



NOT Crossroads — it's Greenham Common

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Sash visits Greenham

How is it that an organization like the Black Sash, does not bring the nuclear issue into its protests, asked a group of women huddled round a log fire on Greenham common?

I went there a week before Christmas, having telephoned the CND to find out how to get there — catch the Newbury train and the bus to Basingstoke. I didn't know where to get off, but I needn't have worried because onto the bus climbed four tough young women in anoraks and heavy boots who quarrelled with the driver and raucously let the whole bus know what they thought of the police, and all about their court appearance that day (they had been charged arising out of the pulling down of the Greenham security fence). I timidly asked them to tell me when to get off. They were then very nice to me but I got dirty looks from the rest of the passengers.

Arriving at the camp at the main gate I was amazed to see a replica of Crossroads — exactly the same mounds of plastic criss-crossed with ropes. Two barbed wire fences surrounded the missile base, and policemen with dogs patrolled inside the area, greeting me in polite British fashion as I walked a short distance around the perimeter. Within a couple of hundred metres of the base, along the edge of the common, there are gracious homesteads and people on horseback, who may or may not find both missile station and women's camp an eyesore — one wouldn't know, as riders seem to learn disdain together with keeping their heels down and elbows in.

I wandered awkwardly around the camp, feeling very silly in my ordinary tourist clothes, among those hardy women in their camping outfits. I shouldn't have, for I was warmly received when I asked if I might listen in on a meeting that was in progress around a small and thoroughly inadequate fire — and everyone knew about the Black Sash.

It was a few days after the fence-breaking episode and the women were discussing its effects on their image in the minds of the general public. One woman, a doctor who seemed vaguely in control of the meeting, regretted having been impatient with women who had been critical of this violent episode. She said, 'I should have understood that they were where I was at, four months ago, and I should have taken the trouble to explain how we progressed to this point.' (Was she suggesting, I thought, that those who now opted for violence were somehow in advance of those who didn't? I was certainly too shy to ask.) Another warned against seeking martyrdom, having caught herself rather liking the idea of being the first women shot while storming the fence, which she realised was altogether irresponsible.

I felt quite at home when one woman spoke at length about her experiences in a peace camp in America, which didn't seem relevant to anything in particular. A few people had plenty to say about the British police, not that I could begin to comprehend what on earth they were complaining about. There were some wayout ideas for future demonstrations, and amid all the irrelevancies, as at any Sash meeting, the women were trying to think what sensible strategies they could adopt to reach out to ordinary women all over England: but it was getting very cold and they decided to adjourn to a meeting two days hence in a Newbury hall. I had no doubt that they, like us over all the years, would work out sensible ways of keeping their movement viable.

After the meeting I spoke to the half dozen women who remained by the fire. It was they who wanted to know about South African women and their attitude to the nuclear threat. I explained that the Black Sash were certainly concerned and that a paper on Koeberg had been presented to our last conference, together with a long dissertation from a member of the German peace move-

ment, but that the pass laws, relocation and detention engaged all our time and energy. This they readily understood. Didn't I think, though, that we might consider establishing some sort of contact with them and with the CND? I promised to suggest this when I got home.

I was amazed all six of them supported the ANC's military programme and they were equally amazed that I didn't. They didn't see how else apartheid could be got rid of. I said I didn't see how we could avoid the atom bomb if we didn't stop thinking in terms of violent solutions to problems. They said, yes, that may also be true.

I asked if the Greenham women, or CND, had contact with similar women in Russia. They said they had support from the official Russian peace movement but said 'the real peace workers' were savagely treated there and it was these people they tried to reach. One woman took out a Christmas card for a Turkish peace campaigner who was in prison, and we all signed it.

Even these few women represented a wide cross section. There was one ordinary housewife (so she described herself), dressed in red ski clothes, who had left her husband to look after the children while she spent a week at the camp. She said many women did this, some time or other during the year. Another young woman, wearing an awful black doek right down over her eyebrows, seemed to live permanently in peace camps all over Europe. There were a few students together with women in full-time jobs who came intermittently to the camp for a couple of days at a time.

What fascinated me was that they said the movement was largely unstructured. There are no committees or chairmen or leaders or spokesmen, and for two years the camp has kept going in this loose and ad hoc way. As they have a telephoning network, I assume there must be a consistent hard core of organizers somewhere along the line but there are certainly no structures at the camps. I saw a tent stocked with tinned foods and utensils and asked who organized that. Nobody, apparently. A group of people arrived one day, erected the tent as a donation and went away. This sort of thing happens all the time, they said. Donations of food pour into the camp, much more than the people there can consume, and they give away large quantities to welfare agencies. There are no shifts or duties. The women tidy the camp and wash up as the need arises or whenever they feel like it. There's not much else to do, they explained, apart from attending meetings. There is a tap at the main gate, but the women I spoke to said they thought the other camps had to transport their water, relying on ad hoc help with combis, cars or trucks. There are no lavatories, only spades for digging holes in the ground. It hadn't rained for some time but there was mud everywhere.

I imagine the numbers of women at Greenham were at their lowest during the Christmas period. Nevertheless there were 30 women at the main gate camp and I presumed a similar number at the five or six camps around the fence. The missile base is enormous and the camps are miles apart.

I nearly died of cold although the weather was 'mild', and was exceedingly sorry for myself during an hour-long wait for the Basingstoke bus back to Newbury. I should have hated to spend even one night there.

The next day I read the following in the Diary section of *The Times*, or *The Guardian*, I forget which:

"Those of you in the habit of shopping in Tesco's just make sure you scrub behind the ears tonight and put on a fresh pair of knickers in the morning. The store management is getting a little choosy about its customers."

This is especially true of the Newbury Branch of Tesco's, which has decided it will not serve anyone who looks as though they might have emanated from the Greenham Common Womens' Camp. Unofficially, this is because Tesco's perceives them to be smelly. Officially, it is out of consideration for the sensibilities of the good folk of Berkshire.

'It's due to the customers' reactions to the women being in the store, I'm afraid' said a Tesco spokesperson."

On the tube that same day I sat opposite two Sloane Rangers who told the whole carriage about their afternoon's shopping and that they were on their way to the ballet and that they might arrive at Covent Garden in time to get something to eat first. Their conversation was louder but considerably less interesting than that of the Greenham women on the Basingstoke bus. I was reminded of my favourite Orwell paragraph, written in his diary just before he died:

'Curious effect, here in the sanatorium, on Easter Sunday, when the people in this (the most expensive) block of "chalets" mostly, have visitors, of hearing large numbers of upper-class English voices. I have been almost out of the sound of them for two years, hearing them at most one or two at a time, my ears growing more and more used to working-class or lower-middle-class Scottish voices. In the hospital at Hairmyres, for instance, I literally never heard a "cultivated" accent except when I had a visitor. It is as though I were hearing these voices for the first time. And what voices! A sort of over-fedness, a fatuous self-confidence, a constant bah-bahing of laughter about nothing, above all a sort of heaviness and richness combined with a fundamental ill-will — people who, one instinctively feels, without even being able to see them, are the enemies of anything intelligent or sensitive or beautiful. No wonder everyone hates us so.'

Certainly I preferred the Greenham women. They may or may not smell, some of them; and others may be aggressive, but as far as showing off is concerned, the Sloane Rangers have them beat. Never mind their lunatic fringe, the Greenham women are mostly lively and friendly and have made a vital contribution to all our lives by compelling attention to the nuclear nightmare.

Like the Black Sash and the United Democratic Front, the peace movement has to hold together vastly disparate people. Among Christian pacifists there are those who are anti-West and those who are pro-West, some who 'would rather be red than dead,' and some who would 'rather be red than kill,' others who believe in Europe building up its defences but not with nuclear weapons, and some, among the uni-lateralists, who are multi-lateralist but believe there has been so much overkill in the West that we could easily make a gesture towards peace and disarmament without weakening ourselves.

A recent article in *Newsweek* (Peaceniks in Disarray, January 1984) pointed out, 'the broad base that was once a major strength is now a disabling liability.' This is a challenge we better succeed in meeting, all of us.