

## The Oxford Carritts

Boars Hill is a leafy suburb of Oxford, home to the well-heeled and the well-to-do. Its residents look down, both literally and metaphorically, on to the sprawling city below them. Boars Hill was where the Carritt family lived in a rambling Victorian house and where Edgar Carritt, Professor of Philosophy at University College Oxford, and his wife Winifred, brought up their seven children during the turbulent years of the mid twentieth century. Two of the children, my father, Noel Carritt (b. 1911) and his younger brother Anthony (b. 1914) went to Spain with the International Brigade. How was it that these privileged young men ended up in the cold and wet and stinking mud at Jarama, and later, suffered the hellish heat of Brunete, where Anthony, driving an ambulance, was killed in a fascist bombing raid? What was it that radicalised them and their siblings to make such life-changing commitments to anti-fascism.



*Noel Carritt recovering in Madrid from Shrapnel wounds received in the battle for Jarama*

In 1930, Noel was a student at Oriel College Oxford, reading Zoology and he was caught up in the burgeoning “new left” movement in the universities at the time. Noel joined the October Club, Oxford University’s first communist society. At home his older brothers were already politically active. Michael was working with the Indian Civil Service and was secretly helping the Indian independence movement in their anti-colonial struggles, and Bill was in the US supporting striking miners in Kentucky. The house at Boars Hill became a Mecca for left wing intellectual debate during the mid-thirties, with Auden, Spender, Crossman and the Carritt brothers, joining with seasoned political activists like Abe Lazarus who was organising the workers at Morris Motors to secure union recognition.

In Germany, Hitler’s fascists had taken control of the Reichstag and were embarking on the reign of terror against all who stood in their way. Many from the political left or who were Jewish were urgently seeking asylum outside Germany but the UK government was far from

welcoming. Exiles had to have financial means of support if they were to be admitted and Professor Carritt was one of several Oxbridge academics providing such guarantees. One exile was Heinrik Mottek, editor of a left-leaning paper in Frankfurt, Germany, who, with his

wife and 18-year-old daughter, Liesel, made it to the UK in 1932. But Liesel risked being forcibly returned to fascist Germany upon reaching her 21<sup>st</sup> birthday and, as both a communist and a Jew, she would almost certainly not have survived persecution and the concentration camps of the 1940s. So, in 1933, Noel married her, and provided the passport that safeguarded her future. Was it just a marriage of convenience or was it more than that? I'm sure that their joint political commitment brought them together and it was Liesel who first went to Spain in the late summer of 1936. In those early stages of the formation of the International Brigades women were not permitted in front line fighting positions, so Liesel, being a headstrong girl, joined a militia unit fighting in the Aragon.

Noel, by then, had left university and was teaching at a school in Sheffield but in the autumn of 1936, he decided to follow Liesel's lead. Without giving any notice to the school's headteacher, one evening he packed a rucksack and caught the train to London. He had an hour to kill in London so thought he should at least tell his parents back at Boars Hill of his plans. As a member of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) he had the credentials for membership of the Brigade, and as a passport holder at a time before the UK government had made membership of the Brigade illegal, he was easily able to travel to Spain without the added hardship of so many Brigade members who had to cross the Pyrenees into Spain on foot.



*Liesel Carritt (nee Mottek) fighting with a militia unit in Aragon in 1936*

At some point whilst in Spain, Liesel must have transferred to the Brigade because towards the end of 1936 we know that she was Secretary to Dave Springhall, the Stalinist Assistant Brigade Commissar in Spain. But she and Noel had little if any interaction in Spain and their relationship slowly disintegrated. Despite the increasing distance in their relationship, Noel still cared for Liesel as was evident when Liesel took herself off the Barcelona without any official leave of absence. Noel wrote to the senior party officials in Barcelona pleading for leniency in dealing with her and suggesting that the brigade might more usefully employ her for her language skills. It seems that Noel's persuasive letter worked and Liesel continued in the Brigade for some time before being repatriated.

In February 1937, Noel as one of the Brigade's foot soldiers, took the fight to the fascists at the key battle of Jarama. Much has been written about the Jarama conflict and readers of these pages will be familiar

with the background. For Noel, as for so many, it was a baptism of fire. Weather conditions were appalling, it was cold and wet, training had been insufficient, communications and intelligence were almost non-existent and leadership, whilst always of high calibre and idealistically positive, was constantly changing as senior officers were killed or injured. Given the circumstances, it is quite remarkable that the heavily out-numbered and out-gunned Brigade held their own against the Fascist onslaught and prevented Franco's forces from cutting the Madrid Valencia road and putting the capital city into a siege situation.

Noel would not have been a good soldier. Brave, certainly, but it was not in his nature to fight with the aggression that is necessary in war. It must have been an awful experience for him. He took some comfort in an odd friendship that developed in the trenches with Clem Beckett, the international speedway rider. They were chalk and cheese, Noel from a privileged background and an academic and Clem being a down to earth working class northerner. It hit Noel very hard when Beckett was killed at Jarama. But he stuck it out until his hand was injured by shrapnel and he was withdrawn for medical treatment.

Whilst recovering, in Madrid, his brother, Anthony, joined the brigade and arrived in Spain sometime in April. Both brothers decided to volunteer as ambulance drivers and in July 1937 were deployed at the battle for Brunete. By then, the cold and wet of Jarama had been replaced by the intolerable heat of a Spanish summer. But as at Jarama, the Brigade was out-numbered and out-gunned, and, in particular it was the Fascists with their Italian and German backers who dominated the skies.



*Anthony Carritt photographed at home in Boars Hill Oxford shortly before leaving for Spain to join the International Brigade*

Sometime around 10<sup>th</sup> July Noel heard that Anthony was missing. Noel searched for evidence of his brother's fate, walking from village to village, from field station to first aid post to try to discover what had happened, but neither Anthony's ambulance nor his body were ever found and Noel had to accept that he had been killed and to communicate the terrible news to his parents in Oxford. More than forty years later, I was in conversation with Len Crome, the Chief Medical Officer with the battalion at Brunete. Len told me that Anthony had delivered a number of injured brigaders to his field hospital on that fateful day and had been instructed to return immediately to the front lines because there were reports of further casualties. Anthony set off straight away, but Len remembered a particularly intense period of bombing at the time and it must be assumed that Antony was caught up in that fascist assault.



*Noel Carritt, standing on the left, at Brunete, July 1937.*

After Brunete, Noel was transferred to the base hospital at Huete, where Peter Harrison, his close friend from Boars Hill, was the chief administrative officer. Whilst at Huete, Noel was briefly appointed to the role of Political Commissar, in addition to his routine driving duties. As always, the Brigade was short of medical personnel and, on the strength of his degree in Zoology he was briefly co-opted by Dr

Douglas Jolly as an assistant anaesthetist.

Noel returned to the UK in December 1937 where he continued to campaign for the International Brigade and for the Aid Spain movement. During WW2 he applied to serve in the Royal Navy but was refused on account of his MI5 record. After the war he returned to teaching. He died in 1992.

Colin Carritt - September 2020