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George

Barbara Frances Wootton married George Percival Wright on 5 July 1935. If she stood beside him meekly in a white dress, as she had for Jack Wootton on that doomed September day in Cambridge eighteen years before, there is no record of it. George was her second marriage, and this marriage was different. Everything about it was different. Barbara was six years older than George, and they had been teacher and student. Her privileged background was matched by his disadvantaged one. Whereas Jack and she had met in the cloistered spaces of Cambridge, her courtship with George was conducted in the much freer and distinctly socialist arena of the adult education movement. When they married, Beatrice Webb wrote to congratulate Barbara on taking a partner in research (there was perhaps a little projection here), and to discuss the matter of a wedding gift. Beatrice used to give her nieces teasetts, but apparently people no longer drank tea: ‘they all drink cocktails, and I don’t know how to give you a cocktail set, so I’ll give you some money’. With the money Barbara bought a rug. But nobody, observed Barbara with respect to the ‘partner in research’ phrase, would have called George that.¹ Left-wing students at the LSE dispatched a wedding telegram commenting warmly on ‘a union of theory and practice’.² What it was exactly a union of remains in large part a matter of conjecture. There are no private papers left which record the history of the relationship. George, an elusive character in his lifetime, has bequeathed few traces of either his public or private life. There are photographs in the archives: photographs of George smiling, of George smoking, of George reading, of George posturing on holiday beaches; photographs of convivial times with friends; but there are remarkably few photographs of George and Barbara together. Two that have survived portray a couple standing slightly apart on a Corsican beach, courtesy of Barbara’s friend Vladimir Raitz, who founded the package holiday; George’s lean muscular body is next to Barbara’s somewhat more rounded one; the sea shows through the space between them, George’s feet are rooted confrontationally in the sand, and on the back are inscribed the words ‘an

argument'. George scandalized their friends with this swimming costume which 'revealed rather more than it concealed to the point where people's eyebrows raised'.³ In a more discrete view, the two of them stand side by side, shoulders touching, in a sunlit English garden. She wears the white dress and clutches a book. He, in rumpled shirt and shorts, faces the camera with a defiant manly look.

How did they meet? Who was George? Why did Barbara enter this unlikely union? There are differing accounts of their first meeting: at a Summer School in 1934;⁴ at the WEA Centre in Fulham.⁵ Throughout the period from the early 1920s to the late 1930s, Barbara maintained an active WEA connection: she was on the District Executive Committee of the London branch; she chaired the WEA Advisory Board responsible for appointing WEA tutors and also visited WEA classes on its behalf; from around 1930 she represented the London District on the Central Executive of the WEA and was a member of its Finance and General Purposes Committee;⁶ as editor of the WEA journal *The Highway* for several years, she was responsible for overseeing the development of WEA policy.⁷ In one of these WEA capacities, she might well have visited the WEA Centre in Fulham to which George Wright was attached and encountered him there. According to her autobiography, they first met properly at a Summer School somewhere in the English countryside in the late 1920s or early 1930s. 'I have many happy memories of these months in Herts or Hants or Sussex, with their blend of stimulating company and golden harvest fields,' she wrote. 'Students came and went, mostly staying one or two weeks at a time, and amongst those who came most regularly, stayed longest and was most popular was one of the name of George Wright. Blond and vivacious, with considerable histrionic gifts, and a marvellous repertoire of near-extinct Cockney songs, George was very attractive to the opposite sex, and more than one of his fellow students was disposed to fall in love with him. So was I.'⁸ In the photographs of these Summer Schools, George looks rakish with his shorts and patterned jersey; Barbara has developed shorts herself, but she still looks bookish and composed. One of the many who wrote to her when the autobiography was published was Alec Linton, who had met George at a Summer School in Buntingford during the War (that very Buntingford the hero of Barbara's novel *London's Burning* passed through on his way to work). A photograph of George smoking and reading in a deckchair at Buntingford in 1942 has survived in the archives. 'I was so impressed with his friendly and kind attitude to everybody,' Alec Linton reported. 'One night at a dance I well remember pointing out to George that none of the students were asking the staff girls of the village to dance with them and as I am not a dancer, George went over to the girls and gave them a dance or two.'⁹

It was one of the most pleasurable of Barbara's obligations as Director of the University of London's Extra-Mural Department, to take charge during August of a residential programme of lectures and entertainment for adult students returning to education. This tradition of the Summer School had become an established part of the adult education movement by 1900; the first in London happened at Eton College in 1914, and was attended by a fishmonger, a needlewoman, two tailors, two joiners, and five clerks, among others.¹⁰ In 1925 eight centres across England and Wales provided Summer Schools for 774 students, figures which had become twelve and 1,423 respectively by 1935.¹¹ Margaret Cole called Summer Schools 'that peculiarly Anglo-Saxon combination of holiday-making, sociability and more-or-less intellectual effort'.¹² Their ostensible purpose was to enable tutorial class students to carry their studies further than was possible under ordinary class conditions, 'and to meet and exchange ideas with their fellow students and tutors under delightful conditions'.¹³ The emphasis on delight is evident in the brochures for the London Tutorial Class Summer Schools, which depict the various country houses where the Schools were held, and advertise the leisure opportunities available: the brochure for the 1934 School, for example, offers four tennis courts, a pool, a cricket pitch, a gym, rooms for 'socials and dancing', rambles and tournaments. The balance between fun and work was always a slight tension in the proceedings. Some students did treat Summer Schools as a cheap summer holiday, and it was certainly the case that many workers had to use their annual holiday to attend them, which was why the holiday aspect was deliberately made attractive, but, on the other hand, students' minds were there to be stretched. Some came for the full four weeks, others for three or two or one. The fees were a modest £2 and 5 shillings (in 1934), and many were paid by trade unions or the WEA. Students worked on their own in the mornings, saw their tutors three or four times a week, and attended lectures 'on topics of general interest'.¹⁴ At the 1934 Summer School, the twenty lectures provided included Barbara Wootton on 'Social Class and Social Equality', 'The Place of Dogma in the Modern World', 'First Lessons from the Soviet Experiment' and 'A Bird's Eye View of Contemporary Economic Trends and Policies'. Other offerings were 'Is Town Life Fatal to Poetry?' (Miss H.M. Matthews), 'Red Vienna' (R.M.M. Stewart), 'Laughter' (Mrs E. Collie-Radford), and sociologist David Glass on 'The Development of Modern Japan' and 'The Future of the Town'. Special lectures were given by two visiting speakers: Dr Ulrich Mayer on 'Why Democracy in Germany has Failed' and Dr Nikolaus Pevsner on 'William Morris'. Mr J.R. Williams gave a piano recital.¹⁵

The practical arrangements for these annual events, for which Barbara was responsible, were extremely taxing. Visits of inspection had to be made to schools

and other places, and there were doubts about the standard of accommodation, whether linen would be provided, or vegetarian meals served. They needed a big house, comfortably furnished, with grounds and leisure facilities. In 1931, she triumphed in finding Stratton Park, a splendid originally Elizabethan manor house with a 170-acre park and formally landscaped gardens. William Cobbett's *Rural Rides* called it a 'large and very beautiful estate' with a very fine oakwood.¹⁶ The estate had passed from the dukes of Bedford through the Baring banking dynasty to a Miss James who ran it as a girls' school.¹⁷ Stratton Park housed the annual University of London Tutorial Class Summer School for seven years. It sits on the front of the Summer School brochure as a large solid white house with an Italianate portico at the front, a backdrop of trees and manicured lawns. The place was so comfortable and the food so good that an HM Inspector suspected that the meal he ate there on his visit had been specially staged for his benefit.¹⁸ Unfortunately, later the food deteriorated and Barbara was advised to hire a housekeeper and cook from the King's College of Household and Social Science.¹⁹

George Wright was one of fifty-four students who attended the 1934 Stratton Park Summer School. The romance between the thirty-seven-year-old tutorial class director and the dashing thirty-one-year-old student would undoubtedly have caused much non-intellectual gossip, but it was not their first meeting. George had taken part in the Stratton Park Summer School since 1931. We know this because he declared his allegiance to the place at a joint Tutorial Class and WEA Conference held in February 1935, a few months before he married Barbara. She was there at the same conference, giving a 'lantern lecture', and the topic of moving the Summer School from Stratton Park to a seaside resort, which some students favoured, was aired. George, representing the Fulham WEA branch at the Conference, expressed the view that it would be difficult, if not impossible, to find a more suitable place; he would like it to stay there.²⁰ Stratton Park occupied a special place in their relationship.

The name 'George Wright' first crops up in the Minutes of the Tutorial Classes Committee in 1933 when he is recorded as having been successful in obtaining one of the two adult scholarships awarded by the Council in that year.²¹ The scholarship scheme started in 1932 with the purpose of allowing selected London Tutorial Class students to progress to further study, either full- or part-time, by taking a University of London Diploma. It was a way into a university course for people who had missed out on formal schooling. The procedure was for students to apply and be interviewed by Barbara, who made recommendations to the Tutorial Classes Committee, although the final decision about admission rested with the school or college concerned.²² Thus, George would have had his suitability

for further study scrutinized by Barbara in 1932, and he would have been an established Tutorial Class student by then, perhaps even taking one of her classes. In the 1929–30 session, she was teaching the ‘History of Socialistic Thought’ and ‘Control of Industry’, and in 1930–1 ‘Democracy in Politics and Industry’, all in St Pancras; in 1931–2 her classes included ‘British Social Policy and Finance’ in Lambeth and ‘Economics’ in Harrow.²³ George and she had a spirited exchange about the working of the scholarship scheme at the February 1935 Conference, when George said he thought the one-year scholarship (which he had had) should be abolished in favour of the two-year one, and that arrangements should be made to ensure that students were found suitable positions at the end of their course. He was, perhaps, making a personal comment here. Barbara’s riposte was to suggest that students could take evening courses, to which George replied that many working-class students finished work too late for this to be possible.²⁴ He did complete his own diploma, which was in Economics and Social Science at the LSE, a popular choice among scholarship students.

George Percival Wright was born in Fulham in 1903, to a long-established working-class family. His father, Thomas, was a journeyman baker. There were five sons: Thomas, Alfred, George, Frederick and Herbert, and one daughter, Winnie. All the sons, except Frederick, worked in the family taxi-cab firm. Frederick became a baker, like his father, and worked for J. Lyons at Cadby Hall, eventually being promoted to General Foreman of the Sponge Cake Department.²⁵ He met his wife Florence (Florrie) there, in the French pastry department; Florrie and Barbara got on well and stayed in touch for many years. In the 1901 Census, the Wright family is living in Tabor Road, Fulham, but George was born two streets away two years later in Southerton Road. By the next Census in 1911 the Wrights are three-quarters of a mile south in Prothero Road, a short street at an angle off Dawes Road, today an unprepossessing, traffic-dense route leading from Hammersmith to Fulham. They shared the Prothero Road house, from where they ran their taxi business, with another family; it must have been cramped in a two-storey house with no inside toilet. The whole of George’s life was lived in this same square mile or so of south-west London, nestled in a loop of the Thames between Putney and Chelsea. By the time he was born, Fulham had lost its rural character; nearby Hammersmith Broadway had become a major transport hub, with the extension of the London Underground and connecting railways; and featureless streets of terraced houses provided cramped homes for large working-class families. Today the house in Southerton Street where George was born is run down, with rubbish and broken-into meters in the front, whereas the Tabor Road house is gentrified, with a smart red door and a blue pot of flowers on the window-sill.

George and his siblings went to local schools. Frederick, the baker, left school at fourteen, so George probably did as well. It seems that George got up to the usual sort of trouble for working-class boys; discussing her work as a magistrate on a television programme, 'The War Against Crime' in the 1960s, Barbara revealed that, at the age of nine or ten, he had been a juvenile delinquent.²⁶ Her comments provoked a headline in *The Daily Mirror*, 'When my husband was a delinquent, by Baroness'.²⁷ There were two things that marked George out from the rest of his family and his background: his physical appearance; and his drive to rise up in the world. George was 'a very good-looking chap'.²⁸ Everybody who met him noticed this, and it was a feature of which George himself was not unaware. Brenda Collison, George's niece, daughter of Frederick and Florrie, remembers: 'Uncle George always looked immaculate. He was casually dressed, but immaculate. He would remind me of somebody like Noel Coward. And he had these amazing bushy eyebrows. He reminded me of an actor. To me, he was glamorous.' To her, he was a star. As a child, she absolutely idolized this glamorous uncle, who was interested in her schooling and the psychology of her family, and who took her and her brother John for rides on their bikes in Richmond Park, after which the children would be bought lemonade while George had his half-pint in the pub. 'I remember Uncle George as being apart from the rest of us ... he was the only one in the family who bettered himself.'²⁹

'Taxi-cab driver' was George's occupation on the marriage certificate, but at some point in his twenties he had discovered the WEA, and thereafter he had taken advantage of this route for bettering himself. The WEA was born the same year as George, in 1903; its founder, Albert Mansbridge, had a somewhat romantic vision of education (no educated man could do harm to his community, education was an instrument for social justice³⁰), but Mansbridge's efforts did bring together the co-operative movement, the trade unions, and the patronage of universities such as Oxford in a genuine alliance of workers and intellectuals. This alliance had the solid underlying political purpose of educating those who would serve the growing Labour movement. Socialism and education went hand in hand. Any rational (educated) analysis of social and economic issues must surely yield the conclusion that capitalism is inefficient and unfair.³¹ This diagnosis was immensely congenial to Barbara Wootton, whose own involvement in adult education was underpinned by a commitment to a moral need for equality. But there was, according to her, another fundamental concern here: the problem of modern industrial work, which is so unsatisfying that it cannot possibly form the basis of people's life interests. The job is just something to be done in order to live; living means a productive use of leisure time. Workers want education, but on their

terms; most of them know incomparably more than they easily convey and most academics know incomparably less. It was a radical point of view which she was not afraid of declaring, including at a Conference of the Industrial Welfare Society in Oxford in 1927, before George entered her life.³² He was not a writer or a public figure, so there was no danger of his upsetting audiences with such sentiments, but they must surely have endeared Barbara to him. When he died it was said of him at his memorial service that he had no patience with cant of any kind and would have sympathized with William Morris's testy remark: 'I don't need to read Karl Marx in order to know that this society has to be changed'.³³

The reading of Karl Marx was something that happened in Barbara's tutorial classes, although the Tutorial Classes Committee kept a watchful eye on the line that tutors were taking; in 1936–7, she was instructed to enquire carefully into the precise scope of a proposed Westminster class on 'Marxism and Modern Thought'.³⁴ The topic of Marxism was a heated one for the adult education movement in Britain, some regarding its espousal as essential to working-class activism, and others seeing it as antipathetic to the important goal of integrating working-class students into a national culture.³⁵ This argument was part of a much wider one about how socialist the new Labour Party ought to, or could, be, in order to fit itself for effective long-running government.³⁶ Barbara herself was focused on the business of expecting conventional academic standards of people with little previous exposure to formal education, an expectation which her experience running tutorial classes was leading her increasingly to criticize. As she explained, in March 1935, to another Conference on the Teaching of Economics in Adult Classes, chaired by G.D.H. Cole, there were three issues: often working-class adult students had great difficulty producing written work; they had to be dissuaded from simply trotting out their own views; and academics had to lose a few of their own pretensions. 'We have no right to be teaching Economics to working-class people unless (1) the people who come to our classes get the sense that really valuable results can be got by the thinking process; and (2) the students also get the impression that unsolved problems remain of which *nobody* has got the whole solution yet'.³⁷ By the time she elaborated on this view in the journal *Adult Education* in 1937, she had made some 500 visits to different University of London tutorial classes, and had seen some 2,000 examples of written work. Her piece entitled 'A Plea for Constructive Teaching' took the side of the extra-mural students whose concern was to derive something useful from their exposure to academic education against the conventional Socratic tradition of the university – that very tradition her own parents had upheld which combined scepticism with contempt for applying knowledge to any practical uses. Was this not, she asked,

and did students not perceive it as, a case of 'sheer intellectual immorality'? She suggested that all tutorial classes should operate with a kind of 'standing order' which would require them to end with the question: if I was the person who had to act in this matter, what is the best answer my knowledge and insight would suggest? It was in this sense that teaching ought always to be constructive.³⁸

Albert Mansbridge feared a middle-class takeover of the WEA, and available statistics do suggest a decline in the proportion of students from working-class backgrounds after the 1930s. But when George Wright first became involved, around one in three WEA students were manual workers like himself.³⁹ When George went to the LSE in 1933, he still drove a taxi for a living. This gave the press much cause for celebration, as they spotted the headline-creating conjunction of well-known lady academic and unknown uneducated consort. *The Manchester Guardian* picked up the impending marriage in its 'Court and Personal' section on 26 March 1935: 'Mrs. Barbara Wootton, Director of Studies for Tutorial Classes at the University of London, is to marry Mr. George Wright, a Fulham taxi-cab driver'. Asked about his future plans, George said, "'I shall probably just carry on as I am for a while'".⁴⁰ *The Daily Herald* tracked him down to the cabmen's shelter near Brompton Oratory, featuring the alliance on its front page: 'Economist to Wed Taxicab Driver'.⁴¹ In *The Daily Mail* and *The Daily Mirror* Barbara was photographed wearing a curious little hat and looking definitely not amused next to the headlines 'Woman Finance Expert to Marry Taxi-Driver'⁴² and 'Woman Chief of Varsity to Wed Taxi-man'.⁴³ The *Mirror* journalist patently had fun with George, whom he described as 'a good-looking fair-haired young man'. George told him that Mrs Wootton had been a great help to him in his studies 'clarifying many points which might otherwise have proved intricate'. By the time she met George, Barbara had a considerable public profile as an academic, a policy pundit and a broadcaster. She had two books published and a long list of articles. Women like her were rare at the time. 'Speak the name Barbara Wootton,' commented a journalist in 1967, 'and a good many people will say: "Isn't that the brilliant economist on 'The Brains Trust' who married a taxi-driver?"'⁴⁴ 'Don who married taxi driver'⁴⁵ became a legend whose power was only superseded by the even greater shock to class-ridden Britain of the first woman peer having such a personage as a husband. In 1958, the new Baroness Wootton was asked for a photo of herself and George standing 'beside his taxi' (the taxi that he had hardly been near except as a passenger for twenty years) outside the House of Lords.⁴⁶ Long after George's death, Barbara was haunted by the designation 'Cabbie's widow'.⁴⁷

George Wright and Barbara Wootton decided to marry after the 1934 Summer School at Stratton Park. They spent a few days together at Mundesley on the East Norfolk coast playing tennis and bar billiards; the September sun shone for

them out of cloudless skies. Back in London, they tried to keep the engagement a secret, but a well-meaning friend announced it at a students' social gathering, and thereafter they were besieged by the press. Barbara stayed in her flat in Hampstead, and George tried unsuccessfully to deflect the journalists by riding round London on a bus, but he got caught when he went home in the evening to Fulham, despite the strategy of entering through a neighbour's house and climbing over the garden wall. At the height of the press interest, Barbara's mother, Adela, ate her lunch in the market place in the centre of Cambridge to show her refusal to be affected by this kind of prurient publicity.⁴⁸ One reviewer of Barbara's autobiography had a particular reason for remembering the media attention attracted by the Wootton-Wright marriage:

The three of us emerged from a meeting in the City one evening and George said gaily to Mrs Wootton (who had her car) 'Are you going to give me a ride?'. Such a request had not occurred to me, but I quickly thought 'I've much more right to a lift than he has; I've known her longer, we have worked in the same office, and, moreover, she will be practically passing my door'. Mrs Wootton unhesitatingly invited me to get in beside her, and George sat behind us, leaning forward and spreading his arms over our shoulders. Only a short time after this incident I heard (indeed, the world heard) that they had married each other. The shock of this unsuspected news, plus the embarrassing realisation that I had unwittingly 'played gooseberry', embedded the incident in my memory for all time.⁴⁹

They did, however, manage to keep the date of the wedding secret. It took place in the registry office in Fulham with Barbara's brother Neil and Leo Simeon as witnesses, and afterwards Barbara and George lunched in the restaurant attached to the London County Council school for cooks and waiters, where you could get an excellent lunch for 2s 6d, 'prepared by chefs of the future and served by young waiters under training'.⁵⁰ Then they played a game of tennis on the municipal courts in Fulham. Barbara secured a sabbatical from her University of London Summer School obligations, and they treated themselves to a honeymoon in Barbara's favourite Norway, in Ulvik on the spectacular Hardanger fjord. Unhappily, after a week George fell ill and Barbara was convinced he had diphtheria and would die and disappear from her life, just as Jack Wootton had done.⁵¹ But George recovered and they returned from Norway to a flat Barbara had found for them in Fulham. It was on the top floor of a block in a garden where tenants were allowed their own plots to cultivate, thereby saving the landlords the cost of upkeep. Number eighty-four Napier Court, though technically in Fulham, was in a smart area close to the river with trees and greenery and landscaped gardens. Close by was a

private members' club, with a Georgian clubhouse and forty-two acres of grounds, where the English upper-middle classes played croquet and sipped gin and tonic. A public park backing onto this provided tennis courts and a pleasant open space. Solid red-brick mansion blocks sat comfortably between the road and the river, where today the Thames cycle path will take you to Kingston in one direction and Hammersmith in the other. Within earshot of the flat, trains rumble over the embankment to Putney Bridge Station, but the aeroplanes on their low flight paths to and from Heathrow would have been absent in George and Barbara's day. A concrete 1960s block now stands in place of the original Napier Court. Their flat, on the top floor, had a balcony, and a view of open green space, so important to Barbara, and when they took it they were unaware that in a few years' time living in a top-floor flat in London would be a risky enterprise; in the event, and much to their surprise, the flat was not bombed. The first record of Barbara living in Napier Court is with Leo Simeon,⁵² so some delicate relationship-manoeuving may have needed to be done; intriguingly, the second woman Barbara would live with, after her years with George were over, later also moved to Napier Court.

After their marriage, and perhaps helped by it, George reduced the time he devoted to the taxi business and increased his activities in adult education and in Labour politics. It was probably through the local Labour Party in Fulham that he met Morgan Phillips, who in 1944 began a seventeen-year stint as National Secretary of the Labour Party. Morgan Phillips and George became close friends. Like George, Phillips had a working-class background – he was the son of a Welsh coal-miner, and had started out working in the pits himself. His route to prominence in the Labour Party was accomplished through trade unionism, work as an agent for the West Fulham Labour Party and the post of Propaganda Officer at Transport House.⁵³ However, George's friendship with Phillips did not guarantee professional support; years later, on at least one occasion, Phillips was overtly critical of George's work as Education Officer at Transport House. (George had silly ideas about training and used unnecessary words to express them.)⁵⁴ It is rumoured that George supported Phillips' work for the Labour movement by reverting to his original occupation and driving him around.⁵⁵

Another of George's socialist alignments was with a fictional character called Henry Dubb. George penned a regular column 'full of warm beer and arguments in public bars' under the title 'Adventures of Henry Dubb' in a new Socialist weekly called *Forward*.⁵⁶ Henry Dubb is the iconic class-unconscious proletarian, the 'good, working man' of the capitalist imagination. He is the working man who does not see the corrupt social system behind the manifold capitalist illusions of his everyday life, and whose resilient lack of awareness lands him in all sorts of scrapes which

are excuses for the more correctly politicized to make fun of him.⁵⁷ Henry Dubb was created by the American cartoonist Ryan Walker. During the 1920s especially, the class politics of laughter generated by radical cartoonists such as Walker had a didactic as well as an entertaining function: Henry Dubb and his like were active forces in spreading socialist ideologies and goals.⁵⁸ *Forward* had reprinted the first Henry Dubb cartoon series, but the character also turned up in other newspapers, such as *The Daily Herald*. In the reincarnation penned by George Wright, the by-line was 'the life and times of an ordinary bloke', and Henry Dubb appeared as a rather dour manual worker with a penchant for the ladies and propping up the bar in his local, The Queen's Legs. There were columns about the Annual General Meeting of the Floodtyde Labour Party, getting 'the NHS into focus' (Henry visits 'Pupils, the Opticians') and a catchy account of a local by-election: Henry drove a van around with a loudspeaker operated by a Lady DeNaquer, who was 'easy on the eyes ... and a Fabian'.⁵⁹ Henry Dubb meant different things to different people. R.H. Tawney, staunch supporter of the WEA, defined him in a footnote to an essay on 'Christianity and the Social Revolution', published in 1935: 'H.D.: the civilian equivalent of P.B.I. or poor bloody infantry, i.e. the common, courageous, good-hearted, patient, proletarian fool, whose epic is contained in the well-known lines, "We go to work to earn cash to buy the bread to get the strength to go to work to earn the cash," etc ... I seem to remember,' goes on Tawney, 'an occasion on which a telegram addressed to Henry Dubb, Labour Party Conference, was duly delivered at the correct sea-side resort. The statement that, on the chairman inviting the addressee to claim it, four-fifths of the comrades sprang to their feet, is, however an exaggeration.'⁶⁰

Forward was originally a Scottish publication, the voice of the Glasgow Independent Labour Party. It was converted into an English national weekly by a group around the journalist and newspaper editor Francis Williams (later to be a colleague of Barbara's on the Board of the BBC and in the House of Lords). The move to bring *Forward* down south was galvanized by the need for a strategy to influence developments in Labour politics, and specifically to address the problem of false consciousness among the working classes. Persuading the working man and his wife (Henry Dubb's was called Henrietta) to support socialism was critical in these years when the Labour Party was still in its infancy as the main political alternative to Conservative Government. Francis Williams edited *Forward* and its assistant editor was John Harris (later Lord Harris of Greenwich) who became Hugh Gaitskell's personal assistant; the paper and its contributors were agents in an internal Labour Party fight between the Gaitskellites who wanted to 'modernize' the constitution by making it less socialist and the 'Bevanites' who were determined to keep it that way.⁶¹

George Wright's escape from taxi-driving was furthered when he became active in local government. He was a member of the London County Council (LCC), representing Islington in north London from 1946 to 1952, and thereafter an Alderman.⁶² The creation of the LCC in 1889 marked the birth of the idea of London as one great city, and provided an outlet for the energies of 'public-minded men and women' like George who wanted to do something practical to improve living conditions and opportunities in their local areas.⁶³ The year before George and Barbara got married saw the first Labour-controlled LCC, with a strong Fabian component, including Sidney Webb; most appropriately, in the summer of their marriage, the LCC took a national lead in removing the so-called 'marriage bar' – the provision whereby professional women were compelled to resign their posts on marriage. At its inception, the LCC consisted of 118 Councillors, elected for three years, and nineteen Aldermen selected by the Councillors and serving for six years; the numbers varied according to a formula which took account of the number of London MPs. In the early decades, governing London was arduous work – on average, Councillors needed to commit four days a week; those who were also Committee Chairs even longer.⁶⁴ It seems unlikely that George was as devoted as this, but in the 1940s he did perform various roles for the LCC: Vice-Chairman of the Parks Committee, 1947–8; Chairman of the Restaurants and Catering Committee, 1948–50; and LCC representative on the Joint Committee of Governors of the Bethlem and Maudsley Hospitals, 1948–51.⁶⁵ According to Barbara, his political ambitions went beyond local politics, and several times he attempted to get a parliamentary seat, but was never adopted.⁶⁶ In the early 1950s, he took a paid job for the Labour Party at Transport House as Education Officer. He was made redundant from the Transport House job in 1961, 'an action which evoked protests from many members', according to George's obituary in *The Sunday Telegraph*.⁶⁷ But whatever George did in these various capacities never attracted public attention the way his wife's activities did. As comments after he died phrased it, 'George was not a leader and never thought of himself as a leader';⁶⁸ his main interests remained in local government affairs, and what he enjoyed most of all was lively talk with others who shared his passion for Labour causes.⁶⁹

It is a heartening memento to George's role in her life that Barbara declared, when interviewed at the age of eighty-one by a local newspaper journalist, that of all her years the happiest were the first five of this second marriage.⁷⁰ From their base in Napier Court, Barbara and George fitted in a lot of travelling before the outbreak of the Second World War. They sailed three times to New York: the first time in July 1936, they went for two months on the splendidly new *Queen Mary*; this was their first voyage on that ship, a voyage which had been misremembered by

Barbara in her autobiography as having taken place six years earlier. The passenger lists record their personal details: 'five foot nine inches, of fair complexion, fair hair with grey eyes' (him); 'five foot seven inches, of fair complexion, brown hair with blue eyes' (her).⁷¹ They went to the USA again in 1937 and in 1938 on the *Transylvania*. These journeys enabled them to enjoy holidays in California and Mexico, among other places, although the ostensible purpose was always Barbara's work. In 1936 she attended a conference in Virginia on 'War Debts and the Future of the League of Nations',⁷² and she was a Chatham House delegate at another conference of the Institute of Pacific Relations in Yosemite National Park in California.⁷³ The Tutorial Classes Committee had to be consulted about these invitations, because they would mean her missing the annual Summer School; Barbara put her case most persuasively (and successfully), citing the useful contacts she would make and the fact that she would be bound to learn much of value to her tutorial class work.⁷⁴ It helped that the previous year she had instituted a system whereby she and her two staff tutors had leave of absence from Summer School duties one year in six. But the 1936 absence came on top of her first year off, the summer of her marriage to George; interestingly, the private reason for absence, the conjoining of the Director of Tutorial Classes with a Tutorial Class student, does not feature at all in the official Minutes.

In Barbara's memory of the 1930s, there is the extra-mural work, the continuation of a long list of government committees – adult education, workmen's compensation – and this 'rather absorbing personal life'. It occupied a lot of time, she told an interviewer in 1971. 'Private affairs don't do much good to public affairs'.⁷⁵ Her and George's escapades generated several amusing stories, which were repeated by Barbara on many occasions subsequently. On one of their arrivals in New York, George was examined for venereal disease and Barbara for head lice: 'The odd thing was that it apparently never occurred to anybody that the risks might have been reversed'.⁷⁶ The travel to Mexico was financed from the proceeds of a lecturing trip, and thereby hangs another tale, again retold by Barbara several times, including when she spoke in 1962 at the Golden Jubilee dinner of the Cambridge branch of the National Council of Women. Having recited a number of the disadvantages that still accrue to being a woman, Barbara noted that it occasionally works to one's advantage:

I recall one occasion when I was fortunate enough to give some rather well paid lectures in the United States, and my husband came with me, and went on the razzle, and when we had finished, we went, as you always have to do, to get an income tax clearance. And we sat down side by side, and all the conversation was naturally addressed to the man of the party. They looked at his papers and said, 'Oh,

you've been here on vacation?' 'Yes', says George. 'Have you had a good time?' 'Yes', says George, with mounting enthusiasm. 'Don't suppose you've earned any money?' 'No,' says George, with absolute truth. I thought, I don't expect to be spoken to but if they would just say, 'Did your wife earn any money?' I will own up, but, if I am the furniture, the furniture I will be. This is thirty years ago, and in my house to this day there is what in those days was considered an outsize refrigerator, which I bought, I am delighted to say, with the money which is entirely owing to the Bureau of the Internal Revenue of the United States of America. And it is still going – and to complete the story, the lectures which provided this were in honour of Anna Howard Shaw, a very well known American feminist – so the whole thing matches very well.⁷⁷

Her American lectures on social and economic conditions in England were spread out over five weeks – a not inconsiderable assignment that probably did justify a refrigerator – and again she had to get official permission from her employers at the University of London, a complicated business that involved the recalculation of the entire annual leave system, as well as consent for her to receive payment from the American University (the \$2,000 that paid for the prized refrigerator).⁷⁸

The conventional stereotypes of the Revenue authorities reversed their actual roles: Barbara was the main breadwinner, George the person whose less remunerative occupation varied according to circumstances. When they went to New York in 1936, he gave his occupation as 'teacher'; in 1937 as 'taxi driver'.⁷⁹ Convention would have dictated that Barbara should have taken the surname 'Wright' after her marriage to George, and it seems that she did have a passport in that name.⁸⁰ In the 1938 transatlantic passenger lists she appears as 'Barbara Frances-wright', but on the *Queen Mary* list in 1936 she reinvokes her maiden name and becomes 'Barbara Frances-Wright Adam'.⁸¹ One imagines the two of them having fun with names. She must, at any rate, have made it clear to George that she was not going to change her name. By the time of their marriage, 'Wootton' had been her surname for nearly half her life; it was the name she worked and wrote under and was known by, and her irremediable loyalty to Jack outweighed any displeasure she might cause George by continuing to use it. Actually, all the evidence points to George being extremely proud of Barbara. He enjoyed rather than envied her achievements. He greeted her successes with generosity and genuine pleasure, and he was particularly pleased to become 'the first male peeress in the world'.⁸² He would neither have been surprised nor displeased by the headlines of his obituary notices: 'Lady Wootton's husband dies',⁸³ 'Baroness Wootton's husband dies',⁸⁴ 'Life peeress's husband dies'.⁸⁵

At thirty-eight when she married George, Barbara could still have had children. It seems that she wanted to, but that George was reluctant to be tied down.

He 'set his face resolutely against' their having a child, and Barbara was forced to accept that 'the price of insistence would be too high'.⁸⁶ She told a friend in later years that she did not think George was responsible enough to be a father.⁸⁷ It would have generated great stress; her being the main breadwinner was another problem. There is some mystery about the cost of Barbara's insistence, however. According to the politician Frank Field, in a piece he wrote for *The Independent*, Barbara had a termination at some point in her relationship with George.⁸⁸ The publication of this claim (along with other remarks Frank made about Barbara's socialism and her yellow hair) angered some of those closest to Barbara, most notably her long-term friend and colleague, Vera Seal, politician Lena Jeger, and O.R. McGregor, another close academic colleague and friend.⁸⁹ These allegations and counter-allegations are part of a general mystery about Barbara's reproductive history. Both Vera in a letter (never published) to *The Independent Magazine* in 1988,⁹⁰ and McGregor in the Preface he wrote in 1992 to a posthumous collection of Barbara's writings, referred to 'the lifelong sadness' of the early miscarriage she had after marrying Jack: 'Throughout her life this loss remained her keenest bitterness'.⁹¹ What is clear is that Barbara did not have children, with or without George, and that she regretted this.

Children would have complicated things, since this second marriage, though possessed of real strengths, also had a seam of weakness running through it. What had attracted Barbara to George also attracted other women. Women fell for his face, his body, his conversation, his conviviality, his humour, his generosity; and he fell for them, one after another. George liked women, and they liked him. When he lectured to thirty-five of them at a Regional Women's Summer School for the East Midlands Labour Party in 1953, many wrote to say how much they had appreciated 'the vigorous discussion that George had stimulated'; the influence he had wielded would cover a wide area.⁹² But when he was not thus engaged in (intellectually) stimulating women, much of the time, with Barbara busy at her job, and writing, and her committee work, and then away lecturing herself, he was lonely. His old haunts and the Wright family home in Fulham were only a mile or so away, so it was natural to go back, and reinstate himself in the pub with his brothers and old and new friends, drinking warm beer, maybe under the guise of collecting material for Henry Dubb's latest exploits. In her autobiography, Barbara is up front and civilized about the problem of George's infidelities: 'From the earliest days of our marriage he had always found it necessary to have what I can only call a secondary wife round the corner. These relationships were not in any way casual affairs. All these secondary wives – at least all whom I knew – were unmarried, intelligent, sensible girls, nice-looking without being devastatingly

glamorous.”⁹³ George’s reluctance to break up his home with Barbara on their account was well understood by his family. His niece Brenda recalls her mother, Florrie’s, intervention on one occasion: ‘My mother knew. I remember her saying to somebody, she told me, “I said to this lady ‘He’s never going to leave Barbara, he will never leave Barbara, he thinks the world of her, so you’re wasting your life. You should go off and make your own.’” And she did.’ After the Second World War, in the late 1940s and early 1950s, the Wrights used to have holidays on the south coast with Florrie’s two brothers, who ran a couple of little guest houses by the sea. One of the brothers had a very attractive young wife ‘and I can remember being down there, we were all down there together, and I used to watch these two, if we went out anywhere these two would always be in a corner talking... what’s going on over there? “You know what your Uncle George is.” He just loved the ladies. And it would take some special sort of woman to tolerate that.’⁹⁴

Barbara, of course, *was* a special sort of woman, and as a social scientist she read this situation as a perfectly acceptable custom entrenched in many areas of the world – polygamy.⁹⁵ As it was acceptable there, so she decided to regard it as perfectly acceptable to her in Fulham. After all, she was in the limelight and George was not, and she was very busy and George was not quite so busy, and so he had every reason for finding a way to amuse himself. She was even quite friendly with several of the secondary wives. More of a problem was the social disapproval occasioned by George’s behaviour. A society which called itself monogamous could be deeply censorious of those who were not, especially perhaps when the alternative that had been established was some kind of *modus vivendi* which worked, at least on some level. There was, after all, nothing sacred about the monogamous family, nothing intrinsically wonderful about it. Barbara did not adore the family or consider family life a life of bliss, as she confided to the audience for a Channel 4 ‘Face the Press’ programme many years later.⁹⁶ What one had to contend with was a façade of glorification: ‘This contemporary idealization of the monogamous family is itself a remarkable social phenomenon,’ she wrote when she and George divided their domestic lives in 1955, noting that the statistics now showed that marriage had become a feeble obstacle to both pre- and extra-marital intercourse.⁹⁷ George and she were merely part of a trend.

As the years passed in Napier Court, traditional arguments about how a household should be run surfaced and added a further complication to the structural weaknesses of their marriage. The only rational conclusion was that Barbara should leave George’s domestic life and become a secondary wife herself. Her flight from Napier Court to Abinger in Surrey, the subject of a later chapter, came after twenty-one years of marriage, took several years to accomplish, and

Barbara Wootton's parents,
Adela Kensington and James Adam

Elizabeth Haynes, 'The Pie', Barbara's nanny

Barbara as a child, c. 1900

Barbara as a child, c. 1903

Barbara Adam, c.1916

Her brothers, Arthur Innes Adam
and Neil Kensington Adam

John Wesley ('Jack') Wootton

The wedding of Barbara Adam
and John Wesley Wootton,
5 September 1917

Barbara Wootton, c. 1924

Barbara's room in Girton College, Cambridge
(painted by Helen Maud Cam in the early 1920s)

Russia, 1932: photographs from Barbara Wootton's journey
(BW near the top, right of the centre, wearing glasses)

George Percival Wright, mid-1940s

George Wright and Barbara Wootton, c. 1937

A Summer School gathering, early 1930s

George Wright and Barbara Wootton, early 1950s, in Calvi, Corsica ('An Argument')

caused much unhappiness. When Barbara was asked, at the age of eighty, to explain her relationship with George, this is what she said:

He was one of my students, and a very unusual character. He had great social gifts and considerable intellectual powers. But, when he was born, the good fairies did not give him just that little bit of extra self-discipline that would have made him go a long way. There was a very strong, indestructible bond between him and myself. As for the taxi-driver/lecturer business, George was described after his death, by one of his best friends, as behaving as though the classless society already existed. So he did. I would say more than that. When he did so, other people responded accordingly.⁹⁸

When Barbara moved out of Napier Court in the mid-1950s, George returned to the Wright family haunts in Fulham. His younger brother Herbert, who looked after the maintenance of the taxis, had a flat above a shop opposite the garage in Bishops Road, and George went to live there, running a little secretarial business. Soon he was joined by a woman called Joan. The secretarial business was his downfall – or at least the ostensible reason for his being sacked by Transport House. ‘The Private Enterprise of Lady Wootton’s Husband’, read *The Daily Mail* headline in January 1961, reproducing the myth that the baroness who married the taxi-driver was still with him. George complained that Transport House had not given him enough work to do, so he had quietly set up a new occupation on the side, and Transport House complained about the new occupation, especially when George circulated them and other Labour organizations with promotional material offering shorthand, typing and duplicating services.⁹⁹ According to niece Brenda, George and his friends were all heavy smokers and drinkers – down the pub a couple of nights a week and on both weekend days. ‘I know there was one occasion when he’d been out for a night, he had a lovely bicycle, a Raleigh bicycle, and he was riding home on his bicycle and he said, “I was riding along and this lamp-post jumped out and hit me in the face”.’¹⁰⁰ In these post-Napier Court years, George seems to have somewhat gone to pieces. Nellie McGregor, the wife of O.R. McGregor, remembers visiting the ‘shoddy’ flat in Fulham in the late 1950s or early 1960s: ‘Terrible place to go to, because George really was a drinker, and he was making his own home brews and you went into this flat, and the corridor where you went in just had rows and rows of buckets with fermenting stuff in’.¹⁰¹ His family could not understand why he had behaved so badly that Barbara chose to leave him. As Brenda Collison put it, ‘This is the selfishness of men, isn’t it? I mean he knew that she knew and he wouldn’t stop ... Uncle George, I feel, didn’t value what he had ... I think he was a very sad man. I think he knew that he’d played it wrong.’¹⁰²

After they stopped living together, Barbara continued to support George financially – including backing his secretarial business – and her extreme loyalty to George impressed her friends.¹⁰³ She was reluctant to admit their separation publicly. As late as 1961, six years after the break, in a resumé for a visit to Australia, she presented the marriage as an ongoing affair.¹⁰⁴ Barbara's old nanny, The Pie, went on knitting socks for George, and asking Barbara to bring more wool, long after the separation, and it looks from the correspondence as though no-one was actually ever brave enough to tell The Pie that Barbara's husband had not left Napier Court with her to live in the country. George and Barbara never divorced. It seems that neither wanted to. Whether it was a successful marriage or not depends on your definition of both 'success' and 'marriage'. As Terry Morris, writer of Barbara's obituary in *The British Journal of Sociology*, aptly observed, it is difficult to judge success 'when so much about the institution of marriage is cloaked in half-blind denials of realities'.¹⁰⁵ George and Barbara were certainly not blind to any of the realities of their marriage. They never denied their deep-rooted commitment to one another, and, in their indestructible bond of friendship (itself no mean feat), they shared a vision of a just society in which those differences between them on which others so repetitively commented would neither matter nor exist.