Transcript

Michelle Matheron, Assistant Director, External Affairs, The Open University in Wales: Noswaith dda pawb, good evening everyone. Diolch yn fawr, thank you so much for joining us this evening. I'm Michelle Matheron, I'm the Assistant Director for External Affairs at The Open University in Wales. We are really, really pleased to be hosting this event tonight - not least because our Open Talks programme has been taking a little bit of an enforced break throughout the pandemic and this is our first talk in quite some time. We had hoped to be able to run the event in-person, but we felt it best for now to hold it online, but we do hope to be able to offer some in-person events across Wales in 2022.

Open Talks is a series of events run by The OU in Wales which aim to engage members of the public with our research and to share our academics work and research with individuals and communities.

Tonight's event allows us the chance to learn about the life of Welsh journalist, broadcaster, and politician Cyril Lakin. To take us on that journey we are joined by Dr Geoff Andrews and by Daryl Leeworthy - and we're very grateful to them both for being with us. Geoff is senior lecturer in politics at The Open University. He has researched and published widely on the history of political ideas and movements, with particular interest in the history of British communism, aspects of labour history, Italian political history, and political biography. He is the author of the new book 'Smooth Operator: The Life and Times of Cyril Lakin'.

Daryl Leeworthy is a fellow historian and biographer; he is the Rhys Davies Trust Research Fellow at the South Wales Miners' Library at Swansea University. Daryl has also written a biography of novelist and broadcaster Gwyn Thomas which is out next year, as part of the same series of books as Geoff's Cyril Lakin biography.

Just a reminder for you all that your microphones, other than Geoff and Daryl's obviously, will be on mute for the event, but if you'd like to ask a question you can do so using the chat function at the top of the screen, it's the speech bubble with the little question mark in it, and I'll be able to see those and read them out later to Geoff and Daryl. So, thanks again for joining us and without further ado I will hand over to Daryl.

Dr Daryl Leeworthy, Rhys Davies Trust Research Fellow, Swansea University: Well, thank you Michelle and welcome everybody who's watching us this evening. Good afternoon and good evening Geoff, it's afternoon somewhere for folks watching and I believe it's also good morning to some folks watching with online. Let's start off in somewhere you're very familiar with, in Barry. Barry was the shock town of the second industrial revolution at the end of the 19th century. It goes from being a tiny little fishing village to the biggest coal port in the world. And for those of you who are watching at home who are unfamiliar with Cyril Lakin and how his family fits in to that scenario - he wasn't a docker, he wasn't a stone mason, he wasn't [from] a working-class family really, so tell us a little bit about how Cyril Lakin fits into Barry and how Barry fits into Cyril Lakin.

Dr Geoff Andrews, Senior Lecturer in Politics, The Open University: He's very much a product of modern Barry. His father, Harry Lakin, moved to Barry in the early 1890s - that's just a few years after the docks. He was a young apprentice butcher, set up his own butcher's shop in Vere Street in Cadoxton. Cyril was born in 1893, so that's really within a few years of the docks, and although Barry was being transformed at that time, as you say, from small villages to this major port town, the

infrastructure wasn't there when Harry Lakin arrived. It was chaotic living conditions – crime, disease, sewage, illegal drinking places. Cadoxton was initially thought to be the main part of the new town. He set up a butcher's business there in Vere Street, Cyril Lakin was born in 1893, so for the next decade or so they were really struggling to get to terms with this this new town.

Harry Lakin was a 'beer and bible' Tory; he became a Freemason; he was high Anglican. His wife was, I suppose, the person who was more influential on Cyril Lakin's education – intellectually, academically - the one who pushed him at school, got him to do music lessons, wants him to go to Oxford. Harry was a sort of shrewd businessman - he was elected as a councillor in Cadoxton in 1906, which, of course, is very interesting because that's when nationally the Liberals made their break from the Labour party and had their first MPs, and so on, went against the trend.

Cyril Lakin's early life then was within this context. He delivered meat to the rectory, he was part of the church choir, as you know Daryl, education was the way people got on really and so that was treated very seriously, particularly by his mother. He was first at Cadoxton school, under the influence of Mr. Eubank, who introduced him to all kinds of, what we might call recreational things as well as cultural things, as well as -

Dr Daryl Leeworthy: - bit of boxing maybe?

Dr Geoff Andrews: - educational things, not sure about the boxing actually. But then of course he won a scholarship to Barry County School, and this figure of Edgar Jones or looms over him and the couple of generations that that followed. Edgar Jones, some people have said he was the sort of Welsh Thomas Arnold without the Anglicanism. He was a liberal, a liberal in politics by night, but of course during the day, along with his begowned teaching colleagues, he was very conventional - Kipling and Tennyson at morning assembly. And I think what Cyril Lakin got, apart from an interest in classics and so on, was this notion of public service, that was instilled in in in the pupils by Edgar Jones. The notion that when you leave here you've got a contribution to make to wider civic life, that was something which stayed with Cyril Lakin.

The last point I'd say about Barry was that one of his school friends was Frank Webber who was later the general manager of the Western Mail. His brother Robert, later Sir Robert Webber, was managing director. So those are the connections that he made, if you like, at school. Frank Webber became a sort of almost a lifelong friend and 'Mr Fix-It' according to Briget, Cyril Lakin's daughter. And I think the connections he made there with Frank Webber took him from, if you like, the Western Mail eventually to Fleet Street, those that connect to you firstly.

Dr Daryl Leeworthy: Yes, those are a lot of the names that appear when you start digging around in the newspapers and you see them [when you're] doing the research. And it's I guess it's Barry County School and the leap out of Barry County school to take him to Oxford which is really very interesting. So of course, he's there at quite an early a point in the school's existence and was therefore one of the first people to go on that, almost like an escalator if you like, from Barry County School up to Oxford or to Cambridge - but in this case very much an Oxford boy. And the list of the boys that followed in his footsteps is quite prestigious. We think of the historians that we know - Sir Keith Thomas, Dai Smith, Gareth Williams, and others. And by quirk of the opposite direction, just appealing to my own interests and heroes - Gwyn Thomas the novelist, who'd gone up from the Rhondda to Oxford and then eventually gets given a job by Edgar Jones' successor E.T Griffiths to teach French and Spanish but was more interested in writing novels which I'm sure we can all

appreciate. So, what sort of experience did Cyril Lakin have in Oxford? Because from reading the book you get a sense that he didn't have as bad an experience as quite a lot of the folks who followed in his footsteps later on. Was that partly down to the college that he went to or is that more the fact that he found himself fitting in a little bit better?

Dr Geoff Andrews: Just [to] come back just one point on the school. It was, of course, co-educational when he was there, later a boys' school and so on. But as you say these figures - Barnett Janner became an MP, and other people mentioned – educationalists, that was important. When he went to Oxford, he was one of two Barry pupils to go to Oxford, so the other one [was the] son of a coal tipper [who] went to Jesus College which has stronger connections with the Welsh schools. He went to St John's, I think probably because the president was a Welsh Anglican vicar as well so, you know, and it had a reputation for Tory high Anglicanism. And Cyril initially wanted to go into the church, I think he had this idea of being, kind of, literally parson. So yes, I mean he had quite wide interests as well - he was very sporty, played rugby and football, running, and so on. And you know he was a sociable person.

At Oxford, interestingly given his Tory Anglican background, the circle he was in, [having] read some of the diaries of his contemporaries, was ironically more of a sort of liberal non-conformist [one]. So, serious minded students [who] took their studies very seriously. The unofficial leader of this group is William Watkin Davies, who was regarded by some of his peers as a protégé of Lloyd George - his family knew Lloyd George, he played golf with Lloyd George before he went up to Oxford. Incidentally, this group went up in 1912. And others in that group probably [had] liberal left inclinations. I would say he certainly wasn't part of, you know, the image of Oxford of, public school rugger players, he wasn't part of that. Although he did actually play football so that probably endeared him to others in in that group.

Of course, his studies were interrupted by war. He started in 1912, [and in] late 1914, after his 21st birthday, he got a commission as a lieutenant in the South Wales Borderers after the War started. Just on that, I think he entered the war without much angst, Watkin Davies, for example, his friend, was much more sceptical about the War. He thought it was his duty to fight and so on, I think he was influenced quite a bit by his tutors, with Earnest Barker who had written the case for war with some other historians. So, he went there, saw it has his duty. I think that, subsequently, [he] probably revised that view of course as many did, and he came home very ill.

Dr Daryl Leeworthy: Yes, and going to France, but his war is mostly spent in the Balkans and Salonika and other places isn't it? So, he gets a slightly different perspective on the First World War than we would get from a lot of the other memoirs that are available for Welsh figures, so that gives him a another edge in the Welsh story. I suppose when he gets towards the end of the war, Oxford is done, he's been very poorly, so the army is very much done for him as well. And he's a young man on the make and that usually means one of the professions - possibly the church. He finds himself temporarily in the Ministry of Food, dealing with a bit of civil service but quickly got out of that, and we can understand why you might get out of that -

Dr Geoff Andrews: - delivering meat…

…delivering meat! Very much so, yes, a bit too close to what dad was doing previously. And he then passes the bar exams and moves on eventually to journalism. This is what dominates his life really isn't it? The journalism - it's his work in various newspapers. And it's a curious moment because

some of the top newspapers in Britain are owned by Welshmen, the Berry brothers from Merthyr Tydfil. So, is there a little bit of national nepotism going on here that brings Cyril into the world of Fleet Street and journalism?

Dr Geoff Andrews: Well, he was, you know the title gives that impression - 'Smooth Operator' - he was very good at making connections. In the period after the War, he came home to die, his family said, he was very ill with malaria and so had a [long] period of recuperation and reflection. I found a commonplace diary he kept in 1920/21, it's in The Sunday Times archive, where you can see that he's trying to make sense of where he is, where his life's going, his principles to live by, citations from poets, and so on. And yes, I think it's quite a long convalescence. But yes, after the temporary jobs that he did, he found himself, I suspect, almost certainly with the help of the Webbers, in Swansea working for the owner of the Swansea Evening Post - David Davis, who'd also been mayor of Swansea and I think acting editor of the Western Mail, a conservative politician. So that was a very important connection he made, he also got engaged to Davies' daughter. He wasn't there very long, three or four years of regaining his strength, he didn't entirely regain his strength and his illness kept came back over the years.

But then his life changed quite dramatically. In 1923, through David Davies, he was recommended to the Berry brothers, the two Berry brothers who ran, well, initially they owned, The Sunday Times. I should say that William Berry, who we know as Lord Camrose, was somebody who had himself been briefly a journalist and was interested in journalism and editing. He turned up at The Merthyr Times and was taken on by W.W Hadley as a sort of office boy, you know, trainee reporter. His father, incidentally, was D.A. Thomas - Lord Rhondda's press agent, and the sons were contemporaries of Margaret Thomas, Lady Rhondda. So, all those connections were there and you he managed to purchase The Sunday Times at a cheap price, Gomer Berry the younger [brother], looked after business arrangements, of course, there was another brother Seymour who was co-owner but not so directly involved in newspapers.

And so, Cyril Lakin turned up there on the recommendation, presumably of Davies, and they took to him really. He's, I think, an aimable character, charming, charisma about him, and initially he worked as a kind of personal assistant to them - building up their trust in him. And then of course they bought The Daily Telegraph, and he found himself in this really quite unique position of being both assistant editor and literary editor of both The Sunday Times and The Daily Telegraph. It's fairly unique and of course that role gave him a lot of influence.

Dr Daryl Leeworthy: Yes, so if he was a character in 'Yes Minister' say, that if the folks who read The Daily Telegraph think that other people run the country, then the other people in this particular case were Cyril Lakin, and his friends, and patrons, and the Berrys, and the Webbers, and things like that. I ruined the joke! Sorry everyone who loves 'Yes Minister', I've gone and ruined the joke so Sir Humphrey will have my guts for garters at some point!

But we've got this impression, yes, he's a 'smooth operator' but he's also on a trajectory that's quite a stellar rise from Barry, which is an important town, but it had peaked in 1913 and was on its way down into the economic malaise that affected most of south Wales at that point. So Lakin has kind of got out of it at a good moment and landed himself a nice plummy job in in Fleet Street. But that literary editor position really brings him into contact with a whole other world doesn't it? And it's a world of people that we still engage with today, we still read them, we still find their works on

bookshelves and in bookshops and in new editions that are coming out regularly. What was that like for him being in the mix of what was almost like a golden generation of British literary talent and agents and publishers at the same time?

Dr Geoff Andrews: Yes, I think he thrived in it. I think he became a kind of literally impresario. So, he was a literary editor [and] talent spotter, a sort of catalyst for new projects. I should say that in his assistant editor role at The Telegraph he was quite influential in changing the format of the newspaper, modernising it, changing the content, bringing in literary pages and then it did, in that period, I think, double the circulation, certainly the circulation went up in a major way. The image, they had these wonderful offices in Fleet Street with marble staircases and fancy lifts, and so on. So, he was in that but as literary editor he brought in people like Rebecca West, who had previously written for Time and Tide, so it may well have been through that connection. But she became a very good friend of his, both at The Telegraph and later at The Sunday Times. And Cyril Connolly and C. Day Lewis [were] among the among the others who at one point were writing reviews on Tuesdays and Fridays simultaneously at key moments in their careers.

So, he wasn't just taking on people who already had established careers. Indeed, a very young Dylan Thomas had his poetry reviewed after a bit of badgering from Edith Sitwell at The Sunday Times. So, he's helping to bring on new talents. The interesting thing is, you could also say that it was the Welsh newspaper connections which took him to this position, but he got married to Vera, who was very English, and very wealthy, and introduced him to parts of life he'd not discovered before - to parts of London…Belgravia, Chelsea, St. James's and so on. So, he had that influence, you see he's now entering, to the point you're making, different kinds of worlds.

The very interesting thing [is], because I've looked at some of these writers in previous books and so on, when C. Day Lewis was his best reviewer, he told his bosses at The Daily Telegraph, it was in his communist phase. In fact, some of the people reading his reviews were asking Lakin whether this is the same person. He was a communist who was then compiling a communist guide to literature, who was then having his post opened by MI5, who was having security services turning up at his meetings, [he was] regarded as a subversive intellectual…[he] was the best reviewer at The Daily Telegraph! And Cyril Connolly was obviously in the formative stage of his career. So, he had very wide - he's a literary impresario - he had very wide contacts. Victor Gollancz was another one, the left-wing publisher, founder of the Left Book Club, another sort of lunch companion. At one point [he was] trying to persuade Lakin to promote the Left Book Club because all his members, many of his members, socialists, were reading The Daily Telegraph - something we wouldn't think about today.

Dr Daryl Leeworthy: Certainly not, no! It's very much a polarised world these days, which I think maybe the 'smooth operator' would struggle even on his terms to navigate. It's interesting to hear those names and those people that you read, you see, you think of them being in the miners' institutes in the valleys, and copies that are left over from those institutes that we hold in in Swansea. And thinking of them being reviewed, read, talked about, discussed at dinner tables with the literary editor of The Daily Telegraph and you realize, well, of course, he's actually very closely connected to the people who are reading those books in the institutes and other places because of where he comes from. It's a reminder that we are not very far away from those worlds sometimes, and it only takes one person to navigate them to bring it to close to us. And that certainly does take him into very strange worlds, in some respects, particularly in the 1930s. There's a brilliant section in

the book where he meets some characters he really doesn't like, neither do we, namely dictators in Europe, the European age of dictators. He's meeting with people that are then involved in the press around them as well. And there were those notes that you tweeted about recently, showing us Lakin's notes from his meetings with the number one dictator of the 1930s - Adolf Hitler. What was that like for Lakin?

Dr Geoff Andrews: Yes, just to give a bit of context - when the ownership of the two Berry brothers divided, beginning in 1937, Camrose kept the Telegraph and Kemsley (that's Gomer Berry) had The Sunday Times. So Lakin had, previously, these dual roles and he had to make a choice between the two. According to Briget Lakin, his daughter, it was the stress of working on a daily newspaper [that] was the reason he gave up The Daily Telegraph. I think another reason, actually, was that he still had in his mind the possibility, the ambition, of being editor of The Sunday Times. Because he, at one point, when the previous editor had died, the full-time editor, he was, according to Leonard Russell and Rebecca West, identified as a successor - but it never actually happened. Hadley, very traditional, dressed like a civil servant - like something out of 'Yes Minister' - carried on as the editor. So, he lost that, perhaps he thought he would get it.

Now this was a fateful decision because Camrose and The Daily Telegraph were, and became more so, anti-appeasement and pro-Churchill. Kemsley and The Sunday Times were pro-appeasement and pro-Chamberlain, and indeed quite close to Chamberlain. So, Hadley, and on occasion, Cyril Lakin would meet Chamberlain, you know, updating them on the political situation. So, making that choice, in retrospect, had significant consequences. And, as you say, in July 1939 – when we look at it now it sounds bonkers really, but a botched attempt at appeasement took place. Kemsley was approached with the idea of exchanging articles in the British and German press. This was thought to increase cooperation. Kemsley went to Germany to meet Hitler and his entourage, and head of press and all that kind of thing. And Lakin went as his sort of right-hand man and indeed wrote up the notes of that meeting, now in the National Archives.

He also kept his own diary, interestingly, and his daughter passed me some fragments from that meeting. Of course, it obviously failed dramatically and had a bad effect on him. It was fairly disastrous. At one point in the evening, some of Hitler's henchmen got drunk and he saw this overzealous sort of fanaticism first-hand. So, he came back dispirited by the whole thing, perhaps wishing he'd gone with cameras…but anyway…dispirited. Then this obviously influenced his decision to work for the BBC, or at least gave him more motivation. He became a broadcaster during the blitz and then, of course, a politician.

Dr Daryl Leeworthy: That's the interesting thing, isn't it, that losing the opportunity to become the editor of the paper that he really wanted to be the editor of pushes him in those different directions. Maybe pushes him away from the opportunities that came from the print media, and suddenly we're talking about broadcast media with the BBC having come into existence almost exactly 100 years ago now. Was he looking around for something else then? Was he actively looking around or was it the happenstance of that sequence of events which prompted him to look around?

Dr Geoff Andrews: A bit of both, I think Leonard Russell thought he was looking for a political career, he was interested in a career at an earlier point, but events took over really. He entered the BBC and two people I think took him there - one was Howard Marshall, who'd been one of his early reviewers and became a close friend on the Telegraph. Howard Marshall was the first real cricket

commentator, [a] very distinctive voice that became very popular in early radio. He became a crisis talker, brought on to keep people calm when the War started. He then, later on, became a significant broadcaster before Richard Dimbleby, who gets all the credit for these occasions. He was also present commentating on state broadcasts for VE Day later on. So, he was the BBC and I have no doubt that helped. And Ivo Geikie Cobb, a Harley Street surgeon who had another career, he wrote detective novels - the Inspector Treadgold mysteries - and he had become a talks assistant at the BBC. Of course, this is a period where the BBC is still in relative infancy and this part of the War talking about 1940/41, it didn't have the red tape it had in the later part of the War. So those two people got him in, and he had he had a natural gift for broadcasting.

Interestingly he wasn't, on his own admission, a talented writer, and he didn't have that artistic gift that Gwyn Thomas or Elaine Morgan (who also worked for the BBC) had, for example. But he was obviously quite good at writing scripts for radio, so those short sentences, which he managed to embellish with his commentary. He was delivering gentle propaganda to the so-called dominions – Australia, New Zealand, and so on. He became very adept at this and the BBC written archives have 170 of his contributions on their microfiche, so that was very interesting to read. And at a very critical time, during the blitz, a period of urgency in the War, and his bosses were very complimentary about his work. Four days a week [he]'d be in the in the BBC studios, the ones in in Oxford Street, delivering a mixture of getting stuck into totalitarianism with these little anecdotes. He wonders about Beppe, this Italian taxi driver, does he still have his enthusiasm for 'Il Duce', and so on. Or he's talking about ordinary English things, a homely way with people – a wife of a diplomat is writing to him and saying it makes us feel so you know happy and secure, it's like talking to Uncle Bernard over the lunch table on a Sunday. So, he had that gentle propaganda that was very important in the War, and obviously it's very good. When he became an MP he carried on broadcasting, we'll talk about that that in a minute. So that was, I think, a new part of his life clearly.

Dr Daryl Leeworthy: Yes, it strikes me, reading the book, that he's making up for the mistake perhaps that he felt he'd made by joining the Kemsley rather than the Camrose branch of the Berry empire. And was able to do that in the context where it mattered more, [it was] slightly different in the pre-war appeasement era but now he can really get stuck in - which is which makes him compelling. And I think you told me that there's a recording of his voice is there?

Dr Geoff Andrews: There are some recordings in his voice, yes, we've got a hold of an American archive. You're absolutely right about the response to that appeasement situation. In the broadcast you see this patriotism. What I would also say is that it was more than that latent anti-fascism, because when he gives his analysis of the dictators – Mussolini, Hitler, and so on, you get a sense of that. And then Lord Haw-Haw in one broadcast went after 'little Cyril', so he's having some effect.

Dr Daryl Leeworthy: Yes, because you get the impression that he's not he's not an overt Germanophile like his near contemporary Gareth Jones - both Barry boys - he hasn't got that quite that same Germanophilia.

Dr Geoff Andrews: [He] was, of course, the second journalist from Barry to meet Hitler after Gareth Jones. No, he's kind of European. I mean he liked Italy a lot, and France, so he was a European. But also, he's from a generation where he was very committed to the Union, strong loyalties in Wales but obviously was very much connected to the London scene, often through his wife. Incidentally, Vera played quite an important part. When he was doing the literary reviews, he was given an

allowance to organise his literary gatherings for writers and Vera hosted these events, and I think threw away his Freemason's apron. So, this gave him something, an independently minded woman interested in in culture and education, and that was very important as well, I think. And also changed him from the Welsh influences to the more British influences.

Dr Daryl Leeworthy: Yes, the interesting elements which then combine in that political career, it's an almost perfectly timed by-election in 1942. They couldn't have got that better. But it allows a certain latitude of independence which I think he quite liked as a 'smooth operator' as well. I wonder whether we [could] explore of the quirks of the by-election a little. For those that are unfamiliar, obviously the there was a stop on active contests between the main parties but not the small parties who didn't necessarily sign up to that moratorium. So, you had the representatives of the governing parties, yes, who are a good backing, and often sort of supported each other in their own ways. But this was an election which was allowing other voices to come through wasn't it, there's a certain degree of independence, all the way along the ticket, of the choices that people had in that by-election. So, take us back to Barry, follow Cyril's journey back to Barry.

Dr Geoff Andrews: You're absolutely right, the timing couldn't have been better for him. He was just at that time about to be offered another programme, and then the sitting MP for Barry, Conservative Patrick Munro, died in this mock invasion exercise at Westminster. So, it opened at an opportune time. He was a Barry boy, and he was somebody they want you know. The electoral truth was the sitting party wouldn't face official opposition, at least that was the theory, and he was somebody very much at home with the National Government. He was very happy with Ernest Bevin and all the other people who entered the government from the Labour Party. So, for him it was very easy to fight that election as the National Government candidate. And really this by-election needs a lot more attention, I think, by historians, because it was effectively the first time the Common Wealth Party fought a campaign. It wasn't officially, it wasn't set up until the following month, but all the characters, personalities were involved. So, it was a very competitive election with Kim Mackay, who was the left Australian lawyer, close to left-wing intellectuals on the left of the Labour party. They wanted a general election, they were opposing - officially the Labour Party was committed to it but unofficially there were people on the left who are now caught again attacking the government and so on. As the by-election played out, the local Labour Party and clearly the activists were behind Mackay.

And so, it was a very competitive election, but he had the unexpected support of the Communist Party. It's quite an interesting part because of the Soviet Union entering the war the previous year, prior to that, you had the disastrous so-called Nazi-Soviet pact. So now the Communist Party actually was in its big growth period with the Soviet Union in the war, supporting the war effort. So, his daughter, who was in the by-election campaign as a fourteen-year-old schoolgirl, she was able to tell me this - 'Joe Stalin says vote for Cyril Lakin'. So, he had support, he had broad support, he had the support of Jack Jones the playwright. But it was a competitive election, The Manchester Guardian and The Daily Mirror are both predicting a victory for Mackay on the verge of polling day. But in the end he won, I mean obviously the election was not as large as it was later, but I think you're right he was the ideal National Government candidate at that time. He could come back to Barry a man of affairs, a broadcaster, [he] had this other life but there were still people from there he knew before – people, local public figures, perhaps known to his father, and so on. He was able to reconnect.

Dr Daryl Leeworthy: Yes, and it's such a contrast with the election three years later. And we know that he loses that election in 1945, the landslide, there's reasons why he might have lost at that point as well and, Barry, now the Vale of Glamorgan, seats slightly different boundaries but has always been a kind of a bell weather for opportunities. So, we think of Westminster, held by a Conservative today, here in Cardiff its held by a Labour member, so it's kind of an indicator of which party is in government in both places. But I don't get the impression he was kicked out in 1945 because he was a bad MP.

Dr Geoff Andrews: No, he was very active in the three years he was an MP. He was on various committees, he was involved, on one he was regarded as a sort of authority on the media and propaganda, that was his first speech. He also contributed to the Butler Education Act. Butler was a friend; he was his brand of conservatism. And also, the Beveridge Report. He was involved in various sorts of committees; he was a busy MP. But, as you say, the landslide had its own momentum. There were soldiers returning from the War [who] wanted a new start. He found himself, although he was a conservative, he found himself probably in a quite unfamiliar position of having to take a partisan role, where he was used to consensus. He had many friends on the left as well as on the right, and so on. But whatever happened, Labour were going to win I think.

Dr Daryl Leeworthy: It begs the question, there's maybe some students in the audience who are working away on essays on the consensus question, that here's a figure who could sum up and say well actually yes there was. Here's someone that [gave] both sides something comfortable to support, and had he been returned he wouldn't have been a necessarily hostile opponent of the Labour government. He would likely have been quite supportive of a lot of the initiatives that they presented after 1945 and maybe that's where Joe Stalin saying 'support us Mr Cyril' comes in.

But there's a sad ending isn't there? He loses his seat and then dies not long afterwards, and that helps us perhaps frame, or accidentally frame, the end of his life and the politics that he's involved in as almost a coda on a career rather than something which was…well he might well have gone on to a different seat, as his successor did, and found a different voice. He may have come back in 1950 or 51 as Raymond Gower, the eventual successor as a Conservative did, and sat in Barry's seat very successfully for many decades. So, is it right to think of that last phase of his career, his turn to politics, as a coda or is it accidentally a coda because of his passing?

Dr Geoff Andrews: He had a very full life. He was 54 when he died, but he died in a car crash in the south of France. He had already been ill; his illness had gotten worse with TB and various effects of the earlier illness. So that would have prevented, I think, a career. But, if you hypothetically speculate where he would be, he would obviously be in that circle of 'one nation' conservatism. That was made apparent by Rab Butler, his old friend.

Dr Daryl Leeworthy: You could see him being a happy Macmillanite, if you like, in a way I guess a reformist conservative, they have maybe lost a little bit of their voice over recent times…

Dr Geoff Andrews: Yes, he was like a lot of classical conservatives, he was somebody critical of abstract theories, he didn't like utopias, he was a pragmatist; common sense was part of his makeup. He was also committed to the Union, and I suppose now, thinking in Wales is waiting for a conservative to come up with a coherent defence of the Union, it's hypothetical because obviously he died many years ago. But he was somebody who did believe very much in that in that idea.

Dr Daryl Leeworthy: Yes, and I suppose he died just on the cusp of when the parliament for Wales campaign is about to kick off, probably would have found himself on the same side as the Labour benches in that campaign - being opposed to a parliament for Wales in the 1950s. So, there's lots of what ifs isn't there, there's lots of potential questions. Which brings us to the bit where hopefully the audience who have joined us can chime in with some of their questions and throw Geoff some challenging questions from the floor. So, I shall pass over to Michelle who has the list of questions waiting for us.

Michelle Matheron: Great, thanks both and thanks for a really, really great session so far. Just another reminder for anyone to please pop any questions in the chat and we'll read them out. So, I've got one that says, 'can you say a bit more about Cyril Lakin's literary links in the 1930s?'.

Dr Geoff Andrews: Yes, they were extensive, I describe him as a kind of literary impresario. Among his reviewers, apart from people already mentioned; Dorothy L. Sayers was obviously a correspondent, somebody who reviewed, Robert and Sylvia Lynd were very close friends, they were like his essayists. I should also say a bit more about Howard Marshall who was this cricket commentator come reviewer. He gave him a very wide berth at first, I think Marshall was his first sort of recruit in a way. And also, Rebecca West, because she was given her own column. They were very good friends, his daughter told me that she was quite taken with him in all kinds of ways - romantically included. And, certainly the women in his life were very important generally, and I think he did quite a bit, he was very keen on getting more women writers into the columns of the Telegraph and The Sunday Times.

The Sunday Times was much more difficult to change because you had J.C. Squire who was regarded as the you know the sort of the 'squire-archy' as Virginia Woolf called him. So, he had to deal with more conservative reviewers in The Sunday Times than he had perhaps with him on the Telegraph. But it was something he picked up, he had wide interests himself. He also liked detective novels - his daughter, who incidentally is hopefully joining us from the Isle of Wight, told me that when they were living in London, he would often use her name to take out westerns, for example. So, he had an interest in, let's say, interesting popular culture as well.

Dr Daryl Leeworthy: Which is a very Welsh thing to do - reading westerns, reading thrillers and detective stories and it just begs the question of what you made of Ellen Wilkinson's parliamentary thriller that's been republished now by the British Library's press. The sort of sitting on the train going up to Westminster on a weekend or a Monday or something, and sitting there reading, you can imagine the politician reading a thriller on the train up to Westminster now. Michelle, do you have any other questions?

Michelle Matheron: Yes, I'm going to use my Chair's privilege and ask one myself actually if that's alright. I'm really fascinated to hear about the connections that Cyril had, and it's obvious that there were some things in in his life that meant that his trajectory was in some ways easy because he knew lots of the right people. And Geoff mentioned his wife and marrying into a certain kind of set. But in terms of being a 'smooth operator' I'm particularly interested in what [was] in his character, in terms of his approach, and what you may have discovered Geoff about the kind of the approach he took to his work, and to the different kind of roles that he took. What made him somebody that was able to kind of open even more doors and build those great connections with different types of people?

Dr Geoff Andrews: Yes, he had a certain amount of charm, I think. He was also, perhaps unusually of a man of his generation, very photogenic as you can see from the from the images. Briget, his daughter, tells me that he was quite concerned about his appearance often. I get the impression of somebody who was very easy going. Obviously, in the early part of his life, I found this when I was looking at…I should say, probably haven't mentioned this, but he was a distant relative; my uncle's uncle, so I'll talk a bit later about how I got onto the story. But in my cousin's archive in Highlight Farm, there have been letters there for a hundred years now, you get the impression that when he first worked for the Berry brothers, he was really flattered by the way they were treating him. And you can imagine a boy from Barry all of a sudden finding himself organising summer holidays, winter holidays for millionaires. I think he was flattered by that and the letters home suggest [this], he tells his parents the latest thing he's done for Bill Berry, and so on.

Later on, I think that he becomes much more worldly, obviously, but he was very young looking. So, if see photos, for example, the National Portrait Gallery has a photo of him at the time of his engagement where he's 30 I think, in his early 30s, and he looks 10 years younger. But if you read his BBC broadcasts, you get the sense of a much older man with his homely phrases, talking from experience, more of a man of the world, if you like, a man of affairs. So, I think he obviously had an easy disposition, he had friends from across the liberal spectrum. The programme he worked on when he was an MP, 'Westminster and Beyond', was a forerunner of politics and current affairs programmes. He hosted it with Maurice Webb, who was a Labour supporting journalist. They would have "experts" but also members of the public concerned about citizenship. He could see a new world is going to happen after the War, how we think about the future of democracy, how do we involve ordinary people. He was aware, I think, of the impact of radio, the media, as he was a moderniser. I think you have to say that, looking at his various jobs.

His father was an entrepreneur, coming to Barry that time, and other members of the Lakin family subsequently have been interested in that entrepreneurial side. So, he was very much a moderniser, this comes across in what he called his progressive conservatism.

Dr Daryl Leeworthy: …and a communicator, clearly someone very interested in communication.

Dr Geoff Andrews: Yes, clarity, I think. He said he found writing difficult, but obviously writing scripts where clarity and brevity are very important, he was able to do that.

Dr Daryl Leeworthy: Yes, perhaps he had a few 'all-nighters' as we used to call them when we were students, when he was writing his collection papers for Oxford as a student.

Dr Geoff Andrews: Well, some of his contemporaries in their diaries make this point actually, yes.

Dr Daryl Leeworthy: Yes, he strikes me as someone who might leave it to the last minute.

Dr Geoff Andrews: And he was sporty, that's another thing that's he's handed down to other Lakins. He played sport.

Dr Daryl Leeworthy: Yes. Now, I'm going to jump in a second, Michelle sorry, to ask a question which has been passed to me by a friend who's read some of your other work Geoff. As folks in the audience might know, this is kind of about spies and maybe you can tell us a little story about spies to quote a spymaster and writer of a different kind. When Lakin comes back from his visits to

Germany, a matter of weeks before the outbreak of war, and they know that the war is coming by that point don't they? One gets the impression that he must have been debriefed by the intelligence services for what he found out or what he knew…do we have any sense that there are records which might tell us that was so?

Dr Geoff Andrews: Well, his official write-up is in the National Archives, and he kept this unofficial diary. His daughter told me that they would ring somebody at the…they would get a call from…let's get this right…somebody in the Foreign Office and they would use a code, a sort of code word, which often, I think, is referred to Briget, his daughter's, health – she's got a cold or something. And this is the way in which they would…so there was a kind of, I don't know how far we would take that but there was a kind of…yes there was a debriefing. And he was, I mean, you know this is Kemsley and Chamberlain, they had regular meetings before they went and afterwards with Chamberlain. Kemsley was very much in Chamberlain's close vicinity, the editor meeting with Chamberlain and I suspect Lakin on a couple occasions also stood in for him, certainly met Chamberlain in Downing Street at different times. So, yes, I mean, we don't know the full story. There are bits and pieces you can get about this Kemsley visit.

The other thing is, you mentioned it before, that there hasn't really been a full account of the Berry brothers. There's the house the Berrys built, there's been some other things, there were some private papers I was able to see from Seymour Berry's grandson there's no [full account]. And it is a story about modern Wales, this is a story about ruling groups, elites in modern Wales, and it's surprising that there's been so little written about that.

Dr Daryl Leeworthy: It is, and in a way ask begs a question about archives, but I should pass across to Michelle lest I hog the floor too much.

Michelle Matheron: Thanks Daryl. Yes, we've got another question which would be interesting to hear your response to, 'how might Lakin have viewed the present Conservative Party under the pro-Brexit gang of Boris Johnson and co'?

Dr Geoff Andrews: Thanks. Of course, this is, hypothetical, making my excuses first; because he died in 1948 before there was even a Welsh Secretary of State. Within the Conservative Party, he clearly belongs to the liberal wing, and it would be European, and would be as his daughter was, certainly the time of referendum, anti-Brexit. He would be somebody…he would be a Ken Clarke, Chris Patten type of conservative. So, I think you would…it's difficult perhaps to see if he has a place in the modern Conservative Party. This sort of 'one nation' tradition, some people are saying it's being revived but it's not so evident. The interesting question, I think I mentioned before, for Lakin, is if we're waiting for a coherent conservative position on the Union - who is going to give that from the Conservative Party, talking from Wales. And this is something which he did believe in as well, so he was pro-European and pro-Union in the sense of the of the UK. But very much on the liberal side. Whether he would have stayed in the Conservative Party I don't know, because Chris Patten is rarely seen – I don't know whether he's still a member of the Conservative Party or not. So, he'd definitely be on the reform [side], the Rab Butler 'one nation' patrician, paternalistic wing - pragmatic rather than ideological. He was suspicious of ideologues and utopias, so he would fit within the classical conservative tradition and would be anti-Brexit, if you like.

Michelle Matheron: Another question that's come in is another interesting one in terms of motivations for you Geoff, which is 'what prompted you to write this book?'

Dr Geoff Andrews: OK, it's a good question. I never imagined I would write this book, but I was looking at George Orwell's BBC correspondence for something else, I can't remember what, possibly an Open University module, I can't remember. But I came across his name and of course I knew his name, because my mother's sister married his nephew…that's right…and I've got Lakin cousins. So, I at that point I was only, you know, curious to know more. So, I then followed this trail with archives. One thing you've got to decide when you're doing any kind of biography, well two things really, one is that to what extent the subject's life can tell a wider story about a society at a particular time. And the other obvious question is whether you've got the sources to tell that story. And, as I looked more into his life, I found archives in The Sunday Times archive, BBC written archives at Caversham which has all his scripts the correspondence, the Glamorgan archives here which has school records and things. As I said my cousin, Chris Lakin, has a box of correspondence from the Lakin family and a lot to do with Cyril.

But the biggest breakthrough I had was, of course, finding his daughter. And she was then aged 89, living on the Isle of Wight and was a terrific resource, a great interviewee – lucid, insightful, witty anecdotes. But also of course she'd been present at some of these events, so she was in the 1942 by-election campaign, she got two weeks off school to be there. She was at her mother's literary gatherings in the 1930s, still remembers them, remembers Rebecca West. I don't know, she's hopefully watching, don't know whether she wants to say more about this. But you know, that was very important, and without that I couldn't have couldn't have written the book. And as I say, for me I spent my early years in Barry so he's interesting from that point of view as well, learning more about history of the town, talking to relatives.

But it was different, obviously, from my other books. One thing they had in common, the two previous books - one was about John Cairncross, the fifth man of the Cambridge spy circle and the previous book was about James Klugmann, who was a communist intellectual who lived through a lot of the events of the 20th century. It was a sort of similar period, and one of the things in common perhaps with Cairncross, my previous book, was the whole question of appeasement. It's one of those issues in British history which of course draws all kinds of…you know…people continue to talk about. There's a new book, Tim Bouverie's book on appeasement, Robert Harris wrote his novel 'Munich' recently, so it continues to evoke those kinds of debates and loyalties. For Cairncross, who was the fifth man of the Cambridge spy circle, that was what prompted him to be to be a spy really. He was in the Spanish section at the time of the Spanish Civil War and in the German section at the time of Munich, and he had no faith in Chamberlain, and then his allegiance to fate disastrous, and so on, it was the reason he became a spy.

Now in Lakin's case, he obviously wasn't a spy, but there were loyalties, divided loyalties perhaps between the two Berry brothers, and that was also fascinating. I find when doing a biography that these kinds of questions, those questions which require you to look at the contested nature of your subject, that I find most interesting. And so, there was that element as well with him.

Dr Daryl Leeworthy: Yes, it's the loyalties of people, place and purpose isn't it that brings us all together. That almost sums up the project overall and, I was thinking, one last thing from myself, about how this all connects to Wales then. Because obviously this is your first book about Wales, hopefully not the last one you do about Wales, Geoff. I think, from a professional point of view, working in these subjects, it's a welcome entry of a new voice and a new set of ideas into the Welsh setting. But I shall pass you on to Michelle who has some details for you as to how you can follow

your own journey through Cyril Lakin's ‘smooth operations’ but thank you Geoff, and over to you Michelle.

Michelle Matheron: Thanks both, a really, really fantastic discussion. I just wanted to say a huge thank you to both of you for a really fascinating hour, and a really great discussion on the life of a man who whose legacy certainly deserves the attention that Geoff's work has given it. I'm also looking forward to a book on Vera, because I think she sounds really fascinating too! Yes, I'd be really keen to find out more about her as well. Thanks to all of you for joining us and for your questions. We're going to pop a few links in the chat box now - one to the site where you can buy a copy of the book and find out more about it, and I'm sure Geoff would be delighted if you were able to do so.

There's also some other links to some of our OU courses, including our free ‘understanding devolution’ course and we'd be really grateful if you wanted to take a look around the whole of our OpenLearn site and explore all of the free learning opportunities that are on there at your leisure. We'll also send you some further links in an email and a survey about tonight's event. Our next Open Talk is on the 25th of November when, in a complete departure from the topic of today's event, a panel of experts will be going head-to-head to debate whether life is more likely on Mars or the icy moons of the giant gas planets. I'm not aware that Cyril Lakin had any kind of space element to his work, but he was obviously a man of many talents, so you never know! That event is an online event as well, so we really hope you'll be able to join us for that one. Thanks again so much to Geoff and Daryl for a really, really interesting discussion and thank you all for joining us. Diolch yn fawr. Nos da.