

Darsie Gillie

Born 1903. Foreign correspondent and broadcaster.

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This life story was compiled in 2021 from material archived, with acknowledgement and thanks, from internet sources.

1. Early Career

The following chapter was archived in 2021, with acknowledgement and thanks, from the obituary of Darsie Gillie by Denis Brogan, published in the Guardian of February 29th 1972.

Darsie Rutherford Gillie was one of the most distinguished servants the Guardian has ever had.

He was born in Eastbourne but he was of purely Scottish ancestry on both sides; in spite of his education at Rugby and Balliol, he never became really English, although he felt himself both Scottish and British. Much more than half his adult life was spent abroad, and he was in every sense of the term a good European. He was a remarkable linguist, and one of the few British journalists who spoke Polish. His French and German were admirable.

At Balliol he read Modern Greats. When he went down from Oxford he decided not only to become a journalist, but to become a journalist in Poland.

There was something characteristic in this choice. Darsie Gillie was a son of the manse. His father was a distinguished Presbyterian minister, a Moderator of the English Presbyterian Church. All his blood kinship was with Scotland. He went to Poland at a time when Poland was the *bête noire* of many of the more 'forward looking' thinkers in England.

He became devoted to the country, to its language and to its tragic history. He made a great many devoted Polish friends, many of whom survive to this day.

2. Warsaw, Berlin and Paris

The following chapter was archived in 2021, with acknowledgement and thanks, from the obituary of Darsie Gillie by Denis Brogan, published in the Guardian of February 29th 1972.

In Warsaw he was the correspondent of the Morning Post and the Baltimore Public Ledger, and it was the Morning Post that transferred him to Berlin. He saw the last agonies of the Weimar Republic, and formed strong views on Germany and the German problem. But (and this again is very characteristic) they were not orthodox views. He detested a great deal in German life and in German attitudes, but, for example, he greatly preferred the Prussians to the Austrians. The Prussians, and by that he did not mean only or mainly Berliners, had real virtues while the Viennese had a large and phony charm.

The Prussian virtues were not those that most appealed to him, but he thought they were real. In a sense the conspiracy of July 20, 1944, against Hitler was a justification of Gillie's respect for Prussian virtues as the welcome given to the Fuhrer by the Viennese in 1938 was some justification of his opinion of the Viennese.

In 1935 the Morning Post transferred him to Paris and he very quickly made his mark there. When the Morning Post died, he went for a short time to the Times, and then became the Paris correspondent of the Glasgow Herald. On the outbreak of war he joined the RAF and served as liaison officer until, in May, 1940, he was suddenly called to London and made head of the French service of the BBC.

3. Wartime Head of the BBC French Service

The following chapter was archived in 2021, with acknowledgement and thanks, from the obituary of Darsie Gillie by Denis Brogan, published in the Guardian of February 29th 1972.

Historically speaking, this was his most important job. It is the opinion of a great many people that the French service of the BBC was the most successful propaganda effort of the war. It became, and has to some extent remained, a great French institution. And it owed an immense amount to its chief.

For this job, Darsie Gillie was supremely well fitted. It was not his admirable knowledge of French and of the French that was his main qualification. It was his character and his judgement. He was entirely without the ordinary ambitions of many worthy colleagues. He had no intention of staying in the BBC after the war, no particular appetite for decorations. He simply had a job to do.

He had in fact three jobs to do. He had to represent the policy of the Government to France, and that was often extremely difficult. He had to criticise the Vichy Government without seeming censorious or smug, and he was able to do this admirably because he could see in the summer of 1940, when few could, that there was a case for French withdrawal from the war; there was even a case for Pierre Laval. Because he understood how many men of good faith but little hope rallied to Petain and tolerated or even supported Laval, the BBC service came to be trusted in France.

He had to fight to get his point of view accepted, and Darsie Gillie's explosions of temper were famous long before the war. Six foot four tall, when he rose to his full height and raised his long arms above his head, he looked like a Hebrew prophet denouncing sinners. These explosions of temper could be awkward, irritating, maddening, but if one listened to what he said rather than to how he said it, one soon learned that his judgment was cool, objective, and highly self-critical.

This quality of entire independence and, in the best sense of the term, absence of partisan feeling, stood him in very good stead in dealing with the two other parts of his job as head of the French BBC service. His British team were variegated enough but they were made into a team, for although Darsie Gillie was nothing of an administrator, he was emphatically a leader.

But there were Frenchmen to be dealt with too. And then there was the General himself. There were clashes between the high policy decisions of British propaganda organisations and the wishes and views of the General.



De Gaulle at the microphone.

The following short extract was archived in 2021 from the obituary of Darsie Gillie published in the Times newspaper on March 1st 1972.

Darsie Gillie was a lovable eccentric. Lovable because of his devotion to the children of refugees from Nazi Germany and Franco Spain. Eccentric, or better still, an anarchist, because of his refusal to conform. He was immensely tall; he would sustain an argument - he was always arguing, sometimes vehemently - with a swinging movement of his long arms which would sweep typewriters and other unconsidered trifles to the floor. His mother once asked him what his politics were. "I want to see justice ". he replied. And throughout his life he worked for justice, whether on the staff of the Morning Post writing from Warsaw or Berlin or of The Guardian, writing from Paris.

4. After the War



Ile St.Louis, Paris.

The following chapter was archived in 2021, with acknowledgement and thanks, from the obituary of Darsie Gillie by Denis Brogan, published in the Guardian of February 29th 1972.

As soon as Paris was liberated, Darsie Gillie returned to his attractive apartment on the Quai Bourbon in the Ile Saint-Louis, and as the ex-head of the French service for the BBC, he was now a figure of great importance. He came back as the Manchester Guardian correspondent and his work since 1944 was in the Guardian's columns and, to a much less degree, in those of the Spectator.

The job of reporting France in these first years was extremely difficult. The resignation of General de Gaulle began a time of troubles for the Fourth Republic, and Darsie Gillie was an acute although by no means hyper-critical observer of some of the errors made.

In March 1955 he married his old colleague of the BBC, Cecilia Reeves, who had been since 1947 the delegate of the BBC in Paris and had built up a great position for herself in that capacity. Cecilia Gillie was the only one of the original French team of the BBC (or, as she always called, 'the corporation') who was an old BBC hand, and her services, although formally secondary, were extremely important.



Gillie sold his apartment on the Quai

Bourbon to Marc Chagall (left), and he and his wife bought a late eighteenth century farmhouse in the Loiret which, through the years, they transformed into an attractive and comfortable country house. They developed a local patriotism towards their own village and acquired a wide range of friends in neighbouring villages and in their local county town Courtenay.



Courtenay, in the Loiret.

But although they were deeply plunged into the French life, neither Darsie nor Cecilia became Frenchified. They regarded their adopted country with affection and understanding, but not with that blind admiration which often affects Britons who 'take up' a foreign country and blinds them to its defects.

Their marriage showed that La Rochefoucauld was wrong: there are delicious marriages. Their tastes, appearance, height were complementary. They both became devoted to Italy and, more recently, to Greece.

In recent years a series of illnesses cut down Darsie Gillie's powers of work and worried his closest friends. His death deprives not only the Guardian of one of its ornaments, but France of one of its most understanding and devoted, if critical, friends.

5. Cecilia Gillie

The following obituary by Leonard Miall of Darsie Gillie's wife Cecilia (nee Reeves) was archived in 2021, with acknowledgement and thanks, from the website of the Independent at www.independent.co.uk. It was published on 23rd April 1996.

Cecilia Reeves was a handsome, lively young woman who played a major role in founding the BBC's wartime French Service and later became its long-term Paris Representative.

In the gloomy summer days of 1940 following the collapse of France she devised the idea of getting a sophisticated group of Frenchmen to discuss the events of the day in a light-hearted and witty manner, enlivened by the use of songs and slogans. Derision became one of the most incisive and effective weapons employed by the programme *Les Français parlent aux Français*. Criticism of those who had managed to escape to Britain was deflected by the slogan "I would prefer to see the English in their country than the Germans in ours".

After graduating from Newnham College, Cambridge, she joined the BBC in 1933 as an assistant to Richard Marriott, the Foreign Liaison Officer. The function of this small section was to look after the needs of foreign broadcasters who used BBC facilities to transmit material to their home countries. In 1937 Reeves was particularly concerned with the arrangements for the new European Director of the Columbia Broadcasting System in New York, Edward R. Murrow. His main task then was to arrange educational talks by other people. She and Murrow became close friends.



Ed Murrow.

In March 1938 Ed Murrow flew at short notice to Vienna to cover the Anschluss in what was his first personal reporting assignment. Cecilia Reeves was called to Broadcasting House very early one Sunday morning to arrange the studio facilities for Murrow's uncensored London broadcast completing the story of Hitler's takeover. Murrow came in at 3am directly from the plane, looking shattered, she thought, and terribly fatigued.

She sat riveted throughout his broadcast with its grim account of the sound of smashing glass as Jewish shops were raided and the haunted look on the faces of those long lines of people outside banks and travel agencies desperately trying to get away. When it was finished Murrow asked Reeves whether she was very tired, for he longed to have the chance to talk. They walked back to Murrow's flat, where his wife was sleeping quietly. He poured drinks and the traumas of the past week came tumbling out as she listened. Later she recalled, "I still have a picture of the horror, and of the agony with which he told it."

Early in the war Marriott and Reeves worked in the BBC's Paris office, but in the dark days of June and July 1940 she had become the Senior Talks Assistant in the French Service. She was trying to put together a team of French broadcasters to handle the expansion of the BBC's service made necessary by the Nazis' control of all broadcasting in France.

She consulted Peter Pooley, the creator of Radio Newsreel, who told her that Michel Saint-Denis, the well-known stage director, was in England awaiting repatriation to France. He had been demobilised from the French army and had been offered a British commission, but Cecilia Reeves persuaded him that he could make a more useful contribution through broadcasting. Known thereafter as Jacques Duchesne, he became the leader of a brilliant team.

Reeves had been much impressed by the way CBS mounted three-way discussions between its correspondents in Berlin, Paris and London. She thought the discussion format would suit the French, who were naturally argumentative. And so, in addition to *Les Français parlent aux Français*, the group *Les Trois Amis* was formed. Duchesne's companions were Pierre Maillaud - who had been working as a journalist in London and was passed on to Reeves by the Ministry of Information; he broadcast under the name of Pierre Bourdan - and Jean Oberle, a painter, who was in London as a war correspondent.

Raymond Mortimer, who was responsible for French Broadcasting at the Ministry of Information, wrote subsequently, "Their work, which sprang from a happy collaboration between Frenchmen of very various professions and opinions, is likely to rank as a classic of propaganda in the best sense of the word."

The French News Editor at the BBC in 1940 was Darsie Gillie, a distinguished foreign correspondent who had been working for the Morning Post in Warsaw at the outbreak of war, and then transferred to Paris as the correspondent of the Manchester Guardian. He had a profound knowledge of Europe and was a man of deep culture and a classical scholar. He left Bush House in 1944 to return to Paris for the Manchester Guardian and in 1955 married Cecilia Reeves, at that time also working in Paris as the BBC's Representative. She was there for altogether 20 years, with a number of different titles, sometimes as the radio assistant to senior members of the BBC Television Service such as Robin Scott and Noble Wilson. She and Darsie Gillie were held in very high esteem by the French, and were staunch Francophiles.

They retired to St Mirabeau in Vaucluse, where Cecilia compiled a detailed history of the BBC's French Service in wartime. Alas, it failed to find a publisher but it is kept as a valuable source for researchers at the BBC's Written Archives Centre at Caversham. Darsie Gillie died in 1972. He had befriended and helped to educate a young Pole, Stanislaw (Stash) Pruszyński, the son of a writer he had met in London during the war. When Cecilia Gillie's health began to fail Pruszyński and his wife kindly invited her to live in their house in Warsaw. She suffered a serious stroke on 20 April 1986 which incapacitated her and made communication very difficult. She died 10 years to the day later.

Cecilia Grace Hunt Reeves, broadcasting executive: born Sheppey, Kent 18 August 1907; joined Foreign Liaison Department, BBC 1933, Paris Office 1939, Senior Talks Assistant, French Service 1940, Paris Representative 1947-67; married 1955 Darsie Gillie (died 1972); died Warsaw 20 April 1996.

6. The Death of Jean Cocteau

As a postscript, the following example of Darsie Gillie's journalism was archived in 2021, with acknowledgement and thanks, from the website theguardian.com. It was published in the Guardian on 12th October 1963. The photos, which have been added, are of Jean Cocteau, Edith Piaf and of one of Cocteau's paintings.

Jean Cocteau, writer, film producer, and painter, died in his home at Milly, near Paris, today aged 73. The death of Cocteau at one o'clock today seems to have been directly linked with that of Edith Piaf, the popular singer, who died at seven in the morning in a Paris nursing home. A representative of the Paris State Radio, who was also a friend of Jean Cocteau, rang him up to ask him if he felt well enough to take part in the commemoration of Edith Piaf's death in on the air.

M. Cocteau was convalescing after a severe heart attack earlier in the summer, but had resumed working and was, in fact, this morning engaged on drafting a new stage set for "Pelléas and Mélisande."

Jean Cocteau replied that he had had an extremely bad feverish night and had a temperature. He had felt last night that his unease was due to the death of some near and dear friend. Now he knew this was Edith Piaf. He then added that he felt the same stifling sensation as when he had his original heart attack. A few minutes later he was dead.

Although he was born in 1889, Jean Cocteau never ceased to strike the amazed public as a young writer. There were several reasons for this – he had the all-round quality of versatility more common to the writer trying his hand everywhere than to the established man.

His friendships covered the whole artistic world of France – and of much of the world – and often reverberated into the newspapers. He explored the ballet, conquered the films and kept up a stream of freshness (though not always a refreshing stream) in the modern French theatre.



He was not, on the whole, a dramatist whose work was likely to last or was even designed to last. Where it typified the hopes and fears of his times it did so by brilliance rather than by depth. The classical tradition in the French theatre fascinated him, as it has done writers from one generation to another, so in his list of works are adaptations of an Antigone, an Oedipus, and an Orpheus.

He distributed his talents almost equally between the stage and the screen in his later years, and sometimes it appeared that if he had concentrated them both in form and in subject his mark would have been a firmer one.

But his humour was sharp enough, his use of a dream-world solid enough to ensure that his plays and films would never be dull even when they were difficult.



Jean Cocteau. Couleurs d'Europe.
