

The Wooden Shoe is on the other foot: examining a myth

The conflict between Albert Meltzer and Freedom Press shaped the landscape of the anarchist movement we joined. We're going to examine one explanation of how it started. It will show (hopefully) that if you rely on later printed accounts and don't dig through what was written at the time you can miss the complexity of what really happened. The Wooden Shoe was an anarchist bookshop at 42 Old Compton Street in London which ran from 1966 to 1967 (It's mentioned in *Freedom* between 15 October 1966 and 28 October 1967). Donald Room blamed it for starting a dispute between Albert Meltzer and Vero (Vernon Richards), but that seems to be wrong.

In 1967 *Freedom* described the shop: 'Last year there also opened in New Compton Street the "Wooden Shoe" bookshop with an extensive range of anarchist books and publications. This shop is owned and run by a comrade, Ted Kavanagh, who now publishes *Cuddon's Cosmopolitan Review* and reprints various anarchist pamphlets including *Anarchy* No. 2 on Workers' Control. Ted K. also publishes many provocative posters, his latest is the famous Bakunin slogan: "If God existed it would be necessary to abolish him."' [1]

In 1967 the first (and only) issue of *Wooden Shoe* appeared. In it, 'Genesis of our group' showed how it started: 'The Wooden Shoe group is, of course, the Cuddon's Cosmopolitan Review group plus those who have gathered around the Cuddonite flag. [...]

'Freedom Press having shifted their bookshop to Fulham, in surroundings that must baffle new members of the Special Branch on the look-out, there was for some time nowhere in central London where people could hang around talking occasionally. When visitors came to London they had to wait for week-end meetings. While convinced libertarians bought their ultra-left journals in the commercial newsagents or even in the totalitarian C-t's [Colletts, presumably]. The Wooden Shoe Bookshop was born – Ted Kavanagh is in charge (process servers from Camden Borough Council, note). Meanwhile; aside from the bookshop – a worthwhile project in itself – we found the necessity for another anarchist press. For it is only when you put all the anarchist books and pamphlets and mags together in one shop, out of which someone has to pay the bills and live, that you find how few they are, and what long gaps there are between

publication.' [2]

Publications available were listed under the headings: Anarchist (*Freedom, Anarchy, Cuddon's*), syndicalist (*Direct Action, Industrial Worker, Rebel Youth*), pacifist (*Peace News*), Marxist (*Socialist Leader, Workers Review, Tribune*), solidarist (*Solidarity*) and psychedelic (*International Times, Oz, East Village Other*). The Wooden Shoe was also a source of situationist material (including *Heatwave*). Jim Duke and Anna Blume were involved. Bob Cobblings, anarchist concrete poet seems to have been involved, too: 'Bob Cobblings has his own cross to bear with the collapse of Better Books and The Wooden Shoe for he was actively engaged at various social economic and political levels in both these cultural enterprises.' [3] Albert Meltzer was involved with the Wooden Shoe (as a member of the *Cuddon's* group). Kavanagh had an offset litho press. Stuart Christie said Kavanagh and Martin Page 'gave their time and skills unstintingly. A chain of apostolic descent in offset printing came from Ted and Martin.' [4]

The shop spanned radical politics, poetry and the 'underground'/counter-culture. In 1996 Albert remembered it fondly as part of the radical upsurge of the sixties: 'Before Ted and Anna closed down with a cryptic note saying "Gone fishing" there were a few far-reaching events. As a meeting place rather than as a bookshop, it influenced the beginnings of new squatting movement, created a least a diversion on the anti-Vietnam War movement and led to the black flag flying over the barricades in Paris. Not bad for an under-capitalised, mismanaged and loss-making bookshop that scarcely existed a year!' [5] But the Wooden Shoe bookshop plays a very different role in the stories that Donald Room tells.

The Room version

In 2008 Donald Room wrote a short history of Freedom Press which he described as 'an amalgam of memories' and 'scissors-and-paste work'. Neither the memories nor the scissors seem to be totally reliable.

'In 1965, the advent of small offset printing made it possible to produce papers with little capital, and Albert Meltzer went off to start a paper closer to his own ideas, called *Wooden Shoe*, and a publishing group called Wooden Shoe Press.

Inside: anarchist letterpress, libraries and looking back

‘In 1968, Whitechapel Art Gallery bought the Express Printers premises at 84a Whitechapel High Street. Before payment was completed, Vero borrowed the money, in his own name, to buy the freehold of 84b Whitechapel High Street, an empty building on the other side of Angel Alley. The publisher became ‘Vernon Richards trading as Freedom Press’.

‘Albert Meltzer wrote to Vero with the proposal that Wooden Shoe Press should hire a room in the building, contributing to the mortgage repayments. Unlike the new Freedom Press building, the Wooden Shoe premises had a shop window. Jack Robinson, who was managing Freedom Bookshop and earning his living as a second-hand book dealer, visited the landlord of the vacated shop with a view to taking over the tenancy, and learned that Wooden Shoe had paid no rent for the three years and were being evicted. Vero might have written to Albert explaining what he had learned, but in the event he wrote a woffly letter, turning down Albert’s offer without mentioning the real reason. Albert began a feud which lasted until both he and Vero were dead, and for some years after.’[6]

First Corrections and another version

Room has removed Kavanagh and combined the Wooden Shoe (bookshop, paper and press) with *Cuddon’s Cosmopolitan Review* (which did start in 1965) and Coptic Press (which started in 1964). The Wooden Shoe had shut before Freedom Press moved to Whitechapel. It’s difficult to say that Albert ‘went off’ when in January 1965 he was being introduced to *Freedom* readers as a new housing critic (he wrote in *Freedom* in 1966 and 1967, and into the seventies).

The account of Freedom Press’ move is confused. Whitechapel Art Gallery did not buy 84a in 1968. Vero used the proceeds of the sale of 17 Maxwell Road in Fulham (owned by his partner Peta Hewetson), money he had borrowed, plus loans from friends to purchase 84(a and b) plus ‘The Golden Plightle’ cottage in Suffolk. Vero was keen *not* to own 84, but to transfer ownership to a trust (the Friends of Freedom Press) of which he would be the unpaid secretary. ‘Vernon Richards trading as Freedom Press’ doesn’t appear on *Freedom* after the move; it seems to be an echo of Vero becoming the registered owner of Express Printers in 1943.[7]

I have found one instance of the ‘Wooden Shoe story’ in circulation before 2008. Finnish-American Wobbly Harry Siitonen visited London in 1976, and was told something similar (with illuminating additions):

‘Richards also made his enemies within the English anarchist movement, particularly with an old Freedom Press writer Albert Meltzer (1920–1996) who had tried to merge his Wooden Shoe Collective into Freedom Press over the former’s objections.

This caused an irrevocable split from then on between them, with Meltzer founding *Black Flag* magazine with a young comrade Stuart Christie to rival *Freedom*. *Black Flag* was more proletarian-oriented than the former which was more generally intellectual. So this caused Meltzer to attack Richards as a “liberal” rather than a horny-handed navvy. (Actually Albert’s day job was as a copy editor at the bourgeois London *Daily Telegraph*.) Talk about factionalism! Where have we heard this before? I called up Meltzer and he invited me to dinner at his flat, where we spent a most convivial evening, with Albert being a most warm and friendly host with whom it was easy to talk shop. I ended up subscribing to both *Freedom* and *Black Flag* for a number of years.’[8]

Purpose of the Wooden Shoe story

These two accounts give us the story created by people around Freedom Press to explain away Albert’s criticism of them. They suggest: the dispute is personal and not political (and originally between Vero and Albert); Freedom Press are criticised by Albert after he fails to take financial advantage of them; Vero defends Freedom Press but is partly to blame because of his lack of social skills; Albert is a ‘workerist’, but does not live up to it because he’s in a white- rather than blue-collar job. It might be significant that in this version they get his job wrong: Albert was employed as a copy taker, not a copy editor.

What really happened with the Wooden Shoe?

In 2018 we reviewed Rob Ray’s *A Beautiful Idea: history of the Freedom Press anarchists* saying that the Wooden Shoe story ‘sounds a rather convenient explanation for a broader conflict’ and ‘The refusal might have happened: presumably there would be evidence in the Freedom Press archives in Amsterdam if so.’[9]

Minutes of Freedom Press meetings are in Folder 130 of Vero’s papers in at the International Institute for Social History in Amsterdam. If you can’t visit to research it’s possible to take the ‘lucky dip’ approach and ask the staff to scan material for you. It doesn’t cost that much, you just have to hope there’s not too much to scan and that what you ask for is useful. Eventually, I bit the bullet and ordered the minutes for 1967 (there are no minutes for 1968). When they arrived, it was obvious things happened very differently to the Room version. In a meeting in Fulham on 1 August 1967 it’s clear that ‘the Wooden Shoe option’ was that Freedom would use the Wooden Shoe’s premises: the shoe was on the other foot![10]

Looking at the minutes for 1965-7 fill in the context. Freedom Press had moved to Fulham from Red Lion Street in September 1960. ‘The Move!’ explained ‘we had at our disposal, and at a nominal

rent, premises in the Fulham area' (but not that it was owned by Peta Hewtson, Vero's partner).[11]

Leaving Maxwell Road is first mentioned in the minutes for 17 May 1966 (the council ending up buying the building for a redevelopment plan that never happened).[12] The issue of whether Freedom Press can find a better location recurs until 1968. The Wooden Shoe is one of the possibilities, another is Robert Barltrop's shop in Walthamstow. It's clear that Vero has the final say in what Freedom Press does.

In the minutes for 2 June 1965 it was 'proposed to invite Albert Meltzer to the editorial meetings.' On 4 January 1966 'A new society for the publication of Freethought literature having been formed, in which a prominent member was Albert Meltzer, he thought it would be a good idea to make their proposed central London bookshop a general radical bookshop, and he would like to discuss possibilities with Freedom Press. Vero Richards agreed to meet Albert Meltzer and discuss the proposition'. (No Secular League bookshop seems to have started.)

13 September: 'New Bookshop: Ted Kavanagh was opening a book shop, The Wooden Shoe, in Central London and would like to have a full range of anarchist literature, including back issues of "Anarchy". It was agreed to supply him.'

26 September: Vero wants to sell the Fulham property, and 'we could not be given a lease as this would reduce the chance of a sale.' Mary Canipa wondered about 'our raising a fund to buy. In Vero's absence, however, nothing further was known as to the present position, and this would have to be held over until he could inform us.'

The meeting of 1 August 1967 discussed a memorandum from Vero which seems to have suggested curtailing what Freedom Press did: giving up printing their own material (possibly to just publish *Freedom* and *Anarchy*, and give up on books and pamphlets); getting rid of the Freedom Press library; giving up running a bookshop. With regard to Freedom Press moving into the Wooden Shoe, Philip Sansom was in favour; Vero thought it 'irrelevant to discussion'.

'Wooden Shoe: Jack Robinson reported that the information he had verbally from Ted Kavanagh had been incomplete and inaccurate. The lease had one year to run, not two (but with strong possibility of extension) [...] Ted owed one quarter's rent and a whole year's rates.

'This made the rent high, but it was a central position; the fact that it could be only for one year might not be such a bad thing, as by then we would know exactly where we were with regard to other premises, and in the meantime we would have an outlet and an office and some of the functions carried on at Maxwell Road could be transferred there before we actually had to leave here. [...]

'John [Rety]: is against merging the identities of

Freedom Bookshop and the Wooden Shoe. There is an increase in the number of bookshops willing to stock anarchist literature; up to now the Wooden Shoe and Freedom Bookshop had been two outlets, and he would like both to continue separately; to transfer certain functions of Freedom Press to that address would only cause confusion. He thought the Wooden Shoe might provide an opportunity for Jack to become a public bookseller, but the mail order side as set out in Lilian's memorandum was invaluable and it was essential to keep Freedom Bookshop going separately, and new comrades would then have to be found to staff the Maxwell Road premises. [...]

'The consensus was that the outlay was too much and period too short, and the risk of distraint by publishers for Ted's debts with them too great. In effect, Jack was offering himself as the bookseller envisaged by Vero. The decision was for him and not for the group, but if he did take the initiative we should do our utmost to back and regard him as the selling outlet for Freedom Press literature; although John Rety remained worried about cutting the throat of Freedom Bookshop, and we would still have to have personnel for the remaining time of the Maxwell Road premises.'

What did happen in 1968?

There never was a plan for the Wooden Shoe to move in with Freedom Press, it was the other way round; and the bookshop closed before Freedom Press moved to Whitechapel in 1968. Yet something did happen in that year. The London Federation of Anarchists Archives hold an undated circular from the LFA:

'We are planning a permanent London office for the LFA, which will be a place for central activities, general information and ordinary social gathering; where, in fact, comrades from London and visiting London can get together, and be put in touch with activity generally. It will also be a general office for our national and international organisational work. We have been offered accommodation at Freedom Press' new premises, and we want to ascertain that we shall always be able to pay our way.' The appeal for donations is aimed especially at 'those who are not otherwise active for various reasons'.[13]

This plan seems to have failed, and enraged the *Freedom* editors:

'Two years ago, when Freedom Press was faced with the problem, once again, of having to leave our premises (these were in Fulham, due for demolition in a scheme which has since been shelved), we found we had the opportunity of acquiring the premises in Whitechapel where our printers have been established for many years. The money to buy these premises was raised by private loans from a few sympathisers throughout the world, and an arrangement has been made whereby the premises are not owned by Freedom Press, but for the first

time we have security of tenure. We have also of course to pay back the loans, which involve considerable sums from these few individuals, within reasonable time. [...]

'Freedom Press has of course to pay a rent for 84b, and it had been hoped that The London Federation of Anarchists would take responsibility for the ground floor (known now as Freedom Hall) and pay a reasonable rent for that towards our costs. Unhappily the LFA seems to have collapsed, so this ground floor is not fully used.' [...]

'The point has been made to us by a consistent *Freedom* seller that the groups should subsidise us, not vice versa. After all, groups come and groups go, but Freedom Press goes on for ever – and is often left with bad debts from disintegrating groups and federations, even!'[14]

In December 1969 John Rety was appealing for volunteers to open Freedom Hall for 'entertainment-cum-education-cum-fund raising once a week'. [15] Freedom Hall was used for meetings (Miguel Garcia spoke there for the Anarchist Black Cross on 15 February 1970) but by May 1971 Albert and his comrades had started Centro Iberico as a social-political centre, another step away from working with Freedom Press.[16]

More questions

Albert's move away from Freedom Press was a gradual one that probably had more than one trigger – the 'Statement by the Black Flag Group to the Liverpool Conference of the Anarchist Federation of Britain, Sept., 1968' gives a list of 'Liberal' statements from *Anarchy* and *Freedom*. [17] Rooum's tale of the conflict as a personal one between Albert and Vero is an attempt to rewrite what happened (from an enthusiastic participant in the conflict). There's no doubt that Albert criticised Vero but I suspect initially the problem was not Vero's ideas but his inaction. In 1973 Albert lamented 'The weekly "Freedom" was built up by the Anarchist Movement as a whole. It was taken over by the Freedom Press Group (not the same thing as Freedom Press which had existed many years before). The last survivors of this group have let it drift into the hands of a body we can only describe as Non-Violent Fascists.' [18]

So, we are left with more questions: When did Albert give up on Freedom Press? What was Vero's political trajectory? It will be interesting to see what else comes out of the archives in Amsterdam.

Notes

- 1, 'News from Elsewhere', *Freedom* 28 Jan. 1967
- 2, <https://www.katesharpleylibrary.net/05qh7s>
- 3, Arthur Moyse 'Around the galleries' *Freedom* 21 October 1967
- 4, p.26-7 of *Edward Heath made me Angry*
- 5, p.184 'The Wooden Shoe' in chapter 12 of *I couldn't paint Golden Angels*

4 Bulletin of the Kate Sharpley Library

6, Donald Rooum 'Freedom, Freedom Press and Freedom Bookshop: A short history of Freedom Press' *Information for Social Change* Number 27, Summer 2008

https://ia802800.us.archive.org/9/items/information_for_social_change/ISC%2027%20Whole%20Issue.pdf

7, See 'November 1943' at

<http://katesharpleylibrary.pbworks.com/w/page/139511268/The%201945%20split%20in%20British%20anarchism>

8, Chapter 25, 'Libertarian Socialism, 1976'

<http://finnlabor.net/Memoirs25.htm>

9, In *KSL: Bulletin of the Kate Sharpley Library* No. 97-98, February 2019

<https://www.katesharpleylibrary.net/vhhp7d>

10, The minutes for 1967 are at

<https://www.katesharpleylibrary.net/k0p4hs>

11, *Freedom* 24 September 1960

12, <https://www.katesharpleylibrary.net/6q58pq>

13, <https://www.katesharpleylibrary.net/sj3x0x>

14, 'The cost of being anarchists' *Freedom* 25 October 1969

15, 'An idea' (letter) *Freedom* 20 December 1969

16, see 'Notes on Centro Iberico'

<https://www.katesharpleylibrary.net/jdfpr8> and

Mudlark121 'Spotlight on London's historical anarchist spaces: Centro Iberico'

<https://pastenseblog.wordpress.com/2021/03/05/spot-light-on-londons-historical-anarchist-spaces-centro-iberico/>

17, <https://www.katesharpleylibrary.net/5x6bpx>

18, Anon. 'How to recapture "Freedom" for the anarchist movement' *Black Flag* v2, n15, January 1973. See also 'The nature of nonviolent fascism and the George Woodcock myth' *Anarchy* (Second Series) #11 (1973)

<https://www.katesharpleylibrary.net/fqz7qc> ■

Keeping Alive the Spirit of Revolt : Some thoughts on Albert Meltzer & his writings

Sometime in the July or early August of 1940, Albert Meltzer went before the Fulham Tribunal to argue his case as a conscientious objector. He made no claims to be a pacifist instead arguing that his militant anarchism prevented him from supporting this capitalist war and he should be granted conscientious objection as a result of it. He knew he had lost before he began but the statement he had prepared for the hearing is worthy of our consideration if we wish to understand who Albert was. In it he argued that:

'Support for this war... would be for me not only an intolerable compromise to the forces of Capitalism and the State, but a radical betrayal of the international working class'

He went on to assert:

‘I believe the working-class of Britain can only achieve its freedom by fighting its own capitalist class in the economic field, by forcing it to grant social and wage concessions and by joining with colonial peoples to end imperialism’

And elaborating that, ‘I am opposed to *all* Governments’ and ‘I am an anarcho-syndicalist’ [1]

Until his death 56 years later these sentences served as the foundation for Albert’s beliefs and actions. There would be changes of nuance and emphasis (they don’t detail his steadfast anti-fascism for instance) but everything he did and wrote was an attempt to build on these basics and make the new world he carried inside him not a dream or an arguing point but a reality.

The Kate Sharpley Library has a bibliography of over 700 articles written by Albert for anarchist and freethought papers both in the UK and overseas during his lifetime. More are still out there, waiting to be found under pseudonyms or as anonymous editorials, and we expect we’ll be adding to the list regularly. The sheer number of articles suggests that throughout his life Albert saw the newspaper article as his main weapon against capitalism and its supporters – as well as other anarchists when necessary!!

Much of his earlier writing in papers such as *Revolutionary Youth Movement*, *Reynolds News*, *Revolt*, *War Commentary*, and *Freedom* is commentary on what was happening in the world at the time of writing and was never written with an eye to posterity. His work at this time was urgent and usually written at high speed as the situation demanded. His thoughts were expressed in clear, straightforward language and aimed at those who knew little about anarchism or its basic principles. He saw himself as helping to build an anarchist movement and never veered from that aim until he died. After his experiences writing for comedians in various music halls and summer revues throughout 1941-43 a wry humour began to appear in his writing. Those days on the road had taught him how humour could be used as a means of effectively getting ideas across to people, as well as highlighting the ineptness and stupidity of capitalism.

His writing up until this time had also regularly reflected his commitment to the internationalism identified in his statement to the Fulham Tribunal. It is not by chance that his most consistent pseudonym was ‘Internationalist’. As well as his articles, this commitment was reflected in his copious correspondence with anarchists overseas offering support or just the odd news briefing. He had contacts all over the world and we might see this internationalism as one of the forces driving the creation of the Anarchist Black Cross in 1968. The ABC took up much of his time in building support networks for those imprisoned as well as regular

correspondence with them to combat their isolation.

As he grew older his writing style and its content changed – especially in the pages of *Black Flag*. Albert, I think, became more and more aware of the shadow of posterity as he grew older. Part of this awareness was that he had begun to see himself as one of the few anarchists left standing who identified with the tradition of class struggle anarchism. It was this class struggle anarchism and its ideas that had mentored him – an anarchism which he now felt was being ignored or written out of history as new groups and tendencies appeared to take over the movement. As these differing ideas about anarchism emerged or gained credence he sensed that the anarchist history and culture that had mentored and nurtured him was in danger of disappearing. In his view, if he didn’t challenge what he saw as mis-conceptions of anarchism then his generation would become victims of historical amnesia and anarchism would become something different from what he had devoted his whole life fighting for.

His support for the Kate Sharpley Library also reflected this awareness of posterity and the need to preserve the record of the past. There was so much he wanted to write and as a result he tried to put far more information into his writing. His articles became more and more polemics against other anarchists, far more than his earlier pieces ever had.

If Albert was instinctively aware of the complexities of working-class life and experience, he was just as aware of the role class played within the anarchist movement.

He felt that middle-class anarchists determined what constituted anarchist history and had no understanding of the day-to-day experiences that shaped working-class life and culture. Consequently, anarchism often did not appear particularly welcoming to people coming from working-class backgrounds. Albert also felt that anarchist history was not just the intellectual history of great anarchist men and women who wrote books and other material that could be found and read. Anarchist history was equally the undocumented; those who put chairs out at meetings, those who put the stamps on envelopes, those who spoke about anarchism to their friends and relatives in front rooms, cafes and pubs or died alone in prison or camps. These people made anarchism come alive as much as any great speaker or person of action ever did, and they had been a key part of Albert’s world. Much of the history he wrote gave them an identity and presence and rescued them from oblivion.

Albert provided myself and many others with a road map to anarchism we could travel with. We may have found new paths on the journey and one or two of the old paths may have become lost and abandoned, but I still use it nearly every day of my life. The map was built on his writings and through conversation. Conversations with Albert were things

of wonder. You began by discussing the merits of Katherine Hepburn as an actress and ended up considering if Rudyard Kipling's *Soldiers Three* was critical in the portrayal of working-class people and language. I still have no idea how we ended up there but I realize now that these chats enriched my sense of anarchism, people and possibilities in a way that official study never did. As the years passed I gradually realized that from him I had learnt that anarchism was as much founded on relationships and people as it was on theory. Neither, he felt, would be much use without the other.

Albert was lucky enough to be part of our movement both during times of growth – 1936-1939 and the period from the late nineteen sixties onwards were exciting times to be an anarchist – as well as being part of it in the barren times when all you could do was write a letter here and there and go to the odd meeting when they were held. He carried sadness and tragedy from his personal and political life experiences but many would never have known that. Albert brought the same energy and enthusiasm to both good times and bad and encouraged us to do the same. He never gave up and he never stopped thinking or writing. I miss him nearly every day.

Barry Pateman

Note

1 His statement can be read at full at

<https://www.katesharpleylibrary.net/hx3gzf>

From *Black Flag Anarchist Review* Volume 1 Number 2 (Summer 2021)

<https://www.blackflag.org.uk/> ■

Frank Leech

Too late to be dealt with in our January number came the sad news of the death of our comrade, Frank Leech. In 'Big Frank' our movement has lost one of its militant pioneers, and a great number of us have lost a good friend. He died in his home at Glasgow, suddenly, aged 53.

Although a Lancashire man by birth, Frank lived for most of his life in Glasgow, where he was an active member of the Anarchist movement, well known to a large number of Clydeside workers. After (as he used to put it) 'being mug enough to go into the Navy' (where he was better known as a heavyweight boxer), Frank came out to be an active anti-militarist ever after. He went into the Anti-Parliamentary Communist (council-communist) movement, from which he graduated to Anarchism. Always a protagonist of getting propaganda to where it meant something – amongst the working-class – Frank Leech was tireless over many years in speaking, giving practical aid to unofficial strikers, and issuing papers and pamphlets.

In 1936 when the Spanish struggle came he threw in his whole time, in the intervals between what was necessary to make a living, in an effort to render the

maximum possible aid. One also recalls his help to German comrades. and his later co-operation (1939) with those 'on the run'. Above all, Frank Leech stood for the Anarcho-Syndicalist viewpoint, and it was his constant endeavour that this be popularised. He was delighted when THE SYNDICALIST appeared; it had always been his cherished idea that an exclusively industrial, revolutionary syndicalist paper was possible, and he was from the first an enthusiastic supporter. The numbers of London comrades who have received hospitality from Frank at one time or another will all testify to the encouragement they felt when walking around with Frank on his home ground – so many workers knew him, and greeted him, and one really felt that here was a man who was getting the message home. The long years of patient work that have been put in by our Glasgow comrades, both of the past and the present, will not be lost, and in honouring Frank Leech, whom we down here knew so well for so many years as a bulwark for so much (both in propaganda and solidarity work), we salute all those who have with him paved the way to the Free Society which shaped their own lives even if they did not live to see it.

I cannot resist at least one anecdote about Frank. It was when he was summonsed for not obeying the firewatching order during the war at the, then running, Anarchist Bookshop, but he refused to pay the fine. 'There is no alternative,' said the magistrate, 'If you do not pay the fine the police will seize your stock and sell it.' 'Ah,' said Frank, 'That means the police are going to sell our Anarchist pamphlets!' Unfortunately, we did not get the spectacle of bobbies going along Sauchiehall Street with our literature!

A.M. [Albert Meltzer] *The Syndicalist*, v.1 no 10, February 1953

<https://www.katesharpleylibrary.net/ffbhz8> ■

Anarchist archives, terrorism and censorship

In the impossibility of countering the mounting tide of vicious anti-anarchist imbecility that is washing over Italy, as Archivio Giuseppe Pinelli we cannot however hold back when it comes to the statements, made by some individual belonging to the parliamentary commission on culture, on the Historical Archive of the Italian Anarchist Federation (ASFAI) <http://www.asfai.info/>. These statements, while naming only the ASFAI (probably due to simple incompetence; too difficult as it is to identify other entities), are obviously aimed towards all anarchist archives.

A request has been made to strip away any public recognition (and funding) from any archive that makes an 'apologia of terrorism', even demanding

the intervention of the Ministry of the Interior to identify any ‘dangerous’ documents on their shelves, which, in their view, would have nothing to do with the ‘historical papers’ that an archive is supposed to preserve.

What emerges from these statements is, unsurprisingly, a problematic conception of history and culture, to say the least. Above all, the cultural work of an archive is misconstrued as political propaganda. If archives cannot preserve all the existing documents relating to a political movement, or referring to a certain historical period, what kind of history would one end up making? We might have an answer, perhaps: as revealed from certain passages of the inaugural speech of this new government, there’s an evident lingering passion for erasing or rewriting unwanted pages of Italian history (it could be enlightening to investigate, for example, which political forces were in the Resistance and which in the Republic of Salò).

A non-secondary component of the reasoning regarding ASFAI is the axiom ‘anarchist equals terrorist’, which has come back into the limelight in recent days. Even taking for granted this ‘terrorism’ notion, which in this time and age is nonchalantly applied even to minor acts of ‘vandalism’ such as terrifying political graffiti, what are they trying to convey? That should we dare to burn texts and documents that speak of violent practices and ideas? And what do we do with the archives on military history, then? What do we do with the Risorgimento history institutes given that most of the Italian patriots can be considered full-fledged terrorists (starting with Mameli, father of the national anthem, mortally wounded on the barricades of the Roman Republic while opening fire on the powers that be)?

In other words, should the Ministry of the Interior decide which documents can be kept? In this case, just as some imaginative denominations were invented for various new ministries, the one for Culture could also benefit, becoming for example the Ministry of Authorized Culture.

The history of anarchism – while not being for obvious reasons the history of the Italian state – is in its own right a part of Italian history, both for the contribution of anarchists to decisive historical moments, and for the (often unrecognized) influence of its contents on the more general culture. The State can fully decide not to finance the preservation of this historical and cultural heritage – which is, in fact, largely self-managed – but we are curious to know what criterion is going to be adopted in selecting the entities to be financed with the public purse. Is this going to be an exception for anarchists or does it extend to all the ‘anti-establishment forces’? Because, in this second case, what should be done with the institutes that deal with the history of fascism (and let it be clear that we are not for cancel culture)?

It is well known that history is largely written by the victors, but going back to lean on police statements when talking about anarchists – as is being done now – is truly a sign of the times. Which are not times of ‘terror’, but of political misery and papier-mâché heroes.

Centro Studi Libertari/ Archivio G. Pinelli
<https://centrostudilibertari.it/en/comunicato-attacco-asfai-eng> ■

Letterpress Revolution: The Politics of Anarchist Print Culture [Book review]

As a curious truant from a Manchester school I was fascinated by the many do-it-yourself magazines that were much a feature of the 1950’s. One such advert would always spark my imagination. The Adana hand press ‘*Not a toy – a real printing press*’ was way beyond my pocket but the advert seeded youthful fantasies of publishing. Years later, I came into some money, so I bought Adana’s starter kit. A well built table-top hand press. It is still working fifty years later.

On a kitchen table in a Lancashire council house I began learning to print by launching a small magazine based upon my Anarchist approach to life. I called it *Anarchism Lancastrium*. It took an age of inky fingers, arranging type, setting up and reprinting major errors. A painful learning process but it worked.

The starter kit was too meagre for detailed printing. At that time many commercial printers began to switch over to computer systems and they were left with redundant letterpress equipment. Blessed with charm and a nice smile I would knock on print shop doors and ask if they were open to gifting any type or inks. As such, I saved a lot of stuff from the skip and over the 50 years I’ve put together my own workshop.

A man and six of his mates from the Conservative club assisted a move away from Lancashire and I switched the title from AL to his current name: *The Cunningham Amendment*. The magazine continued its satirical origins but the onset of Identity Politics saw a series of radical shops, to this day, decline to take copies.

There is something inherently wonderful about letterpress. As a compositor I construct words by hand and am constantly on guard to rectify errors. Some of my print and the tins of ink date back to before the second war. The whole process requires thought and skill – an art wholly different from computer-made lay outs. I take pride in the economy of the skill. Just about everything I have was designed and built to last for decades. There is no throw-away in letterpress. Accordingly, I have no

need to replace equipment from commercial concerns. Such is the economy of letterpress that it now costs more to post the magazine than it does to produce it.

The versatility of the craft deserves recording. Mainly because letterpress lends itself to a wide variety of materials. Once I cut up pages from a telephone directory and printed up the slogan: *Don't Vote – Govern Yourself*. I placed a stack of the papers on the roof of a five-storey building, placed a crust of bread to hold it down, and as the pigeons came so the wind distributed this wisdom around central Manchester and beyond. I was once given a box of beer mats and I overprinted witty slogans and carefully placed them onto pub tables. Several times I have used supermarket flyers to over-print warnings that what's on offer is bogus. What mischievous times we live in!

Now comes along a magnificent book that examines the print culture of the past and talks to contemporary printers who continue with the craft today. As in today's silo-times Anarchism has always been an assembly of factions and we can be certain that every tendency produced its own paper. Ferguson is to be praised for tracing the many forgotten printers 'the named and the nameless' who, in many cases, devoted their lives to the craft.

The book is a welcome counter to our modern method of using corporate-owned electrical devices as the means of publishing. Letterpress crossed 'the gap between craft and art taking a step toward a world in which workers would not be alienated from the process of their labour'. Many printers considered the equipment they worked with as almost living entities. Using mostly ancient machines they considered the press as a companion. Quoting printer Jules Faye 'the presses are people, almost, they have a persona, a personality, they have moods...'

Anarchist material always carries an edge. There are people out there who find the notion of a free society threatening. Ferguson gives space to describe many police and vigilante raids. *Freedom*, once a more open outfit than it is today, was raided four times during WW1. Machines were broken, type and inks confiscated and comrades who came to offer support were raided also.

By focussing on letterpress Ferguson presents a novel way of looking at the history of Anarchism. Letterpress as a way of working generates an active hands-on ambition to build and embody new and creative ideas. Many now depend on small electrical devices that come with a package of the instant judgements of sad keyboard warriors. It's not always easy to see how destructive this way of working actually is. As a method letterpress can be visibly seen working and many aspects of the process lends itself to unskilled assistance. Ferguson's history promotes the message that meaningful radical

development builds from face-to-face, hand-to-hand, cooperative endeavour.

Peter Good

Letterpress Revolution: The Politics of Anarchist Print Culture by Kathy E Ferguson Duke University Press 2023 <https://dukeupress.edu/letterpress-revolution> ■

Looking Back (then and now)

Our comrades from the Workers Solidarity Movement have issued the closing statement they promised when they stopped in December 2021. It gives a good round up of what the WSM achieved in terms of promoting anti-authoritarian ideas and direct action. 'We believe it is better and more effective at this point in time for anarchists to build new networks, tools, projects and organisations adapted to the changing political landscape.' They have interesting things to say about changes in radical media and crushing effects of austerity <http://www.wsm.ie/c/workers-solidarity-movement-closing-statement>

The defeated anarchist militants who had opposed the official 'collaborationist' line during the Spanish Civil War carried out some similar soul-searching. We have just put up 'Starting Over' (*Révision*, 1938) and 'Government Anarchists' (*L'Espagne nouvelle*, 1939) by Louis Mercier Vega

<https://www.katesharpleylibrary.net/jdfph2>

Révision published a manifesto in their first issue <https://www.katesharpleylibrary.net/nk9bqr> and we have posted their final issue: *Révision* 6 : Post from the Camps [1 August 1939] on the conditions and ideas of exiles, including the Friends of Durruti group in exile. 'It is the camps and the prisons that hold the best workers from the social struggle.' <https://www.katesharpleylibrary.net/932111> ■

Publication details

KSL: Bulletin of the Kate Sharpley Library

ISSN 1475-0309

Kate Sharpley Library, BM Hurricane

London, WC1N 3XX

Sign up to our e-newsletter at

<http://www.katesharpleylibrary.net/doc/subscribing>

Subscription rates for one year (4 issues) are:

Individuals UK: £5 Europe/RoW: 15euro
USA: \$10 Americas/RoW \$20

Institutions £20

Friend (bulletin and all other publications)

£10 a month / \$20 a month

- Your subscription expires with this issue
- Your subscription is now overdue
- This is your final issue