and events in Catalonia. For the purposes of the centenary, however, he forsakes the image of someone who '*no milita en cap partit i manté gairebé sempre una actitud d'observador intel.ligent i crític, malgrat les seves simpaties*'. Did Berga feel obliged to switch allegiances because of the circumstances?

Orwell's 'instinctive hatred of intellectuals' (p. 14) together with his unreliability in the reporting of facts have long been recognised, and one should be wary of these limitations. But Berga has allowed himself to be led badly astray in the composition of his lecture. In order to strengthen his presentation of Orwell, he has written an account of Langdon-Davies which is factually incorrect and, by conjecture and innuendo, dishonest and offensive. He should acknowledge this with particular reference to the following points:

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In Berga's biography Langdon-Davies notes the changes in Barcelona '*i no les valora pas negativament... a ell el preocupa, sobretot, l'impacte que està representant l'arribada massiva de refugiats a Catalunya*', which was the primary reason for this visit. In the lecture, Berga deduces from Langdon-Davies's observations that he 'has moved from his initial fascination with Catalan anarchism to

an ever-closer siding with the theses of the Communists'. This far-fetched deduction, a complete non sequitur, shows how little he has understood of Langdon-Davies's long-standing interest in anarchism.

p.12

Why was it 'mischievous' of Langdon-Davies to describe the POUM as Trotskyist? This was no machiavellian fabrication; the term has always been widely used by writers of all persuasions to refer loosely to any non-orthodox form of Communism. One can even find instances of the term used by POUMists in reference to themselves. It may, with half a century's hindsight, be inaccurate, but it is certainly not 'a way of saying that there is full justification for the effort under way, determined by Stalinist strategy, to pursue and capture the POUM leader, Andreu Nin, and other dissidents'. This statement would probably be actionable if Langdon-Davies were alive today and it should be removed from the public domain.

p.12

What Berga calls a 'lengthy, patient and detailed refutation' by Orwell of Langdon-Davies's account of events is in fact two pages of hair-splitting and a rather crude attempt at ridicule. The rest of that chapter is devoted to a defence of the POUM against general charges.

a) There is no suggestion in Langdon-Davies's article that anyone waited for the enemy to build a barricade before attacking. He describes how buildings were barricaded as it became clear that fighting was likely to break out. Obviously no-one was going to start shooting from an undefended position.

b) Langdon-Davies does not put the effects before the cause as Orwell claims. The poster he speaks of (or leaflet, if you prefer) reveals the prevailing attitude of certain groups who openly opposed the Generalitat and were calling for an uprising.

c) The *pacos* were active throughout the Republican zone. Langdon-Davies correctly explains to his readers who they were. There was no need for anyone who was even minimally informed to 'ask them' if they were fascists. Orwell's attempted irony suggests he either did not know what was going on or simply wished to mislead his readers. If anyone is so naive as to swallow this sort of nonsense, they hardly deserve to be taken seriously.

p.12

In the biography and in his introduction to *La setmana tragica de 1937*, Berga says that Langdon-Davies dismisses *Homage to Catalonia* in a few lines. For the Orwell centenary this becomes 'a couple of malicious sentences directly inspired by the communist orthodoxy of the moment...Orwell is a poor, misguided devil who is incapable of accepting revolutionary discipline, meaning, naturally, that the tiresome "purists" fail to understand that the end justifies the means, however squalid these might be'. First of all, honest criticism is not malicious, which implies the intention to do

harm. Secondly, we once again see Langdon-Davies's personal convictions attributed to an orthodoxy he did not even subscribe to. And thirdly, there is nothing 'natural' about Berga's 'squalid' conclusion.

p.13

For two years, Langdon-Davies published nothing with political overtones. When he did so he gets a condescending pat on the head from Berga with the words 'Langdon-Davies *will become* a fervent anti-Stalinist' (our italics). There is nothing in his writings or actions to suggest he had ever been otherwise and this damaging innuendo should be corrected.

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Langdon-Davies is supposed to see himself in Orwell's satirical description of the 'good party man'. A 'good party man' is a member of the Communist Party, which Langdon-Davies was not, so this comment begins with an assumption which is known to be untrue and goes on most offensively to a personal denigration of character.

p.17

In his critique of *Homage to Catalonia*, Langdon-Davies is apparently '...providing reassuring arguments to the militants who have to carry out or connive at the dirty work demanded by the circumstances in accordance with the party line'. Does Berga really think this interpretation is an honest one? It fits in well with his lecture, but not with the facts, and it certainly bears no resemblance to any comment, opinion or utterance made in the course of conversations between Berga and Langdon-Davies's widow.

It is not the task of the serious researcher to fill the gaps he finds with partisan conjecture, but Berga does exactly this, demonstrating his complete failure to get inside his subject. If he had taken the trouble to speak at greater length to those who knew John Langdon-Davies personally, his picture of him might have been more accurate.

Common decency demands that Dr Berga should acknowledge these misrepresentations and that they should be eliminated from the Anglo-Catalan Society's website.

Links:

<http://www.arrakis.es/~ald/newschronicle.htm> John Langdon-Davies's article for the *News Chronicle*, 10 May 1937.

<http://www.arrakis.es/~ald/htcap.htm> George Orwell's 'refutation' of John Langdon-Davies's account, from the appendix to *Homage to Catalonia*.

<http://www.arrakis.es/~ald/jpnotes.htm> Notes on the Joan Gili Memorial Lecture, by J.L. Palmer.