

# Aidan Semmens



## AIDAN SEMMENS

Poet, sports journalist and columnist. This blog is taken from my weekly column for the Eastern Daily Press (and formerly in the Ipswich Star).

## ABOUT ME

 Aidan Semmens

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TUESDAY, 1 APRIL 2014

## The calm, sane voice of Britain's nuclear history

You might think – what with climate change, booming world population, bankers and others grabbing all they can before capitalism implodes – that we have enough to worry about. Now consider this. “I think nuclear weapons are a somewhat overlooked danger today. “We went through a period of public anxiety, almost panic, during the Cold War. But human beings can’t maintain that level of anxiety and fear so they just get used to it. It becomes part of everyday life, almost like the wallpaper.

“I am very much afraid that that is when things become dangerous.

“Also they become dangerous when you have decision-makers who are not experienced and who do not understand what they are dealing with.”

The speaker is my aunt, Lorna Arnold, official historian of Britain’s nuclear project, who died last week at the age of 98.

And boy was she experienced. She was born during the Great War when her father – my

grandfather – was working on the airships that then seemed likely to play a big role in 20<sup>th</sup>-century life.

At the outbreak of World War II she joined the Civil Service. By its end, though not yet 30, she was senior enough to be the first British woman to enter Berlin with the victorious Allies.

As UK secretary to the economic directorate, she had to negotiate with the Americans, Russians and French over the difficult administration of newly occupied Germany.

After that came a spell in the British embassy in Washington before a return to London as a housewife, and then as a single mother.

It was some years after joining the Atomic Energy Authority in 1959 that she became its historian.

She was awarded an OBE in 1976, but her most important books – on



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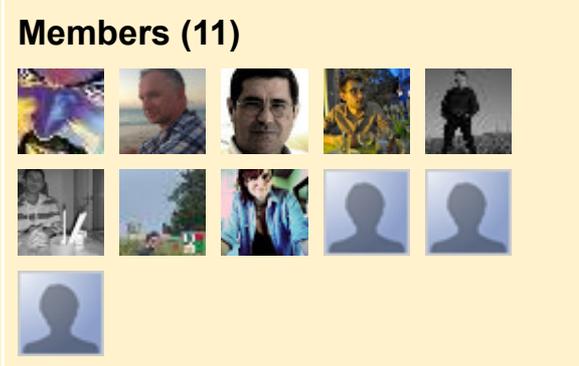
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the H-Bomb, on atomic weapons trials and the Windscale accident – came later.

Like many in the industry, she went from accepting a need for nuclear weapons to being a well-informed opponent of them. Her opinion of nuclear power – initially enthusiastic – underwent a similar change. Her last two books on nuclear matters, and her book of memoirs, ‘My Short Century’ (2012) were all completed after she was registered blind in 2002. The disability did not prevent her from continuing to speak at conferences well into her 90s – including one at Los Alamos, the New Mexico site where the first atom bomb was developed.

My aunt Lorna was a remarkable woman. An exceptionally clear thinker, and a very clear and measured speaker.

If you’re one of those who watch documentaries on atomic weapons or the energy industry, you’re sure to have seen her. She was for years the BBC’s chosen adviser on all things nuclear.

It’s a very odd thing to read an obituary of one of your family in the national press. It was a first for me, and probably a last as well.

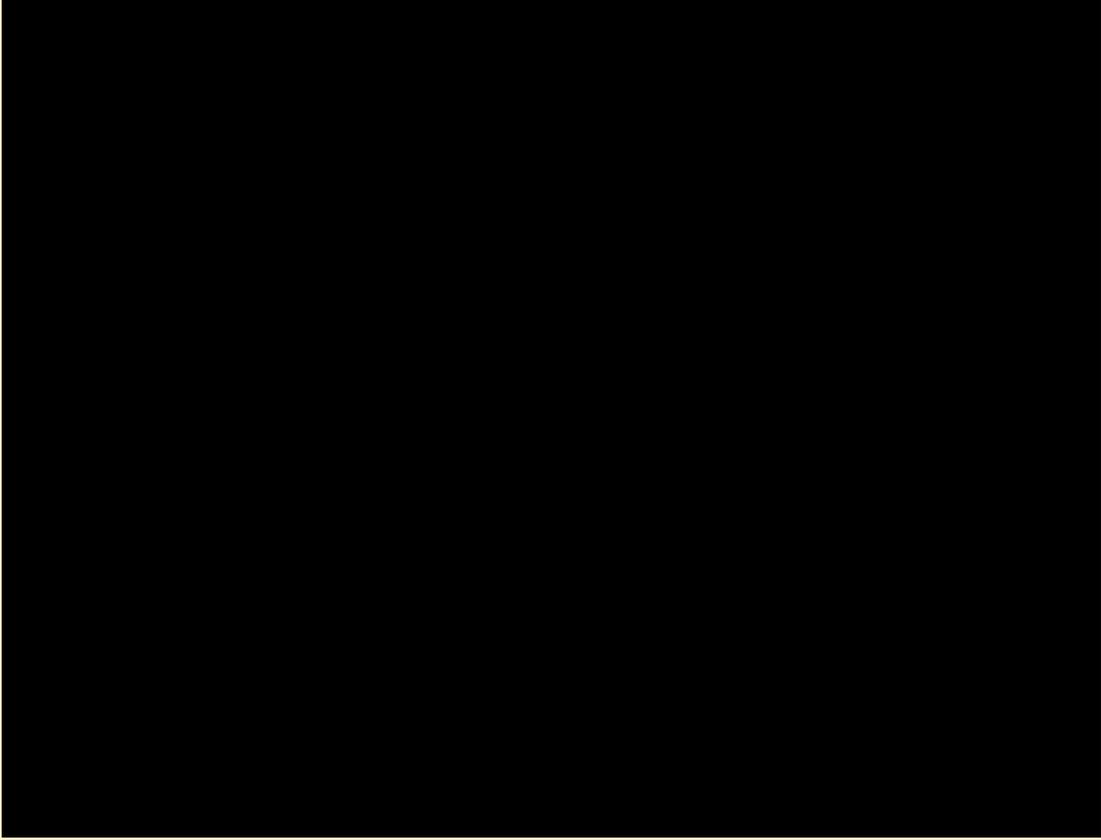
It could be an ambition of mine to earn one – when Lorna was my age she wouldn’t have seemed a likely subject for the honour. But of course if I do I won’t be around to read it. And I’m very unlikely ever to have the dedication to one subject that Lorna had to nuclear history.

Her death has been described, conventionally and predictably, as sad, but I’m not so sure.

Which of us wouldn’t want to get to 98 still in possession of all our mental faculties and then fade out, gently but rapidly, with friends and family around us?

If I live up to Lorna in no other way, I’d like to emulate her in that.

- [Lorna Arnold website](#)
- [Her books](#)



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Brrmm, brrmm

Two funny things happened at the Malaysian Grand Prix this weekend. Well, not so much at the Sepang circuit itself as in my home.

First, I read an article in the race build-up that caught and held my interest. Which was roughly the first time I've been interested in Formula One since Jochen Rindt killed my early enthusiasm by dying at Monza in 1970.

It concerned the fact, hitherto unguessed by me, that F1 drivers have to watch their weight like jockeys.

Apparently they stood to lose as much as 4kg (more than half a stone) during the race through dehydration. Which would at least improve their cars' performance, if not their own.

For it seems every 10kg of extra weight can slow the cars by up to three tenths of a second per lap, which is a lot in F1 terms. It could mean quite an advantage for Felipe Massa (63kg), or even Lewis Hamilton (68kg), over Adrian Sutil (80kg).

The second funny thing was when I turned on my radio – and didn't immediately flip channels away from the ghastly screeching.

It's hilarious – and shows the childishness of the whole business – that this season's big controversy so far has

been about the noise made by the new, slightly greener cars. Or rather the relative lack of it.

There have been threats by track owners to sue the sport's governing body over the lack of va-va-vroom. Bernie Ecclestone, the Svengali of F1, has weighed in too, saying the sport "needs to be a bit louder".

For goodness sake. If all they want is a testosterone-pumping racket, they should hire a heavy metal band. Or perhaps bring back Murray Walker to make brrrrmm-brrrrmm noises over the loudspeaker system.

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