

Claude Hender Henderson

Spy, Codebreaker, Diplomat and Puppeteer



Roch the wind in the clear day's dawin
Blaws the clouds heelster-gowdie ow'r the bay
But there's mair nor a roch wind blowin
Through the great glen o'the world the day.
It's a thocht that will gar oor rottans
-A' they rogues that gang gallus, fresh and gay –
Tak the road and seek ithir loanins
For their ill ploys, tae sport and play

(From *The Freedom Come-All-Ye* by Hamish Henderson)

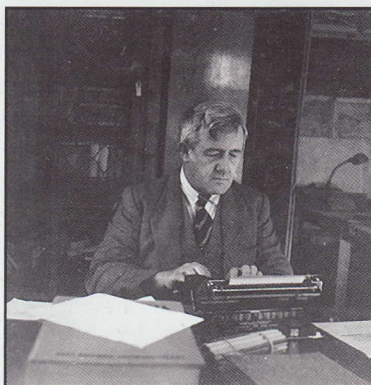
The Henderson Puppets

by
**MALCOLM
KNIGHT**

In April 2019 a troupe of 35 marionettes and puppets from "ither loanins" came home to Scotland from Kent. They were bequeathed to the Scottish Mask & Puppet Centre by Nancy Henderson, the granddaughter of Claude Hender Henderson, affectionately nicknamed by his family as *Norrio*. While there is no direct link between the poet and freedom fighter Hamish Henderson and the secret service spy and puppeteer Claude Hender Henderson other than the patronymic form of the name (son of Henry or "home ruler") they shared a similar creative and anti-fascist spirit. The bond between the Italy and Scotland was also something they both had in common.

Claude Henderson
at work in
Bletchley Park ▷▷

The ancestors of Claude Hender Henderson lived in Fife with a family tree extending back to a gardener who lived and worked in Auchterarder in 1694. According to Nancy, Claude's great-great uncle Lewis Henderson (1780-1825) was born in Pittenweem and was press-ganged into Nelson's navy and deserted at Livorno. Thereafter he lived and married in Livorno and set up trading links with his nephews in Scotland (there were four Henderson brothers born in Fife in the 1800's). One of these brothers was Patrick Henderson who set up a successful shipping company based in Glasgow called Paddy Henderson and Company that traded initially in marble and coal with Italy. Claude's mother, Constance Paterson, was the daughter of an Edinburgh GP and he was born in 1891 in Livorno and educated in Switzerland and Germany. He was fluent in four languages – English, Italian, German and Spanish. Villa Henderson, where the family lived between the World Wars still exists in Livorno and became a museum after it was sold by Claude's father in 1935. He married Doris Wingfield and they had five children, four of whom were born in Italy. Claude was a soldier in World War I and was recruited by the British Secret Services in 1936 working for The Government Code and Cypher School (GCCS). He was kicked out of Italy for his spying activities by Mussolini's government in 1937 and became part of Captain Ridley's Shooting Party (the group who set up Bletchley Park, Suffolk, in 1938). Between



1939-1941 he worked as a code breaker and cryptanalyst at Mansion Room 51 in Bletchley Park and is commemorated in the roll of honour on The Codebreakers Wall. In 1941 he was posted as Vice Consul to the British Embassy in Barcelona where he was active in the British effort to help Jews escape the Nazis. He remained in the diplomatic service post World War II and was awarded both an MBE and an OBE (1958). Quite at what point Claude became involved with the more *innocent pursuit* of puppets is not clear. We have several extant photos taken in post-War Rome of children watching puppets and two of Claude operating marionettes. Nancy tells us: There is a story that while he was based in Spain he was corresponding with a fellow puppet enthusiast in London and nearly got himself into trouble as it was thought he was perhaps using some sort of code. I like the idea of puppet master and spy! Anyway, after the War he went back to Italy and while still working as a diplomat made some of the puppets that now form the Henderson Collection (1945-1955) or *The Merry Midgets* as they came to be called. One of Nancy's cousins also remembers Claude taking about connections with a puppet theatre based at Villa Borghese in Rome – presumably The San Carlino Theatre. The story does not stop there, however. Puppets as we know only too well last longer than their makers and occupy an inter-cultural space. The Henderson Puppets are of particular significance for the British Puppet and Model Theatre Guild because they were not used for commercial gain but for their entertainment value and their community and educational worth. Most of the puppets (except the Punch and Judy figures) are only twelve inches tall and the characters they depict are drawn from the tradition of Variety Theatre.



▷▷ Angus McWhiskey

The Compere is an elegant figure with white lace ruff and cuffs who delivers the prologue and epilogue to the show. Angus McWhiskey has a moving mouth and is built to sing and dance. Arabella Screech is a singer, accompanied by Mr Tinkle the piano player, whose performance is rudely interrupted by a large spider. Bomboni the strong man can lift his huge dumb bells and balance them on his forehead. Mustafa ben Trovato is a variant on the juggler who balances a ball on a pole. Professor Strumalotti is a virtuoso grand piano player who flicks his coat tails while sometimes falling asleep or falling off his piano stool. Yo-Yo is a donkey who can do maths and together with a Ringmaster there is a whole magic routine (also preserved as a script, video and sound recording). The company also includes a cast of musicians: Conductor, Drummer, Cello, Saxophone and Violin players.

▷▷▷ The Professor

The Merry Midgets in performance ▽



Not forgetting Taiwo and Kehindi as twin dancers, Tito Tum the Skeleton and Willy Nilly the Clown. Honest Earnest looks like a forerunner to Monty Python's Upper Class Twit of The Year. All in all, a motley crew designed to elicit delight and laughter from the audience. The Compere concludes "When the day is ended and you're tucked up in bed we are bundled 1,2,3 into a wooden box. It's dark and lonely in that box. It isn't very nice. Thank you all for coming. And when you're safe back home, think kindly of your puppet friends and the show that we have done."

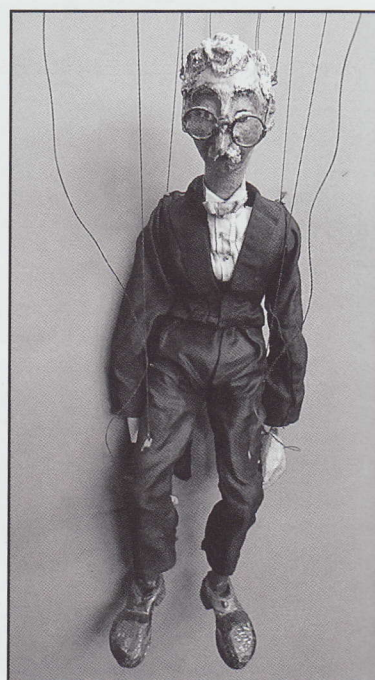


In 1971 Claude, as the now retired diplomat, was living in Kingham Village, Oxfordshire and in 1973 he delivered them for use and safe-keeping as a gift into the hands of a remarkable teacher, Mr. Harry Potts. Together with his wife Monica, they lovingly preserved and used the entire company for the next forty-five years (until 2018).

The exchange of puppets turned into an exchange of gifts. From a teacher at Kingham Hill School in Oxfordshire to the Head of the English High School in Bogota (Colombia) then as Head of The International School in Dar es Salaam (Tanzania) to Head of the British School in Tripoli (North Africa) to The International School in The Turks and Caicos Islands

(West Indies) - Harry Potts used the puppets tirelessly to teach, train, educate and inform. In the UK he also worked with the Exeter Cathedral School (Devon) and Westminster Abbey Choir School with school children, his own children and grand-children. In addition Harry Potts is a fine instrument maker and craftsman specialising in making the viola d'amore.

All this work by Harry Potts and the Potts Family) helps to explain how the Henderson Puppets were lovingly cared for over such a long period and on arrival at Scottish Mask and Puppet Centre



each figure was wrapped in a canvas bag with ties and placed within a small plywood box. The marionette stage has survived entirely intact and is accompanied by props, scripts (scenarios) and sound recordings. David Potts says "I think that the best outcome would be that the puppets had a home that is either a museum where they can be exhibited or a puppeteering group/ school/ organisation that will ensure that they get used and looked after."

The gift exchange of Claude Hender Henderson has gone far beyond the time, place and culture of its making. The Henderson Puppets are an expression of peace not war.

Mustafa ben
Trovato ▷



Claude in later
years still sharing
his enthusiasm
with the younger
generation ▷▷

They do not leave an oppressive sense of obligation, they do not manipulate or humiliate or maintain hierarchies through spite and fear. They are bestowed upon us as a pleasure and a privilege, as a vehicle of that culture which is the art of friendship with the people as the great Sergei Obraztsov always insisted. It is only fitting to end with a heartfelt thank you to the Henderson-Potts connection without which we would be very much the poorer or as the author Margaret Atwood says "my concern is the gift we long for, the gift that when it comes, speaks commandingly to the soul and irresistibly moves us".

