

III. Notes

Spies

Paul G. Bahn

More than 80 years have passed since a little-known, bizarre and amusing episode in the prehistory of the French Pyrenees. Starting in July 1924, a 4-month excavation was undertaken in a cave in the Ariège region, known as the 'Violet Hole', by two American women – Ruth Otis Sawtell of Harvard, and Ida Treat. It proved to be a fruitful dig, uncovering a skeleton of the Azilian period, from the end of the Ice Age (Sawtell 1931; Vaillant-Couturier Treat & Vaillant-Couturier 1928).



Sir Basil Thomson

The crucial point, however, is that Ida Treat was at that time married to Paul Vaillant-Couturier, a politician (as well as poet, journalist and orator) whose experiences in the Great War had turned him towards pacifism and Communism. He eventually became editor of *L'Humanité*, and died in 1937. Vaillant-Couturier not only assisted in the excavation, but also provided the drawings illustrating the ladies' popular book which resulted from it, *Primitive Hearths in the Pyrenees* (Sawtell & Treat 1927). The Ariège had been his boyhood home.

The presence of this prominent Communist in the region was not without effect. Can it be a coincidence that, precisely at this time, Sir Basil Thomson appeared in the French Pyrenees, seeking permission to excavate the prehistoric cave of Marsoulas, not far from the Violet Hole? Thomson, then aged c. 62, had been chief of Scotland Yard's Special Branch (the Intelligence Service) until he retired in 1921. One of the greatest spy-catchers, it was he who had advised Mata Hari (in vain) to quit espionage and save her life; and he was profoundly anti-Bolshevik. Why did a man with absolutely no experience or competence in prehistory suddenly turn up at this time and place, seeking permission to dig? It seems unlikely that it was for the good of his health.

Indeed, we know from Norbert Casteret (later to become the world's leading speleologist), who assisted Thomson in his work, that he took a great interest in local hydro-electric installations, factories and industries. Moreover, he never received mail at his hotel, but instead drove 20 km every morning to a rendez-vous with a woman who handed him a package (Casteret 1960).

Somewhat amazingly, Thomson was indeed granted permission to dig not only in Marsoulas cave (where he failed to notice the numerous paintings and engravings on the walls till they were shown to him), but also in two nearby rock-shelters, Tarté and Téoule, during the month of August 1924. He even published a brief article (Thomson 1939) on the material from the latter site in 1939, the year of his death! Unfortunately no more is known about his presumed surveillance of Vaillant-Couturier's activities, though perhaps a file on this may exist somewhere. Later in life, Thomson was arrested for committing 'an act of indecency' in London's Hyde Park, a sorry end to a distinguished career in diplomacy and espionage.

References

- Casteret, N. 1960. 'L'Intelligence Service' sous terre dans la Grotte de Marsoulas. *Revue de Comminges* 73: 165–168.
- Sawtell, R. O. 1931. Azilian Skeletal Remains from Montardit (Ariège), France. *Papers of the Peabody Museum, Harvard*, XI, No. 4, 217–253.
- Sawtell, R. O. & Treat, I. 1927. *Primitive Hearths in the Pyrenees*. D. Appleton & Co.: New York & London.
- Thomson, Sir B. 1939. L'abri aurignacien de Téoule, près Tarté (Haute Garonne), pp. 195–200 in *Mélanges Bégouën*, Edition du Muséum: Toulouse.
- Vaillant-Couturier Treat, I. & Vaillant-Couturier, P. 1928. La grotte azilienne du 'Trou Violet' à Montardit (Ariège). *L'Anthropologie* 38: 217–243.

On the evening of Monday 1st July 1895, between 8pm and 11.30pm,

Conversazione in the University Museum 'By kind permission of the Delegates'

In honour of the eighteenth Annual meeting of the Midland Union of
Natural History Societies.

Evening Dress, Carriages at 11.30

Megan Price

About 400 people were present at this event, which was organised by Henry Underhill, a High Street Grocer and amateur archaeologist, and Edward Poulton, University of Oxford lecturer in Zoology.

The Victorian conversazione was a social gathering held once or twice a year by a learned society. It was a ubiquitous cultural event of tremendous significance and popularity, representing the epitome of middle class cultural sophistication; it was a way of demonstrating to the public the society's scientific prowess and its institutional pride. In Oxford, the Ashmolean Society, the Oxfordshire Natural History Society and Field Club, the Junior Science Club and the Oxford Architectural and Historical Society each held individual and distinct Conversazioni.

These occasions normally had a preliminary planning committee, an ambitious programme of events and presented exhibitions of 'natural and artificial wonders' (Bellamy 1908: 337). In Oxford these societies were able to make use of the new University Museum, which had opened in 1860. Surviving plans of exhibits and programmes of speakers reveal that during the 1880s and 1890s, University members such as Edward Tylor (1832–1917), Arthur Evans (1854–1941) and Edward Poulton (1856–1943) played prominent roles in the proceedings.

Non-University individuals were also involved. Henry Underhill (1855–1920), a High Street Grocer, was often called upon to give lanternslide lectures. Frank Bellamy, an Assistant at the Observatory, demonstrated various telescopes, and George Druce, a chemist and botanist, display his collection of local flora.