

As I Was Going to St Ives: A Life of Derek Jackson

by Simon Courtauld.

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In all the history of second-guessing in warfare, the Window affair is one of the most extraordinary. As early as 1934, Post Office engineers reported that passing aircraft could interfere with radio reception. Less than a year later, Robert Watson-Watt demonstrated by a simple experiment in a field outside Daventry that aircraft could be detected by radio. Radar was born. Remarkably, it was only two years after this that Lindemann demonstrated to Churchill that tinfoil strips cut to a certain length and jettisoned from a height would simulate aircraft on the enemy's radar screen and baffle anti-aircraft batteries. Churchill, always a sucker for gadgets, loved the idea, but the scientists in charge 'looked down their noses at the suggestion', according to Lindemann's protégé R.V. Jones, who had first thought of it. Partly they didn't care to see their amazing discovery so quickly outfoxed, but also they worried what would happen if the Germans got hold of this simple device. For the next five years, no research was done on Window – as the scheme came to be known. So in the first raids of the war British bombers flew over German defences like so many flights of sitting duck.

What none of them then knew was that exactly the same thought process had occurred in Germany. A technician had suggested silver strips to Göring, who immediately saw the danger to the German defences. All papers relating to the idea were impounded and strict orders issued that it should never be mentioned again. Thus both sides had denied themselves the use of anti-radar for fear of what the other side would make of it. Each preferred to protect its own civilians from being bombed rather than its bomber crews from being shot down.

As late as spring 1942, just before the thousand-bomber raid on Cologne, Window was still being held back until its likely effects had been tested. It was at this moment, with bombers and their crews being destroyed at a horrific rate, that onto the scene charged the exotic figure of Flying Officer Derek Jackson. He had already flown 60 sorties as a navigator with 604 Squadron, resulting in 11 combats, five enemy bombers destroyed, with four more damaged. He was also a lecturer in spectroscopy at Oxford, part-owner of the *News of the World*, a rampant bisexual, partly Fascist and wholly outrageous in his views. Jackson was put in charge of the trials – or 'Jackson's Air Farce' as they quickly came to be called.

By chucking handfuls of tinfoil out of the cockpit, he quickly discovered how much was needed to blot out the enemy radar, then, conversely, how an improved radar system could learn to detect the aircraft through the chaff. In the process he was himself shot down by an ill-informed Spitfire. By this stage it was agreed that the dangers of German bombers using Window effectively against Britain were much diminished (most German bombers were now flying against Russia), and even the sceptical Bomber Harris came round. It is estimated that Window saved about a hundred British aircraft in its first week of operation. Air Marshal Portal calculated that it might have saved the lives of the crews of 250 bombers had it been introduced four months earlier.

This was by no means the end of Jackson's wartime achievements. Before D-Day he devised a new type of Window strip to persuade the German radar operators that two 'invasion fleets' were approaching the French coast some distance to the east of the actual Normandy landing. And he found in a captured Junkers 88 a detector, known to the Luftwaffe as Flensburg, which he discovered to his horror was superbly effective in locking onto Monica, the tail-warning

radar issued to Bomber Command. As well as alerting British bombers to impending attack from the rear, Monica also allowed the enemy fighter to zero in. Jackson carried out a mass trial himself, flying the Junkers in pursuit of a gaggle of 71 Lancaster bombers and homing in without difficulty on each of them. That was the end of Monica. Harris had her removed and more pilots lived a little longer.

There was a glorious impatience about Jackson at war which, combined with a meticulous capacity for research, enabled him to get his own way. I like to think of him whirling around the English skies, homing onto Lancaster after Lancaster, chattering away over the intercom, often in German as he liked to in the air, proving to his satisfaction that these people were suicidal idiots to fasten these pieces of kit to their rear ends. In the officers' mess he was a loud and flamboyant figure, waddling in with his splay-footed gait, still carrying his parachute, to make the next move in the chess game he had started before being scrambled. When the news of his Distinguished Flying Cross for 'devotion to duty' was announced in the evening news bulletin, Jackson was heard bellowing from the bar in his strange, gravelly voice: 'Devotion to duty? What about bwavewy?'

His rumbustious arrogance was intolerable, unstoppable and, in war at least, indispensable. He was bred to it. His father, Sir Charles Jackson, was a Monmouthshire architect-developer, lawyer and politician who, among other things, built up a large collection of silver which virtually *is* the National Museum of Wales's collection and bought shares in a then obscure Sunday newspaper called the *News of the World*, of which he became chairman. He did not put this fact in his *Who's Who* entry. As sales rose from 40,000 to 4.4 million in 1941, the 25 per cent shareholding Derek and his identical twin brother, Vivian, inherited in the paper – the *Flesh and the Devil*, as it was known before a rougher age called it the *News of the Screws* – became so hugely valuable that when Attlee put the super tax rate up to 19s 6d in the pound, Derek fled the UK never to return. In Ireland, where he took refuge first, the *News of the World* was banned, and to keep an eye on his investment he had it sent to him under plain wrapper.

He and Vivian had little contact with their elderly, distant parents. Their only deep emotional engagement was with each other. Both of them went for anything that moved, of either sex. 'I ride under both rules,' Derek said, referring to the different codes for flat racing and jumping. The twins argued – and agreed – about everything. Vivian too was a brilliant physicist. Wherever they went, from schooldays on, they bought the finest spectrometers and interferometers, sometimes equipping entire laboratories when university funds were short. Vivian was killed in a sleighing accident in the winter of 1936, and Derek was never quite the same again, never able to achieve real intimacy with anyone, except dogs and horses. His long-term collaborator at the Clarendon Laboratory, the German refugee physicist H.G. Kuhn, summed him up perfectly: 'Jackson's strong feeling of independence had been enhanced during his upbringing by the sense of power that money gives, and even in his development as a physicist he was largely self-taught: he had never done any research under or with anyone and probably had hardly ever been contradicted by anyone of his age.' Yet Kuhn found him courteous and considerate and never discovered any inclination to Fascism in him.

In *As I Was Going to St Ives*, his deliciously slim life of Jackson, Simon Courtauld tells the story of a remarkable human being – well, remarkable being. Even Diana Mosley, Jackson's best friend, had to concede that he wasn't quite human, and it takes one to know one. Courtauld provides as lucid an account of his work as the layman could hope for, and it would be hard to improve on his laconic, inconspicuously ironic treatment of Jackson's seven marriages (six and a half to be strictly accurate), which are responsible for the book's silly title. To call his carry-

on goat-like would be grossly unfair to goats, who seem celibate, faithful and even-tempered by comparison. He married Augustus John's daughter Poppet first, then Pamela Mitford, then the femme fatale Janetta Woolley, one of whose previous husbands was Robert Kee. On the day Janetta gave birth to Rose, his only child by any of his wives, he ran off with her half-sister Angela. When he dumped Angela three years later, he did so over lunch in the same restaurant in which he had persuaded her to leave her husband. Maybe goats are more sensitive, too.

When he began his affair with Janetta, he told her that the last person he had slept with was Francis Bacon – this, Courtauld hazards, on the night he gave Bacon and Anne Dunn dinner at Claridge's before they all went to bed together. He also gave them £100 each, a lot of money in 1950. Only a few months after Princess Ratibor became his fifth wife, he complained to her cousin, the actor Peter Eyre, that she could be ratty and was frequently boring. Then he made a pass at Eyre. He took on tougher opposition with Number Six, the ferocious minx Barbara Skelton, part-original of the lethal Pamela Flitton in *A Dance to the Music of Time*. She had already scored with a whole bestiary of sacred monsters. Jackson would boast that 'after King Farouk, Cyril Connolly and George Weidenfeld, I was the pretty one.' Skelton, like many of his wives and lovers and Jackson himself (his brother Vivian too), was besotted with animals. She was particularly in love with her coati, a raccoon-like creature which she used as a weapon in her fights with Jackson in the Ritz, thrusting its wicked snout into his face, urging it to bite chunks out of his lip. When Janetta said the animal should be put down, she retorted, as animal fanatics do, that people who talk of putting animals down ought to be put down themselves.

Jackson loved horses as much as he loved dogs, indeed he was known to his friends as Horse. He went on competing in steeplechases until his 60th year, riding with short stirrups like a monkey on a stick. He took part in the Grand National three times. My father rode in many chases alongside him, both of them often on horses trained by Captain Bay Powell. He admired Derek's dash rather than his elegance, in and out of the saddle.

For us children dragged along in his wake, Derek was not so easy. Like Rose and his transient stepchildren, I found him an unnerving presence. He would set out to be genial and interested, perhaps thrust a fiver in your hand – he was always generous with his cash, not least to his ex-wives, though perhaps not as generous as the divorce courts today would have forced him to be – but his glittering eye, his hurried, overbearing manner of speech, his South-Walian swagger betrayed such a volcanic impatience that it was impossible for you to be any more comfortable in his company than he was in yours. He had a wearisome itch to get a rise out of everyone, to upset or unnerve or frighten, especially while driving his Bentley or Mercedes, racing up to level crossings as the gates were closing, putting his foot down on narrow Irish roads until the needle crept up to 90, and Janetta could not help crying out: 'No, Derek, please, not so fast.'

He did not want children of his own – too much competition. The same could be said about his loathing of God, 'that grey-bearded monster'. His dislike of organised religion was so strong that he could not even bear to take an apartment which had a view of Notre Dame. He detested Bach and Mozart because they wrote 'church music', but adored Wagner. All this arose partly from his desire to shock. He asked Oswald Mosley, in the presence of two devout Spanish Catholics: 'Do you think Christ was a bugger?' He adored Mosley, perhaps even more so after Mosley had been disgraced and they were both living in exile in Paris. Jackson would always greet him with a kiss on both cheeks, followed by a sharp pinch on the bottom, a feat not easily achieved, since Mosley was about a foot taller; and one not much welcomed by the Leader, who was accustomed to do the bottom-pinching himself.

Courtauld pitilessly records all the Fascist spoutings with which Jackson liked to annoy people, his habit, even after the war, of singing the 'Horst Wessel Lied' in Austrian hostelryes and referring to Hitler as The Great Man. He records too, without overmuch comment, the view of Jackson's friends that this was 50 per cent teasing. That may be more or less true without constituting a valid excuse. In his milieu, such things could be said only in a teasing way. What strikes one, on the contrary, is that Jackson had a pretty complete Fascist mindset, with the possible exception of anti-semitism, which didn't interest him.

He was possessed by a fear and loathing of socialism. He was contemptuous of the lower orders who read the *News of the World* and paid for his racehorses and his wives, and he liked to bellow out Gilbert and Sullivan's 'Bow, bow, ye lower middle classes, bow, bow, ye tradesmen, bow, ye masses.' His visceral love of Germany was trumped only by his fierce patriotism. Typically Fascist too were his intoxication with speed and danger and his dislike of the milksop *Sklavenmoral* of Christianity. At the same time, as Fascists often are, he was superstitious, would not walk under ladders or work on a Friday if it happened to be the 13th. The worst event of his life – Vivian's death in the snow – had been foretold by a fortune-teller in a nightclub.

Nor was the greatest obsession of his life, nuclear physics, incompatible with the Fascist cast of mind. Since scientists are more inclined to veer to the extreme left, lured by the scientific pretensions of Marxism, it is often forgotten that Fascists too worshipped science as something true and hard and modern. In a hazy light, therefore, one might identify Derek Jackson with the *Urbemensch*, or on a lower plane with Zouch, the Superman who takes up foxhunting in Anthony Powell's *From a View to a Death*.

No journalist would be able to resist describing Jackson as 'a colourful personality'. Yet in a curious way he seemed almost colourless, evanescent. It is an inspired touch of Courtauld's to choose as his epigraph the anecdote of Derek at a nuclear physics conference in Rome in the 1970s strolling with a young English delegate who tells him that there's an extraordinary man at the conference, a brilliant physicist who had an outstanding war in the RAF and rode three times in the Grand National, and was fabulously wealthy and had been married six times. Jackson: 'I think I ought to tell you, before you go any further, that I'm the man in question.' 'Oh, really?' the young man says. 'I'm sorry, but we haven't been introduced.' 'I'm Derek Jackson.' Young man (after a pause): 'No, that wasn't the name.'

What remains fascinating is the contrast between Jackson's brusque impatience and infidelity when in the beau monde and his dedicated, courteous, endlessly patient behaviour in the laboratory. His first seminal paper for the Royal Society, on 'hyperfine structure in the arc spectrum of caesium and nuclear rotation', was published in 1928 when he was 22. Fifty years later, according to Heini Kuhn, he was still poring over spectral lines on his old microscope, 'measuring their spacings as accurately as – or even more accurately than – anyone else could have done'. The photoelectric scanner (like the MRI scanner, the indirect result of his researches) would have supplied him with digitised results in half the time, but Jackson would not have enjoyed it so much: 'The continuing challenge of skill and judgment would have gone.'

I cannot help thinking of Darwin in his last years on his hands and knees measuring the worms whose habits he had first studied thirty years earlier, insisting on the same old instruments and refusing to buy state-of-the-art kit. Darwin was a devoted paterfamilias who strove to avoid giving offence to the Christian religion. Jackson could hardly have been more different, except

in his dedication to his art. After a tour of German radar installations in the Baltic at the end of the war, he infuriated an air marshal when asked to describe a piece of equipment by saying: 'it was so pretty that I wanted to stroke it.' Nothing else in the world would he have stroked with such genuine love.