

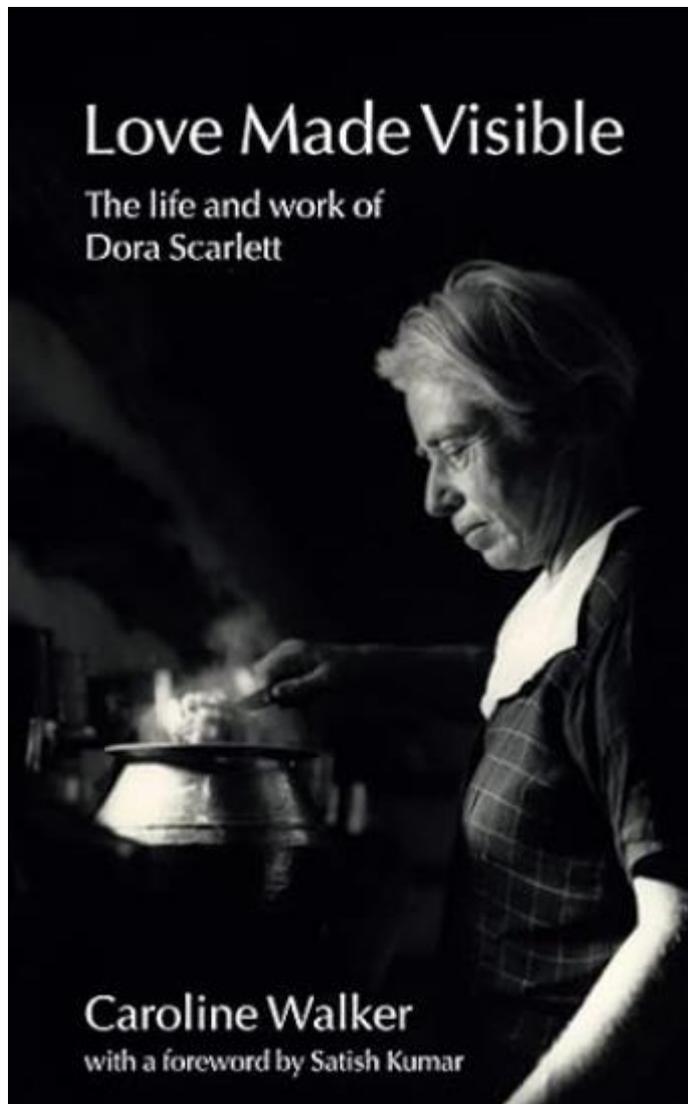
Dora Scarlett

Dora Scarlett was noted as a writer, broadcaster, communist activist, and above all as the founder and driving force of an organisation providing medical care to the poor in India. But throughout her life her real love was gardening and living a simple rural existence. Her last 40 years were spent in India where she started a rural clinic giving free treatment to poor villagers. From very simple beginnings it grew to encompass several health and development organisations working with hundreds of thousands of poor and marginalised people. She was made an MBE in 1994. She died in 2001 aged 95.

Earlier she had lived in Hungary, broadcasting to the West about Hungarian life. There she became disenchanted with communism and fled during the 1956 uprising.

The daughter of a schoolteacher, Dora grew up in modest surroundings in Liverpool. She had strong memories of her Liverpool childhood, of the docks and the strange plants in the Sefton park glasshouse. She always retained a slight Liverpool accent. With her intelligence and flair for writing she shone at school, but refused the expected move to university. She was more interested in horticulture, she told her parents.

And that was what she determined to do, working first on a chicken farm in Oxfordshire and later farming her own smallholding in Devon. There, long before the idea became fashionable in the 1970s, self-sufficiency and simple living appealed to her. She claimed later she needed only tea from the outside world.



In Devon she became involved with the Communist party, and after the war went at the party's instruction to Hungary to work as a broadcaster for Radio Budapest. She was supposed to beam stories of communist paradise to a British audience but found herself increasingly disillusioned with communism – and equally taken with the peasant life of eastern Europe. When the Soviet invasion came in 1956 Dora left in a hurry, with the help of the British embassy.

Back in London, she left the party and wrote a book about her experiences, *Window Onto Hungary*, including one of the best eyewitness accounts of the uprising. She spent several less than happy years in London, stifled by urban life and dead-end jobs. In 1959, without telling a soul, she left. Six weeks later she was in Chennai, having travelled by cargo ship. Dora was soon working in a village clinic outside Chennai and had found again that lifelong love – the simple rural life.

After two years she felt ready to commit herself to India. She had formed a friendship with a local farmer and his wife, and together they went deep into south India, finally settling some way west of the ancient temple city of Madurai, in the foothills of the Western Ghats that run down the spine of India. Here was a place remote from the modern world, with empty land and little in the way of medical facilities. Dora sometimes recalled those early days – of what must have been the high spot of her life. Of finding the land, divining water, digging an open well, the first crops on hitherto unused soil. She told of trudging from village to village with a bag of basic medicines, learning how people lived. And she had special memories of the first western volunteers – American Peace Corps at the time of Vietnam – and how they toiled all day in the heat digging pits to plant the coconut trees that now ring the place she called Seva Nilayam, or Home of Service.

Everything was to be modest – the buildings of mud and tile in the local style, no vehicles, traditional farming methods, certainly antibiotics where needed, but simple homespun medicine where they weren't. Seva Nilayam soon had a reputation for caring as well as effective treatment and for being welcoming to the poorest and least regarded. For Dora the poor were always the focus and the reason for giving free treatment – without which the poor would never attend. Seva Nilayam attracted interest around the world. Volunteers came from the US, Australia, Sweden and Britain and funding from Switzerland, Denmark, Australia, the US and Britain. The centre took in "in-patients" , but not conventionally on rows of beds in wards. Rather, these were patients who needed rest and good food as much as treatment, or who lived too far away to attend daily. The in-patients were part of the community, some staying a few days or weeks, others much longer so that they

became part of the place. They helped out in the farm, garden, kitchen or clinic, in an environment not much different from their village.

In the 1970s a new challenge arose. Western development agencies were moving to more progressive policies – preferring preventative to curative medical work. Dora's philosophy was that westerners had no right to impose their views on what Indian society might or might not need. She was there to provide what was asked of her, if she could. Undeterred by the loss of funding from agencies, she became her own fundraiser. Sitting on a wooden stool in a mudwalled building bashing at a 1920s typewriter, she composed a letter that started: 'I am writing to you from a remote corner of India...' and mailed copies to all the people she could think of. Dora's style was far removed from modern assertive fundraising techniques. She believed if you simply stated your need, people would respond. And they did. Soon Dora was writing a bi-monthly newsletter; not appealing for money but describing the life she saw around her in clinic, village or further afield in India, and adding her insight to what she thought it all amounted to. Over the years these letters – each one a wonderful read – came to comprise a very individual statement about Dora Scarlett and her life and work in India. Many compared her beliefs to those of Gandhi – whom she had met in the 1930s when he visited London. She recalled taking early morning walks with him in the East End and being deeply impressed by his presence. But she always insisted her ideas were her own, worked out herself, not taken from others.

Dora remained active in the clinic and writing to well beyond the age that many retire. But as disabilities of sight and hearing grew in old age she stepped back and the Seva Nilayam board appointed a director to

manage the organisation. She remained at Seva Nilayam, taking an interest in the clinic and garden, and in turn being cared for as she coped with increasing disability. In her later years she returned to the Catholicism of her upbringing. But Seva Nilayam had always embraced all faiths, indeed it was predominantly Hindu in its customs. So naturally her funeral followed local custom. Hundreds of local people attended the simple burial service in the beautiful garden she had created at Seva Nilayam.

Born 29.12.1905, died 28.3.2001.

Dora Scarlett's Letters from south India are available from VST.