

Nan Green nee Farrow - 1904-1984

Volunteer in Spanish civil war & Peace activist



Nan or Nancy as she was then called, was born in Beeston, to an aspirant lower middleclass Anglican household. Her mother was Maria Kemp known as Polly and her father was Edward Farrow who had been a mechanic in a bicycle workshop which had developed into the Raleigh Cycle Company, and he became a chartered accountant and Company Secretary and then General Manager. Nan was born in Surrey Cottage in Glebe Street, she was the third of 5 surviving children and felt smothered by her mother who focused the whole house around her father. The children were forbidden to play with anyone rough or socially inferior and she was once severely reprimanded for playing with boys from the local Board school in Beeston Square. She was educated at a private village school - Miss Horner's West End School. She was an unhappy child her friends were chosen for her, she was required to be good, clean, tidy, well-behaved and found this stultifying. Transgressions earned the children severe beatings from their father.

The family's standard of living plummeted after WW1, her mother suffered a stroke, her father lost his job in 1916 and had a break down and then with her father working in London all the family except Nan, fell victim to the 1918 influenza epidemic. After the war her father got a job in Birmingham and the family moved to a small flat above a shop; shortly after moving there her mother died. Nan was sent to a mediocre private school and then attended night school and gained a free place at Birmingham city school of art which she attended for a year. She gained a scholarship for a further year but her father lost his job and they moved to Manchester and he refused to let her stay and study in Birmingham. Nan worked at various clerical posts and stayed for a while at a large wholesale drapery warehouse in Manchester. Here she was introduced to the rambling association and spent joyful Sundays walking the rugged countryside of the Peak District arriving back in time to attend evening

concerts of the Halle orchestra or opera. However, in the mid 1920's the family moved back to Birmingham where she worked in a large insurance office.

In 1928 she joined her old friend Marie Brown and went to Manchester to join a rambling weekend and here she met George Green a 24-year-old cellist with whom she fell in love. They married on Nov 9th, 1929, and lived in lodgings and then a flat in Manchester. Nan became pregnant having her daughter Frances in February 1931 and her son in 1932. While recuperating she was accidentally poisoned by a nurse with neat belladonna and was in a coma and nearly died. With George she then moved to London and began to take an interest in politics briefly joining the Independent Labour Party (ILP) but transferred to the Communist Party – her father was appalled. Both Nan and George embraced communism giving out leaflets, attending meetings, speaking on soap boxes and being clear that the choice was peace and democracy or fascism and war.

When the Spanish civil war broke out in July 1936, George decided to volunteer and with Nan's full support he left early in 1937. A wealthy English aristocrat Wogan Phillips served with George, and he offered to pay for Nan and George's children to attend Summerhill (an independent boarding school in Suffolk) and so Nan headed out to Spain in September 1937. Nan went to the 'English' hospital at Huete as a medical administrator, then Valdeganga where she helped organise the convalescent home and then to the Ebro. Her administrative work, forthright criticism of conditions and food and also of being an early blood donor are described in her memoir published in 2005 *A Chronicle of Small Beer. The Memoirs of Nan Green*. Her commitment continued even after her husband was killed in September 1938 at the Ebro.

After the war she accompanied a boat load of Spanish Republican children seeking safety in Mexico. She was also a leading figure in the National Joint Committee for Spanish Relief. She became the secretary of the International Brigade Assoc. from 1943-1950 travelling to Europe and China. During and after WW2 she was active in humanitarian and left wing causes among them the World Peace Movement. She managed to visit and write about the women's prison in Madrid and survived to see Franco's death and the end of the dictatorship in Spain. There is a chapter on her life in Paul Preston's book, *'Doves of War – Four women of Spain'* 2003 and she features in *Tomorrow Perhaps the Future* by Sarah Watling 2024. The Imperial War Museum have a series of tapes where she speaks in detail about her life and work during the Spanish Civil War – click on the link

<https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/80000809>