
BOOK REVIEW

Tolley, Dorine. 2008. *The Power Within: Leon MacLaren A Memoir of his Life and Work*. Sydney: BookSurge Publishing. 364 pp. \$30.00. ISBN-13: 9781439210307 (pbk).

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In *The Power Within: Leon MacLaren A Memoir of his Life and Work*, Dorine Tolley traces the life and teachings of influential spiritual teacher Leon MacLaren (1910–1994) and outlines the beginnings and development of the New Religious Movement that he founded, the School of Economic Science. This very personal memoir offers firsthand accounts from Tolley's unique and long-standing position within the movement. With the inclusion of personal photographs, excerpts from Tolley's own heartfelt diary entries, and verbatim extracts from MacLaren's personal letters and transcribed talks and lectures, *The Power Within* gives a rare, intimate insight into MacLaren's background, character and ambitions.

In the first chapters Tolley details how the School of Economic Science began in 1937 in London as the Henry George School of Economics, a group dedicated to the work of nineteenth-century economist Henry George. In 1942 it transformed into the School of Economic Science (henceforth SES), when MacLaren began distancing himself from George and incorporating into his work the “scientific” study and observation of the “natural laws” of economics. In the 1940s MacLaren was introduced to the ideas of P. D. Ouspensky (1878–1947), a pupil of Armenian-Greek spiritual teacher G. I. Gurdjieff (c. 1866–1949). From 1953, when MacLaren was reacquainted with Ouspensky's work through contact with Francis Roles (1901–1982), a pupil of Ouspensky, he began to seriously integrate Gurdjieffian philosophical and religio-spiritual elements into his teaching. Tolley's Chapter 5, “The Indian Connection,” recounts how Roles and MacLaren went on to discover Advaita Vedanta. After meeting Maharishi Mahesh Yogi (1918–2008) in the 1960s, they became pupils of Swami Shantananda Saraswati, the Shankaracharya of the North. Roles and MacLaren soon parted ways and MacLaren spent the rest of his life refining and promoting his eclectic teaching, which was by then predominantly based on Advaita Vedanta.

In these opening chapters Tolley reveals the fascinating personal connections between her family in the Netherlands, Ouspensky, Roles and MacLaren. From 1938 her parents, Dorine and Frans van Oyen, had been devoted pupils of Ouspensky, travelling from Amsterdam to London to spend periods of time at his property in Lyne Place. After his death in 1947 they became members of Francis Roles's Study Society, with Mrs van Oyen eventually leading the Dutch branch. Through their connection with Roles, the van Oyens met MacLaren in Amsterdam on Christmas Day in 1961 and went on to join the “School voor

Filosofie,” the Dutch branch of the SES. Mrs van Oyen rose to head the branch and Mr van Oyen became a senior tutor and treasurer. Leadership passed to Tolley’s brother Paul from 1989 to 1997. Tolley relates how her first encounter with MacLaren was playing Mozart piano duets with him as a young girl in her family home, following his music instruction. Years later, in her first year as a student at Amsterdam University, she was involved in a near-fatal car accident, spurring her to finally join the School voor Filosofie, eventually becoming a tutor there until she left the Netherlands altogether to become MacLaren’s personal assistant at the age of twenty-four.

From Chapter 6, Tolley chronicles her complex relationship with MacLaren as she served as his personal assistant, companion, nurse and guardian for twenty-one years to his death, visiting with him overseas branches of the SES and witnessing firsthand the significant expansion and transformations of the movement. She describes SES branches opening and flourishing in New York, Ireland, Australia, Malta and Belgium, as well as the founding of full-time private schools for children in London, the “St James Independent Schools,” and the SES’s acquisition of more and more large properties, such as sprawling seventeenth-century mansion Waterperry House, and neo-Tudor mansion Sarum Chase in London. Alongside this, Tolley gives accounts of MacLaren’s core theoretical teachings, particularly his work on the Law of Octaves, and gives details of SES residencies where, in line with Gurdjieff and Ouspensky, MacLaren invited group members to live together for periods of time where they would carry out intensive physical tasks and spiritual exercises, and live on little sleep. In the last chapters Tolley describes MacLaren’s decline and death in 1994, and the disputes that ensued over who owned the copyright to his intellectual property. In Chapter 19 Tolley includes a copy of MacLaren’s will, signed by MacLaren, proving that he had bequeathed all copyright to her, but the SES refuted this, ultimately allowing her the rights only to his musical compositions. Tolley left the SES and is now a renowned Gurdjieff Movements instructor and pianist in Sydney, Australia, where she married in 2001.

Tolley’s candid, detailed memoir casts a new light on this little-known though highly eclectic and sizeable New Religious Movement. Until recently, scholarship on the SES was almost exclusively based on journalists Peter Hounam and Andrew Hogg’s sensationalist exposé, *Secret Cult* (1984). This led to a barrage of negative press on the SES, particularly in regard to their associated St James Schools (mainly populated by children of SES members) and their use of corporal punishment and nondisclosure of their ties to the SES. Tolley’s memoir, while acknowledging these criticisms, offers the reader an alternative insider’s picture of the movement and the multifaceted figure of MacLaren. The book will surely interest those curious about the SES, as well as those more broadly interested in Gurdjieff, Ouspensky, Advaita Vedanta in the West, Gurdjieffian fringe groups, and how New Religious Movements might amalgamate Eastern and Western esoteric teachings.