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What price solitude?

A pilgrimage to the home of Derek and Jeannie Tangye

In the run-up to the General Election, you may feel like getting away from it all. How about a pilgrimage to the land of the Minack Chronicles?

In the days of the New Testament, so I have been told, a journey 'to the ends of the earth' meant a voyage from the Holy Land to Cornwall. Surprisingly, the southern edge of this county, around Lamorna Cove, still boasts a haven of peace and tranquillity between the two tourist attractions of Land's End and St. Michael's Mount.

Simplicity

Armed only with vague directions from one of his books, I recently walked the winding lanes there in search of the author Derek Tangye. With his wife Jeannie, he left the stressful life of a London journalist over 40 years ago, exchanging a fashionable home by the Thames for a tiny, rented farm cottage with a tin roof.

Friends in the city and the local people in Cornwall thought the young couple would never endure the primitive conditions. But they were all proved wrong. Derek and Jeannie shared a common vision: to live a life of sincerity and simplicity. Many of their peers had died in the Hitler war, and they wanted to spend the rest of their days giving thanks they had escaped the worst of the conflict.

Secret service

A member of MI5, Derek met his future wife when she was working as press officer for the Savoy Hotel group. Jeannie came into contact with a host of influential people and celebrities as part of her job. Derek realised her strategic importance and recruited her for the secret service.

The roles involved making weekly reports to the Secretary of the Cabinet: informing him of rumours, behind-the-news stories and scandals. Derek regularly saw Philby, Burgess and Blunt; being pumped for information by the latter on more than one occasion. It was a life of intrigue and glamour, punctuated by horrific news from the front line.

A Polish agent arrived in England with stories of atrocities the Gestapo were committing against Jews. He told of how groups of people were herded into train wagons, after being chased and shot at. But the floor of each compartment was covered in lime, ensuring that once the doors were closed, all those inside died a slow, agonising death.

Concentration camp

The same man was smuggled into and out of a concentration camp. There he saw naked inhabitants, torture, and dead bodies lying around, apparently unnoticed. When Derek related these accounts to Jeannie, she began to cry. Later, he realised these were the first tears shed on this side of the Channel for the victims of the Holocaust.

After peace came, Derek and Jeannie took a holiday in Cornwall. One day, while walking a coastal path, they saw a small dwelling on top of a cliff, surrounded by sloping fields and woodland. They felt drawn to the place, sought out the farmer who owned it, and determined to rent it. They would make their living growing flowers - mainly daffodils and violets - eat home-grown vegetables, keep chickens and write books.

Quiet place

They moved in at midnight on a Good Friday, intent on surviving with a weekly budget of £2.50. To begin with, Dorminack Cottage had no mains services. Water was drawn from a nearby stream, and one afternoon Derek's mother, who was visiting, found a tadpole in her cup of tea!

Though the land had been used for farming in previous generations, it had grown wild again and had to be tamed afresh. It was back-breaking work, but the Tangyes never regretted their move. Their feelings could be summed up by a letter an Indian chief sent to the President of the United States over 100 years earlier: 'There is no quiet place in the white man's cities. No place to hear the leaves of spring or the rustle of insect wings ... what is there to life if a man cannot hear the lovely cry of a curlew or the sound of a frog around the pond at night?'

A copy of the letter came to Derek from an American air hostess. After he began writing what became 22 books, known collectively as *The Minack Chronicles*, readers from all over the world started finding their way to the Tangye home. Ann Schwengels from San Francisco was one of those looking for inner peace, who wanted to know more about the couple's 'back to basics' philosophy.

The writings are delightfully simple, and as their titles suggest (e.g. *The Evening Gull*, *Sun on the Lintel*, *When the Winds Blow*) are concerned

with everyday life at Dorminack. They catalogue with absolute honesty the Tangyes' triumphs and heartaches, blessings and sins. Bible references are few, but then these are not spiritual journals. What comes through is an almost Franciscan joy of innocent daily pleasures, a revelry in things small and normal.

We live in an age where everything, including people, has to be given a tag or label. But that poses problems when someone or something does not quite fit the mould. These two pioneers cannot neatly be popped into the box marked 'evangelical'. They certainly displayed an ongoing faith which reached out and touched many thousands of people. But they never went to Spring Harvest, did not plant churches or run an Alpha group. To those needing to categorise, a fair description might be: terribly British Anglican mystics/hermits, with an unpaid counselling ministry.

Dorminack Cottage still belongs to a local farmer. But income from *The Minack Chronicles*, together with books Jeannie wrote about hotel life, enabled the couple to purchase 20 acres of surrounding land. Under The Minack Chronicles Trust, this area is being preserved as a special place where visitors may sit or wander in solitude.

Pilgrimage

Jeannie passed away in 1986 and Derek died just a few weeks after I made my pilgrimage to his home. As I approached the house, down a lane constructed of loose stones by the Tangyes themselves, I experienced a wonderful feeling of stillness. It grew stronger as I walked over the stream that is now marked by a stone plaque, inscribed 'Monty's Leap'.

The couple had no children, but during their lives cared for a number of animals. Monty was one of their cats, and he would jump over the water rather than risk wetting his paws. Two donkeys, Merlin and Susie, were the only creatures at home when I called. From the field where they are kept one can view the sea. And I recalled how, on one occasion, the captain of the QE2, by pre-arrangement, sailed by and saluted Jeannie and Derek with the ship's siren. A clothes line prop bearing an orange tablecloth had been erected as a marker. And as the horn sounded, two donkeys - at that time, Penny and Fred - hooted in reply.

Without Derek and Jeannie, life goes on around Dorminack the way it has for centuries. I watched a pair of magpies, listened to the quiet murmuring of the sea below the fields, and wandered around the nature reserve, followed by a group, or should I say flock, of brightly coloured butterflies.

Only when I was disturbed by the noise of a low-flying helicopter en route to the Scilly Isles, did I realise that the afternoon had passed in pleasant meditation. I said 'goodbye' to Merlin and Susie, and much refreshed, made my way back up the lane to the busy Penzance road and so-called civilisation.

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