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"The Other West": Gandhian Quaker, Marjorie Sykes (1905–1995)

by

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Abstract: Gandhi enjoyed the friendship and support of numerous members of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers), largely because they held similar views on a number of political, ethical and spiritual matters. Interestingly, several of Gandhi's female friends from the west, became Quakers while living in India. Marjorie Sykes, very young British born Cambridge graduate, arrived in India in 1928 to teach. She lived in India for over sixty years, fully endorsing Indian independence by becoming a citizen of her adopted country. Sykes did not have a religious upbringing but eventually became a member of the Religious Society of Friends. Within Quaker circles, she developed an international reputation for her peace work. Upholding Quaker testimonies or principles of simplicity, peace, integrity, community, equality, and stewardship, Sykes found in India, a spiritual home where she could carry out her life's work as an extraordinary teacher, peace activist, grass roots organizer, writer, editor and translator. Respected by Gandhi, Tagore and other leading figures in India, Sykes, as one memorialist wrote "played an important role in interpreting the East and the West to each other".

Introduction

In *Postmodern Gandhi and Other Essays*, Lloyd I. Rudolph and Susanne Hoeber Rudolph (2006: ix.) refer to such thinkers as Leo Tolstoy, John Ruskin, Henry Thoreau and Edwin Arnold as "the other west". They profoundly influenced Gandhi's philosophical and moral development. In turn, Gandhi (who could be thought of as representing "the other east") had a huge influence on the American civil rights movement as well as peace and reconciliation movements globally. In this essay, I focus on one particular western woman, Marjorie Sykes[1]. Among

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[1] Marjorie Sykes is included in a collective biography of western women who supported Gandhi and Indian independence (Sharon M.H. MacDonald, 2010). The other women included Mary Chesley (Tarabehn), Anne Marie Petersen, Esther Faering, Mary Barr (Marybehn), Pearl Madden (Motibehn), Margaret Jones, Mary Ingham (Shantabehn), Mirabehn (Madeleine Slade), Saralabehn (Catherine Heilemann), Muriel Lester and Agatha Harrison.

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western women who were closely attuned to Gandhi's mission, particularly as it pertained to his ideals regarding non-violence, education and village uplift, she holds a prominent position. Sharing much common ground with other like-minded women, she stands out in a number of ways, not least of which is the fact that she lived in India the longest. First arriving in India at the age of twenty-three, she made India her home for over sixty years. Her life spanned the greater part of the twentieth century and she is well remembered by many individuals still alive in India and elsewhere. Sykes lived an extraordinarily productive life as a teacher, social activist, writer, editor and translator. She served as a mentor to both Indians and westerners because of her integrity, intelligence and commitment to the non-violent revolution that Gandhi espoused. Like the other women, Sykes had already chosen a pacifist path and a materially simple lifestyle and had developed a philosophy that had strong similarities to Gandhi's own, long before the two met. Although her engagement in educational programs that Gandhi spearheaded largely occurred in the years after his death, Gandhi had recognized Sykes' abilities and asked her if she would come to Sevagram to teach the principles of his *Nai Talim* (Basic Education) program when she was free from other responsibilities. Sykes made this promise, but by the time she was able to commit herself to this work, Gandhi had died. Thus, the actual personal contact between Sykes and Gandhi was limited. Sykes had good friendships with several women close to Gandhi, and, through her Quaker connections and research into Quaker history in India (Marjorie Sykes, 1997), she knew something of those, like Mary Chesley, a Canadian Quaker friend of Gandhi, who died before an opportunity for the two women to meet presented itself. Sykes has been the subject of a biography and much of the following biographical information has been derived from this source (Martha Dart, 1993).

In this essay, I would argue that, rather than being mere camp followers, even before meeting Gandhi these women had already developed their own political and social ideas, which complemented Gandhi's philosophy and mission. Extending the term "the other west" to include these women, I would suggest that they played a part as interpreters, in bridging the gap in understanding between the east and west.

Early Experiences

Sykes' formative experiences growing up had parallels with other western women friends of Gandhi and some of these will be noted. Marjorie Sykes was born in a small coal-mining village in South Yorkshire in 1905, only fifty miles from the birthplace of Mary Barr, another woman in Gandhi's circle who eventually became one of Marjorie's close Quaker friends and a neighbour in later years. From an early age, Marjorie witnessed, yet was somewhat cushioned from, the debilitating effects of poverty. Her parents, both teachers, had grown up in relatively poor but not impoverished families. Sykes' father, as headmaster of a school in a poor district, did not have a large salary; nevertheless, Marjorie had an emotionally and intellectually rich childhood. Marjorie exhibited early signs of intelligence and creativity. Because of her father's position, the household received sample copies of children's books from publishers, so Marjorie had access to a good library and learned to read at an early age. Her parents and inspiring teachers along the way

would nourish this love of literature. As well as reading and play-acting with her siblings and playmates, Marjorie received an excellent practical education through both her parents. From her mother she learned to cook, bake and sew. Her father loved gardening and the natural world, so Marjorie had her own vegetable plot and, during long Sunday morning walks in fields and forests, her father introduced her to the flora and fauna of the area. Sykes did not have a church-going background. Her later spiritual development was likely nurtured by those Sundays with her father who shared with his children a deep reverence for all growing things. The skills that Sykes learned from her parents in an unforced and organic way would eventually stand her in good stead for the life she would choose in India (Sykes, 1990).

Sykes was only nine years old when World War One erupted. The first direct effect of the war was felt when a beloved teacher, who happened to be German, was forced to leave her position. Because Sykes' father had studied in Dresden in his early years and still had German friends, the family felt even more keenly the divisive and cruel nature of war (Dart, 1993). Sykes, as a young girl, may not have been able to articulate fully her reaction to war's irrational transformation of friends into enemies, but undoubtedly the groundwork was laid for her later pacifism. Sykes' experience also echoed the experiences of other women friends of Gandhi. Catherine Heilemann (Sarala Behn) directly felt the blow of discrimination when her father, though not even German, but of Swiss-German descent, was interned as an enemy alien (Sarala Behn, 2010). Madeleine Slade (Mira Behn) likewise saw the hatred with which ordinary Britons suddenly turned on innocent Germans because of war propaganda (Madeleine Slade, 1960). The Canadian Quaker, Mary Chesley, wrote letters home from Paris to her parents during the war expressing her dismay about such hateful attitudes (MacDonald, 2010). In the post-war period, both Slade and Chesley actively sought to counter hatred towards Germans – Slade through reintroducing German music and conductors to the London stage and Chesley through fundraising for German children who were victims of war.

Losing a favourite teacher was not the only loss Marjorie Sykes and her family would endure because of the war. Her father, in spite of his own distaste for war, eventually felt the pressure to volunteer for service. When he returned from duty, Marjorie had no recollection of the event. She had fallen ill in the huge influenza epidemic and, as a consequence, missed a fair portion of the school year. During her recovery the family made a move to a new town where her father took another job. At the time he was unable to settle back into teaching, although he would eventually return with renewed enthusiasm for his vocation. Nevertheless, the war's toll on the family continued to be felt for some time. Once Marjorie was safely on the mend, her mother's health broke down and, for a period of months, the teenaged Marjorie, the oldest child, took over the running of the household, caring for her younger siblings and doing all the chores.

This "apprenticeship" not only helped Marjorie to consolidate all those practical skills that she would put to use in India, but undoubtedly developed in her a sense of responsibility and the capacity to take charge. By the fall of 1919, Marjorie's mother had recovered and Marjorie entered a new school with inspiring teachers. This experience must have been all the more appreciated after having given up her schooling during her mother's illness. She received an excellent grounding in

literature and the religious education at the school also appealed to her. She attended the Cathedral in the town. Sykes would later reflect:

> I absorbed the lovely music of the ritual, and the magnificent prose cadences of the Book of Common Prayer…. In school some of the great passages of English poetry 'haunted me like a passion' in much the same way as did the prayers. There was no division between the 'sacred' and the 'secular'. I was being prepared to understand to some extent how other great religious poetry, such as the *Qur'an* or the *Vedas*, may have a 'meaning beyond meaning' for those whose roots are in the Islamic or Hindu culture (Dart, 1993).

Sykes' love of learning translated into excellent marks and she was fortunate to be coming of age at a time when educational opportunities in Britain were opening up for someone such as herself who did not come from a privileged background. After taking the Cambridge entrance exams, Sykes received not only a university scholarship but also grants from her local riding and the national government, which covered her fees and living expenses. Newnham College Cambridge offered Sykes a superior education in every sense of the word. Not satisfied with simply handling the courses mapped out by her tutor, Sykes attended many open lectures on subjects outside of her chosen areas of study (English and linguistics); she participated in some sports and also made friends with students from around the world. Sykes' own ideas about the futility of war, initially fostered by her father, were further developed at Cambridge under the inspiration of teachers whose own convictions about peace and social justice were influenced by the life and teachings of Jesus. It was during her time at Cambridge that Sykes developed her understanding of and commitment to the ideals of truth and non-violence. This conviction, based on the teachings of Christ would later be enriched by her contact with Gandhi and others in India.

Not surprisingly, most of the people Sykes met at Cambridge came out of a Church of England background. What is relevant is that the church leaders who had the most impact on Sykes were far more radical (and one might suggest "Quakerly") in their approach to questions of the spirit and their pacifist convictions than would normally be found within the established church. Sykes was not aware of the existence of the Religious Society of Friends (or Quakers) at this time. Interestingly, she would discover later that her four closest friends at college either joined or worked closely with the Society of Friends in subsequent years and engaged in reconciliation work and other forms of service, indicating at least two things – that the mentors at Cambridge made a profound impact on their students and that Sykes established her closest ties with like-spirited individuals. Years later, in India, Sykes would meet Jehangir Patel with whom she would co-author a book of reminiscences of Gandhi. Patel, it turned out, was also a student at Cambridge during the same period as Sykes, although they did not meet then. He, too, received a formative education at Cambridge that would prepare him to accept the challenges of Gandhi's "fight". As Patel and Sykes would recount in their book:

> 'This is my second university', Jehangir would sometimes say to Gandhi. 'It's a university of service, and I am happy that you should be its Chancellor. Cambridge and Sevagram go very well together'. As it happened, a considerable number of India's national leaders of that generation were Cambridge men; people used to comment that at certain stages of the struggle for independence meetings of an India 'Cambridge Society' might have been held, and well attended, in more than one of the government's jails. Certainly we both found the experiences

> in Cambridge and in Sevagram, far from being incompatible, complemented and enriched one another (Jehangir P. Patel and Marjorie Sykes, 1987).

As stimulating as Cambridge was, it was ultimately the example of her father that inspired Marjorie to become a teacher. On a holiday at home, she observed her father who, having returned to his original calling, provided an excellent model of how to be creative and joyous in one's approach to students and all subjects. Like Mary Barr and another friend of Gandhi, the Danish Anne Marie Petersen, Sykes was fortunate to have been exposed to an educational approach that was far more progressive than would have been the standard education curriculum and this informed their later teaching in India. In 1926 Sykes graduated with first class honours (English Tripos) from Cambridge and then remained at Cambridge to take teacher training.

Of the women referred to in this essay, Sykes shared the most in common with Chesley in regard to experiences in university. Although all the women had post-secondary education or had initiated their own course of personal studies, Chesley and Sykes both received university degrees before going on to take teacher training. They shared a passion for academic learning, nature, sports, spiritual seeking and pacifism. Chesley received her first degree and teacher training in Canada but went on to complete a second degree at the London School of Economics. She also spent time at the University of Oxford (MacDonald, 2010), meeting inspiring professors there who inculcated some of the same values as Sykes' mentors at Cambridge. Sykes and Chesley shared a love of literature and languages. Sykes' linguistic study at Cambridge exposed her to Anglo-Saxon, Greek, Latin, French, German, Danish and possibly Sanskrit. This training inevitably aided her in India, where she learned at least three Indian languages – Hindi, Bengali and Tamil. Chesley went to the Sorbonne to study French and also studied Esperanto, the language of "hope" for those who believed in international friendship. Whether Chesley knew any other languages is not known (her major at the London School Economics was political economy—it is unknown what courses she took at Oxford), but in her short time in India, she studied Hindi. Both women would become Quakers and both would garner the respect and admiration of Gandhi for their intellect, compassion and commitment to India. In spite of not knowing one another personally, they were linked through common friends, most obviously Mary Barr and Gandhi.

Upon completion of her coursework, Sykes let it be known to the friends she had made among international students and teachers during her time at the university that she would be interested in a possible overseas position. Before moving to India, Sykes had come into contact and made friends with international students, indicating, at the very least, openness to diverse cultures. This is another commonality she shared with western women in Gandhi's circle. In Mary Chesley's letters home while she was in university, she talked of her friendships and conversations with international students. Catherine Heilemann also recounted her growing knowledge of Indian politics that she gained through friendships with Indian students in Britain.

Travel to India

After graduation Sykes taught for a year in England; however, when she received an invitation to take a position at a girls' school in Madras, she accepted and sailed

to India in October 1928 (Dart, 1993). Upon arrival in Madras, Sykes was met by Alice Varley (later Barnes), the Principal of Bentinck School. Their association as colleagues would develop into an enduring friendship, terminated only by Barnes' death in 1968. From the beginning, they found common ground. The Student Christian Movement (SCM) had played an important formative role for both women during their university years. The SCM had a profound impact on the lives of many inquiring young people in North America as well. For example, it would be difficult to find committed social activists in Canada who entered university in the first half of the twentieth century who did not credit the SCM with providing the formative experiences that led them towards community service and social activism.

Alice Barnes belonged to the Madras International Fellowship and Marjorie also joined. Founded by an Indian Christian, the group included people of all religions as well as different political persuasions. Sykes first met Quakers through this group and it was through the Fellowship that she was introduced to Chakravarti Rajagopalachari (familiarly known by all as Rajaji or C.R.), a close friend of Gandhi and a leading light in the independence movement. Rajaji helped introduce Sykes to India, particularly from a political and public affairs perspective. His correspondence reveals a man of wit and warmth. Widowed in 1915, he never remarried. An outstanding intellect with a strong moral commitment to Gandhi's program of social service, Rajaji left a successful law practice as early as 1919 to dedicate himself to Gandhi's mission of village service (Rajmohan Gandhi, 1984). Gandhi and Rajaji became in-laws when their children married.

Even in his later political life as the Premier of Madras Presidency and in his role as last Governor General of India, Rajaji maintained a simple lifestyle. At the time that Sykes met Rajaji, he lived in an ashram with a group, including all castes, serving in nearby villages. His would be the first ashram that Sykes visited in India (Dart, 1993). In addition to Rajaji's tutelage on life in India, she was exposed to the political, social and educational currents through other Indian friends and colleagues.

Through Ted Barnes, a chemistry teacher at one of the colleges in Madras, Alice had begun attending a small Quaker group in the city and Marjorie also attended. Not surprisingly, given the kind of values upheld by Friends, Sykes found a spiritual home among Quakers and, when she went on her first furlough to Britain in 1936, she formally joined the Religious Society of Friends (Dart, 1993). Quakers were unconventional in many ways. They did not adhere to a creed, but they held certain principles, which they called testimonies concerning simplicity, pacifism, integrity, community, equality and stewardship of the earth. An important aspect of Quaker life is putting into action one's belief in these principles. Consequently, Quakers historically have been at the forefront of social movements such as the abolishment of slavery, civil rights, women's equality, the peace movement and other causes for justice. It is notable that westerners in India who did not belong to the established church or have colonial attitudes with regard to Indian politics found themselves attracted to the Religious Society of Friends. While there are people born into established Quaker families, many join Quakers later in life. A significant number of Gandhi's western friends became Quakers and the others were often closely associated through friendships and organizational affiliations.

By the time Sykes joined Friends, she had been in India teaching for eight years. In 1930, her friend Alice Varley had married Ted Barnes. As was customary (or mandatory) for the times, Alice, once she became a married woman, gave up her position as Principal. The Indian teacher who took her position also married, so Sykes, still in her mid-twenties, became Principal. While in this position she made some dramatic changes in the educational approach. In the older grades, classes were still taught in English. However, the younger children learned in Tamil. Sykes invited Indian women actively engaged in Gandhi's non-cooperation movement to come to speak to the children in Tamil about their work. Such women, with their English schooling, had some discomfort with Sykes' request, fearing that their Tamil was not good enough; however, most agreed and, through their involvement in the school, exposed the youngest children to role models within their own culture. The school, open to children from all castes, encouraged the development of egalitarian principles. When, in 1937, Gandhi published an article in his journal, *Harijan*, describing his vision for education in India, Sykes immediately found resonance in his ideas. On her own, she had already implemented certain programs that echoed Gandhi's philosophy. This realization of common ground was timely for Sykes, for, by the mid-1930s in India, the climate, both political and social, had become more restrictive due to the British government's creation of separate electorates divided along religious lines. The cross-cultural, cross-denominational friendships that had flourished in such groups as the International Fellowship became more difficult. As well, the government increasingly took greater control of education.

Teaching and Translation at Santiniketan

Sykes, with her unconventional ideas felt the need for more independence. The possibility of an opening at Rabindranath Tagore's school at Santiniketan came up, so in 1938, during her Christmas vacation, Sykes travelled to Sevagram where she met Gandhi for the first time, then went on to Santiniketan, Tagore's international school. Warmly welcomed in both places, Sykes was impressed by the rapport both Gandhi and Tagore had with children. Tagore invited Sykes to join his staff. Santiniketan (originally developed by Tagore's father Devendranath Tagore in 1901) had expanded to the extent that it included an international university by the time Sykes joined the faculty in 1939. As a totally independent school with no government involvement, Santiniketan had the freedom to create a curriculum without the usual constraints, which appealed to Sykes. The Friends Service Council in London funded her position, indicating the support that Quakers were willing to give not only to someone like Sykes but also to alternative institutions that creative Indians such as Tagore were building for the new India.

Sykes quickly became an integral part of a community that welcomed intellectual, cultural and religious diversity. C.F. Andrews, a former Anglican priest who had longstanding friendships with both Tagore and Gandhi – "known as the 'hyphen' between them" – moved back to Santineketan, the place he considered home (Dart, 1993). Sykes had met Andrews a few years earlier on a trip to Britain and in the short remaining time that he had to live, the two became close friends. When Andrews died in 1940, the relationship between Tagore and Sykes grew closer as he began to

rely on her to translate his writings into English from Bengali, Sykes' most recently acquired language. Sykes translated several of Tagore's plays, his childhood reminiscences and other writings (Tagore, trans. Sykes, 1943, 1950). *My Boyhood Days*, Tagore's childhood memories have subsequently been translated into many Indian languages and continue to be reprinted.

Community Engagement

Sykes' productive and creative life at this time was not without its challenges and losses. While she was vacationing with Alice and Ted Barnes in May 1941, Ted became fatally ill with malaria and died within the month. After helping her friend Alice through this period, Sykes returned to Santiniketan to find Tagore in fragile condition. He died soon after. Months later Sykes' own health broke down while on holiday and she took a leave of absence from the school. While recuperating with her friend Alice Barnes, she began writing a book for children about the life of Tagore. Once she was on the mend, the Women's Christian College in Madras asked Sykes if she would fill in as an English teacher for a time. Because of restrictions on travel during the war, replacement teachers from Britain were not available. Santiniketan agreed to a temporary loan of Sykes to the college. Instead of living on campus, Sykes chose to live in one of the slums of the city. In her poor neighbourhood she initiated a nursery for the young children of working parents and put forward a proposal to the students in the college to help finance the nursery teacher's salary. This project, much expanded over time, has continued into the present day. It was during this period that Sykes took in a number of orphans, helping them both to get an education and then to establish themselves. One of the girls, Rani, became an adopted daughter.

Teaching was not the only preoccupation for Sykes during this period. On the international stage, World War Two presented a deeply disturbing development for pacifists like Sykes. With the Quit India Movement in full swing (Gandhi had declared Indian non-compliance with Britain), Sykes, along with her students, organized a committee so that they could carry out constructive work. As part of his national strategy Gandhi had encouraged a "Grow More Food" Campaign and Sykes, an experienced gardener, helped plan a vegetable garden with her students, and, ever frugal, used bath water to irrigate it (Dart, 1993). Amidst the community work, the teaching and numerous other college responsibilities, undertaking Quaker business and keeping fellow pacifists in touch with one another for support, Sykes hosted the many people who came through her life (for a time sharing her house and veranda with several dozen neighbours who had lost their homes in a fire). She completed her children's book on Tagore and it was published in 1943 (Dart, 1993). Sykes also managed to fulfill requests for articles and book reviews from a number of journals and publishers. After two productive years in Madras, Sykes returned to Santiniketan, this time, to work on a biography of C.F. Andrews in collaboration with Benarsidas Chaturvedi, an Indian journalist who had been, along with C.F. Andrews and Gandhi, an anti-indenture activist in Fiji and South Africa (Sanjay Ramesh, 2004). In 1945, during the course of her research, she met with Gandhi to discuss Andrews' correspondence with him. When asked if she would come to

Sevagram to help with the Basic Education program. Sykes agreed to consider it once she had completed her writing project. Research also took her to Britain where she made contact with family and friends of Andrews and collaborated with Agatha Harrison (another Quaker and friend of Gandhi), Andrews' literary executor. Sykes, Harrison and Barr, in particular, had close affiliations not only with Gandhi and Sevagram but also with Santiniketan and the Tagore family. This speaks to the Indian leaders' respect for these women. It also reflects the women's diverse and shared educational, political, social and artistic interests. Tagore, the poet and artist, integrated the performing and literary arts in his educational program. Gandhi had little time for or interest in aesthetics, and his educational approach was of a purely practical nature. Yet, even Mirabehn, who most closely identified with Gandhi's frugal, practical approach, had an artistic side. She liked to sketch and designed what would become Gandhi's house in Sevagram; the interior walls are decorated with her simple but elegant relief work. Once, in a conversation with Gandhi, Agatha Harrison, who loved flowers, asked him why he did not include beauty amidst the practical. Gandhi found it difficult to understand why people could not see, and be satisfied with, the beauty of vegetables. For him, if one could not eat a plant or produce something useful from it, the time spent on cultivating it was a waste. His spiritual path was one of asceticism. For Tagore, beauty and artistic creativity were essential for spiritual wellbeing. The women referred to in this essay, though so closely allied with Gandhi, embraced both the ascetic and the artistic – another indication of their independence of thought[2].

Work at Sevagram

It was not until 1949 that Sykes was able to fulfill her promise to Gandhi that she would go to Sevagram. In the early post–Independence days, she returned to Madras

[2] An amusing example of Gandhi's diversion from the strictly practical is evident in Sarojini Naidu's letter to her son when she, Gandhi and others were in prison. Naidu, India's famous poet (referred to as "The Nightingale") and known for her irreverent wit, called Gandhi by the nickname of Mickey Mouse because of his big ears. Absolutely devoted to the cause, she nevertheless did not feel compelled to wear *khadi* or adhere to Gandhi's austere regime. Gandhi, taking advantage of Mirabehn's artistic talents, allowed his imagination to stray from more serious matters for the diversion of his good friend Naidu. The following excerpt was written on her birthday, 14 February 1943: "Would you believe it that lying so exhausted and helpless in his bed, [Gandhi's] puckish humour devised an amusing birthday gift for me—the model of a *good* Sarojini Devi (or Amma Jan as he calls me)…lying on a couch obedient to medical orders as distinct from the bad Amma Jan, who flouts all physicians and refuses to lie down. It is very crude but cleverly executed by Miraben, according to the Fasting Man's sudden design!!". Sarojini Naidu, *Selected Letters 1890s to 1940s*, ed. Makarant Paranjape, Kali for Women, New Delhi 1996, p. 307.

to be with her daughter in the months leading up to Rani's entrance into a nursing training program. There she worked as the Librarian at the Women's Christian College. Because she had been domiciled in India for so many years, she had no trouble gaining citizenship in the new independent nation. Once her daughter entered nursing school, Sykes felt free to honour Gandhi's earlier request, although he was no longer alive, having been assassinated in January 1948.

Marjorie Sykes spent ten years at Sevagram, training teachers for Gandhi's *Nai Talim* program. Such training involved learning every possible skill that would be needed in a village setting. In a letter to friends, Sykes' description of the training paints a vivid picture of the expectations for both teachers and students in Gandhi's ideal community:

> Every year a new class of students is put down here, away from towns with their piped water and municipal lighting and sanitation, in a settlement in the middle of village India… We say to them, 'Here you are…Grow your own food, pick your cotton, spin yarn and weave your clothes, plan and care for your own sanitary system, keep your surroundings clean and hygienic and your buildings in repair. Tackle each of these jobs as intelligently and scientifically as you can; find out what sort of knowledge and skill you need to do them efficiently, and find out how you can get it. When you have re-educated yourself in REAL knowledge by these means, you will be ready to do your bit in the education of the nation. We teachers spend our days alongside the students in the field and kitchen and workshops, helping them with the technique, with the organisation, with the recording, analysis and study of their daily chores and with the machinery of responsible self-government that goes with it all…Side by side with the teachers' training school… is the… school community, where growing children are being educated by these methods of self-reliance and intelligent work. The two communities help each other and pool their resources for emergencies and special needs (like harvesting). But there are never enough workers here for all there is to do; there are constant calls on us to help the new 'basic national' schools and training centres in other parts of the country…The days are not long enough for all there is to do-we fall asleep before we have finished. But if you believe, as I do, that Gandhiji was fundamentally right in what he declared to be necessary for human welfare, it is absorbingly interesting and worthwhile (Dart, 1993).

Sykes had many other responsibilities and injected her own creative ideas to keep children engaged in what might have otherwise been considered dreary work. Undoubtedly her experience and observation as a child with parents who seemed to seamlessly combine practical work with joyful play and exploration helped Sykes to develop a similar teaching model. In addition to the work at Sevagram, Sykes travelled to basic education schools around the country, helped organize both national and international conferences (the World Pacifist Conference in 1949 held its meetings in Sevagram and Santineketan), hosted a constant stream of visitors interested in observing the *Nai Talim* program in action, addressed Quaker concerns and, when Vinoba Bhave began his Bhoodan Movement, Sykes and her students and teachers took part in *padyatras* (journeys on foot with a purpose) to the villages in the district. The Bhoodan or Land Gift movement was one in which wealthy landowners were asked to voluntarily give over a portion of their land to the landless. In the mid-1950s, Sykes spent some months away from teaching in order to write about Basic Education and translate from French into English a book by Lanza del Vasto on the Bhoodan Movement. Lanza del Vasto, a Sicilian Christian living in France, visited Gandhi at Wardha and became committed to non-violence and started an organization, Action Civique Non-Violent in the 1950s (Hardiman, 2003). For a

period of months Sykes also split her time between Sevagram and the Friends Rural Centre in Rasulia when a staffing crisis arose. Once Vinoba Bhave resurrected Gandhi's idea of a *Shanti Sena* – a "Peace Army" which was intended to train volunteers to carry out non-violent peace keeping, Sykes became involved in this development.

Kotagiri and Beyond–Mentoring Youth, Peace Keeping and Food Security

As her decade at Sevagram drew to a close, Sykes contemplated her next step. She wished to organize non-violence training, but on a smaller more intimate scale than at Sevagram. She moved to Kotagiri in the Nilgiri Hills of Southern India. Her friend Alice Barnes was already living there. Mary Barr also retired to Kotagiri. Living in a terraced valley to which one could walk, not drive, down a steep slope to get to the house, Sykes conducted training camps for groups of seven or eight students who would live, work and study with her. Like the life at Sevagram, each person was expected to participate on every level and the days were full. Sometimes, between training groups, Sykes herself engaged in peacekeeping work. In 1962, she went to the North East Frontier during a border dispute between India and China. In 1964, the North American Regional Council of the World Peace Brigade asked the *Shanti Sena* to send someone to help train peace workers in the United States and Canada. Marjorie was chosen by the group to go. She worked with both white and African-American students and her overall impression was that the African Americans were far more disciplined because of their civil rights training, which had been greatly influenced by Gandhi's approach to civil disobedience.

Sykes had no sooner returned home to India, than Jayaprakash Narayan (widely known as J.P.), a leading Gandhian and *Shanti Sena* organizer, asked her to go to Nagaland on a peace mission. When the British lightly controlled Nagaland, which borders on Burma (Myanmar), American missionaries had converted many Nagas to Christianity. Culturally and ethnically, Nagas are more similar to groups in Southeast Asia than to those Indians living on the Indian plains. Because of cultural and religious differences, Nagas had hoped for full autonomy after 1947. Disputes broke out between Naga guerillas and Indian forces. The Nagas themselves wished for a peaceful resolution and a cease-fire was made possible through the efforts of J.P. and other Gandhians (Dart, 1993). Sykes became a core member of an Observers Team that mediated disputes between the two sides. The work, both physically and mentally challenging at all times, suited Sykes. One can only imagine that she had remarkable stamina as well as tact, for she gained the trust of the Nagas *and* the Indian troops. Sykes would have stayed longer than three years had she not been drawn back to the Nilgiri Hills because of her older friend Alice Barnes' failing health. Within the next couple of years Marjorie lost not only her two closest friends in Kotagiri, Alice Barnes and Mary Barr (Christine Easwaran, 2007), but also her adopted daughter, Rani, who died of cancer at the age of 36.

Sykes' mediation work between opposing forces is mirrored in the work of the majority of the western women who were friends with Gandhi. Mary Barr, Agatha Harrison, Margaret Jones, Mirabehn, Saralabehn and Muriel Lester all participated in negotiations and peace-making efforts in war zones. Chesley, though she did not

have an opportunity to participate directly in such work, publicly proclaimed the message of peace and reconciliation during a time when such ideas were largely unpopular. Courage through conviction distinguished these women. Most of this dangerous work was carried out quite apart from Gandhi, and, in a number of cases, well after his death. Gandhi, where involved (in the case of Margaret Jones and Agatha Harrison, for example), requested their participation because of his trust in their abilities. Gandhi had a genius for friendship; he could be friendly with almost anyone. However, the people he relied on had to be trustworthy, intelligent, hard-working and totally committed to non-violent change. The work that these women carried out during their lifetimes provides ample evidence that they were leaders and initiators in their own right, rather than mere camp followers of Mahatma Gandhi.

In spite of losing those closest to her, Sykes continued to keep her base in Kotagiri for some years to come. After Mary Barr's death, she took on the editorship of *The Friendly Way*, the Quaker newsletter for India. Now in her mid-sixties, Sykes would remain extremely active for more than another two decades, engaged in gardening, studying, writing, editing, translating and teaching workshops to the many young people who sought her out and lived with her for a time in order to learn more about non-violent mediation and environmentally sustainable living. Her international reputation among peace activists, Quakers and those interested in Gandhi, Tagore and C.F. Andrews meant that she was invited to give workshops and lectures and share her experiences in countries across the globe. Because she had engaged in work with tribal peoples in the Nilgiri Hills (H.N. Kalla Gowder, 2003), Sykes had a particular interest in investigating the conditions of indigenous peoples in the countries that she visited. In 1979, when she returned to India after various research and lecturing stints abroad (she also served as Friend in Residence for several months at Pendle Hill, a Quaker retreat near Philadelphia), Sykes took up an invitation from the Friends' Rural Centre at Rasulia to join them in their experiment in 'natural farming' (Masanobu Fukuoka, 1978, 1990). Pratap Aggarwal, who had been a volunteer at Rasulia years earlier, had become the Centre's coordinator and was instrumental in pushing forward this work.

In the early 1960s, many countries around the world took up what became known as the "Green Revolution" in which increases in food production were brought about by the introduction of new seed varieties, chemical fertilizers and pesticides. Initially there were remarkable results in terms of crop yields; however, Sykes and her Indian coworkers (as well as Mirabehn and Saralabehn) recognized early on that large-scale agricultural practices were neither environmentally sustainable nor a way to eradicate hunger among the poor. While India's food yields went up, the poorest people continued to suffer because the concentration of land remained in the hands of the wealthy and the poor could not afford to buy the produce. Higher food production has not lessened world hunger and, according to Peter Rosset, an agricultural ecologist for the Institute for Food and Development Policy, by the mid-1980s, green revolution practices were proving to be environmentally destructive and non-sustainable (Peter Rosset, Joseph Collins and Frances Moore Lappé, 2000; Vandana Shiva, 1993).

Sykes stood solidly with Gandhi and others of like mind who believed that small-scale local cultivation would be the only guarantee of food security for the poorest.

The project at Rasulia, initially considered retrograde, eventually gained greater respect as the negative impacts of the green revolution became apparent. However, after Aggarwal left Rasulia in early 1988, the Governing Board of the Centre hired a more conservative coordinator. The most creative of the young workers at Rasulia found the atmosphere too restrictive and left to begin their own experiment (Lorry Benjamin, 2003). Sykes stayed on briefly to help the community, but left later that year when invited to take a position as Friend in Residence at Woodbrooke College, a Quaker Centre in England. By now in her eighties and in frail physical health, Sykes nevertheless continued to give talks and write. She worked on her history of Quakers in India; at the request of Indians, she translated more of Vinoba Bhave's writings from Hindi into English (Bhave, trans. Sykes and K.S. Aharlu, 1977; Bhave, trans. Sykes, 1994). In 1990, she had come across Quaker Geoffrey Maw's notes in a British library on his earlier experiences in India and decided to bring his work to the public (Geoffrey Maw, ed. Sykes, 1991). In her remaining years, Sykes returned to India briefly, but, due to serious illness, was taken back to England. She died in 1995 before completing her history of Quakers in India, but it was published posthumously (Sykes, ed. Geoffrey Carnall, 1997). After Sykes' death, her executors wrote to those whose addresses were contained in Marjorie Sykes' address book and, with the many tributes that poured in, published a memorial booklet with quotations from these letters (comp. Barbara Bowman, Julian Brotherton and N. Ramamurthy, 1996). The tributes are a testimony to Sykes' profound impact on so many lives. Among the many tributes from India, one sees how deeply she was integrated into Indian society. "She became the Indian of the Indians", wrote Dayal S. Gour. Representatives of the Fellowship of Reconciliation in India wrote, "She played an important role in interpreting the East and the West to each other". Sykes' wish to return "home" to India was not fulfilled while she lived. Her ashes, however, were taken to India for immersion in the Narmada River.

The Other West

Perhaps of all the western women who were close to Gandhi, Sykes most readily moved between east and west, culturally, spiritually and linguistically. Because of her physical traits, she was sometimes mistaken for Indian. In many senses, she might be called a "Renaissance" woman for her diversity of talents. Not unlike Gandhi, Sykes displayed a rare combination of remarkable self-discipline and flexibility that enabled her to focus on tasks and accomplish so much yet still remain open to constant change. Not as extreme as Gandhi (for example, with regard to sexual relations, Sykes once wrote "I think this is one of the places where I most basically part company with Gandhi") (Dart, 1999). In spite of the fact that Sykes and the other western women friends of Gandhi were single, celibate women, they were not prudish. In some cases, they were remarkably open-minded and some had close friendships with men who were known to be homosexual. While seldom in the spotlight, Sykes nevertheless had her own charisma, based on a powerful intellect, an engaging personality and a rigorous ethical foundation. Like Gandhi, in spite of her capacity for great warmth, humour and compassion, she also had outbursts of hot temper in situations where she detected dishonesty, greed or exploitation (Bowman

et al, 1999). Frugal, like Gandhi, in her paring down personal needs to a minimum, she did not necessarily expect everyone to have the same standard, but in certain situations could not abide unthinking waste. As she aged, she gained recognition for her spiritual wisdom, and her Quaker faith must have seemed as solid and ancient as the rock of ages to her younger students and admirers. Yet, like everything else in her life, Sykes achieved this strength of spirit through continuous work, study and experience. A letter written in 1949 to Horace Alexander, one of Gandhi's British Quaker friends and a member of the India Conciliation Group, is revealing in a number of respects. Alexander and Sykes were part of a group who were trying to establish an interdenominational friendship organization in post-Independence India. Alexander had sent a draft of the proposal to Marjorie for advice, both editorial and content-wise. Sykes ended her comments with a frank personal disclosure about her "faith":

> Quite apart however from my doubts of the organisational side, it is a source of embarrassment to me and of potential embarrassment to others to be named as a kind of stable pillar of any religious organisation wherever. No matter how non-intellectual and undogmatic we [Quakers] may be, that implies some stable faith which I do not think I can claim to possess. It seems that I am fundamentally agnostic, and my code such as it is essentially pragmatic though not perhaps quite crudely and selfishly so. I have had only the dimmest glimpse of the experiences to which the mystic bears witness; and I am bound to ask myself whether even that dim glimpse is susceptible to another explanation. In fact I am first a 'seeker', a questioner. It is this knowledge of my own position which made the situation in Madras so intolerable, when it seemed that true Quaker experience and understanding was failing, and the Meeting dying for lack of it, and I knew I (the 'official' Quaker) could not supply the experience. And I also knew that if I attended Meetings the temptation to act a part as though I felt what I was expected to feel, would be very strong (Letter to Alexander, 1949).

Based on later writings, it would seem that Sykes grew into a deeper, more assured faith than she had at the time of writing this letter. What her words reveal is the importance she attached to truthfulness and that she understood the temptation she might have to act a part that would be less than honest. They also indicate that Sykes did not profess a blind allegiance to any religious group, even one as "undogmatic" as Quakers. As a seeker or questioner, she studied all traditions. Her knowledge of and appreciation for Hindu, Buddhist, Hebrew and Muslim texts is apparent in her writings and to some extent, Sykes' philosophical and intellectual outlook was a synthesis of the wisdom from all the great religions.

Sykes, who did not have an implicitly religious family upbringing, grew into her faith over the course of a lifetime. She had the opportunity through her school years of being exposed to conscientious Christians who made their mark on her thinking. In India, her contact with people of all faiths enriched her journey as a "seeker" but ultimately, she found herself most at home within the Religious Society of Friends. Like Gandhi, Quakers did not separate the practical aspects of living from intellectual, political, ethical and spiritual considerations. Sykes lived holistically, transforming words and ideas into action. Like Gandhi, she gave as much weight to the necessary "menial" jobs as she did to intellectual pursuits. The fact that Gandhi and Tagore, two of India's most influential figures of the twentieth century and men of ideas and action, recognized Sykes' multifaceted gifts and invited her to teach in their respective institutions speaks volumes. Other leading independence figures

such as Vinoba Bhave, Jayaprakash Narayan and Rajagopalachari also deeply respected and called upon Sykes' skills and wisdom. That Sykes is still well remembered is evidenced by an article published in a major Indian newspaper on the centenary of her birthday, which paid tribute to her life and contributions to Indian society (Rengarajan, 2005). A news article on the unjust imprisonment of a brilliant doctor, Dr. Binayak Sen, who has given more than thirty years of humanitarian medical service to the tribal poor in Chhattisgarh, also made reference to Sykes. "As a young man [Sen] – star pupil with the world at his feet – he had turned his back on the many rich career options before him to take a job at a rural medical centre in Hoshangabad run by Quakers, where he was greatly influenced by Marjorie Sykes". (Shoma Chaudhury, 2008). This article not only brings out the fact of Sykes' influence in helping Dr. Sen choose to direct his skills to the most disadvantaged, it also shows that in modern-day India, there are still heroic figures who risk everything in order to live the simple, honest life of service that Gandhi and the women from the "other west" believed could transform society.

In her writings, time and again, Sykes referred to non-violent revolution or revolutionary change. Many people believed that Gandhi and his co-workers were against modernization and wished to turn their backs on all "progress". Sykes disagreed. In an article that addressed the principles of the *Nai Talim* system of education, she discussed a number of key principles and beliefs that she shared with Gandhi (Marjorie Sykes, 1955). Countering the idea that Gandhi wanted to "set the clock back," Sykes stressed the revolutionary nature of the *Nai Talim* system. Gandhi maintained that in order for a human being to become mature and whole, "two things are needed, love and work." Describing the importance of family and community life for the developing child, Sykes suggested that the decline of family life and the disappearance of small communities "bound together by a common economic life and the provision of mutual services", particularly in the west, "denies the little child so many of the experiences and satisfactions which he needs". A school using the Basic Education system "is an attempt to build up a purposeful, organic community." *Nai Talim* operated on the idea that hard work provided children with "the satisfaction of achieving physical endurance and skill" and that "many of the so-called labor-saving devices of Western civilization deprive students of the chance to take pride in their prowess". Another aspect of the training was to instill in the children a respect for all of creation, not only humans but also plants and animals and that the earth should not be exploited.

"Simplicity of living is both a deliberately chosen method and a goal of the work". Apart from the idea that simple living can be motivated by a desire to be socially responsible, in the eyes of Gandhi, as well as Quakers, voluntary simplicity could be considered "good *in itself*, conducive to the true development and real happiness" of human beings. It was believed that an education in simplicity would lead to personal, social and international peace. Sykes made a final point on the educational philosophy and one that made particular sense in a country that had millions who lived in poverty:

> Closely related to simplicity is the willing and wholehearted acceptance of the limitations of circumstance. True education does not consist of wandering more widely but in pondering more deeply. If the school provides its students with experiences that touch the basic needs of life,

> the kind of experiences which arise naturally in an intimate community engaged in cooperative enterprises like those described, it makes possible…the highest development of mind and spirit. The restless urge to see more places and read more books can only in itself, result in the amassing of information; the development of a mature personality, the true goal of education, needs the leisure and relaxation of mind that comes with simplicity and contentment. This is not a call to go back; it is a call to go forward. The hard work it demands is not drudgery, but intelligent and purposeful labor… The craftsmanship it encourages is not primitive crudity, but the release of a truly creative energy of mind. The simplicity it upholds does not belong to the Dark Ages; it is the fruit of the wisdom of the most enlightened of mankind. The enlightened choose a so-called 'poverty,' not because they must, but because they may. The mature mind and spirit made a free conscious choice of simplicity of outward circumstances, because such is the nature of man that only through simplicity can the individual find himself aright, and the well-being of society be assured. Will India and the world listen? If not, and if our modern 'progress' as it well may, destroys itself, the tiny communities of the 'New Education' may be among the seeds from which a new and saner civilization will grow (Sykes, 1955).

Sykes firmly believed and lived this philosophy. No mere armchair philosopher, she spent her ninety years bringing such ideas into practical application. Sykes and other women friends of Gandhi chose so-called 'poverty', yet they lived rich lives, simply, courageously and with integrity. Eschewing western privilege, Sykes and the others were an extraordinary collective of modern, independent women who shared much in common with one another and with Gandhi, yet each one found her own way to express and put into action common goals. It is no mere coincidence that the women were teachers (whether with formal training in education or not), with a love of learning and a desire to share that love with others. Whether consciously or not, each woman must have understood that knowledge meant power. Higher learning had given them the power to choose unusual life paths. Through teaching, Sykes and her cohort opened the key to learning for those who, otherwise, might not have had such opportunities. Combining down-to-earth practicality with intellectual curiosity and love of nature, they individually and collectively deserve to hold a place in the history of India's movement for social and political change.

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