

BONARJEE, DOROTHY NOEL ('Dorf') (1894 - 1983), poet and lawyer

Name: Dorothy Noel Bonarjee
Date of birth: 1894
Date of death: 1983
Spouse: Paul Surtel
Child: Denis Surtel
Child: Claire Aruna Surtel
Parent: Janet Bonarjee (née Sirkar)
Parent: Debendranath Bonarjee
Gender: Female
Occupation: poet and lawyer
Area of activity: Poetry; Law
Author: Beth R. Jenkins

Dorothy Bonarjee was born in Bareilly, India, in 1894, the middle child of Debendranath Bonarjee, journalist and lawyer, and Janet Bonarjee (née Sirkar). The family moved to Dulwich, south London, in 1904 when her father entered Lincoln's Inn. Bonarjee came from a Bengali Brahmin family, who boasted a long-tradition of lawyers. Her mother was the honorary secretary of the Indian Women's Education Association in London, and both parents were strong advocates of education for Indian girls. When her parents returned to India in 1910, the children stayed in England under the guardianship of an Irish barrister.

In 1912, Bonarjee enrolled at the University College of Wales, Aberystwyth, along with her elder brother, Bertie Kay Bonarjee. At Aberystwyth Bonarjee took an active role in student life: she was Treasurer of the Literary and Debating Society, and a member of the editorial board for the student magazine, *The Dragon*, in which she published several poems. In 1914, Bonarjee gained significant acclaim amongst her peers when she won the bardic chair at the college eisteddfod for her poem on **Owain Lawgoch**. Writing under the pseudonym 'Shita', Bonarjee received 'a deafening ovation' when she revealed herself as the author (*The Cambrian Daily Leader*, 2 March 1914). She also reportedly came close to winning the competition the previous year. Her success received significant publicity in the local and national press. Her father, who gave an impromptu speech at the ceremony in response to demands from the students, reportedly said: 'if India had given birth to a poet, Wales had educated her, and had given her an opportunity to develop her poetic instincts' (*The Cambrian News*, 6 March 1914).

Bonarjee was also a regular contributor to *The Welsh Outlook*. Her published poems include 'Noon' (July 1914); 'The Grave in the Woodland' (December 1914); 'Afterwards' (January 1915); 'London' (January 1916); 'Suburban Houses' (October 1917); 'To Diana', 'Morning' and 'Immensity' (July 1919); and 'Renunciation' and 'Menelaus Lamenting' (November 1919).

Following her graduation from the University of Wales in 1916 with a BA in French, Bonarjee attended University College London. There she became the first woman to gain an internal law degree from the Faculty of Laws in 1917 (as opposed to the external LLB). This was a significant achievement because women could not formally practise law until the Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act in 1919.

Bonarjee was also a supporter of women's suffrage, and her younger brother, Neil, later wrote that she 'mixed in minor artistic and literary circles considered "advanced" for the period' (Bonarjee, *Under Two Masters*, pp.58-9). In 1919 she signed the Indian Women's Franchise Address along with mother. During the same year, she also spoke at a meeting of the British Dominions' Women Citizens' Union (Indian Section), an international feminist organisation which promoted women's suffrage across the British Empire.

Dorothy Bonarjee married a French artist, Paul Surtel (1893-1985), in 1921. They had one son, Denis, who died in infancy, and a daughter, Claire Aruna Surtel. The couple divorced in 1936, and Bonarjee lived the remainder of her life in the south of France until her death in 1983.

Author

Beth R. Jenkins

Sources

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N. B. Bonarjee, *Under two masters* (London 1970)

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The Dragon, March 1914; December 1914; May 1915; November 1915

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Andrew Whitehead, 'Dorf Bonarjee', 6/5/2012

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Further reading

University College London: 100 years of women in law

BBC News: 'She is beautiful but she is Indian': The student who became a Welsh bard at 19

Wikipedia Article: Dorothy Bonarjee

Images

Wikipedia: Dorothy Bonarjee with her son Denis - about 1922

Sound and Film

BBC World Service: The Hindu bard

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