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Biography of an Exceptional Sociologist: The life and times of W. H. J. (Sebastian) Sprott

Peer Reviewed Article

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Abstract

It is the purpose of this article to reclaim for contemporary commentary the now little mentioned but significant sociologist W. H. J. Sprott. Walter John Herbert Sprott was born in Crowborough, Sussex on 19th April 1897 into a family of the professional middle-class. He attended Felsted School after which he served during the First World War. On being invalided out of the army he taught for a short time in preparatory schools and in 1919 went up to Clare College, Cambridge where he gained a double first in Moral Sciences. He was elected a member of the Apostles.[1] After his degree he became a demonstrator at Cambridge's Psychological Laboratory. In 1925 he took up a post at University College, Nottingham. In due course he became professorial head of a department responsible for psychology, philosophy and sociology. At first known as a psychologist he later became better known as a sociologist. After a distinguished academic career, he retired to Blakeney, Norfolk where he died on 2nd of September 1971.[2] Sprott was homosexual and his homosexuality played a significant part in his life. He had serious intimate relationships, with among others, Lytton Strachey, John Maynard Keynes, and E. M. Forster as well as largely promiscuous relationships with working-class men and "rough trade". When he died he was mourned and

eulogised by his friends and his associates. What follows is not a comprehensive discussion of Sprott's academic works but a biographical account of an exceptional sociologist.

Keywords

Sprott, Sociology, Cambridge, Bloomsbury Group, Nottingham

Cambridge and Bloomsbury

Sprott, for much of his adult life led three related lives: one as a successful academic, another as an affiliate of the Bloomsbury Group[3] and thirdly, as an active homosexual during a time when such activity was illegal.[4] These parts of his life are sensitively and amusingly captured in an obituary notice by the historian Alexander McDonald:

> *I shared an office with Sprott at Nottingham in the mid 1930s. . . . I also knew his home and his ex-criminal friends (he was 'Jack' to them), the house filled with books: "I see, Jack," said one, "that you like reading." Every October he threw a party for his university friends and their wives, who were welcomed with great courtesy by large men carrying small trays of wine in their fists. At other times he entertained men like Aldous Huxley and E. M. Forster from his London life. Always he was working seriously on his subject. . . . He would drive me to Cambridge, dropping me at Clare while he joined the circle of Maynard Keynes in King's. These are good memories of a man who turned his own life into an educational influence and was recognised for his intellectual quality. None of his friends will forget him* (McDonald, 1971: 82-83).

While at Cambridge Sprott's charm, beauty and erudition made him a dashing figure. His fellows thought it better that he lose his original Christian names and they be replaced with 'Sebastian' a name that stuck until later in life when he was mainly known as 'Jack'.[5] That he was clever was not in doubt – B. L. Hallward the Vice-Chancellor of Nottingham writes in a preface to a book of Sprott's public orations, that in Cambridge ". . . the phrase 'a sprott' became a generic term for the intellectual and aesthete par excellence" (Hallward, in Sprott, 1964: 1). Sprott's youthful eccentricity is captured by a fellow undergraduate, Frances Marshall, who later became Mrs Ralph Partridge, Bloomsbury's most comprehensive diarist:

> [There was] *a young man in whom I noticed, without being able to diagnose them, some symptoms with which I was later to become very familiar. That voice? . . . it had a life of its own, starting low and soft, rising to a faint scream, stopping altogether, swallowing itself, and then sinking to the depths again.* [He also had an] *elegant, precise walk very different from the usual undergraduate slouch; the interesting cameo ring, the cloak . . . This was Sebastian Sprott, who, though I doubt if we exchanged a single word at the time became one of my dearest friends. The disease he was suffering from was, of course, incipient Bloomsbury.* [He had caught his

> symptoms] *by way of Maynard Keynes, with whom he was closely involved. It is my belief that the Bloomsbury voice was a product of the Strachey family and the Cambridge intellectuals combined, . . .* (Partridge, 1981: 66-67).[6]

In the words of Forrester and Cameron, Sebastian Sprott, "had a great gift for securing the love, affection and trust of eminent older men; he was also a great beauty" (Forrester and Cameron, 2017: 193). Sprott became Keynes' Ganymede at Cambridge and it was through him that he began actively to consort with the Bloomsbury Group. Dora Carrington wrote to Gerald Brennan on the 18th of December 1921 from The Mill House, Tidmarsh:

> *We [are] also preparing for Xmas, and for the great Shah of Persia, Maynard Keynes and his attendant slave, Sebastian Sprott* (Carrington**,** 1970: 199).[7]

At this time Sebastian Sprott became (briefly) tutor to Quentin and Julian Bell at Charleston, the Sussex country home of Clive and Vanessa Bell and a centre of Bloomsbury sociality. Sprott was depicted as such in Duncan Grant's *The Hammock* of 1922.

Figure 1: The Hammock, c.1921-22 by Duncan Grant (1885 -1978)
Courtesy of Bridgeman Images.[8]

In the hammock is Vanessa Bell. Grant's daughter (with Vanessa), Angelica, is pulling a toy animal. Her two sons (with Clive Bell) Quentin and Julian are shown, respectively, rocking the hammock and boating on a pond. Sebastian Sprott, is sitting on the ground, reading.[9]

This tutoring was something of a vacation interlude in Sprott's Cambridge life because otherwise he was deepening his knowledge of German in order to read, especially, Freud. Sprott visited Freud in July 1922 to invite him (at the bidding of Keynes) to give a course of lectures in England. For practical reasons the lectures did not materialise.[10] However it is clear that Freud had been impressed by the young Sprott, as he wrote to Ernest Jones:

> *Mr. Sprott is a young man of excellent manners and good connections, a favourite of Lytton Strachey and friend of Maynard Keynes, a Cambridge student of psychology, who came to invite me for a course of lectures to be given at Eastertime . . .* (Paskauskas, 1993: 500).

Sprott was to go on to translate Freud's *New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis* and also Kretschmer's *Physique and Character* (1925). Shortly after the publication of the latter Sprott's Cambridge life came to an end and a new one in Nottingham began.

Although Sprott was away from Cambridge its influence remained. Here G. E. Moore, the Cambridge philosopher and author of *Principia Ethica* (1903) had a crucial and lasting effect. Moore's ordinary language, analytic philosophy, suspicion of synthesising and totalising theories, commitment to an unambiguous, exact, highly unrhetorical style of writing were to become hallmarks of Sprott's own work. Further, Moore's version of utilitarianism in which, friendship is regarded as an intrinsic good became part of Sprott, as it did for many of his Cambridge/Bloomsbury associates.[11] As Tom Regan puts the matter, ". . . those who understood Moore's moral philosophy best were not moral philosophers but were a group of his closest friends, bound together by their thirst for the pleasures of human intercourse and love of beauty, . . ." (Regan, 2001: 1110). In Keynes' view *Principia Ethica* provided the Cambridge/Bloomsbury affiliates with their 'religion' (Baldwin, 2006: 237).[12] For a group that in large had no or little religious belief it was in personal relationships that the purpose of life was found.[13]

Figure 2: Dora Carrington, Stephen Tomlin, Sebastian Sprott and Lytton Strachey, Garsington Manor, 1926. National Portrait Gallery.[14]

Nottingham

In the Summer term of 1925 Sprott took up his lectureship at University College Nottingham. At the same time his intimate relationship with Keynes ceased. Keynes gave up his homosexual life and became exclusively heterosexual, marrying the Russian ballerina Lydia Lopokova on the 4th August 1925.[15] Sprott lost contact with various members of the Bloomsbury group but those with whom he had made a strong bond he continued to see. In terms of Bloomsbury his most long-lasting and enduring relationship was with E. M. Forster.[16] Of the other members of the group he had a particularly affectionate and playful relationship with Dora Carrington as is exhibited in a letter she wrote to him in 1921.

Their closeness lasted until her suicide on the 11th March 1932. Lytton Strachey died on 21st of January that year and Carrington wrote to Sprott not long afterwards: "Darling Sebastian, I wanted to give you these ties and belt to keep. . . . come here and stay with me alone and talk to me of Lytton and yourself. Your ever loving Carrington" (Carrington, 1970: 486). Shortly afterwards she wrote again to Sprott:

> *Sebastian dear, what I wanted to say was that Lytton knew you loved him most. We had a talk this summer, before he was going to Nancy, and he said how lonely he was really, and then said "of course Sebastian probably cares more for me than anybody"* (Carrington, 1932).

As for Keynes, while his world-wide influence grew, Sprott, was at a University some of his reference group were unaware even existed. The eminent Freudian and brother of Lytton, James Strachey wrote to his wife, Alix, from Cambridge:

> *I always find Sebastian soothing, and we discussed as usual the Haarmann case, Dr Hirschfield, etc.*[17] *The poor fellow has been given a post at Nottingham University (did you know there was such a place?) where he retires in April to give lectures on Logic* (Strachey and Strachey, 1986: 205-206).

Most of Sprott's Cambridge/Bloomsbury friends (even those closest to him) were puzzled and mystified by the move to Nottingham.

It is not unlikely that the overwhelming reason for taking the Nottingham post was a shortage of funds. Although he received small sums from E. M. Forster, Lytton Strachey and his father he was hard up. Although himself open-handed he found it (in common with many) extremely difficult to ask for money. Lytton Strachey wrote to him in October of 1926:

> *Dearest Creature, you are really rather a wretch . . . why didn't you write and tell me that you were short of cash? What am I here for, I should like to know, if I'm not to be applied to in such circumstances. I enclose a cheque . . .* (Belshaw, 1994: 23).

Sprott on his arrival in Nottingham thought he had made an awful mistake. It would have been like nothing he was used to, and as well as money problems the end of his intimacy with Keynes would have increased his despondency. However while intimate relations with Keynes were over there was no question of any suppression of normal cordiality and shortly after his arrival in Nottingham and finding himself in despair he wrote to him:

> *My dear Maynard, I'm sick of this place and I'm sick of teaching psychology to halfwits. I want to give it up. The Secretaryship of the library of Cambridge is vacant, . . . I want that badly . . . better than this unending vague lecturing . . . My love and please help me. Sebastian* (Sprott, 1926).

Keynes replied to him soon afterwards, obviously pleased that he should want to leave Nottingham:

> *I am glad you have drained the Nottingham cup dry. I'm sure the right thing for you is to have some steady but not very exacting administrative job which will leave plenty of you over for anything else. Ever your affectionate JMK* (Keynes, 1926).

Further, to increase his despondency Sprott had a novel rejected. The work (with a homosexual theme) had been sent, at Forster's urging, to Virginia Woolf with a view to its publication by the Hogarth Press. Whether the rejection was related to the homosexual

content of the novel which Woolf noted would "make it risky from the publishing point of view" or on artistic grounds it is not possible to say. In all likelihood it was on both (Woolf, 1977: 174).

However in spite of the setbacks and the generalised gloom Sprott's spirits suddenly lifted and he decided, after all, to stay in Nottingham and make a go of things. For the rest of his working life he was devoted to Nottingham University - as it was to him. For many years he was the University's public orator. He became head of a department that encompassed psychology, philosophy and sociology and brought to Nottingham not a little of the Moral Sciences ethos of Cambridge. However while his intellect remained his sartorial flamboyance and Bloomsbury voice steadily lessened. He certainly resumed his sex life very soon, picking up one Charles Lovett in a Nottingham public lavatory.

Sprott was an unambiguous homosexual with a preference for casual and brief relationships among the working-class and lumpenproletariat (e.g. Ellman, 2017; Skidelsky, 1992; Furbank, 1979). On occasions people met under these conditions could produce an unseemly result. Lytton Strachey writing to Roger Senhouse in 1930 comments:

> *Sebastian has got a new young friend called George. . . . It was rumoured that George had knocked someone down. Sebastian accused him of this, and George admitted it. – Why? 'Well, a bloke came up to me in a urinal – wanted some of it – all right, I didn't mind – but what do you think? – he wanted it for fuckin' pleasure* [that is, not for payment] – *for fuckin pleasure! – bloody cheek! – so I knocked him down'* (Levy, 2006: 637).

Unquestionably Sprott's manner of life came with considerable risk and the possibility of social ruin. It also could do no other than sharpen his insights into the nature and character of delinquent subcultures.[18] On Sprott's death the leading criminologist, Sir Leon Radzinowicz wrote in *The Times* that Sprott's, "always original and never pretentious" contributions to the development of criminological thought were important in the "promotion of establishing criminology as an academic discipline" (Radzinowicz, 1971: 15).

Sprott was not unique in preferring transient sexual partners of a class below his own. Numbers of his homosexual contemporaries among the middle and upper class acted in a similar way. It was he and his close friend Joe Ackerley[19] (the literary editor of *The Listener*) who were to introduce their mentor E. M. Forster to this side of homosexual life (Furbank, 2006; Moffat, 2010). Robert Skidelsky talking of Sprott in his biography of Keynes observes:

> *In the 1930s he and his friend Joe Ackerley would roam the pubs in Portsmouth and Dover looking for low-life adventure with which to titillate the prim Morgan Forster. When he went to Nottingham University he . . . used discharged prisoners as domestic helpers in his grim Victorian terraced house* (Skidelsky, 1992: 36).

This terse description leaves out Sprott's charm, good humour and gift for friendship already referred to by Alexander McDonald in the opening paragraph of this article and further rehearsed here by Professor Edward Thompson in *The Times*:

> *Of the amenities* [in Sprott's house] *you could say little more than at least the lavatory was indoors and not at the end of the yard. And yet, who were his visitors there? A Master of the Rolls, a Chancellor of the Exchequer, E. M. Forster, countless scholars of the highest distinction and also unabashed persons of a different type. I have myself heard his quick footsteps hurry to the hall door in answer to a ring, and his warm greeting, "Come in dear boy. I knew you were to be released this afternoon"* (Thompson, 1971: 14).

The Chancellor of the Exchequer referred to above would have been Hugh Gaitskell (in office 1950-51). The future leader of the Labour Party on leaving Oxford took up a post in Adult Education at Nottingham. At first he felt at a loss, finding it difficult to communicate with his working-class students. However Sprott's new, arisen spirits were to influence him:

> [Gaitskell] *made friends with a young lecturer at the university, W. J. H. Sprott, . . . Sprott was a gay, jolly, rather bohemian character who had been an Apostle at Cambridge. Following his example Gaitskell for the first time in his life took a flat of his own and began to cook for himself. His social life was vigorous and various and he was as much at home in the local* palais de danse *as in university or Labour circles* (Yates, 1963: 6).

Gaitskell like Sprott had professional integrity while being able to indulge a capacity for private enjoyment. The Master of the Rolls referred to by Edward Thompson would have been Sir (later Lord) Raymond Evershed (recipient of a Nottingham honorary degree in 1951) for which Sprott gave the oration.[20]

While predominant, Sprott's sexual relationships were not always transitory; as well as fleeting "rough trade" he formed genuine relationships with working class men. Charles Lovett, after the public lavatory meeting with Sprott was to become a long-time friend.

Sprott's sexual life neither offended or troubled his friends and colleagues. He was seen by them as highly intellectual, kind and charming. Quentin Bell in a retrospective on Bloomsbury talks of Sprott in terms that are broadly (if occasionally simplistically) the case:

> *Maynard's second importation* [to Bloomsbury] *was a brilliant young man from Cambridge called Sebastian Sprott. . . . we liked him very much. I wish in the years that followed I had kept up that friendship, for something very remarkable happened to Sebastian: he vanished. At a fairly early age he went to teach at Nottingham University and clearly he liked the place, for he stayed there for years and years. When newly appointed he must have been an exquisite young person, slim, pale, long-haired, romantic. He wore a ring so exuberantly designed and so massively wrought that one feared that in attempting to lift his hand he might do himself an injury. When I next met him, about thirty years later, he was a Professor . . . But Sebastian had vanished; Jack Sprott had taken his place, a sensible, bluff, breezy fellow who in some mysterious way had managed, while dropping all Sebastian's pretty absurdities, to keep all his sweet temper and fundamental good sense. Seeing him with his colleagues one understood more perfectly why he was so happy in Nottingham: they obviously loved him; he was, as it were, the licensed pederast of the university and must have attained that privileged situation long before his vice had been legalised* (Bell, 1995: 88-89).[21]

If somewhat uncomprehendingly, Sprott's Bloomsbury and cosmopolitan intellectual friends accepted his Nottingham life and would visit his unprepossessing house in his insalubrious street.

Figure 3: Sebastian Sprott, Gerald Heard, E M. Forster and Lytton Strachey at Ham Spray, late 1920s.[22]

Sprott and Social Science

As far as his scholarly work was concerned Sprott published in the learned journals of the day in all of his three specialist areas - philosophy, psychology and sociology.[23] As well as journal publications Sprott produced a group of widely read books. Among these his *General Psychology* (1937), *Sociology* (1949), *Human Groups* (1958) and other titles were widely read and reprinted. He gave, at the invitation of Charles Madge, the Josiah Mason lectures at Birmingham in 1953. They were published as *Science and Social Action* (1954) receiving wide approval by a variety of leading scholars including George Catlin (1955), Jane Oppenheimer (1956) and Richard Titmuss (1954). In 1947 on the death of Karl Mannheim Sprott took over the editorship of Routledge and Kegan Paul's "International Library of Sociology and Social Reconstruction."

Donald MacRae was of the opinion that of Sprott's range of specialisms it was in the area of sociology that his influence was most marked:

> *He believed in sociology as an academic discipline when such a belief was neither general nor respected. Despite the title of the Chair* [psychology] *he held and the width of his concerns as a scholar it is as a sociologist that he will be remembered* (MacRae 1971: 16).

In the early post-war years, the scope for sociological discussion in British journals was meagre and the general view of the subject was unenthusiastic. The majority of sociological or social science research that was carried out (much of it impressive) was of a practical, social-policy kind tied to current events. T.H. Marshall had reservations that this was too much the case and put forward the view that sociologists should do more than, "shovel up facts needed by politicians and administrators" (Marshall, 1953: 206). Sprott said that his own interest in sociological theory was thought to be, "as wicked as Nero's interest in music" (Sprott, 1957: 622). Only a single sociology journal, *Sociological Review*, existed prior to the Second World War. The *British Journal of Sociology* wasn't founded until 1950, *The British Journal of Criminology* (previously the *British Journal of Delinquency*) until 1960, and *Sociology* until 1967. As late as 1957 only two universities offered single honours degrees in sociology – London and Nottingham. John Vaizey wrote in his memoir of Anthony Crosland, "At the end of the War sociology was virtually non-existent in Britain. A few heroic souls – Morris Ginsberg, Jean Floud, D. V. Glass, W. H. J. Sprott – were soldiering on" (Vaizey, 1977: 87). This group kept the faith and no doubt were surprised to see some twenty years later the subject flourish to such an astonishing degree. Of its largely unexpected fluorescence in the 1960s MacRae noted wryly, "at Cambridge the question is now said to be less whether sociology which the 1950s rejected should be admitted, but rather what particular paradise of delights should be prepared for its reception" (MacRae, 1961: 3). Amid the euphoria it was even rumoured that C. P. Snow saw sociology as the bridge between the Two Cultures (Little, 1963: 64).

However, all this was not the world of sociology in which for many years Sprott laboured. When the British Sociological Association (of which Sprott was a founding member) held its inaugural meeting in 1950 the majority attending were not sociologists. As Jennifer Platt records:

> *Only one-third of the seventy people attending could be regarded as 'sociologists', the remainder coming from other social science and humanities disciplines. Of the twenty-seven signatories of the initial public letter calling for the establishment of the BSA, headed by the director of the LSE, Alexander Carr-Saunders (a demographer by origin), at most six held posts in sociology (Ginsberg, Glass, T. H. Marshall, Simey, Sprott, and Wootton), and the remainder . . . academic posts in other social sciences or philosophy* (Bulmer, 2005: 39).

This general survey of Sprott's life is not the place for a detailed discussion of all his contributions to sociology. However beyond his well-known books perhaps two areas of interest can be mentioned - his advocacy of the value of the ethnographic study of subcultures and his sympathetic explication of the work of Talcott Parsons.

In a wide-ranging article for *The Listener* in 1950 entitled "New Methods in Psychology" after commending various studies Sprott raises the matter of the paucity of ethnographic research in industrial Britain, stating, "the need for such studies is pressing" and would need to be characterised by being small-scale and intensive where what is sought is the recognition of "cultural differences between classes, between towns, between suburbs and even between streets" (Sprott, 1950: 638). Sprott secured an award from the Rockefeller Foundation which resulted in a major study of subculture - *The Social Background of Delinquency* (Jephcott and Carter, 1954).

This important work directed by Sprott was carried out by two remarkably fine social scientists Pearl Jephcott and Michael Carter. It was an analysis (rich and extensive in qualitative data) of the subcultural aspects of juvenile delinquency in the working-class life of a small Midlands industrial town.[24] The investigation employed formal socio-economic description, participant observation, close unobtrusive interviewing and ethnographic survey. What emerged were subcultures within a subgroup - located next to each other in adjacent streets. These subgroups thought of delinquent behaviour in differing ways, their living patterns being either prescriptively respectable or unprescriptively casual and amoral:

> *Delinquency is much more prevalent in some areas of the town than in others. Certain streets have a steady load of delinquency, whereas other streets, materially comparable and in close proximity hardly ever have a youngster or adult before the court* (Jephcott and Carter, 1954: 74)

What was so remarkable about this pioneering study was the descriptive clarity of differing moral climates. The standards and norms relating to the choice of being law-abiding or delinquent where found not to be determined by psychological maladjustment but by group membership, even when those groups were in terms of their residential location all but indiscernible.

However Sprott in his typical, avoidance of mounting high horses wrote later of the study:

> *In* [the rough] *street life was easier. Children were allowed to do much as they pleased, they were bribed not to make nuisances of themselves, money was fairly easy to come by, they thought little of pinching what they could, and their sexual sophistication was remarkable. I should hazard a guess that if any delinquents from these two streets were to be judged 'seriously disturbed' they would come from the respectable group. . . What I believe to be important is the influence which the ethos of a whole street has on the individual brought up in it. It is a Durkheimian social fact, external and compelling* (Sprott, 1956: 138).

At a more general level he continued:

> *To plot the incidence of crime (either its locus or the addresses of the perpetrators) against low housing values, slum areas, overcrowding, the presence of warehouses and shops etc., is fairly easy, but, in my view, it is not particularly useful. To investigate the 'climate of opinion' in the streets and squares from which delinquents come is much more difficult, but incomparably more worthwhile* (Sprott, 1956: 138).

The study was not published at the time – the explicit language, the exceedingly coarse descriptions of women by male factory workers as well as their sexual practices would not have found a ready publisher in 1954. However the work was widely read among those commentators concerned with the community study of delinquency and was influential for other analyses of urban working-class life in the later 1950s and 1960s.

As well as Sprott's promotion of the study of subcultures it is also important to mention the somewhat unlovely task he undertook in his advocacy of the works of Talcott Parsons. Certainly no one more understood and explained Talcott Parsons' monumental works than Sprott - primarily, in two articles for the *British Journal of Sociology*. They were entitled "Principia Sociologica" and "Principia Sociologica II", appearing in 1952 and 1963. Both essays are, respectively, an elucidation and appraisal of Parsons' *The Social System* (1952) and his *Towards a General Theory of Action* (1951). Here Parsons, at a high level of analytical abstraction put forward his complex, evolutionist classificatory scheme of societal division and change and its subsequent tendency to restabilise.[25] They were works that dominated sociological theory in the 1950s and 1960s after which they bore a sustained attack from those who rejected Parsons synthesising schemata or from those unable to understand him.

Today appreciation of Parsons is more positive. Many sociologists would not be as affirmative as Holton and Turner, "we claim that Parsons' work . . . represents a more powerful contribution to sociological theory than that of Marx, Weber, Durkheim or any of their contemporary followers" they nonetheless would recognise his importance (Holton and Turner, 1986:13). In careful, precise English, Sprott is able to explain the complexity of Parsonian theory in a way that makes it approachable and recognises its significance, not least to social psychology.[26] That Sprott has reservations and frustrations relating to Parsons are clear but he recognises the value of the work and supplies considerable illumination for the bemused reader. As well as being able to make Parsons comprehensible Sprott's writing style can be seen in contrast to a verbosity among sociologists that became (if not universal) increasingly evident in the 1970s. In complaining of this stylistic agony Dennis Wrong wrote:

> *British sociology may have lost a distinctive virtue that it possessed back in the bad old days . . . the ability to expound in lucid and economical prose the ideas of the most prolix and abstruse American and European theorists. . . . Sprott for instance came close to making more sense out of Talcott Parsons than anyone else, including Parsons himself . . ."* (Wrong, 1975: 533).

Writing of Sprott's elucidation of Parsonian sociology Robert Angell observed in the *American Sociological Review*, "it is doubtful whether it has ever been interpreted with more clarity" (Angell, 1956: 235).[27]

While alert to and admiring of the subtleties of Parsons' functionalism Sprott was not blind to his grotesque mode of expression. He ended a masterly single-page summary of Parsons' *Social Action* in *The Listener* with the following:

> *This is an important book, but, alas, it is almost unreadable. And yet one may hope that this sketchy account of it may persuade a few people to take the plunge. . . . At first they will be filled with despair and horror, but if they can survive that dark night of the mind and pursue their way through the jungle, they will get used to the jargon and reach Chapter V buoyant and full of hope. But when they have mastered the revolting language, may Heaven forgive them – no one else will – if they ever use it* (Sprott, 1952: 605).[28]

Figure 4: Wrestling with Parsons. *Laocoön* (1506). Vatican Museum.[29]

In 1950 Donald MacRae wrote perceptively of Parsons in the *British Journal of Sociology*:

> *On this side of the Atlantic we tend to see Professor Parsons and his intellectual children struggling like Lacoön and his sons with the intractable coils of the conceptual serpents of a "general theory" and "a mature science". Perhaps we feel a certain relief at avoiding Professor Parsons's difficulties and his language, but we must after all remember that Lacoön was in fact right – even though the gods punished him for it* (MacRae, 1950: 264).

This is a view that Sprott endorsed and it fell to him to attempt to prevent Parsons appearing a Casaubon. Given his reluctance to embrace totalising schemes in his own sociology such effort was to his credit (Sprott, 1962a). In all aspects of his life he would resist overarching theories and generic definitions. His version of that Cambridge/Bloomsbury liberalism that he shared with his teacher G. E. Moore and too, particularly, with his great friend E. M. Forster made him profoundly undogmatic.[30]

Epilogue

By the 1960s the world in which Sprott had flourished and developed was changing, conventions were altering and his social milieu reducing. The Cambridge/Bloomsbury liberalism which had informed his personal and social practices as well as his intellectual outlook was less influential than it had been. Keynes, Lytton Strachey, Virginia Woolf, Roger Fry, Carrington, and Vanessa Bell had all died before 1950. Further, Sprott's position as the "articulate link between the older founders of sociology in Britain . . . and the new professionals" was much less crucial than it had been (Halsey, 2004: 1006). He retired from Nottingham in 1964 and held for a time a visiting professorship at Bedford College but most of his academic work had been done (Clare, 1971; Nottingham, 1971). His last years were spent chiefly in Blakeney with his sister where in contrast to his gruesome house in Nottingham he lived in some elegance.[31] E. M. Forster died in 1970 and Sprott became his literary executor. It was while carrying out this work that he died of a heart attack on 2nd September 1971.[32]

With Forster gone and Joe Ackerley dying in 1967 Sprott had lost both his closest friends. Edward Thompson his Nottingham colleague wrote of his last year:

> [He] *gave the impression sometimes of feeling that the world had become an empty, even a lonely place; and I imagine that he was not reluctant to leave it. But none of us who have survived him will ever have a more wonderful or a more chastening friend* (Thompson, 1971: 14).

Among the many tributes on Sprott's death the eminent socio-legal scholar Oliver McGregor, with whom he had worked at Bedford College stresses Sprott's and Forster's similar way of thinking:

> *For the last 12 months of his life, Sprott had been working on Morgan Forster's papers. In outlook and conviction, the novelist and the sociologist had much in common. Sprott distrusted schemes which promised this or that social salvation, and he had a deep suspicion of (as he would have said) those* ignes fatui *that men call causes.* [Sociologists] *will mourn one of their subject's most cultivated practitioners.* (McGregor, 1971: 16).

McGregor is right – it would be hard to separate the personal philosophy held by both men, which is best put in Forster's "Two Cheers for Democracy":

> *Where do I start? With personal relationships. Here is something comparatively solid in a world full of violence and cruelty. Not absolutely solid, for psychology has split and shattered the-idea of a "person" and has shown that there is something incalculable in each of us, which may at any moment rise to the surface and destroy*

> *our normal balance. We don't know what we're like. We can't know what we're like. We can't know what other people are like. How then can we put any trust in personal relationships, or cling to them in the gathering political storm? In theory we can't. But in practice we can and do. For the purpose of living one has to assume that the personality is solid, and the "self" is an entity, and to ignore all contrary evidence. And since to ignore evidence is one of the characteristics of faith, I certainly can proclaim that I believe in personal relationships* (Forster, 1938: 65).

This Cambridge and Bloomsbury liberalism (given so explicitly above) and its influence on sociological commentary was out of fashion in sociological circles by the 1970s and has remained so. Whether something of it may return in a non-Bloomsbury guise and hold any sway among members of the profession it is difficult to predict, but in terms of intellectual history and the study of lives it is a perspective necessary to remember. The succinct summary written by Donald MacRae the long-time professor of sociology at the LSE and long-time managing editor of the *British Journal of Sociology* will serve as an apt conclusion to this essay:

> *Many people knew "Sebastian" Sprott" better than I, but I have counted him a friend for the last twenty-five years. Unfailingly courteous, he was also a man of constant and ready kindness, sceptical and practical, to those who knew him well and to others who had only the most casual claims on his time and energy. He was an admirable teacher and expositor of the most difficult themes in modern sociology as generations of students at Nottingham and Bedford College, London, can testify. He was the most eloquent, just, and witty of public lecturers. His devotion to Nottingham University was intense and he refused invitations to what were then more famous and superficially attractive institutions with firm politeness. His part in the intellectual life of Cambridge and Bloomsbury at the height of their influence and achievement will no doubt be chronicled by intellectual and literary historians. His important, delightful and eccentric role in the establishment of British sociology also deserves its memorial* (MacRae, 1971: 16).

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Note

[1] During Sprott's time the Cambridge society of intellectuals known as *The Apostles* included among its members John Maynard Keynes, Lytton Strachey, Leonard Woolf and E.M. Forster. Keynes was Sprott's proposer. As Noel Annan observed of the Apostles, "it was in this discussion club that Bloomsbury found their ethos" (Annan, 1999: 28). Sprott was also at various times a member of other associated intellectual societies - *The Heretics* (founded 1909), *The Cranium Club* (founded 1924), *The Memoir Club* (founded 1920), *Tots and Quots* founded (1931).

[2] Sprott shared his Blakeney home with his sister Velda (1906-1991) with whom he was close and who was not infrequently part of his social circle. Velda was often in London with Sprott and in the company of E. M. Forster and J. R. Ackerley. It was Velda who ensured that Sprott's papers went to King's College Cambridge.

[3] BG It is unnecessary and would be burdensome for the reader were full reference details to the very well-known members of the Bloomsbury Group be given in this article. The most comprehensive account of the Bloomsbury Group is Rosenbaum (1995).

[4] The word 'homosexual' rather than 'gay' is used in this paper. None of the people described (or their social group) employed the term. The *OED* definition indicates why this should be the case*:* "Gay: Originally U.S. slang (originally among homosexual people). Of a person: homosexual. By the 1950s gay had begun to be used more widely among some gay people as an alternative to terms like homosexual, which was regarded as more of a clinical term, and queer, which often carried derogatory connotations. It was largely the preferred term in the gay liberation movement of the late 1960s, passing subsequently from slang into general use."

[5] When the musicologist Edward Dent, carrying music by Bach, came upon a Cambridge group containing Sprott, "it was decided there and then that he was now to be called 'Sebastian'" (Furbank, 1978: 118).

[6] Frances Partridge's home, Ham Spray House on the eastern border of Wiltshire, was a Bloomsbury house for many years up until the early 1960s. It was most notably occupied by Dora Carrington, Lytton Strachey, and Ralph and Frances Partridge and was a meeting place for many of the Group.

[7] See also for the connection between Sprott and Carrington, P M Jones (2006).

[8] Figure 1: The Hammock, c.1921-22 by Duncan Grant (1885 -1978) Courtesy of Bridgeman Images (License reference CH701278).

[9] The painting is in the Laing Gallery, Newcastle-upon-Tyne.

[10] In fact, Freud was not to come to England until 1938, following the *Anschluss* in 1938 – "to die in freedom" (Forrester and Cameron, 2017: 191). Also, on this trip to Austria Sprott visited Wittgengstein.

[11] As Moore argues in *Principia Ethica*, "by far the most valuable things which we know or can imagine, are certain states of consciousness which may be roughly described as the pleasures of human intercourse and the enjoyment of beautiful objects . . . it is only for the sake of these things—in order that as much of them as possible may at some time exist—that anyone can be justified in performing any public or private duty" (Moore, 1903: 237-238).

[12] It may also be noted that they too had a belief in humour, as a corrective to taking oneself too seriously (Stone, 1997: 192).

[13] During Moore's editorship of *Mind* (1921-1947) Sprott was the influential journal's most regular reviewer.

[14] Figure 2: Dora Carrington, Stephen Tomlin, Sebastian Sprott and Lytton Strachey,

Garsington Manor, 1926, by Lady Ottoline Morrell. Rights and Images Department National Portrait Gallery, St Martin's Place London WC2H OHE. The image is dedicated to the public domain under CC0: http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/

[15] The marriage was a happy one but also to the chagrin of various members of the Bloomsbury Group who considered Lopokova, while a considerable artist, an irritating chatterbox (e.g. Bell, 1995: 291-292).

[16] Michael Halls in his discussion of the Forster archives at Cambridge notes, "The letters [Forster] received he usually destroyed . . . the major exceptions to this are those from W. J. H. Sprott, Goldsworthy Lowes Dickinson, D. H. and Frieda Lawrence, and T. E. Lawrence" (Halls, 1985:149).

[17] Friedrich Heinrich Karl Haarman (1879-1925) was a German serial killer. Magnus Hirschfeld (1868-1935) was a well-known German sexologist.

[18] Male homosexual activity remained illegal until 1967 when the Sexual Offences Act decriminalised private homosexual acts between men aged over 21. To some the sordid conditions of some sexual encounters were part of the attraction (Houlbrook, 2005).

[19] Ackerley's acclaimed biography of his father, *My Father and Myself*, was published in 1968. He was a very close friend of Sprott's.

[20] Joan and Raymond Evershed had known Sprott well before this date – e.g., *Letters from Joan and Raymond Evershed,* King's College Cambridge Archives, File GBR/0272/WJHS/1/24.

[21] Bell is using the word 'pederast' in an entirely jocular and hyperbolic manner here. There is not a shred of evidence that Sprott engaged sexually other than with consenting adults.

[22] Figure 3: Sebastian Sprott, Gerald Heard, E M. Forster and Lytton Strachey at Ham Spray, late 1920s. Photo (EMF/27/351) used by kind permission of the King's College Cambridge Archives.

[23] Here especially, but elsewhere in this article, A. H. Halsey's entry for Sprott in the *ODNB* has been very helpful (Halsey, 2004). It was Chelly Halsey who suggested to me long ago that Sprott should be remembered. I am grateful for the time he spent with me in the bar of the Oxford Union Society and providing so much information on the early development of British Sociology. It is to be regretted that Professor Halsey, from his unique perspective and given his interests, did not write even more than he did on the post-war generation of sociologists.

[24] The town anonymised as Radby in the study was in fact Hucknall, a colliery town seven miles north of Nottingham

[25] The most recent relevant scholarly history of British sociology is Holmwood and Scott (eds) (2014).

[26] Not least to his own advocacy of the subcultural study of delinquency.

[27] For economy and accuracy Sprott's single-page exposition of Parson's in the *Listener* has not been bettered (Sprott, 1952a).

[28] For "Principia Sociologica" see (Sprott 1952b) and (Sprott 1963); for the *Listener* article see (Sprott 1952a).

[29] Figure 4: Wrestling with Parsons. *Lacoön* (1506). Vatican Museum. The image is dedicated to the public domain under CC0: https://creativecommons.org/publicdomain/zero/1.0/deed.en

[30] It is not without interest in the development of sociology in Britain that three individuals linked by a background of Cambridge liberalism - Sprott himself, T.H. Marshall (brother of Frances Partridge and friend of Virginia Woolf) and Charles Madge (the poet and co-founder of Mass Observation) - should all become key figures in post-war sociology. All three - Sprott at Nottingham, Madge as Professor of Sociology at Birmingham and Marshall with a professorship at the LSE. As A. H. Halsey (who knew all three) observed: "There was a small recruitment to sociology in this period [post-war] from Bloomsbury - T.H. Marshall, Charles Madge, and W. J.H. Sprott. The resulting connection of sociology to upper-class aestheticism and the Communist Party is a minor, unexplored, element of the history of the subject" (Halsey, 1985: 164).

[31] Sprott remained close not only to his sister but also his mother. Frances Partridge noted, "He was a devoted son and brother, and when his mother died, he surprised me by confessing how lost and unprotected he felt without her" (Partridge, 2000:68).

[32] Forster's papers then went to King's College Cambridge.

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