

Lorna Arnold - obituary

Lorna Arnold was a public servant who surmounted sex discrimination and became the historian of Britain's nuclear project



Lorna Arnold

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Lorna Arnold, who has died aged 98, was the first girl in her village to win a scholarship to secondary school and the first in that school to win a scholarship to university; she went on to prove herself a superb public servant and later became the official historian of Britain's nuclear project, producing landmark studies of British nuclear testing, the Windscale disaster and the British H-bomb project.

Despite her evident talents, however, she endured years of struggle in post-war London, during which time she was reduced to working in the production line in a biscuit factory. Her memoir *My Short Century*, published last year, charted a life spent at the centre of some of the most historic events of the past 100 years — but also chronicled the life of one of the many thousands of women denied greater eminence because of their sex.

The eldest of five children, she was born Lorna Rainbow on December 7 1915 while her father was in

Flanders with the Royal Naval Armoured Car Division. Towards the end of the war he was transferred to the newly-created Royal Naval Air Service and posted to an air station at Howden in East Yorkshire. After demobilisation he enrolled in a government training scheme as a farm student, and in 1921 the family moved to a farm near Guildford. One Sunday, Lorna left on her plate all the meat she had been given and became a vegetarian — she had worked out that a beloved cow, whom her parents claimed had been sold because she was getting old and did not give much milk, had probably not found a new home on another farm.

From Guildford County School for Girls, Lorna was offered scholarships to read English by both Reading University and Bedford College, London. Not everyone was impressed. “Oh, how very nice for you, Mrs Rainbow,” a neighbour remarked to her mother. “Thank goodness none of my girls will ever have to do that kind of thing!”

She decided on Bedford, and after graduation enrolled at a teacher training college in Cambridge, where she attended lectures by FR Leavis and sent him an essay she had written about AE Housman’s A Shropshire Lad. In his lecture the week after, Leavis read the essay aloud, and asked the “chap” who had written it to come to see him later. “I should have been too shy, except that I could not let pass the assumption that I was a chap,” Lorna recalled. As a result she became the only female member of the small circle of Leavis disciples who met for weekly discussions.

After qualifying she found a job teaching English and Latin at a school in Belper, but her pupils were a long way from being the well-mannered girls of the private school where she had done her practice teaching. When war broke out, evacuees from Southsea were added to classes that were already overcrowded, and Lorna began to have fainting fits.

Diagnosed with heart problems, she resigned her teaching post and returned to the family farm. Subsequently she secured a clerical job in the Cambridge offices of the Ministry of Pensions, and had not been there long when she received a telegram instructing her to report to the War Office.

She was taken on as a junior administrative assistant in the Army Council Secretariat, and within two years her staff included three majors . Shortly after D-Day, the Foreign Office asked her to transfer to a small unit working on the planning for the occupation of Germany when the war was over.

My Short Century

Memoirs of an accidental nuclear historian

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Lorna Arnold

Foreword by Brian Cathcart

In June 1945 Lorna flew into Berlin as part of the team setting up a new British Control Commission: “There was this sickly smell everywhere: the smell of unburied bodies, some underground and even some just left out in the open.” Nowhere seemed safe, and she slept with a gun under her pillow. Russian soldiers had not yet pulled back into their own zone and “were all over the city, roaring up and down the streets, shouting drunken songs, and firing into the air. Looting was common... We felt completely unprotected.”

Assigned to the central secretariat of the Allied Control Council — the four-power government of the

whole of Germany – she served as UK secretary to the economic directorate, engaged in constant, difficult negotiations over food supplies, transport, industry and labour.

Then, in 1946, she joined a delegation to the United States to discuss new arrangements for financing the British Zone of control and was asked to remain on the British Embassy staff in Washington, where she worked alongside Donald Maclean. “He had the world at his feet: he was senior, youngish, handsome, and popular, with a delightful wife,” she recalled. “Strangely, whenever I saw him around the Embassy, I wondered why he always seemed such a bundle of nerves.” It was only after his defection to the Soviet Union in 1951 that she realised this must have been due to the strain of living a double life.

In 1949, with men “reclaiming their traditional places in government departments [after war service]... and women expected to return to their former roles”, she resigned. She found a position as general secretary of the Family Planning Association, but the job proved short-lived. In 1949 she married Robert Arnold, an American choirmaster whom she had met in Washington and who had come to London to study at the Royal College of Music. In 1950 she had the first of two sons and gave up her job.

For a time they lived on Cheyne Walk in Chelsea, London, where Arnold maintained a National Trust collection of musical instruments. But from early on she realised that, although her husband had always longed for a home and family, his homosexuality was pulling him in a different direction. In 1953, shortly after she herself had had to undergo a traumatic hysterectomy, she received a letter from her husband saying that he was on a ship back to America: “For all practical purposes, he was gone, leaving me a single parent, wholly responsible for my family, and without any income.”

She took a job on the packing line in a biscuit factory and from there graduated to badly paid clerical jobs. Then, in 1959, a chance meeting with a civil servant she had known in Berlin led to her being invited to work in the new health and safety branch of the United Kingdom Atomic Energy Authority, followed in 1967 by a job managing the AEA’s records and supporting the authority’s official historian, Margaret Gowing.

Together they produced *Independence and Deterrence: Britain and Atomic Energy 1945–1952* (1974), a two-volume study to which Lorna contributed six chapters. When Margaret Gowing went part-time as her academic career blossomed, Lorna Arnold emerged as a historian in her own right. *A Very Special Relationship: British Atomic Weapon Trials in Australia* (1987), published at a time when the atomic tests were a hot issue, provided an accurate and fair-minded account which counterbalanced sensationalist reporting in the Australian press. This was followed by *Windscale 1957: Anatomy of a Nuclear Accident* (1992) and *Britain and the H-Bomb* (2001), published when she was 85.

Lorna Arnold's books were well-received on both sides of the nuclear debate because she had concentrated on description and explanation and tried to avoid taking sides. In fact, as she admitted in her memoir, she was strongly opposed both to nuclear weapons and to the civil use of nuclear power.

Lorna Arnold was appointed OBE in 1976, and was elected a fellow of the Institute of Physics — a rare accolade for a non-scientist.

She is survived by her two sons.

Lorna Arnold, born December 7 1915, died March 25 2014

This week on The Deadline, Harry de Quetteville talks about the deep immersion in all things Syrian of the foreign correspondent Patrick Seale. And among Moustache news, he tells the amazing tale of Miloslav Bitton, who ran escape lines out of wartime Czechoslovakia and himself escaped to become an RAF fighter pilot.

Christopher Howse and Bernadette McNulty remember the menacing but nuanced screen presence of Bob Hoskins and compare him with that other gritty English tough guy, Michael Elphick, in film and in real life.

Christopher Howse has your letters, with a campaign by Lethal Bizzle for people with multiple sclerosis, and a complaint about the absence from the Proms of Palestrina, Monteverdi, Corelli and Purcell. Then there's a strange claim that James Joyce refused to be Irish.

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