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THE MARRIED COUPLE DICKINSON–BERRY ON SERBIA*

The paper analyzes the efforts of the British couple May Dickinson and James Berry to change the negative image of Serbia in the British public in the first two decades of the twentieth century. These two eminent doctors gained a positive impression of the Serbs already during their first visit to Serbia in 1904, when they attended the coronation ceremony of King Petar Karadjordjević. Their medical and humanitarian mission from 1915 to 1916 is particularly important, when they, together with fifty of their colleagues formed a special hospital, the so-called 'Berry mission' in Vrnjačka Banja. Thanks to their unselfish efforts they eradicated the typhus that was raging throughout Serbia during those months, and cured many sick and wounded Serbian soldiers. Having returned to London they published a book in which they presented their impressions of their stay in Serbia and the humanitarian medical work.

Key words: *Great Britain, Serbia, The First World War, doctors, hospital, humanitarian missions*

Кључне речи: *Велика Британија, Србија, Први светски рат, лекари, болнице, хуманитарне мисије*

The image of Serbia in the British public at the beginning of the twentieth century was not at all favorable. Distance, ignorance, prejudice, had led to the point that the Serbs in Great Britain were considered to be bad guys who only create problems in the Balkans.¹ Serbia had a particularly bad rating on the British island after The May Overthrow in 1903. The Serbs were then called murderers, barbarians, savages.

* This paper is a part of the project *Modernizacija Zapadnog Balkana* – "Modernization of the West Balkan" (No. 177309) supported by the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Serbia.

¹ Растовић 2005, 427.

The change of gray perceptions about Serbia in Great Britain after 1903 was brought by the strong impact of the married couple of doctors from London, May Dickinson Berry, an anesthesiologist, and her husband, otherwise known surgeon James Berry. They both spoke French and German very well, and they learned the Serbian language. James Berry was born on February 4th 1860 in Kingston (Ontario) in Canada, but he gained his education at *Whitgift School, South Croydon* in London, where he studied and had his advanced training at St Bartholomew's Hospital. He was a longtime associate of the Royal College of Surgeons. He was elected as a consultant surgeon and honorary lecturer in clinical surgery at the *Royal College of Surgeons* in London. He retired in 1927. He is the pioneer in thyroid surgery in England. He wrote a number of papers in the field of surgery.² Together with his first wife Frances May Dickinson, he led a team of British doctors who visited Serbia during the World War I. As a result of this mission was his book *The Story of a Red Cross Unit in Serbia*, which was published in 1916, and dedicated to the heir to the throne Aleksandar Karadjordjević.³ Then they were captured by the Hungarians who expelled them to Switzerland after a few months and from there they continued their humanitarian work in Romania. Berry died in 1946. His first wife, Frances May Dickinson Berry was born in 1857. She was an anesthesiologist by profession. She wrote the book *Austria-Hungary and her Slav Subjects*. She died in 1934.

The spouses Dickinson- Barry stayed for the first time in Serbia in 1904 when they attended a ceremony marking the coronation of King Peter Karadjordjević, and after that they toured the country on their bikes. Upon their return to London, through public lectures and at various meetings and receptions they organized, they informed the intellectual and cultural circles of their country on what they had seen and heard in Serbia. All the information about their activities was regularly sent to Belgrade by Aleksandar Jovičić, a Serbian diplomat in London.

Only in the autumn of 1904, he sent three major reports from which we learn the details of their journey. At a reception in late October that year, prepared in their house for about eighty people, Dr. Berry and his wife spoke favorably about their journey through Serbia, stressing that they particularly noted the enthusiasm of the Serbian people toward King Petar and his dynasty.⁴

² The most important papers: Diseases of the thyroid gland and their surgical treatment. London, 1901, A manual of surgical diagnosis. London, 1904, Harelip and cleft palate. With Special Reference to the Operative Treatment and Its Results. With Thomas Percy Legg (1872–1930). London, 1912.

³ Dickinson Berry, 1916.

⁴ АС, МИДС, ПО, 1904, Ф–III, Д–IV, I/9, Пов. бр. 1837, Јовичић – Пашићу, 17/30. X 1904.

In mid-December the same year, Jovičić sent a detailed report to Belgrade in which he presented the lecture given by Dr. James Berry on December 8th in his apartment. Stressing that it was an excellent, instructive and well attended lecture, he noted that Berry spoke for more than two hours without notes, with illustrations and photographs. The lecture consisted of three segments: the geographical and historical, the current situation in Serbia, a retrospective view on The May Overthrow. The prominent London surgeon was particularly impressed by the picturesque Serbian landscape, mellowness, warmth and hospitality of the Serbian people. During his presentation he particularly highlighted the safety of their stay in Serbia and that all roads were suitable for biking. He pointed out that the food was good and cheap. He was surprised at how the Serbian people were honest and tolerant, and could not understand that this nation could be called murderers and barbarians because of The May Overthrow, as if other nations were immune to such events. He stated the arguments of a prominent Serbian statesman in favor of the removal of King Aleksandar Obrenović. According to his explanation, the former king's actions, such as declaring the unconstitutional status, marriage with an inappropriate person, insulting the senior officers and generals by the queen's brothers who were at the rank of lieutenants and her intention to denominate one of them as the heir to the throne, spilled the glass of the people's patience. Therefore, in the opinion of the Serbian statesman whose name Berry did not mention, we should not condemn those who pledged their lives to save the country from shame and humiliation. In Jovičić's opinion, these words of James Berry left a strong impression on the listeners. At the end of the report he states that the couple Dickinson-Berry indebted Serbia with that lecture and that they are to be thanked for the efforts they make.⁵ May Dickinson and James Berry were otherwise engaged in collecting support for Serbia during the Balkan wars, and during the First World War they gave a great contribution to the opening and equipping of the Anglo-Serbian hospital.⁶

They demonstrated their respect and love towards Serbia and the Serbian people in the best way soon after the beginning of the First World War. At the kind request of Mabel Grujić⁷, an American, the wife of Slavko Grujić, a Serbian diplomat in Great Britain, May Dickinson and her husband accepted the proposal to come to Serbia with their friends doctors and the medical staff and assist in the treatment of the Serbian sick and wounded, as well as

⁵ АС, МИДС, ПО, 1904, Ф–III, Д–IV, I/9, Пов. бр. 2191, Јовичић–Пашићу, 2/15. XII 1904.

⁶ F. O. 372/881, N° 14460, C. Hillon to E, Grey, August 4, 1916.

⁷ Мабел Грујић (1881–1956. Предавач на Америчкој школи класичних студија у Атини)

to combat typhoid fever. After the outbreak of the war, Mabel Grujić was sent to London as an accredited emissary of the Serbian government with the task to alert the local public opinion and appeal to a number of humanitarian and medical organizations to help the sick and wounded in Serbia. At the beginning of the World War First, she established the Committee of Ladies that collected one hundred and fifty thousand francs for the Serbian people and she obtained a gift of fifty thousand francs from the Serbian Relief Fund for the purchase of medical supplies.⁸ She performed her humanitarian work successfully thanks to, among other things, her friendship with Professor Seton-Watson who also had a great reputation in the British public and scientific circles. Professor Watson was the ideological driving force of the creation of the *Serbian Relief Fund*, which aimed to inform the British public about what kind of help Serbia needed.⁹ The friendship of Mabel Grujić with Lady Paget, the wife of Ralph Paget, the British Minister in Serbia, is also known.¹⁰

The married couple Dickinson-Berry with their medical team made a large part of the British mission of doctors and nurses called *Anglo Serbian hospital*, which was active in various regions of the Kingdom of Serbia, until the Austrian occupation of the country at the end of 1915. This was the official name of Berry's team that was almost never used. The popular name of the mission was the *Berry mission*. It was one of the best equipped hospitals that arrived in Serbia.¹¹ It is interesting to note that in their country the members of the mission were called the *Royal Free Hospital Unit*.

The mission consisted of fifty-four members and led by Dr. James Berry and his wife, May Dickinson, went from London to Serbia on January 19th 1915, and arrived at their final destination, Vrnjačka Banja, on February 11th the same year. In Berry's team there were doctors of various specialties, nurses, cooks, superintendants. They brought with them to Serbia huge equipment and medical instruments, medicines, hospital items including beds, blankets, food, clothing, boots in the total value of seven thousand fifty-seven pounds. This amount also included all the expenses of the mission on the territory of Serbia, i.e. Vrnjačka Banja where it was stationed until February 18th 1916 when, at the request of the occupying authorities, it had to leave Serbia. The mission members travelled to Serbia over Malta and then to Thessalonica where they were told in the Serbian consulate that the place determined for their action was Vrnjačka Banja. From Thessalonica they arrived in Skopje over Gevgelija, where they met Lady Paget from whom they heard that there was typhus in Serbia. From Skopje, they

⁸ Грујић Мабел, СБР, 840. (Новаков, А.)

⁹ Ostojic Fejic 1988, 195.

¹⁰ Allcock 1991, 73.

¹¹ Крипнер 1986, 41.

continued their journey to Nis, where they had meetings with Slavko Grujić, Lieutenant Colonel Vojislav Subotic, Serbian Deputy of the Red Cross and Red Cross President Colonel Karanović from whom they learned that they were assigned to a backup military hospital in Vrnjačka Banja, i.e. subordinated to the Serbian military authorities based in Kragujevac. Then they finally went to a place where they would work for the whole year. Due to the large number of Englishmen who resided in Vrnjačka Banja, this town was called the English town.¹²

After the necessary technical preparation, the mission of doctor Berry and his wife, May Dickinson began to work on February 19th 1915, and on February 21st, their hospital received for treatment the first twenty-three patients. The humanitarian mission led by James Berry and his wife had six hospitals with a total of three hundred sixty beds under their supervision, and beside the fifty-four members of the mission at hospitals, there were also Austrian prisoners of war who worked as technical staff or engineers, and there were also Serbs, which meant that between sixty and seventy people worked in British hospitals in the area of Vrnjačka Banja. The Berry placed the main hospital in an abandoned and large casino, i.e. the spa villa, which had the name Therapy.¹³ This building was the ideal location for the hospital because it had a large dining room, several spacious rooms, rooms for storage of goods, bathrooms, unlimited supply of water, steam laundry, power plant, central heating, modern toilets. A better place for the hospital almost did not exist even in Belgrade.

In their work they were subordinated to the Serbian army headquarters in Kragujevac, and communication with the headquarters was kept by the major Gasic, who was a civil doctor in Belgrade before the war. Another man for connection with the Serbian authorities was the interpreter Nojhat, a hotel manager from Belgrade who had spent a long time in the United States where he had learned English. Each member of the mission received three dinars a day from the Serbian government, which they used for daily provision of food and hospital equipment, medical material, while the Berry mission was supplied with petrol and kerosene by Serbian authorities.

One of the most important activities of the mission was the eradication of typhus, and in that sense, they succeeded in building a special hospital-barracks in a very short time, where only the typhoid patients were accommodated. By the way, in Serbia during 1914/1915 one hundred and fifty thousand people and nearly half of its doctors (over eighty) died of typhus.¹⁴ It is interesting that the

¹² Petković 1996, 66.

¹³ Кришнер 1986, 70.

¹⁴ Дивљановић 1986, 95.

price of construction of the improvised hospital was five thousand dinars or just one hundred and fifty pounds. It is curious that this was the first hospital of its kind built in Serbia. The hospital also had a special insulation department for those with dubious symptoms or suffering from typhus.¹⁵ Due to good organization, order, cleanliness, successful treatment of Serbian soldiers, the wounded and sick, the English doctors and humanitarian workers received a written appreciation from Duke Radomir Putnik on May 25th 1915.

As the war front was approaching the south, there was a dilemma among the English humanitarians whether the mission should continue working or retreat together with the Serbian army in the case of Austrian occupation of Serbia. There was an opinion that it would be a pity a lot of doctors and nurses to remain idle in Serbia while they could work more effectively to help at hospitals in Malta or in another war front. The mission members talked repeatedly about this issue with the emissary Ralph Paget and Serbian military authorities that felt that in case the army retreated, the Berry's medical unit should do the same. By the way, Ralph Paget performed the coordination of all British medical and humanitarian missions in Serbia and took care of their relations with Serbian authorities. He was also the head of the International Commission for prevention of epidemic typhus in Serbia.¹⁶ The whole situation was further aggravated by the news of the Austrian occupation of Belgrade, Požarevac and other Serbian towns, and it was getting more likely that the Austrian troops would arrive in Vrnjačka Banja. Eventually the Berry mission was decided to remain in Vrnjačka Banja regardless of whether they would be able to continue their work or would be captured by the Austro-Hungarian soldiers. Except for three members of the mission who expressly requested to withdraw in the direction of Albania, the others remained determined to stay in Vrnjačka Banja, which effectively meant that twenty-eight of them continued working after withdrawal of the Serbian army.

Austrian soldiers entered Vrnjačka Banja and the British hospital of doctor Berry on November 9th 1915, and the next day the mission continued their daily hospital tasks as that was the decision of the occupying authorities. In the next few weeks, at the hospital of the married couple Dickinson-Berry, they continued treatment of the Austro-Hungarian soldiers and the wounded whose fought on the Russian and Italian fronts. Their relation to the members of the British team, but also to the Serbs who stayed in hospital and in the town was correct. Doctor Berry even noted on the pages of his book that during their captivity under the Austrian occupation forces, no atrocities and violence of the Austrians were recorded except that there was sporadic looting. However, over

¹⁵ *Idem*, 104.

¹⁶ Grba 1995, 34.

time the hospital emptied, the British doctors and nurses had less work, and at the beginning of 1916, the occupation authorities ordered that the mission of the British doctors and humanitarian workers had to leave the town and Serbia towards Kruševac, as they did on February 18th 1916. After almost a year, Doctor Barry, his wife May and twenty-five members of the mission left Vrnjačka Banja, and began their journey via Kruševac, Belgrade, Budapest, Vienna and Switzerland to Paris from where they headed to London, which was the completion of this mission activities and the end of the couple Dickinson-Berry's stay in Serbia.

The couple Dickinson-Berry published their impressions of the work of the medical and humanitarian mission in 1916 upon their return to London in a book that was titled *The Story of a Red Cross Unit in Serbia. With F. May Dickinson Berry and W. Lyon Blease*. This work is an extremely valuable record of war time, but also a kind of description of Serbia and Serbian people seen by impartial observers who had spent a year among the Serbs and prepared the book based on that. Its creation was also influenced by requests of numerous friends of the British couple who wanted everything that happened during that year's work of the Red Cross mission to be recorded. Doctor James Berry notes in the preface that their stay in Serbia was a strange blend of tragedy, comedy and pathos. They arrived in Serbia with feelings of respect for the Serbian people, whose history was full of great deeds that deserved to be recorded in Great Britain, and whose struggle for freedom and liberation of the country from the invaders was so heroic.¹⁷ This work was otherwise dedicated to Prince Alexander Karadjordjević who left a strong impression on two British doctors. This respect for the Serbian heir to the throne was best proven by the words that he, with his military skill, energy and ability had done much for his country and the allied cause.

The book consists of eighteen chapters and two hundred and ninety-two pages that describe in detail the stay and activities of the Berry medical mission. Besides the couple, different chapters of this book were written by members of the mission Helen Boyle, Donald Norris, Lyon Blease. It should be noted that in addition to the fact that Berry was a highly respected doctor, he was also well acquainted with Serbian political history, which he showed in the first chapter, where he made a kind of retrospective of the historic events that preceded the outbreak of World War I. Berry points out that the whole problem started in 1908 when the Austro-Hungarian Empire suddenly annexed Bosnia and Herzegovina, which did not get the adequate protest of the great powers, unlike in Serbia, where the act caused anger of the local population. Underlining that the Austro-Hungarian Empire did much to advance the provinces during the

¹⁷ Dickinson Berry 1916, VIII.

thirty-year occupation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, he admitted that its reign was never popular among the population and the annexation marked the end of all dreams about a possible Serbian alliance with these two provinces.¹⁸

On the pages of this chapter, the British doctor also pointed the existence of hostilities between Serbia and Bulgaria, which was encouraged by the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and that the success of the Balkan allies in the war with Turkey in 1912 was a major blow to the aspirations of Vienna in those regions. Berry also warned that Austria-Hungary sought the reason for a long time to attack Serbia because it did not want a strong neighbor on its southern borders, and the murder of the heir to the throne Ferdinand was what they sought. On the other hand, Serbia did not want the outbreak of the war because it had just emerged from two wars and was not prepared for a new conflict.

One of the key parts of the book (chapter nine) concerns the description of the Serbs as a people, the mentality, customs, habits. All the members of the mission except doctor Berry, his wife and another member, had a problem with the Serbian language, which was a kind of nightmare for them. But despite that fact they all managed to establish close contacts with their patients, the hosts and the population of Vrnjačka Banja, which led to their positive general impressions of the Serbs. Also, despite the dusty and muddy roads, poorly cobbled streets, poor railways, they found Serbia attractive and were surprised by the landscape of northern Serbia, which greatly resembled the hilly parts of Great Britain.

In terms of the social structure of the Serbian population, the authors noted that most of the inhabitants were peasants who owned the land and that they maintained a modest standard of living which was characteristic for their ancestors who had also lived very modestly. Unlike them, the rich people in Serbia measured their wealth as they did in the seventeenth century England, through the land, cattle, horses, furniture, dishes. The couple noticed that the part of the people who were educated abroad, accepted a high level of civilization and modernization as opposed to ordinary people who kept the primitive racial spirit.¹⁹

Berry-Dickinson point the following as being the most important characteristics of the Serbs – patriotism, cheerfulness, hospitality, delay and giving promises easily. Patriotism is deeply rooted in the Serbian people who do not speak about Holy Serbia, but their feeling for the country is more religious in nature than it is, for example, in Russia. Referring to the enemies of the Serbian state, Berry and his wife say that the Serbs hate Austria far more than Turkey, because the Turks tortured them only physically, while the Austrians tried to seize their soul. The special topic of discussion was the status of the

¹⁸ Idem, 1.

¹⁹ Idem, 123.

Serbian woman which was not very good, but it was far better than the one in Montenegro. The British doctors were unpleasantly surprised by the Serbian custom that men were willing to beat their wives. On the other hand, they were pleasantly surprised by the fact that almost every larger Serbian village had a school. However, they believed that one of the greatest ailments of the Serbs was bureaucracy and a slow movement forward (modernization of the society).

On the pages of this book, an interesting comparison with the Irish was made. The similarity of the Serbs and the Irishmen was reflected in the fact that both people enjoyed the benefits of everyday life, were ready to postpone the completion of the unfinished things not for the same day, but for the next or another day. Also, the similarity was reflected in the fact that both peoples had a strong nationalistic spirit, were careless to dirtiness, superficial and impulsive, very hospitable.²⁰ Commenting on the Serbian patients in hospitals where they worked, James Berry emphasizes that they are good and obedient, but very suspicious, especially regarding anesthesia, because they believe that any anesthesia shortens your life for a number of years and therefore are willing to endure pain rather than undergo sedation during the surgery.

The example of this prominent couple shows that during their visit to Serbia they gained a completely different picture of the country and its people, from the one that was enshrined in the British public. The married couple Dickinson-Berry were true friends of the Serbian people, and quite opposite, for example, to what Mary Durham and Herbert Vivian were doing, they presented the real Serbia everywhere and at all times. Their noble 1915–1916 activities were of paramount importance and unprecedented in the history of relations between Great Britain and Serbia of the time.

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БРАЧНИ ПАР ДИКИНСОН–БЕРИ О СРБИЈИ

Угледни брачни пар лекара Дикинсон–Бери из Лондона дао је немерљив допринос разбијању увреженог стереотипа о Србији као земљи дивљака и убица, нарочито актуелног почетком двадесетог века, тачније, након мајског преврата 1903. године, када је дошло до промене династија на српском престолу. Они су први пут боравили у Србији 1904. године, када су присуствовали церемонији крунисања новог српског владара Петра Карађорђевића. После завршетка крунидбених свечаности, бициклима су обишли Србију. По повратку у Лондон одржали су серију предавања, на којима су пред окупљеном тадашњом интелектуалном елитом своје земље, говорили о Србији и српском народу у позитивном смислу. По избијању Првог светског рата, а на позив Мабел Грујић, одазвали су се њеном апелу да са својим колегама лекарима и болничарима поведу у Србију једну хуманитарну мисију како би помогли у лечењу народа и српских бораца-рањеника који су претрпели страхоте у ратним дејствима. Медицинско-хуманитарна мисија, популарно названа Беријева, у којој су се налазили угледни британски лекари, болничари, медицинске сестре (укупно педесет четири лица), боравила је пуних годину дана, од фебруара 1915. до фебруара 1916. године, у Врњачкој Бањи, где су организовали најсавременију болницу за лечење рањеника и оболелих од тифуса. Свој племенити рад су наставили и после аустроугарске окупације Србије, мада у смањеном обиму. По повратку у земљу објавили су књигу сведочанстава о боравку у Србији, у којој су на објективан и непристрастан начин представили Србију и њен народ.