

TONY CORFIELD (1919-2011):

TWO COMPANION PIECES

by Penelope J. Corfield

*The first account was written for the short obituaries section and published (with altered sequence of paragraphs) in OTHER LIVES, **The Guardian** 2/9/2011 (p. 38).*

It is followed by a companion piece, on Tony Corfield's role in the former Transport & General Workers Union (now Unite), as contribution to Education News on the Unite website: www.unitetheunion.org/sectors/education.



Tony Corfield as an army volunteer in 1939.

Short Obituary for The Guardian

My father Tony Corfield, who has just died aged 91, was a trade unionist, adult educator, and man of the left, who remained a sunny optimist throughout life's upheavals. His positive, thoughtful, unassuming manner made him many friends. And he was singularly happy in his family life, sharing a life-long 'marriage of true minds' with Irene Corfield (née Hill). They met at a dance at Oxford University's Labour Club and married in 1941. Five of their six children survive him. We remember a loving and unconventional father, with droll humour. On seaside holidays, he captained our family team for cricket on the beach and – to our horror as kids - tried to let the other side win.

Tony believed in communal action and cooperation, rather than in individualism and dog-eat-dog. When still a student, he volunteered for the infantry at the start of World War II and ended up as a trainer in the Parachute Regiment. That experience launched his career in adult education, which gave him the deep contentment of someone who had found his vocation.

From 1950 to 1968, he was Education Secretary for the Transport & General Union (merged 2007 to form Unite), working under two powerful General Secretaries, Arthur Deakin and Frank Cousins. Tony was in his element. He pioneered educational programmes for the shop stewards, featuring negotiating skills, public speaking, and trade union law.

When Jack Jones stood for the post of General Secretary in 1968, Tony took a bold step. He published a pamphlet on *Collective Leadership for the Transport and General Workers' Union*, advocating constitutional changes to check the untrammelled role of the General Secretary. Larry Smith from the Transport section stood against Jones on this platform; but lost. After that, Tony left to become Director of the Workers' Education Association Social Studies

Centre. He always remained friendly with his former colleagues, including Jack Jones. But Tony was later rueful that the unions had not updated themselves before hostile ‘reforms’ were imposed by Thatcher.

From 1971 to 1976 Tony was Principal of Birmingham’s Fircroft College of Adult Education. He then became Secretary of the Birmingham Health & Safety Association until retirement in 1997, being awarded an MBE for his services. Throughout his life, he wrote books and articles on adult education, industrial relations, trade unionism, and Health & Safety. He was always busy, always committed. And, in the evenings, he played the piano and sang.

Family notes:

Tony Corfield was the second son of Bert Corfield and Florence Jane Corfield (née Cole). They named him formally as Alan John Corfield, which was his father’s choice. But Tony was always called Tony, which was his mother’s preference.

The six children of Tony and Irene Corfield are Penelope Jane; Adrian (d.1990); Julian; Alison; Christopher; and Rebecca. And their four grand-children are Melissa; Sherena; Victoria, and Jeremy.

An account of probable family connections is available in Justin J. Corfield, ***The Corfields: A History of the Corfields from 1180 to the Present Day*** (Victoria, Australia, 1993), although the exact genealogical link between the main family tree and Tony Corfield’s branch of the Corfields remains to be documented. Tony’s publications are listed in ***The Corfields***, p. 323.

Contribution to Education News for UnitetheUnion:

By Penelope J. Corfield

My father Tony Corfield (1919-2011) worked in adult education all his life and one of the busiest and happiest stages of his career was as Education Officer and eventually Education Secretary for the mighty Transport & General Workers Union from 1950 to 1968. Tony believed in communal action and cooperation, rather than in competition and dog-eat-dog. He himself was an open and sunny-tempered person, with an infectious laugh. His friendly manner combined with his thoughtful approach brought out the best in others, who responded to his lack of ‘side’.

In the T&G’s Education Department, Tony was in his element. He launched new programmes aimed at skilling the shop stewards who are essential to the Union’s shop-floor organisation. Courses on offer featured organisational and negotiating skills, public speaking, industrial relations, and trade union law. Every summer he organised residential programmes for the shop stewards, held at Cirencester Agricultural College. Staying on a beautiful campus, meeting other activists from across the country, and updating on topical issues together generated an intense and exciting atmosphere. Friday evenings were the highlight, with big debates, followed by beer and sing-songs.

When Tony was working at Cirencester, our family stayed nearby. As a teenager with an interest in politics, I remember being allowed to sit in on some of these Friday evening debates. They were knowledgeable and passionate. One debate was about the pros and cons of the closed shop. *‘Would you allow a passenger to have the ride, without paying the fare?’* was the culminating appeal of the advocate of the closed shop, to immense applause.

In 1968 Frank Cousins (1904-86), the powerful boss of the T&G, left his post to become a Labour MP. In the internal election that followed, Tony saw an opportunity for the Union to update. He wrote and distributed a pamphlet on *Collective Leadership for the Transport and General Workers' Union*. His central case was that the powers of the General Secretary should be cut down to size. It was a matter of principle, not of personality. Larry Smith from the Transport section stood on this platform but lost to the favourite Jack Jones (1913-2009).

It was an interesting moment. Larry Smith remained within the Union, again standing unsuccessfully in 1977 for the post of General Secretary, this time against Moss Evans. Tony, however, decided to leave to become Director of the Workers' Education Association Social Studies Centre. He remained on friendly terms with his former colleagues, including Jack Jones. Tony was also proud of spotting and aiding on his educational courses the rising star of Bill Morris, who later became T&G General Secretary from 1992-2003 (now Lord Morris of Handsworth). In response, Bill has very recently confirmed to me by email that: 'My generation of the T&G owes him [Tony] a great deal of gratitude'.

Overall, Tony Corfield's key contribution to the Union's long-term promotion of high-quality educational programmes was acknowledged in 1997 by the award of the T&G's Gold Medal for outstanding service. It was a mark of recognition that he greatly valued. But Tony always thought that the Union had made a mistake in the 1970s by not taking steps to democratise its internal workings. It left it, with the other unions, open to attack from outside, which Margaret Thatcher duly provided in the 1980s.

Throughout his life, Tony wrote books and articles on adult education, industrial relations, trade union history, and Health & Safety. With his precursor

as T&G Education Secretary Ellen McCullough [pictured], Tony produced the staple *Trade Union Branch Officers' Manual* in 1964. It was typical of the practical help that he always tried to provide – as was his commonsensical WEA pamphlet *How to be a Student* (1968).



Tony Corfield as a youthful Education Officer at the T&G with Ellen McCullough, his precursor as Education Secretary: 1958

Another of Tony Corfield's publications of relevance to trade unionists was *The Rule of Law: A Study in Trade Union Organisation and Method* (1982). In it, he probed the intersecting careers of Alan Law, the 'Big Wheel' of road transport in the 1970s, and the lorry drivers' 'larger than life' branch 5/35, whose meetings Tony attended by invitation. He concluded partly with admiration for shop steward power; but also with warnings that by using that power to abort the Labour Government's Social Contract with the unions in the later 1970s, trade union militancy helped to bring in Thatcher and two decades of militant Tory anti-unionism in response.

That judgment summed up Tony's position. He never wanted the unions to box themselves into the wrong corner, politically. The role of trade unionism to defend and enhance the role of workers in their place of work, where so much of life is lived, is too important to be allowed to fail.

Tony Corfield speaking
at the Labour Party Conference, 1968:
cartoon by Bill Pappas, published in *The Guardian*,
Oct. 1968 and reprinted to accompany Tony's obituary in 2011.

