

The Quirky Dr Fay: A Remarkable Life - Hugh Gault

Preface

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Charles Ryle Fay was, among other things, an economic historian, advocate of co-operation and women's rights, and World War I machine gunner. Thought eccentric by contemporaries and family alike - hence "quirky" - this did not diminish the affection in which he was held. He could be abrupt, dressed haphazardly and one daughter-in-law considered him "insufficiently domesticated". He had at least three breakdowns in his life.

From Liverpool, like one of his heroes William Huskisson, he was a lifelong friend of John Maynard Keynes from their first day as students at King's College Cambridge in October 1902. He was a protégé of Oscar Browning, one of the most colourful characters in Cambridge at this time and with a chequered past. He gained his DSc at the London School of Economics (LSE) returning to Cambridge as a Fellow of Christ's College. Fay and Alice Q Hartland married in 1911 and had three sons. Her father turned his hobby into a career, becoming a well-known anthropologist and analyst of folklore and fairy tales.

Fay served in the East Kent Regiment and then the Machine Gun Corps from 1915 to the end of the First World War. He was wounded, suffered from shell-shock, mentioned in despatches and took part in the 1918 assault on the Hindenburg line that preceded the armistice. He returned to teach at Cambridge University, wrote the 1920 report on women's admission that was rejected that year, and left shortly afterwards to become Professor of Economic History at the University of Toronto. In 1930 he was persuaded to return to Cambridge to the post of Reader in Economic History that had been created for him. He was an advocate of agricultural co-operation, later becoming a Trustee of the Horace Plunkett Foundation and Chairman for over ten years from 1934. He was President of the Economics Section of the British Association before the Second World War and on the Colonial Office Commission on Co-operation after it. He was a member of the Royal Economic Society Council for almost twenty years. After retirement in 1949 and Alice's death in 1951 he made his oldest son's home in Belfast his base camp for his remaining years.

He wrote more than twenty books as well as many articles. He presented a paper on labour disputes in 1912 alongside Ramsay MacDonald. His ideas on co-partnership date from this time, but have come back into vogue in recent years. Now often called "social enterprise" he would have recognised them as the co-operative values he lived as well as espoused. He saw at first hand the consequences of nationalist aggression in World War I, and the impact of self-interest and extreme capitalism in the crash of 1929 and the depression that followed.

I first came across Fay through his writing, initially when I read his unconventional biography of Huskisson some years ago. This made me want to find out more about him, and the more I discovered, the more fascinated I became. He has been overlooked as a historian in recent years, but he wrote history with the reader in mind - spiced with anecdotes and reminiscences that, rooted in the reality of people's lives, entertain and inform. They are designed to be remembered, as were his lectures by those who heard them. He was on a quest: both to enlighten as a teacher and to ensure that people remembered the horrors that mankind had inflicted in the 19th and 20th centuries and did not repeat them. He was thought ahead of his time in the twentieth century, but is in tune with many of the values of the 21st - not least as regards women, the environment and the enriched lives that education and co-operation can result in. Fay's life demonstrates that, while 'actions may speak louder than words', the two together are even more formidable.

