
CONRAD DONALD im THURN (BL30/BLC2)

by Hilary Richardson

In the peaceful churchyard of the picturesque village of Butleigh, Somerset can be found a grave with Brooking family connections. The double grave has but one person buried in it, and the inscription on the gravestone reads:

*In memory of Conrad Donald im Thurn 1883-1930
I am the way, the truth, and the life.
I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly.*

Recently I received a query through Genes Reunited, from Robert Senior, who runs the website for Butleigh village and who was researching people with Butleigh connections. He asked, "Why is this man buried in Butleigh?" I had absolutely no idea.

Conrad Donald im Thurn, known as Donald, was born in 1883, in Dulwich, Surrey. The curious Old German name is deceptive. The im Thurns were, like many assimilated European families, more English than the English. The original family seat was at Schaffhausen in Switzerland, but Donald's grandfather Johann Conrad im Thurn had emigrated to London in the mid-1800s, and in 1868 established the firm of Messrs. J. C. im Thurn & Co., merchant bankers with business in Germany and Argentina. Donald himself had been sent to Radley, where he was reputed to be an expert cricket-player. His uncle, Sir Everard im Thurn, had been an explorer and a Governor of Fiji, and his brother John im Thurn was a successful sailor who got a Mediterranean command and became a Vice-Admiral. But I could find no Somerset connections in the im Thurn family.

Donald im Thurn's wife was Ysabel Anita Brooking of London (BL29/BLC1), the third child of George Brooking (BL7) and Victoria Bokenham (see my article in the Journal, v. 12 no. 3, Dec. 2006, p. 110-114). They met because Donald's sisters attended the same boarding school in Brighton as Ysabel and her sisters, who sometimes visited the im Thurn family during school breaks. At the age of 23, Ysabel and Donald were married in 1906 (Kensington, Jun Q).

At the outbreak of World War I, Donald's rather prosaic career path took an unexpectedly interesting turn. He served with MI5, and got into this job quite by accident. Before the war he worked in an estate agency in Hampshire. Bad health prevented him from signing on for active military service. In August 1914 he was leading a quiet family life in Bishops Waltham. His wife and children were at the seaside, in Boscombe. One Sunday, according to Ysabel's possibly romanticized account of his entry into the secret service, as he was driving back from Boscombe, he saw a motorcyclist by the side of the road, who had been floored by one of the anti-motorist devices still common at the time, a wire stretched from tree trunk to tree trunk. The motorcyclist turned out to be a military dispatch rider. Im Thurn left him to an ambulance, and himself carried the despatches to their destination, the GOC for Southern Command. That officer, impressed by his enterprise, noted his name, and in due course im Thurn was asked to undertake a dangerous mission carrying despatches to Belgium. From this, a move to MI5 was, in the amateurish way that Intelligence recruited people a century ago, a natural step.

It was Ysabel's younger sister Lilian Brooking, BL35/BLF1, who provided the Somerset connection. In 1910 Lilian appeared on the amateur stage at London's Royal Court Theatre in the play "*An American Citizen*". One of her fellow thespians was W. F. Dickinson, whose family had owned the estate of Kingweston, Somerset (very near Butleigh) since 1745. Lilian became a close friend of the family, and met her future husband, Hugh Bryan Clark, on one of her visits to the Dickinsons'. Hugh lived nearby in Street, Somerset, where the family had a shoe business, C & J Clark's. In World War I Hugh served in Motor Transport on the Western Front and was awarded the Military Cross. Lilian Brooking, a Censorship Officer in the war, was married to Hugh Clark at the British Embassy in Paris on May 9th 1917. After the war, Hugh returned to work in the family business, and the couple lived in the Old Vicarage, Butleigh (also called Butleigh House). Kelly's *Directory of Somerset* places them in Butleigh from 1923 to 1935, and Hugh was a President of the Butleigh Branch of the British Legion. It was mostly in Butleigh that their children grew up: Victoria and Hugh Brooking Clark. Known as "Brook", the latter was the husband of Rita Brooking Clark, a Brooking Society member until she passed away in 2004.

The im Thurn family was now living at 28, Eaton Terrace, London SW1. Their son John later worked for B.P., and daughter Ursula, who became a doctor, married John Hamilton-Paterson, also a doctor. (One of Ursula's children is well-known writer James Hamilton-Paterson.) But it was in Butleigh that the im Thurns and the Clarks would get together in the post-war period. Photos of Butleigh depict it as a charming English village, and my surmise is that Donald mentioned to his family that some day he would like to be buried in such a place, and his wishes were followed. The double grave probably indicates that Ysabel had expressed a similar wish. But by the time Ysabel died 28 years later, in 1958, the Clarks no longer lived in Butleigh, and she'd changed her mind about where she wanted to be buried.

Donald im Thurn had enjoyed his time in MI5 during the war. He was a brave and patriotic Englishman. The adventurous life, in the country's cause, appealed to him, and there can be little doubt that when the war ended and he returned to private life, he missed the sense of belonging to an obscure but important group of patriot gentlemen. He turned to business in London, and became involved in a variety of companies run by Russian émigrés, including the London Steamship and Trading Company, of which he was Director. While working in St. Mary Axe in the City, he still maintained his contacts with MI5, SIS and Naval Intelligence, as well as with newspaper proprietors and leaders of the Conservative Party. And he was an Englishman among the White Russians who shared their hatred of Bolshevism, and, by extension, Socialism. But in the 1923 election the Conservatives, led by Stanley Baldwin, lost their majority, and when they also lost a vote of confidence in the House in January 1924, King George V called on Ramsay MacDonald to form a minority Labour government, the first one in the United Kingdom's history. The U.K. had already recognised the Soviet Union, and MacDonald informed Parliament in February 1924 that soon a treaty would be negotiated with the Soviet Union. This announcement would have been anathema to im Thurn and his friends.

In October 1924 Donald im Thurn was involved in an intelligence coup of greater magnitude than anything he had ever handled for MI5. It had to do with the Zinoviev letter.

On October 8th 1924, the fragile Labour Government fell, and an election became certain. That

same day, Donald im Thurn kept a business appointment with a man, identified only as “X” in his diary, who happened to be in close touch with British Communist circles. At the end of their business this man told him of the receipt by the British Communist Party of a letter from Grigory Zinoviev, President of the Third International in the Soviet Union. The story continues with im Thurn’s own testimony, read to the House of Commons and recorded in *Hansard* on March 19th 1928:

From his description of the contents of this letter I saw at once that the matter was serious, and in view of the incitements to sedition contained in it, I asked him if he could obtain for me the complete text of it. He said ‘Yes’ and gave me the complete text at approximately 9:30 a.m. on the following day, 9 October.

On reading the letter I was very indignant to find that at the time when the Labour Government was proposing to lend good British money to Moscow, as part of a treaty which they had actually negotiated, Moscow was at that moment engaged in fomenting sedition and revolution here. I was particularly incensed by their plans for conducting subversive propaganda in the Navy and the Army.

I thereupon decided to do two things: (1) to bring the facts to the notice of the Government department mainly concerned, which I did; and (2) to communicate this information to the electorate of this country through the Press....I handed my copy of the letter not to the Daily Mail direct, but to a trusted City friend whom I knew to be in close touch with that newspaper, and requested him to arrange for publication. I would certainly do again, in similar circumstances, what I did then, and I am only too glad to think that I have been instrumental in placing the electorate in possession of the whole facts before they supported a policy of lending many millions of the taxpayers’ money to a country which was, at that very moment, fomenting sedition in this country.

I would add that at no time did I obtain any information whatsoever with regard to the letter and its contents from any official source, and that from first to last I was solely responsible for obtaining the text of the letter and securing its subsequent publication in the Daily Mail. At no stage in these transactions did I receive any assistance from anyone employed in any capacity in any Government Department. I need hardly say that my action in this matter was dictated solely by patriotic motives and that at no time did I receive any payment or any other reward therefor.

Signed: Conrad Donald im Thurn

The publication of the letter four days before the election had the expected consequences. The downfall of MacDonald and his first Labour Government and the landslide majority of Stanley Baldwin on October 29th 1924 were caused in large part by the perception of a high percentage of the electorate that only the Conservatives could save the country from a Communist plot. A longer lasting result of the Zinoviev letter was that it hardened British attitudes towards the Soviet Union, and, it could also be argued, turned the government’s attention away from events that were unfolding in Germany, events which would eventually lead to World War II.

Years later, the letter was finally proved to be a hoax. It had been fabricated by two White Russian exiles living in Berlin, who had had it leaked to im Thurn because of his known hatred for Bolshevism, plus his MI5 and Conservative Party connections. Their plan worked extremely well.

Im Thurn, however, had at no time any doubts about the authenticity of the document. He was sure that he was a man who had saved his country, and he believed this until the end of his life. He died not long after, at the age of only 47, on March 15th 1930. One of the more lurid tales of the time was that he had been poisoned by Bolshevik agents. The truth was that he had never been an outstandingly fit man, and in March 1929 he had fallen seriously ill. The doctors never seemed certain what was wrong, but within a year he was dead. Robert Senior reports that his death certificate gives his cause of death as a. Pneumonia, b. Lymphadenoma. His daughter, who was with him when he died and was a medical student at the time, later diagnosed it as Hodgkin's Disease. Unfortunately the radiography treatment that might have cured him (had he been diagnosed) was only begun in 1932.

Mystery pursued him to the end. On March 21st 1930, he was buried in Butleigh, Somerset. His house in Eaton Terrace was empty, and that night it was broken into, by people who searched only his desk and clothing. They took nothing of value, and if they wanted information on the Zinoviev letter, they were almost certainly disappointed. Im Thurn had long before made sure that none of his confidential documents were kept at home; everything, including his diary, was at his office in St. Mary Axe.

Three days after Donald im Thurn's death, his wife Ysabel received a letter which was seen as a conscientious recompense for the knighthood he had sought but did not get. It said:

Dear Mrs. im Thurn,

Though I only had the pleasure of meeting your husband once, may I offer you in all sincerity my truest sympathy? He was a man who was always ready to give himself to the service of his country.

I am,

Yours sincerely,

(sgd) Stanley Baldwin.

Im Thurn's 1928 testimony to the House of Commons is quoted from *Hansard* by Lewis Chester, *The Zinoviev Letter* (Heinemann, 1967), a fascinating book which was my main source for this article. Also helpful were Joy Burden, *Winging Westward - a history of the Dickinson family at Kingweston* (Robert Wall Books, 1974), and Lilian Brooking Clark's unpublished family memoir. Many thanks to Robert Senior of Butleigh for the photo of the grave, and much other information about the im Thurns and the Clarks. Also thanks to Andrew Janes for searching Kelly's *Directory of Somerset*. The photo of im Thurn as a secret agent in World War I was published in *The Zinoviev Letter* by permission of his son, Mr. John im Thurn.