

## The Priestleys and the Bomb

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Special Collections at the University of Bradford recently received the Archive of the archaeologist and writer Jacquetta Hawkes. The Archive is now available to researchers, along with that of J.B. Priestley, her second husband. It includes correspondence, press cuttings and ephemera which explain and illustrate the Priestleys' important role in founding the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament.

In 1957, the Priestleys shared growing public disquiet about Britain's nuclear policy, particularly as a result of British H-bomb tests on Christmas Island. Jacquetta, as an archaeologist, realised that humanity's achievements and the world they depend on could be poisoned and devastated in an instant, while J.B. Priestley had argued since the 1930s that arms races led inevitably to war<sup>1</sup>. Priestley articulated these concerns in an article in the "New Statesman", in which he refuted the arguments used in favour of Britain's nuclear deterrent, concluding that the idea of the deterrent was madness and the best course for Britain would be to discard its H-bombs:

"Alone we defied Hitler; and alone we can defy this nuclear madness ... There may be other chain-reactions besides those leading to destruction; and we might start one"<sup>2</sup>.

The article struck a chord with readers, who wrote sackfuls of letters to the magazine. A meeting was arranged at the flat of Kingsley Martin, the magazine's editor, to discuss a national anti-nuclear campaign. This included the Priestleys and existing peace groups and individuals. After further meetings, the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament was formed, chaired by Earl Russell, Priestley was Vice-President and Canon L. John Collins chairman. Priestley was one of the speakers at the public launch of CND in the Central Hall Westminster, on February 17 1958.

Jacquetta felt that women had a particular role to play in nuclear disarmament:

"I do not like to think of women apart from men. But in this one thing it is different ... Men have got beyond killing one another and are preparing to kill us and our children. Women are slow to change. It might be that we should still all be peasants if it were not for masculine genius. But now that genius is running mad, and we have to come to the rescue"<sup>3</sup>.

So she set up a women's group within CND. The group published pamphlets, arranged all-women public meetings, lobbied and sent deputations to governments and the United Nations. It later became the CND Women's

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<sup>1</sup> For example, in Priestley, J.B. *The lost generation*. London: Friends Peace Committee, 1932.

<sup>2</sup> Priestley, J.B. "Britain and the nuclear bombs". *New Statesman*, 2 November 1957. Reprinted in *Voices from the crowd*. London: Owen, 1964: 38-45.

<sup>3</sup> Hawkes, Jacquetta. "The way out" in *Women ask why: an intelligent woman's guide to nuclear disarmament*. London: CND, 1962: 11-16.

Advisory Committee, again chaired by Jacquetta, but arranged more formally to enable links with international women's organisations.

Priestley "heartily disliked the world of committees and minutes and meetings"<sup>4</sup>: he believed he contributed far more by writing and addressing rallies about nuclear disarmament. He also wrote a television play, "Doomsday for Dyson", broadcast in March 1958, and arranged a fund-raising event at the Festival Hall in 1959.

He did not take part in the Aldermaston marches, though Jacquetta was actively involved. The first, in Easter 1958, arranged by the Direct Action Committee but joined by CND, marched from London to the weapons research establishment at Aldermaston, later described by Jacquetta as

"a mixture of hospital, prison and prehistoric cemetery. It is lifeless, harsh and has a cold, hygienic air about it which might make one think it was dedicated to the treatment of disease instead of to the spreading of universal death. The grassy mounds which look like ancient barrows are, of course, baffles against explosions"<sup>5</sup>.

CND took over the 1959 march and Jacquetta suggested a reversal of route from Aldermaston to London, towards the centre of political power to influence decision makers. The change of route symbolises the division between the Direct Action Committee (and later The Committee of 100) who believed in nonviolent direct action, whereas Jacquetta and others on the CND executive aimed to change government policy by achieving mass support and saw civil disobedience as a denial of democratic methods<sup>6</sup>

In October 1960, Lord Russell resigned as president after a split over this issue; Priestley characteristically took the opportunity to resign. By the time their friend Canon Collins also resigned, in 1964, the Priestleys had come to believe that the original aims of the movement had been taken over by others for extreme political ends. Jacquetta resigned from the executive, although she continued to be sympathetic and supportive to the Campaign into the 1970s.

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<sup>4</sup> Priestley, Tom. "J.B. Priestley and the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament". *City of peace: Bradford's story*. Bradford: Bradford Libraries, 1997.

<sup>5</sup> Hawkes, Jacquetta. "Aldermaston 1960". *Shire & spire*, no. 30, May 1960: 10 (Hawkes Archive HAW/13/4).

<sup>6</sup> I have taken the idea of the change of route as symbol of the civil disobedience split from: Rigby, Andrew. "The origin of a peace symbol", at time of writing available online: <http://legacywww.coventry.ac.uk/acad/isl/forgive/images/origins.doc>