

EIRWEN HARBOTTLE

(15 February 1921 – 6 February 2022)

PEACE CHILD ORIGINS



1980 was a memorable year.

We were well on the way with the UN World Disarmament Campaign. The first Special Session devoted to Disarmament (SSD1) had taken place at the UN in 1978. The second (SSD2) would follow in 1982. Meanwhile our efforts to obtain a million signatures of support from the public were being diligently promoted by a growing number of local support groups across the country. Many had begun by young mothers looking at their young children and worrying what kind of world they were going to inherit, plagued by the threat of nuclear weapons. Teachers were often reluctant to raise their heads above the parapet of government disapproval when nuclear defence policies came under scrutiny.

The fact that our WDC, although led by two distinguished peacemaking Lords – Philip Noel Baker and Fenner Brockway - was administered by a retired one-star Brigadier in the British Army was an encouragement to many people. If a high ranking soldier could have the courage to speak out in favour of disarmament, why shouldn't they? Sometimes husbands would warn their wives to steer clear of becoming associated with controversial issues such as disarmament and peace protests lest their own job security might be affected. Best leave such things alone, dear.

Abroad a new book by Bernard Benson was winning much acclaim in diplomatic circles. Written and illustrated in the form of a comic by Benson's own hand, it was a savage criticism of the political world of arms traders, nuclear weapons development and the inability of leaders to halt the world clock moving inexorably towards midnight and nuclear annihilation.

Woven into this scenario was a tale of a Storyteller telling a group of young people the story of celebrating "Peace Day" and of how children helped to bring peace to the world. Starting with saving the butterflies then the whales and the tigers, they discovered that when a few people with good intentions got together IT WAS AMAZING WHAT THEY COULD DO. The story then continues about a boy meeting the President of a Big Power and the child's conversation with him - of his horror to learn about the Key of Death being carried in a big bag by a man following the President wherever he went. To a party... on a picnic... in church... in bed?

"Yes, yes, yes. Always, always."

"But that's no way to live" said the boy. "No," said the President.

1980 also marked the 40th anniversary of the destruction of Coventry Cathedral and with it a great part of the city itself in a catastrophic aerial bombardment by German planes. Across the isolation of the English Channel it matched a similar savage destruction of the city of Dresden with its beautiful historic Cathedral and the huge numbers of civilian casualties. Here seemed a partnership in tragedy and a decision was taken to create a Centre of Reconciliation in Coventry Cathedral. It was led by Canon Kenyon Wright with the immediate task of calling together representatives of many peacemaking organisations to share information over a long weekend on what kind of progress was being made on issues of peace and reconciliation. Michael was invited to represent our World Disarmament Campaign so we were both present there. On the Sunday we were bidden to attend the debut in the Cathedral of ALPHA-OMEGA - a new oratorio by a young man named David Gordon.

The ambience of the newly restored Cathedral, risen phoenix like from the ashes of war, was potent. We waited in a strange expectation of what was to come. And what came was soul shattering to me: magnificent, overwhelming, like some stupendous storm of sound enfolding readings from different holy scriptures, telling of the rise and fall of humanity. Years later I can still recall its effect on me.

We drove back to London in a kind of silent daze to resume our work from the tiny WDC office in Little Russell Street. Reporting to Philip and Fenner the following day, we were informed that SSD2 was now gaining increasing interest and CND would be holding a vast march to Hyde Park where well known speakers would be holding forth. What innovative suggestion could we come up with for our WDC? We were told to think this over and return soon with an idea.

Michael was as ever a one for new ideas. Clearly nobody would want another march or a demonstration in the Same week, in the same city, on the same subject. What would really be different? Suddenly his new idea came.

"You know that story in the Peace Book of how children brought peace to the world?"

"Yes...?"

"Well that would make a marvellous musical for young people!"

"Gosh, YES! But we should somehow marry that story to ALPHA-OMEGA. They belong together!"

And that was how Peace Child began.

Things then moved swiftly Rosey called me to say that David Gordon had been wanting to offer ALPHA-OMEGA to CND in the hope they could somehow make use of it. But Rosey had replied:

"Why not call my Mum who works for the World Disarmament Campaign?"

This clearly seemed more promising to Gordon. It was a WORLD campaign after all! OK. Let him try Rosey's Mum...

The rest is a bit of a chronological blur. A little group was formed of Michael and me, David Woollcombe and Rosey and David Gordon, Michael and I held a supper party at Hamilton Terrace when Benson and Gordon met and agreed to blend their two successes - storyline and music - into a youth musical. Rosey was delegated to find the appropriate young actors and singers, using her experience of Theatre in Education in London schools. David W (DW) , although winning career success and awards in film making, had always been interested in innovative educational projects and saw the potential of THE PEACE BOOK story in such a light.

So the 'new idea' seemed ready for presentation to Noel Baker and Brockway. Michael and I duly arranged to tell them about it. Their reaction was underwhelming.

"A children's musical about disarmament? What do children know about that?"

I looked strait-faced at him.

"You know, Fenner, they know far more than we think."

"Well, where's the money coming from?"

They had a valid point there. Like all peace groups, WDC was strapped for cash. We had to agree we needed to think again. Back to our core group we had to confess total failure with our noble Lords. And where could we obtain the funding for such a show? This was where the subsequent series of miracles began to occur. Benson's son approached a Buddhist institution and won a grant from them that would finance such a proposition. Back we went to our two Lords:

"We have the money. Will you give your blessing to this project. Please...?"

There being no financial commitment by WDC, their agreement was given although clearly they thought we were pretty crazy.

Miracle No 2 was that at the last possible moment, a cancellation on the last night of UN Disarmament Week meant that the R. Albert Hall was ours. 3,000 people attended and the celebrated Irish Nobel and Lenin Peace Prize Winner, Sean McBride, who was sitting next to Michael, confided to him amid the applause that rang out around the Albert Hall:

"You can't leave this show here. You have to take it to the UN!"

Michael murmured to him what I was thinking: "Dear God! You have no idea what it has been like to get this far...!"

But I should never have under-estimated the courage and tenacity of my wonderful daughter, Rosey, and the man she'd had the good fortune to marry, David. And both were driven by the energy of David Gordon and the vision and the majesty of his music and Bernard's story.

EIRWEN INTERVIEW



1. **Question:** Why do you think Peace Child is still important to the world?

Eirwen: ecause it tunes in to the arts, to music, to imagination, to poetry at a time when consideration of world affairs is so stultifying in its lack of all these elements which make life worth living. Instead we have argument, endless repetition and now false news. Peace Child has arguments – but it is arguing for a better way to deal with the issues facing us. There is a difference between argument and quarrelling – and what we get with the false news is a lack of any kind of empathy and integrity.

2. **Question:** What are your best memories of Peace Child? –

Eirwen: I so much love the songs and they have been with me now for nearly 40 years. So when I hear those songs which mean so much to me – and I hear the children’s voices singing these songs that mean so much to me – it is very emotional to me to hear a new group of children singing them – children for whom, I think, Peace Child has been the first time that they have had a chance to think about the problems of the world from a perspective of joy!”

3. **Question:** Do you have a favourite song – or Scene – from Peace Child??

Eirwen: I think I Want to Live. That would be my favorite – because we all want to live and, in the play, the children are confronted with the possibility of total extinction. My favourite scene from the Albert Hall was the little group of children clad in their winter clothing singing “Mr President” to the US President – and the whole of the Albert Hall except for the spotlight shining on that little group of children. That song was followed by the scene where the President was so moved to create Peace Day: but he couldn’t bring himself to do it. It was not possible for him. But – of course – later the children hammered away and made Peace Day happen – as of course 4 years later, it was created in the UN by Costa Rica – on the 3rd Tuesday of September. And somehow the children of Peace Child had done the preparation for that. That speaks to my believe that we all play our part – and in the fullness of time, we can all affect change.

4. **Question:** What do you hope young Peace Child casts take away from the experience?

Eirwen: I hope that they will find the resilience to keep faith with what they have clearly begun to appreciate and understand of the role we all have to play. It is so easy to get laughed out of court by the adults who appear to know everything and who say: “What do children know about such matters?!” At the Albert Hall, the issue was disarmament and, when we suggested to Lords Fenner Brockway and Noel Baker, that we celebrate World Disarmament Week – Fenner in particular was absolutely shattered by this crazy idea: “What do children know about disarmament....” And I said then: “They know far more than you would give them credit for....” And it’s true. It is so easy to dis-credit children’s passion in world affairs when things are going so wrong. So – now we have the sustainable Development Goals – and the extraordinary Blue Planet series on TV – and the facts that are emerging about plastic polluting the oceans, and choking the fish and the sea-birds in unimaginable ways. It is so easy to throw away plastic bags – so I hope that children of each Peace Child show will remember the SDGs – and will know them by heart – and realise that it really is NOT FAIR that such bags should re-appear in the stomachs of dolphins and whales, and poison the coral reefs. And it’s difficult to know exactly how we can shout loud enough to make everyone take notice. BUT there is a bright horizon in a way because big industries are recognising the seriousness of the situation and they need our energy to push them over the edge to new behaviours: “Stop wrapping things in plastic...”

5. Question: What do you hope Peace Child audiences take away from the experience?

Eirwen: I hope that they will take away the fact that their children can address these sobering issues of our times. At one show recently, at a Primary School, I turned round and asked a mother, whose child was in the show, and asked her what she thought. She said: *“It’s extraordinary! I’ve never thought about these things before – and now my children have shown me the way....”*

I might be wrong – but I think that women are more likely to empathise with the children than maybe their fathers are. But always it comes back to the financial security of the family. If the men-folk shout loudly enough in the criticisms of what their firms are doing, their jobs are at risk – and all the things that they are working so hard to provide for their families will be lost – because they can’t keep their mouths shut. It happened over nuclear weapons – but perhaps it is easier now to make environmental protests. But I would like to talk more about it to fathers....

6. Question: What values do you think a Peace Child cast member should be promoting?

Eirwen: Fairness is the main issue; it is allied, of course, to Justice – which is rather heavy and made more heavy by lawyers. Because every child yelps: “It’s NOT FAIR” – and they are right: it’s not fair that children are thrown out of their homes in Bangladesh, in Syria, and so many places. It’s not fair that people are forced to take to drink because life has become so intolerable.

7. Question: What would you like the people running the Peace Child Foundation 50 years from now to be focussing upon?

Eirwen: I certainly think that monetary reform will be need to be properly addressed either then – or before then. Over the work that I’ve done – in the Centre for International Peace-building – peace and security are paramount goals for every generation – including the one in 2067! And so, I think of a conversation I heard in a play when some one said: “Thank God! – peace at last....” And I think that people will want that security of Peace in the future. What does security mean? One friend in Cyprus told me: “Better Locks!” – WHY? To lock up people’s minds; to lock up their tongues, their jewels. That’s not security: that’s insecurity. And another friend found security in the Tsunami by climbing a tree as the foaming waters swirled beneath him. That Tree was security.

So I made a pie-chart because, when the Generals for Peace and Disarmament were going to have a meeting just after Gorbachev came to power, their theme was Security – National, International and Personal Security. And so I thought: “What do I think about this question?” – and I made a pie chart, with Financial Security, Environmental Security, Educational Security. And I asked a Jewish girl-friend: “What have I left out?” And she said, “Yes – know your history.” And I gave it to General von Meinfield – the Dutch General – as a joke! And he put it in his pocket – and the next day, he pulled it out – and he’d had it translated into Russian – so he asked me to introduce to all the Generals: *“I know I’m not a general but this is just what one woman thinks...”* And they all thanked me for thinking about this. And the Hungarian General said: “This is the first time we have had something really interesting to talk about....” And the Polish General took it away and pinned it on the wall. So – to EVERY CHILD, I say: Speak up when you can – and don’t mind if you are thought stupid!

8. Question: What are the main issues you would like Peace Child to focus on right now?

Eirwen: Money, Environmental issues and the SDGs. The story of money and of usury and the arguments over usury that have been at the heart of most of the world faiths.