



RISDON, JON, *BLACK SHIRT AND SMOKING BEAGLES. THE BIOGRAPHY OF WILFRED RISDON: AN UNCONVENTIONAL CAMPAIGNER*, WILFRED BOOKS, SLEIGHTS 2013, 699 PAGES

Wilfred Risdon (1869–1967) was an ever-present, albeit minor political figure in British history for a significant portion of the twentieth century. He was a political organiser associated primarily with Mosley’s infamous British Union of Fascists (BUF), and an animal welfare activist. He was born in Bath, Somerset, in January 1896 and later moved to South Wales to work as a coal miner. There he became involved in trade union work. During the war, he served with the Royal Army Medical Corps and finished his service with the rank of sergeant; in 1919, he was still in Germany with the British Army of the Rhine. After his return to the United Kingdom, he joined the Labour Party and became a candidate for South Dorset in the general elections of October 1924. Afterwards he moved to Birmingham, where he became a Midlands Divisional Organiser for the Independent Labour Party (ILP), but more importantly also met Oswald Mosley, his future colleague, mentor and employer. When Mosley started his New Party in March 1931, Risdon was one of the founding members. After its ultimate failure in the general elections, Risdon became one of the founding members of Mosley’s new political project, the British Union of Fascists. In 1933, he became the movement’s Director of Propaganda, but was replaced in 1934 by William Joyce and moved to Manchester where he became the movement’s local organiser. He was a regular contributor to BUF publications and only left the movement in July 1939.

Just before the outbreak of the Second World War, he organised a census of public attitudes towards vivisection for the London and Provincial Anti-Vivisection Society (LPAVS). He spent less than a year in this post and as a former leading member of the BUF was arrested under Defence Regulation 18B without charge or trial. It was quickly decided that Risdon posed no threat to national security and he was released. At the end of 1940, he made one of the most significant wartime contributions to animal welfare when he designed an air-raid shelter for domestic pets. By January 1942, he was already the secretary of the LPAVS committee and later, when the LPAVS merged with the National Anti-Vivisection Society (NAVS), he became the secretary of this organisation. He was one of the most important campaigners for animal rights and his tireless work significantly advanced the cause of anti-vivisection in the United Kingdom. He died on 11 March 1967.

Despite his interesting life, and despite the fact that he played an important part in the history of Britain’s largest and only relevant fascist movement, as well as in anti-vivisection movements, it is likely that only a relatively small number of people have ever heard very much about him; the historiography certainly lacks any kind of rudimentary work concerning the life and work of Wilfred Risdon. In fact, he is not even included in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. This is probably partly because of his “black sheep status” arising from his involvement with fascism, and partly because of the baffling ignorance of historians.

Jon L. Risdon, author of this book, and Wilfred Risdon’s great nephew, set out “to redress that omission” and it is indeed a successful attempt. Risdon’s work provides an exhaustive compendium of meticulously assembled data about Wilfred Risdon’s life

and work. In this extensively researched book, Risdon describes the history of political organisations through the lens of one man. While he focuses on the narrative of one individual, he provides us with new and interesting insights into the workings of several organisations with which Wilfred was involved.

A significant portion of the book (chapters 4-10; pages 94-335) deals with Wilfred's involvement in the BUF. Here, the author enriches our knowledge concerning Britain's most prominent fascist organisation by providing interesting insights and fresh information about it. From my point of view, however, the most important section of the book is the chapters that describe Wilfred's work from 1939 until his death in 1967 on behalf of animals (chapters 11 and 13-14; pages 336-382 and 440-568). As is clear from the book, Wilfred made a significant contribution to the British anti-vivisection movement and to animal welfare. This is one reason why he deserves such an extensive and detailed biography, and why he deserves to be more widely known and understood.

The author provides us with an extensive reference apparatus, thus enabling readers to follow up the sources the author draws upon and to find out more about their particular area of interest. Unfortunately, not all the sources quoted in the references have page numbers, making them sometimes difficult to check up or follow.

From the point of view of the historian dealing with a study of fascism, it should be said that as a contribution to generic fascism studies in the wider sense this work does not fulfil its potential. The author does not succeed in identifying the sort of movement Wilfred actually belonged to. He is not up to date with the latest research in comparative fascism studies (the works of Roger Griffin, Stanley Payne, Roger Eatwell, Emilio Gentile and so on) and his book is somewhat narrative oriented.

Just as Marxist historians are determined to see in fascism only the machinations of capitalism and the reactionary ultra-conservative movement, Risdon writes about the "conversion of the Movement from socialist-oriented revolutionary party to a militaristically-oriented reactionary party". (p. 102)

The author fails to recognise the significance of his subject's obsession with the renewal of British society and culture, and with the BUF's (revolutionary) drive towards the rebirth of the British nation and its obsession with decadence and determination to create the "new man" and a new civilization. A vast literature concerned with "fascist culture" has been generated over the past two decades (the works of Julie Gottlieb, Thomas Linehan, Roger Griffin, Gary Love and others), but this is, unfortunately, left untouched by the author. He relies, furthermore, rather heavily on the works of Robert Skidelsky and Colin Cross. Cross's book, however pioneering for its time, is today regarded as out of date, and in comparison with newer works clearly lacks any strong analysis. Similarly, Skidelsky's biography of Mosley, although astounding in its level of detail (it is an extensive volume which runs to almost 600 pages), must be regarded critically. Skidelsky knew Oswald Mosley personally and did not conceal his subtle admiration for the man, and the book makes a bold attempt at vindicating certain aspects of Mosley's leadership (namely his anti-Semitism). Skidelsky relied on Mosley's autobiography (*My Life*, published in 1968) for information, and portrayed Mosley as a "lost leader" of the Labour Party and a man who could have averted the economic crisis and thus in effect could have saved the United Kingdom from war. The book garnered much criticism.

In short, the author does not use the latest academic works on the BUF, and the theoretical and conceptual framework of generic fascism is missing. Risdon's exhausting empirical research needs to be located within the wider context. Nevertheless, I hold this work to be a noteworthy contribution to historical discourse.

All of this was not, furthermore, his goal. He set out to write a biography of Wilfred Risdon and he succeeded in that. The book gives us a complete picture of a passionate and tireless campaigner and political activist who during his life worked with some of the most interesting men and women in British history. It contains a mass of new information and gives us an interesting insight into the existence and work of several organisations. Risdon's grasp of the topic at hand is excellent, the work is perfectly readable and, in contrast with significant sections of much of the preceding scholarship, is objective and without judgements. Jon Risdon has written a book which makes a valuable contribution to Anglophone historiography, and, after decades of ignorance, has put Wilfred Risdon on the map of British history.

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