



A world without war has been the vision of utopians down the ages. In the early years of the First World War a young Serb, Dimitrije Mitrinović, appeared in the intellectual and artistic circles of London, arguing that the way to a harmonious world lay through the creation of a "world consciousness" in the minds of individuals. Gathering around him a group of devoted followers, that included Alan Watts, later to be an influential figure with the counter-cultural movements of the 1960s, Mitrinović launched a welter of groups, movements and other initiatives to promote and embody his vision of the world as an organic whole.

Andrew Rigby describes in this book the substance of Mitrinović's vision and the fascinating story of the efforts to translate it into practice. Drawing on a wealth of material, including interviews with some of Mitrinović's closest associates, he appears as a larger-than-life character with a tremendous personal magnetism. Described as a "rascal-guru" by one who knew him, he was no charlatan. He believed in what he preached and sought to put it into practice with his followers as they sought to transform themselves into cosmopolitan citizens of a new age.

*This enthralling account reveals both the originality of Dimitrije Mitrinović, and the skill of the author in bringing alive his vision of a cosmopolitan world community, as well as the significance of his ideas for our times.*

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ISBN 1 85072 334 6



*D. Mitrinović, probably 1920s.*



*D. Mitrinović, probably 1930s.*



*D. Mitrinović with members of the New Europe Group, Essex, 1930s.  
From left, at rear: Valerie Cooper, Ivo Gabeler, Dimitrije Mitrinović;  
at front: Leslie Lohan, Watson Thomson, Gladys Macdermot,  
J. V. Delahaye.*



*Group photograph, 1930s.  
Extreme left: Erich Gutkind. Centre: Father Vêlimirovic.  
Extreme right: D. Mitrinović. The woman in front of and to the left of  
Mitrinović: Winifred Gordon Fraser.*

# Dimitrije Mitrinović

## A Biography

*by*  
Andrew Rigby

William Sessions Limited  
York, England

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ISBN 1 85072 334 6

Printed in 11 point Plantin  
from Author's Disk  
by Sessions of York  
The Ebor Press  
York, England

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# Acknowledgements

THE ORIGINAL research for this book was carried out during the late 1970s and early 1980s. Throughout that period I drew heavily upon the support and criticism of the people associated with the New Atlantis Foundation who had been closely involved with the life of Dimitrije Mitrinović. In the original edition of this book I acknowledged in particular the help and encouragement of Harry and Gracie Rutherford, Ellen Mayne, Violet MacDermot and David Shillan. Unfortunately David died while I was still working on the original manuscript but I took the opportunity to make reference to the invaluable assistance he had provided, especially in translating what I then referred to as Yugoslav sources. The world changes and in the years since the original book was published Ellen Mayne, Harry Rutherford, Violet MacDermot and Gracie Rutherford have also died. Each of them, in their own way, encouraged and supported me during the original research and writing process – and in truth the book was very much a collaborative effort.

In revising the text for this second edition I have gone back in my mind to the times I spent in the homes of these co-workers and friends, pouring over archives and engaged in discussion, as I struggled to make sense of what it was that had inspired these gifted people to devote so much of their energy and their lives to the work of this strange Serbian with the shaven head, Dimitrije Mitrinović! They welcomed me into their lives, and the respect and the affection that I developed for them remains within me, as strong as ever.

Special mention should be made however of two people without whom this edition of the book would not have appeared. Without the patience and the humour Harry Rutherford showed as he ‘interpreted’ Mitrinović for me some twenty or more years ago I would never have persevered with the original project. When



Harry died Violet MacDermot took over his mantle as advisor and as carer of the archival materials relating to the life and work of Mitrinović. Violet's strength and determination beneath her quiet and self-deprecating manner was always a source of wonder to me.

In the process of revising the script for this second edition a number of people have been important. Jeanne Kaczka helped with the preparation of the text, and Philip Conford worked on the proofs and on the index. I would also like to acknowledge the help of someone with whom I used to work closely – John Horton of Bradford University's J. B. Priestly Library. When I first approached John on behalf of Violet and the other trustees of the New Atlantis Foundation to enquire about lodging Mitrinović's books and the archives within the university library, he welcomed the prospect and went out of his way to smooth the transfer. It is good to know that there are still 'proper librarians' around, without whom so many of us who spend our time reading and writing would be lost.

Finally, I owe a deep debt to Mike Tyldesley with whom I share many interests beyond Dimitrije Mitrinović (including Rugby League). Although we work in different universities Mike has proven himself the perfect colleague, his enthusiasm and perseverance has been central to this project, and I thank him for it.

ANDREW RIGBY  
Coventry  
June 2006

# Introduction

ON MAY 24th 1933 a new weekly paper appeared on book-stalls throughout Britain. It was called *New Britain*, the organ of a political movement of the same name launched the previous December. By August 1933 sales of the weekly had reached 32,000 and over 60 local groups had been formed throughout the country. The time was obviously favourable for a new political initiative. The country had just passed through the financial crisis of 1931; unemployment and poverty were devastating problems. In Germany Hitler had risen to power and the threat of a new European war began to appear on the horizon. Whilst the spectre of civil strife loomed with the growth of fascism, the main political parties seemed bankrupt of ideas.

The New Britain movement appeared to many to offer a radical and imaginative approach to such problems. Its programme consisted of four main proposals:

1. The reorganisation of industry as National Guilds based on workers' control;
2. The devolution of parliament into three Chambers – a House of Industry based on the National Guilds taking control over economic affairs; a House of Culture composed of representatives of the arts, sciences, religion and education which would exercise a guiding influence over cultural affairs, and a Political Chamber which would be concerned with questions of law and order and international relations;
3. The radical devolution of decision-making power on as wide a range of issues as possible within Britain itself as a step on the way towards European and ultimately world federation;
4. The complete overhaul of the monetary system by restoring the right to issue credit to the nation rather than the banks.

The movement made a direct appeal to those who yearned for a new social order to take responsibility upon themselves for its creation in their everyday lives. One of the early manifestos concluded:

*To wait for leaders is to evade responsibilities. . . Those who wish to save themselves from drifting into a state of war – a war of all against all, must make themselves responsible to each for all, and find others who will join them in overcoming all that stands in the way of a NEW ORDER.*<sup>1</sup>

From the first issue of *New Britain* there was evidence that this was not a conventional political movement, in the form of 10 articles entitled 'World Affairs' written by someone with the pen-name of M. M. Cosmoi. These were written in an apocalyptic style, ranging over the whole world panorama and touching on different aspects of human life. This was the same M. M. Cosmoi who had contributed a long series of articles under the same title of 'World Affairs' to A. R. Orage's weekly *The New Age* between 1920 and 1921. The main theme of these articles had been the notion of the world and humanity as a developing organism. Within this framework he had attempted to sketch what he called 'the psychological layout of the world,' assessing the contribution and relative function of each race and nation in this organic world order.

Few of those who read the articles in *The New Age* and later in *New Britain* knew the identity of M. M. Cosmoi. His name was Dimitrije Mitrinović. He was born in Hercegovina in 1887. As a young student he had taken a prominent part in his country's struggle against the Austrian regime and became one of the leading young lights in the literary world there through his involvement with the radical literary review *Bosanska Vila*. In 1914 while studying at Munich he became associated with Wassily Kandinsky. The artist introduced him to a group of distinguished thinkers from different countries who were trying to create a strong cultural influence on behalf of international harmony. They called themselves the *Blut-bund*. Amongst the figures associated with the initiative were Erich Gutkind and Frederik van Eeden who were the moving spirits, Gustav Landauer, Martin Buber, Florence Christian Rang and Theodore Daubler. Romain Rolland and Walter Rathenau were also peripherally involved. The outbreak of World War I frustrated their plans and Mitrinović fled to England where he sought work with the Serbian Legation.

In London he was introduced to A. R. Orage and became part of the circle of writers and thinkers associated with *The New Age*, one of the most important journals at the time for radical political thought in its support of Guild Socialism and Social Credit. In 1922 Orage resigned from editorship of *The New Age* and left for France to work with Gurdjieff. Mitrinović, by this time, had begun to gather around him his own circle of friends and acquaintances, and had begun to lead informal discussion groups on a wide range of subjects: philosophy, sociology, the arts, religion and psychology.

In 1926 he met Alfred Adler in London and the following year he founded the English branch of the International Society for Individual Psychology, known as the Adler Society. He was also at this time closely associated with Philip Mairet, Maurice Reckitt and the other members of what became known as the Chandos Group. With some of them he provided the impulse for the formation of the New Europe Group, a British initiative for European federation, of which Patrick Geddes was the first president. The New Britain movement grew out of the Adler Society and the New Europe Group, as a movement for national renaissance based on the recognition that if the age of plenty made possible by technological development was to be realised it required a total re-ordering of society, a transformation not only of the social structure but also of individual consciousness – ‘Self change for world change’, as Mitrinović phrased it.

The New Britain Movement came to an end as an active public movement in 1935 after publication of the movement’s papers ceased owing to lack of funds. However, a group of people remained with Mitrinović and continued to work with him. He believed that the age of hierarchical leadership had passed and that a new organic social order required a new organ of integration. He called this new function ‘Senate’. It was not to be an alien body grafted onto society to rule from above, but rather a large and loosely connected group of people who would attempt to intermediate between all the different functional groupings that would together make up the new, cooperative order. In such a society the values of mutual aid and community would need to be held in dynamic tension with the values of individual freedom. Some source of guidance was necessary if such a balance was to be maintained. This was to be provided

by senators. They would possess no authority other than their personal influence as members of the different groupings in society. Their function would be one of helping contending parties to view their conflict within the context of the world as a whole, to help them discover how their respective points of view might be reconcilable within a wider organic context. Mitrinović called this method 'Third Force', implying the rejection of 'either-or' types of thinking in favour of an approach which he characterised as 'above, between and beyond the extremes and opposites.'

During the years prior to World War II Mitrinović worked with those around him in a kind of prolonged training exercise in those personal and interpersonal skills and attributes which would be required of potential senators.

In 1976 I received a letter from one of the people who had been involved with Mitrinović during this period. He explained:

We believed that those who were to help in founding the social state must start with an absolute personal commitment to one another; must be prepared to pool their wealth in the widest sense of the term, including sharing responsibility for one another's lives and problems; and finally must be prepared to speak openly and frankly with one another, in declaring their own mind and will and appreciating and criticising others. So they would form a group in which both the widest diversity of individuality and a real sense of equality and community would exist together; in which there could be both the continuity of a collective and the continual change which arises from the free working of individual initiative. Such a group would have no fixed formal organisation but would always be flexible.

Success and failure in such an endeavour cannot be measured, but we entered into it with great dedication and we had our share of both. Much of the time we lived in different houses, though there were houses where some of us lived together a life in common.

Mitrinović died in 1953. The following year a charitable trust, the New Atlantis Foundation, was formed for the purpose of maintaining the archives of the different initiatives with which Mitrinović was involved, holding meetings and issuing occasional publications on various aspects of Mitrinović's thought. The small group of people who ran the Foundation were all involved with Mitrinović in the 1930s and continued to share their lives together until his death and beyond. The letter I received in 1976, the first time I had ever come across the name of Mitrinović, was from one of their

number. He had read my books on communes and alternative communities in Britain and felt that there was much in Mitrinović's thought and work that was relevant to the contemporary quest for an alternative social order based on the insight that true socialism can be achieved only by people who are themselves true 'inner socialists.' Hence the origins of this book. It represents an attempt to convey something of the life, thought and work of a man who, although possessed of great abilities and formidable intellectual energy and imagination, is virtually unknown. In his home country of Former Yugoslavia he is mainly renowned as one of the intellectual and political leaders of the pre-World War I revolutionary youth; a mysterious figure who, for some unfathomable reason, deserted the liberation struggle and became embroiled in mystical esoteric circles in England.

In truth there is much in Mitrinović's work, especially his published writing, which is obscure and seemingly totally divorced from the realities of the world. Anyone who attempts to read, for example, his series of articles from *The New Age* or some of his contributions to *New Britain* will find his idiosyncratic and eccentric language and style almost incomprehensible; whilst the ideas that he sought to convey by such means often appear so utterly fantastic, so far beyond the normally taken-for-granted ways of approaching the problems of the world as to invite dismissal as the bizarre ramblings of a somewhat deranged dreamer. This indeed was the response of many, including the present writer, on first encountering Mitrinović's published writings. Others however came to realise that it was this very ability to move beyond the conventionally taken-for-granted modes of thought and practice which was an integral part of the man's significance. Rowland Kenney, the first editor of the *Daily Herald*, observed that:

Mr. Mitrinović transcended ordinary language as he transcended ordinary thought. He was speaking and writing from levels which we were not using. We were too much under the influence of logical sequence and what Ouspensky called the formatory mind. We were not used to writing, thinking and speaking from our feeling centre, which Mitrinović did. Mitrinović was therefore preparing many of us for an understanding of things in a new light and I think that is one of the contributions he has made to our modern world. He has taught those of us who were so wrapped up in common-sense, in reason, in

the scientific outlook, in logical, sequential thought, that there is something much deeper and of much more value.<sup>2</sup>

There is indeed much in Mitrinović's work and in his ideas which is of contemporary interest. The demand for workers' control in industry is still on the political agenda. The frustration felt by those excluded from exerting an effective influence over decisions that affect their lives grows apace with the centralisation of political and economic power. The owners of capital and the controllers of finance continue to exercise a determining influence over our lives in their search for profit. The spectre of international and regional conflict continues to hang over us. Despite continued technological progress, the problems of poverty and unemployment remain.

I would never claim that Mitrinović had all the answers to such issues of world concern, but throughout most of his life he was trying to confront these problems in an original and creative manner. A colleague recalled after Mitrinović's death that 'he had the wonderful gift of being able to say to individuals and to our generation what future experience would make clear to them.'<sup>3</sup> Perhaps the world needs its practical planners – people with the ability to judge between lesser evils; but we also need our visionaries, people possessed of a utopian imagination, able to conceive of an alternative ordering of society and life, and willing to risk censure and ridicule in pursuance of a grander image of the future. What follows is an attempt to retrieve from history the life and ideas of such a person.

## NOTES

1. 'New Britain Manifestos. The Social State,' *New Britain Quarterly*, vol 1, no. 2, Jan.-March 1933, p. 53. Emphasis in original.
2. Commemoration meeting, New Europe Group, January 29th 1954.
3. David Davies, Commemoration meeting 1954.