

## Thoughts on anarchism, academia and history

I joined the anarchist movement in the 1980s. I've read a lot of anarchist books, pamphlets and papers, and a lot of history books since then. Given that I want to know everything, why do I find so much of the "new academic anarchism" alien and alienating? I've lost a lot of sleep trying to understand both the trend and my reaction to it.

For example, it always gets my goat to read the term "classical anarchism". It strikes me as a patronising putdown of the anarchist movement: I hear it as "In the Olden Days classical anarchists wore togas and talked Latin. They liked barricades (which is Latin for 'barbecue'). Eventually they all moved to Latin America." Actually, it's a term used by academics arguing about Kropotkin's philosophical underpinnings and their significance (and sometimes to write off class struggle anarchism).

Radical bookshops were my introduction to anarchism. I'm fairly sure I bought a collection of Ricardo Flores Magon's writings before I picked up Kropotkin's *Memoirs of a revolutionist*. I don't think that's significant: there was so little available on anarchism that you read nearly anything that came your way. Flores Magon and Kropotkin are "big names" but I also remember getting a copy of the *Cienfuegos Press Anarchist Review* with Richard Warren's cartoons in. I still think they're great. But I'm not sure all our "new anarchoeologists" would even get the point. Obviously "What use is history?" and "Why does academic writing sound so strange?" aren't new questions. But now, I feel we're often talking at cross-purposes both about what anarchism is and how to understand it. Books are bread and butter

to academics (and anarchists!) but I worry about the breezy confidence that one book by Kropotkin can stand in for the endless discussions, humour (and self-mockery), challenges and celebrations that make up anarchism.

I can't say that anarchism in the 1980s was an especially happy family. Even within class struggle anarchism there were some significant political and tactical differences (let alone the liberals we felt had "wandered away" completely). I remember a line to the effect (and I'm not going to look up the reference) that if so-and-so couldn't spell Durruti then you shouldn't take their analysis of the Spanish anarchist movement seriously. That taught me the value of proofreading!

In a social movement you learn common assumptions. Militancy was a voluntary commitment. The movement was amateur in the sense of non-professional (which doesn't mean amateurish) and largely anonymous. Making a name for yourself was for the brave or the unfortunate. We didn't think propaganda was a dirty word but were interested in being understood by (other) working class people. Anarchist history was a proof to them as well as ourselves that things could be different. Coming from a background like that, I find the idea of only writing for people with PhDs (or of writing a PhD about your affinity group) a little odd.

I know movements evolve, but I sometimes feel that offers to "reinvent" or "update" anarchism don't offer anything new (I don't think Tolstoy is new!) but something the authors personally feel more comfortable with. That's about politics, not "new" or



Yes, learn from history - study past struggles in order to learn... but do we re-run the glorious past as compensation for a miserable present?

Inside: anarchist history and book reviews

## Anarchist history



“old”. Of course, how to define anarchism is a permanent bone of contention. I see it as anti-state socialism, and don’t have much time for tendencies that sound to me like “any old shit will do”. Still, it’s hardly new if academics repeat mistakes by earlier ones: Malatesta was complaining about self-serving misrepresentations of anarchism in 1892 (*The Method of Freedom*, p163).

I hope to get wisdom as well as inspiration from history. But history is a messy business. Marx got it right about people making history, but not in conditions of their own choosing. I think the writing of anarchist history has always faced an uphill struggle. This is the story of an oppositional social movement, after all. Sometimes those who know most about what went on, say nothing (“no names, no pack drill”, after all). Sometimes anarchists (yes, even proper anarchists) can write stuff that is boring, simplistic, or wrong. There’s always the temptation (I can feel it now) to read one more book before saying anything.

Feel free to laugh at this, as I am an old sectarian who has no time for understanding without judgement; but I think we need to write history with respect. A mind is a hard thing to keep open: it’s vital to not simply accept assumptions that suit you. Be critical. What’s written down may not be the whole story. It may not even be true. And we need to respect the people of the past. To demand they be either resolutely heroic or inherently dismissable (a bunch of “extra-thick thickies”, as *Freedom* slagged off the miners, perhaps?) is not clever.

Professor Yaffle

Picture Sources:

“The misadventures of Ann and Archie [on the uses of history]” by Richard Warren p55 of *Cienfuegos Press Anarchist Review*, #5 [1980]

“Anarchaeologists” by Richard Warren p97 of *Cienfuegos Press Anarchist Review*, #5 [1980]

### The Anarchist Expropriators by Osvaldo Bayer [Review]

Early twentieth-century Argentina was a cauldron of violent social conflict. Bayer recounts the story of the ‘conference’ called by the police in Jacinto Aráuz. The workers who came were disarmed ‘then made to lie down on the ground and were beaten with clubs. A pretty drastic way of resolving a labor dispute. But the anarchists who were still in out in the yard and who were assuredly no choirboys themselves opened fire even though they were surrounded. It was a real bloodbath with fatalities on both sides.’ (p52) So, violent conflict was the background to Argentina’s anarchist expropriator movement of the 1920s and ‘30s.

The book opens with a useful introduction from the Kate Sharpley Library laying out the conflicts we’re about to read about: not just expropriators versus the police, but violent, tragic divisions between different branches of the anarchist movement.

Though written forty years ago, *The Anarchist Expropriators* has the freshness of new work. Unsurprising, given that Bayer talked with those who had been involved in these events and can say that this ‘for the very first time is the actual story of how Major Rosasco was assassinated and the names and persons involved’ (p123)

The anarchist expropriators are fascinating historical figures, a mixture of equally intense anarchist purism and pragmatism. One example will have to do. Miguel Arcangel Roscigna was a metalworker and stalwart of anarchist prisoner solidarity. He managed to get a job as a guard at the feared Ushuaia prison in order to liberate anarchist militant Simón Radowitsky. A trade unionist ‘blabbermouth’ lets the secret out and Roscigna is sacked. ‘Before he vanished and lest all his trouble should have been for nothing, Roscigna torched the prison governor’s home.’ (p55)

Bayer does not hero-worship the expropriators, but he gives them respect. ‘Those who were not killed and who managed to survive the prison regime in Ushuaia returned to their old trades as bricklayers, textile workers, or mechanics, toiling hour after painful hour in spite of their years. To put it another way, we may question their ideal and the methods for which they opted, but we cannot question their attachment to that ideal, which they embraced through thick and thin.’ (p113)

*The Anarchist Expropriators* provides plenty of food for thought for those interested in a critical look at anarchist history and practice.

*The Anarchist Expropriators: Buenaventura Durruti and Argentina’s Working-Class Robin Hoods* by Osvaldo Bayer. Translated by Paul Sharkey. AK Press & Kate Sharpley Library, 2015. ISBN 9781849352239 \$12/£8.50

## Anarchist history

*The Syndicalist* (*The syndicalist for workers' control*) was a monthly anarchist newspaper published from May 1952 to April 1953 by the Anarcho-Syndicalist Committee (including Albert Grace, Albert Meltzer and Philip Sansom). It was an agitational paper, hence the need for this article explaining the point of putting pieces on history in. We've written elsewhere about "Albert Meltzer and the fight for working class history" (KSL bulletin 76, October 2013. <http://www.katesharpleylibrary.net/qz62j9>). This is an early appearance of his concern with history as inspiration for future struggles (which led him to play a central role in the Kate Sharpley Library).

### The Lessons of History

The series of articles on syndicalism in various countries has been short, both for reasons of space, and limitations of knowledge. It is unfortunate that many of the revolutionary movements of vital concern to us have not received sufficient documentation. It should be our constant aim to add to this knowledge, as there is something positive to be gained from it.

The cursory reader might regard it as being remote from his interest that such-and-such a revolutionary strike took place in such-and-such a country. Likewise, as most of the material which comes to be published on it in English is in the nature of protests against repression, he might draw the one-sided conclusion that all such revolts are doomed to failure, and find, perhaps, sympathy but not inspiration. [1]

It is in the nature of revolts that many have been successful in lifting countries out of a morass of feudalism that persisted in modern times, but naturally none has finally achieved a free society which exists unchallenged and flourishing. This could not possibly be the case in the political circumstances of the world to-day, with an unabated trend to dictatorship and monopoly. If one thing had not caused a libertarian achievement to go under, another would have followed. Hence the record of foreign intervention in countries like Spain and Mexico on occasions when it was possible that the authoritarian society might collapse.

From the industrial struggles and revolutionary attempts that have taken place we can, however, draw many conclusions. That a consciously Anarcho-Syndicalist movement can be built up is proved by the Spanish experience, and that workers' control can be put into practice was seen in the collectivised undertakings of 1936. We have also found that political influence can creep in (which can be seen in Mexico, when twice the anarchists have abandoned syndicalist movements they had built up, which had later been corrupted, in order to build again on a libertarian basis). The example of the Argentine shows how political influence can be kept out, and the struggles of the F.O.R.A. are closely parallel to

those of the I.W.W. in North America. In both cases, however, we have seen the unavoidable wane of influence when militant workers turned to the Communists under the "glamour value" of the Russian Revolution.

The spontaneous possibilities of the workers, even without a positive syndicalist movement, are seen in the struggles in Germany after the fall of the Kaiser [1918-19]. There the workers were in a position to seize their workplaces, and likewise establish free communes. The latter, a typically anarchistic conception as opposed to the conquest of State power, was something seen in Spain which was a rebellion against the Marxist tradition in Germany.

Syndicalism as an industrial weapon was perfected in France, but with the decline of influence of the Anarchists owing to the rise of social-democracy and chauvinism, such syndicalism became corrupted and used against the workers, both by social-democrats, and later, by communists. In England we have seen that syndicalism faced the possibility of becoming merely a "trend in the labour movement". This proved fatal to it, for revolutionary syndicalism has flourished when it is separate and apart from the reformist labour movement. It might be pointed out to those who wail about "splitting the workers" that in many cases it has been the reformists who set up the dual union (often at governmental instigation or with the blessing of companies) because of the activities of the revolutionary syndicalists (e.g. Italy, Spain, and many South American countries). At other times the revolutionary union has been the challenger, but it has not split the workers according to crafts, as the reformist unionists take for granted.

A libertarian idea cannot be one that rests upon preconceived philosophies and written theories, but one that has been fashioned by experience. It is hoped, therefore, that a historical series such as the present has contributed towards the clarification of the theory of anarcho-syndicalism.

Internationalist [Albert Meltzer]

*The Syndicalist*, vol. 1, no.2 June 1952

Note

1, the 'protests against repression' Meltzer mentions probably include those against the executions of anarchist militants of the Tallion group on 14 March 1952. See A Leaflet [protesting the execution of members of the Tallion group]

<http://www.katesharpleylibrary.net/dv42ss>

## Book reviews

### **Solidarity and Silence: the story of Ona Šimaitė, librarian lifesaver**

Ona Šimaitė (pronounced Shim-ay-teh) was a Lithuanian librarian, best known for smuggling food, messages and other contraband into the Vilna ghetto during the Holocaust.[1] She also smuggled people, news and books out. She was tortured by the Gestapo after her arrest. Vilnius University raised a bribe to save her from execution; she was deported to Dachau and ended up in a POW camp.

Šimaitė was frequently asked to write her autobiography. On one level, she was willing to write it. But it never happened, postponed by the daily grind of work and task of regular correspondence. She wrote a short account to I.N. Steinberg,[2] and made other passing references, but it was too painful to examine at length. I also suspect it went against the grain to say too much. If preserving information is the task of librarians and archivists, anyone involved in clandestine activities should know how to forget things. Šimaitė certainly did: when she was being deported, she had forgotten so much she was unable to pass word to friends and family when the chance arose. Even after the war, she frequently talked about not getting people in trouble – understandably, given post-war Stalinist repression. Šimaitė was always modest (and reticent) about what she'd done, not referring to saving lives but to 'my errands'.[3]

Which is where Julija Šukys comes in. Šukys is a Lithuanian-Canadian writer, so has the language skills to tell Šimaitė's story: "this only makes me wonder if Šimaitė had been born in Germany or France, and if her name had been Anna Strauss or Anne Simard, and if she'd written her diaries and journals in a major Western European language, perhaps someone would have written about her decades ago." [4] Instead, Šukys wrote *Epistolophilia* which contains two stories – the life of Ona Šimaitė, and her own journey of uncovering it, from a name in a card catalogue, to the point where her bundle of photocopied letters can't go as hand luggage any more. These letters give the book its title: 'epistolophilia' can mean either a love of writing them or a letter-writing sickness.

These two women live very different lives. Librarianship is 'the beloved profession' to Šimaitė, but Šukys (in a moment of doubt) gets 'a sinking feeling when I realize... she was a *cataloger*, the lowest of the low.' [5] Šukys meditates on women's writing – how it happens and doesn't happen – partly from her own experience: 'Only after making a series of unilateral decisions about childcare, home care, and food supply did I begin to claw back writing time and relocate a sense of my former identity.' [6]

Politically, Šimaitė started out as a Left Socialist Revolutionary. She regarded I.N. Steinberg as her intellectual mentor and engaged with solidarity work for prisoners before the second world war. So, she

was a revolutionary and no Stalinist. Her political and personal connections with Jewish comrades (the Lichtensteins, Faivush Trupianski, Gershon Malakiewicz, Mikhail Shur)[7] drew her into her 'errands'. On the eve of the establishment of the ghetto, Left Socialist Revolutionaries and anarchists held a meeting to consider their response: 'an insignificant minority among whose voices my own could be counted.' [8] Šimaitė moved ever-closer to the anarchists. Nine months before she died in Paris, Šimaitė described herself as 'still becoming an anarchist'. [9] She also wrote to Chicago anarchist Boris Yelensky, addressing him as comrade. [10]

We owe Julija Šukys a debt of gratitude for retrieving Šimaitė's story. Šimaitė knew how to keep silent, and of course part of that silence comes from trauma. I also think she knew, as a working class female radical, the value of being overlooked, of hiding in plain sight. She recounts one 'errand', when she ransoms Gershon Malakiewicz: 'how dare I pay the ransom of a Jew? [...] They hurl insults. [...] I play stupid, pretending to be a woman who knows nothing.' [11] Hopefully this account of Šimaitė's life will encourage people to think of all the unknowns who did the right thing and never spoke, or never could speak, of it.

Marc Record

### Notes

- 1, Vilna (the Yiddish name for it) is at the same time Vilnius (Lithuanian) which was previously Wilno (Polish). In the same way Ona is known as Anna, Anya and Ana.
- 2, *'And I burned with shame': the testimony of Ona Šimaitė, Righteous among the Nations; a letter to Isaac Nachman Steinberg* by Julija Šukys. Published by Yad Veshem in 2007.
- 3, *Epistolophilia: writing the life of Ona Šimaitė* by Julija Šukys. Published by the University of Nebraska Press, p19.
- 4, *Epistolophilia*, p14.
- 5, *Epistolophilia*, p8; p164.
- 6, *Epistolophilia*, p167.
- 7, See *'And I burned with shame'*, p.23, p.25.
- 8, *'And I burned with shame'*, p.53-4.
- 9, *Epistolophilia*, p.77, quoting diary 28, April 10, 1969.
- 10, See Folder 62 of the Yelensky papers in Amsterdam. Copies online at <https://senyafleshinpapers.wordpress.com/2015/06/25/boris-yelensky-papers-folder-62/>
- 11, *'And I burned with shame'*, p.35.

## Book reviews

### Johnny come home: a review

A novel by Jake Arnott published by Hodder & Stoughton and reviewed for 3ammgazine.com

Jake Arnott's latest novel *johnny come home* is set like earlier novels in a period he cannot have known except as a child, but which is well researched, and which cover those few years when anything seemed possible, and radical bohemianism stopped being an elite affair. It is a period that still haunts the rich and powerful; that the poor and relatively poor might be happy, creative and intelligent is intolerable to them. The new novel is set in 1972. The backdrop is the start of the Angry Brigade trial. I was a defendant in this trial, and so with recall the period is alive to me. Life was very intense, and it is tempting to say Oh, he's got this wrong or that, but he is very fair to the time, the libertarian left, and sympathetic to his characters.

This in itself is in sharp contrast to another novel written closer to the time, Doris Lessing's *The Good Terrorist*. In this novel the dice are well and truly loaded, the protagonists are not just arrogant, careless, stupid wishful-thinkers, but sexually impotent as well. Once can imagine the critical response to this kind of treatment of a successful businessman; that this wasn't art, it wasn't fiction, it was polemic, whereas there are still hacks praising the novel. What stands out is how Lessing, the ex-Stalinist, hated the 'counter-culture' and its politics just as much as those who kept the faith like the father of the character Nina, and even he is treated with sympathy. Arnott is scrupulously fair in emphasising that the Angry Brigade was not a tight hierarchical group, but also that its SN8 Defence Committee was more politically important than those they were defending.

The tone of Arnott's novel is elegiac and is set by the offstage character O'Connell, offstage because he has committed suicide but left behind him the potential for a trail of trouble, but also the way in which those who have lived in the same squatted house – Nina and Pearson – come to hook up with the other two main characters in the novel. It is through them – rent boy Sweet Thing and the singer re-invented as Glam Rocker, Johnny Chrome – that the sense of political defeat is linked to a regressive step in a music world that is once again one of manipulation, and this time by predatory gay producers. These are the only really nasty characters in the novel (the character of Jonathan King is thinly disguised, as is DS Roy Cremer – an absurdly romanticized figure in writing about the AB – as the character Walker), and this has some punch to it given the importance of the Gay Liberation Front to the politics of the novel. The contrast of the two worlds also cuts the other way, the bombing of the fashion store Biba (claimed by the Angry Brigade a year earlier), is totally wrong in the eyes of Sweet

Thing because Biba's is easy for shoplifting exactly the clothes that can make him feel not just glamorous, but which are sensually pleasurable.

The four main characters are sympathetically treated but all, except Nina (he was all right after all the Stalinist dad, she is the most solid) are tragic, whereas she unexpectedly at last has an orgasm. They are tragedies coming out of different forms of desperation that are a result of different forms of exploitation, or as a result of what we come to see as O'Connor's sentimental nihilism. But also as if tragedy was the necessary tenor of the times. It is here that difficulties arise, for it was also the very same time when the miners defeated the state at Saltley, and the leaders of a dockers' strike were released from Pentonville prison as a result of mass physical pressure that was not clandestine. The absence of even a passing mention matters given that Arnott is addressing younger readers with the very proper intent of giving a feel of that period of passionate politics. It leaves it a little unbalanced. The absence of the texture of pre-gentrified inner London, its egalitarian feel, is less important given that intent. In the end though, I did, as a fiction reader, wish that he allowed the characters to speak more for themselves, to give them a voice, rather than the authorial voice telling us so much of who they are and what they think.

John Barker

<http://www.theharrier.net/essays/johnny-come-home-a-review/>

[You can read much more of John Barker's fiction and non-fiction at theharrier.net]

### Living Anarchism: José Peirats and the Spanish Anarcho-Syndicalist Movement by Chris Ealham [Review]

José Peirats was a brickmaker, writer and above all a *cenetista* – a member of the anarcho-syndicalist union, the Confederacion Nacional del Trabajo. Reading *Living anarchism*, it's striking how the CNT was not just an economic and political organisation, nor just a source of hope. It also made a parallel alternative world. When the church schools had failed to beat young José into submission, working class rationalist education ignited a lifelong love of learning. This was between 8 and 9 years old, after which he joined the workforce. Once he had joined – even in exile, even when expelled – the CNT was Peirats' life. The stories of their struggles run in parallel (and struggles he had aplenty: not just the obvious anarchist ones against employers and the state, either).

In the turbulent 1930s Peirats opposed insurrections by small groups. He fought on the barricades in Barcelona in 1936 as the Spanish Revolution exploded. He was a significant figure in the opposition to the collaborationist line adopted by

## Book reviews

the CNT leaders. That line not only went against anarchist principles but also the democratic structure of the organisation. In Lleida, he worked on the newspaper *Acracia*, both promoting the revolution and saving the lives of rightwingers. His humanism rejected ‘violence that was dressed up as “revolutionary terror”’. As Peirats said: “Real revolutionaries kill (if they do) with disgust.” (p95). Like many others, after the defeat of the revolution (sacrificed to the popular front policy) ‘he felt he had “run out of gas”’. (p113). After that, he joined the 26<sup>th</sup> division (the former Durruti Column), surviving the last retreat over the Pyrenees.

Ealham really comes into his own in his account of Peirats’ exile years. Exile is never a happy time. Peirats got it right when he said ‘The nomad always has his eyes on his country of origin’ (letter to his parents, written from Panama in 1943, p.121). Peirats’ greatest achievement is his three volume history *The CNT in the Spanish Revolution* (1951-53, first published in English by Stuart Christie 2001-6). When approached to write it he pointed out others were better qualified. ‘They may be better and they may be “able” to do it [...] but you will do it. You will write the book because you’re stubborn and have self-respect!’ (p147). The result was a landmark work, rescuing the story of the revolution and its grassroots protagonists: ‘he never writes a history of the heroic endeavours of great men; rather he shows that the untutored energies and aspirations of the large collectivities of anonymous masses were indeed the human agency of the dispossessed, the driving force behind revolution and historical change, of those who invariably go unrecorded in written history but who, very rarely, [...] grasp an opportunity to reclaim control of their lives and make their own history.’ (p155)

Peirats’ exile was not just looking back and writing history, though. It was a time of poverty and insecurity. He was threatened with expulsion, tortured by the French police and wrote part of *The CNT in the Spanish Revolution* in prison (one Kropotkin had been in! – p152). Most tragic of all was the infighting within the CNT. That’s the curse of exile politics, but it was also the continuation of unresolved conflicts from the civil war years. Not that these disputes were only about ‘where were you in 1936?’, but also practical issues of what tactics to adopt.

Even *The CNT in the Spanish Revolution* caused conflict with exiled bureaucrats like Germinal Esgleas and Federica Montseny. The ‘rue Belfort leadership’ refused to consider an offer to republish it (by José Martínez of Ruedo ibérico in 1968): ‘Peirats lost patience and told Martínez to organise a new edition, thereby prompting a new conflict [...] Peirats was branded a “double thief” and “con man”’. (p191) Peirats gave the advance and royalties to a comrade for safekeeping; they were delivered ‘to the

reconstituted CNT in post-Franco Spain.’ (p194)

Peirats, having devoted his life to it, was unable to consider walking away from the CNT. This is hardly a surprise. He always trusted in the young to revive it, though he found the young anarchists of the 1970s too far removed from his ‘ascetic brand of old-school anarcho-syndicalism’ (p209): ‘When the movement showed sensitivity towards other forms of oppression beyond the workplace and addressed feminist, gay and ecological groups, Peirats denounced this as “dog’s dinner”’. (p207)

There’s little available in English on the CNT in exile, which makes this book all the more valuable. It covers the internal weaknesses that marred the revival of the CNT after Francoism, but also touches on the opposing forces that were working to make sure that the ‘transition’ ensured ‘business as usual’ (for example, the Scala Affair terrorist frameup).

Ealham never met or interviewed Peirats, though he interviewed his partner, Gracia Ventura. This means that *Living anarchism* is the result of a huge amount of effort expended on archives and manuscripts. I found it remarkable just how much Ealham could pull from Peirats’ letters. *Living anarchism* is a great read for anyone interested in the writing of history, radical politics or working class lives. Even if you’ve never read a book on the Spanish anarchist movement, you’ll not be lost. And if you’ve read all the others, this is one you mustn’t miss. This isn’t just the story of a remarkable life. It’s also an account of the successes and failures of the Spanish anarcho-syndicalists. Beyond that it’s a reminder that history is not a simple business; but that it is made by people.

Stan Brook

*Living Anarchism: José Peirats and the Spanish Anarcho-Syndicalist Movement* by Chris Ealham  
AK Press, 2015. 9781849352383 \$20/£15.

<https://www.akpress.org/living-anarchism.html>

### Library News

A number of leaflets and pamphlets have been digitised and are now available on the Kate Sharpley Library wiki:

<http://katesharpleylibrary.pbworks.com/w/page/103563587/Digitised%20Documents>

Melchor Rodríguez and Los Libertos, a biography of Mechor Rodríguez the “Red angel” by Alfonso Domingo is up at:

<http://www.katesharpleylibrary.net/zkh303>

Produced by the KSL collective, late Feb. 2016. Let us know what you think. Thanks for your support, keep it coming.

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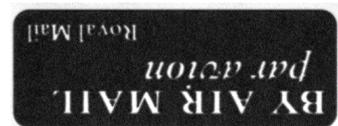
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