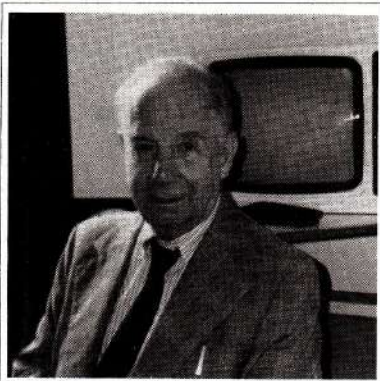


DENNIS BARDENS, Writer *Extra-ordinaire*: Still Going Strong At Eighty

Interviewed for Pensioners' Voice by 'Alexander'



By his own admission, Dennis Bardens was not a healthy child; nor did he have a particularly happy childhood. But life often consists not in being dealt a good hand of cards but in playing a poor one well. And Dennis Bardens has certainly played his cards well. From his humble and unhappy beginnings he went on to serve as Public Relations Adviser to the Czech government in exile during World War II, and to become at one time the highest paid freelance journalist in the country, and to edit the BBC TV Panorama programme. He has written sixteen books, including an international best-seller on psychic animals, which has run to (among others) Swedish, Argentinian and Japanese editions.

Dennis's father served in the army. He was the youngest of three children and the only one born in England; the others were born in India. His mother was by all accounts a very beautiful actress but not a very faithful wife: she deserted her family when he was three years old. When he was 14½, Dennis started as a junior on the Evening Express after lying about his age (he told the paper he was seventeen). The features editor was always drunk – an occupational hazard for many hacks – and this worked to Dennis's advantage.

After a spell at the Glamorgan Gazette during the Great Depression, he was, by the age of 27, working on the Sunday Express where, he admits, he got a bit big-headed. He also worked for the long defunct Sunday Referee and for the Daily Mirror. Of the thirties he recalls that the middle classes were all very pro-fascist and says of the press baron, Lord Rothermere, "If you're naughty enough on a high enough level of society, you do get a sort of automatic degree of immunity. When he died, all

the notabilities went to his funeral, including Churchill."

In the early fifties Dennis presented Focus on the Light Programme, the forerunner of Radio One. This covered every subject under the sun, and in 1954 he moved to television where he edited the Panorama programme, which he says, went out live. The BBC was a monopoly at this time, and he presented the programme for six months. Another journalist who was foolish enough to claim that he and not Dennis was the first editor of this programme found himself on the wrong end of a libel writ. Dennis proudly shows me the court judgement in his favour.

From TV he went back to the printed word and in 1967 published a biography of Churchill, Churchill in Parliament, and says of him, "Like all big men he was a mixture of good and bad . . . certainly he saved the country, and to a certain degree, Europe too. He did it by utter ruthlessness and by making some terrible mistakes."

Dennis also wrote a biography of Anthony Eden, which, unfortunately, was published before the Suez Crisis. In 1964 he wrote a biography of the newly married Princess Margaret, whom he described as an extremely beautiful woman; the book was illustrated by the Princess's husband – sadly they were later to divorce. He wrote not one, but two biographies of Norman, later Lord Justice Birkett, one devoted to his most famous cases, and one of the prison reformer Elizabeth Fry.

Not everyone Dennis wrote about was on the right side of the law though. One of his earliest books was about great con men. Crime Does Pay, which he published in 1948, was written in 6 weeks. The book dealt with, among others, Ivor Kreugar, the match king, and the king of liars, an out of work actor named Arthur Fergusson who sold Trafalgar Square for cash, sold Big Ben on the way out then let the White House on a 99 year lease! "I wish I could act like that," says Dennis admiringly, "I'd go and sell Buckingham Palace tomorrow!"

If crime has been one of his main interests, the supernatural and the occult has been another. His first book on ghosts sold a million in America; another, Ghosts and Hauntings, went out of print, while a third, Mysterious

Worlds, covered ghosts, flying saucers and related phenomena. He calls these books his Hee Bee Gee Bees. Does he believe in ghosts? In one sense they are real, because people definitely see them, "Whether they have any tangible, physical existence is another matter."

Dennis is also a believer in ESP, but is content to put it down to something which we cannot yet explain. He is though very sceptical about some of the claims which are made by "psychics" and says that there are a lot of charlatans about who are very skilful at exploiting people's credulity and spiritual hunger. "Most people are not reconciled to mortality". He believes this is a pity, because "it really spoils their time here".

Dennis's wife died after a car crash eight years ago; he was in the car too and claims he owes his life to a premonition. Clearly he is himself resigned to mortality, but he is not prepared to give up the ghost just yet. The evening of the morning I met him he was going to a party where he hoped to develop a contact for future commissions. At an age when a lot of people are content to sit and vegetate or to look back with nostalgia, Dennis Bardens is living proof that you are indeed as young as you feel.