

[In 2021 David Goodway published 'Revisiting Charlie Lahr : The Powys family and the Red Lion Street circle' in *The Powys Journal* (<https://www.jstor.org/stable/27033272>) in which he quoted from 'Albert Meltzer, 'Bloomsbury's Anarchist' (MS in possession of the writer)'. When we asked for more information, Goodway replied 'Albert wrote this for the memorial volume for Charlie that I failed to get published. I made some critical comments which he addressed by sending some further paragraphs for me to use as I saw fit.' Here is the manuscript.]

Albert Meltzer - Bloomsbury's Anarchist.

"Bloomsbury" has become a ticket of history, an evocation of time and place which owes a lot of its significance to its "village shopkeeper" of the twenties and thirties, Charles Lahr. But his first and abiding love was not literature at all, but anarchism; and he had an impish sense of humour which found its greatest satisfaction in seeing authority fall over on a banana skin. It is just possible that "Bloomsbury" which is now offered in book after book as an evocation of above all, "The Thirties," was his most elaborate joke of all.

Karl Lahr came to London in 1905 from Germany where he had been a member of an anarchist group. (He only went back twice to Germany. The second visit was a few years before his death; and when the passport officer asked him why he never troubled to become naturalized British, he answered, in his incomparably dry way, that he wasn't sure if was going to stay or not). His dossier followed him to London where he found it hard to obtain work, and he started with one of the ubiquitous German bakers - in the sweated night bakery conditions of the time.

Soon after, in 1907, the Kaiser visited London, and known German anarchists were shadowed by Scotland Yard. Charlie, running all morning to complete a bread-round, took pity on the detectives who were assigned to watch him. "I cannot shoot him while I'm working. Be outside the baker's shop at one o'clock—that's when I finish--and you can stay in bed till then." To his amusement they agreed gladly. "Why are all German bakers' workers anarchists?" one asked. Charlie replied, "Because people who bake bread don't want government." (Years later interned in Alexandra Palace in the First World War, he met one of the Special Branch men again. "What a pity the Anarchists *didn't* get the Kaiser that time.", he said.)

The anarchist propaganda of the London *Freiheit* Group - which had carried on a tradition from the time of Johann Most--was centered in what was then the German part of Soho (of which only Schmidt's Restaurant remained as a reminder--until its closure in April 1975). Both libertarian and authoritarian socialists united to build the Communist Club - an international center in the West End which was both workers' club and revolutionary meeting place.

It played a major part in the bakers' strike (of around 1909-10) - pressing the foreign bakers to join in the strike and not to be used as scabs, and also explaining to the English bakers that the immigrants were used because of their ignorance of the language and their poverty.

When the war broke out it gave a remarkable display of international solidarity. The German bakers, Italian waiters and French cooks joined forces to combat the unemployment into which they were all thrown, and began a communal kitchen - which became an eating house for the harassed and isolated internationalists until finally it was closed down by the authorities following complaints that it was harbouring "a nest of enemy aliens." Lahr and other German comrades, including Rudolf Rocker, were picked up - despite their proven opposition to "Kaiserism." (Rocker was even asked in interrogation who were "the comrades" to whom he referred in letters to his wife - "Pan-Germans?")

After the war, Charlie Lahr was not deported like so many other German anarchist militants (Rocker too despite his fame), although it was not because he did not have as good a record of activity. He told me (I accept it with the proverbial pinch of salt) that he went into bookselling because he was so lucky in cards during the war that he was owed money everywhere and everybody paid him in books because that was about all they had to pay in. Another of his stories was that he later bought his home in Muswell Hill for sixpence - the price of a second-hand Indian-

printed Kipling he bought on a stall and sold at the height of the Kipling boom, so either he was very lucky in many respects or he had a fund of stories.

I can authenticate one good one. In his shop at Red Lion Street - which I first visited in 1935 - he kept on a swatch the newspaper bills of the day. But each one was slightly altered. The customer would come in and turn them over - on top was something like *Mae West to Marry Pope*, the next *Stalin Becomes King*, the most famous was the parson who was, in the original, *ducked* in the pond, and so on. On the anniversary of the Zeppelin being shot down in Cuffley Hill, the German Embassy sent an invitation to German citizens in London to attend a special service. As the Nazi top brass in London filed out of the cemetery, one by one, top hands reverently on their arms, Ribbentrop in the lead, they were staggered to see a soap box with a dish on top with some coins, and a fluttering newsbill that announced baldly, *HITLER ASSASSINATED*. They broke ranks and rushed to the station, pacing up and down and seizing the papers as they were thrown in for the news that, alas, never came.

Charlie had to keep quiet about his reaction to the invitation.

After becoming a bookseller, he never took part in any militant anarchist activities again; but he always gave help and encouragement which ranged from the translations he did for a group in touch with German anti-Nazi activists to the assistance he gave when Freedom Bookshop opened in 1940 around the corner to him in Red Lion Passage. It burned down in 1941, some years later re-opening in Red Lion Street. I also remember him chuckling at the assistance he gave to some stateless comrades in arranging "matches" for them, for in those days it was easy for ladies to acquire British nationality on marriage. Emma Goldman was fortunate in solving her problem by the assistance of an old Welsh anarchist who made her his "wife;" but there were not many men as generous as Jim Colton and others in a similar position had to look for old pensioners anxious to put their nationality to profit for once... ("It's terrible to go to Lincoln Inn Fields to look for husbands. You can get misinterpreted.")

Many of the pre-World-War One anarchists who found themselves politically isolated after the spread of parliamentary socialism and the rise of the Communist Party tended to be cynical, and especially bitter about the latter. But what was sharp and deeply felt bitterness to men like Colton in the Welsh mines tended to become genial humour in the Bloomsbury bookshop; and it seemed a never-ending joke in Lahr's shop that the Communist Party became first a front-runner for the Labour Party, then as the Popular Front days approached, moved to the right-wing of the social-democrats to outvie the right-wing in patriotic sloganeering that (after a prat fall interlude in 1939/41 when they returned to ultra-leftism) reached its crescendo when Russia entered in the war. The in-joke about the Communist Party reached its zenith in politico-literary Bloomsbury - divided between the fellow-travellers and the heretics.

When I first went to Charlie's bookshop I was somewhat of a minor notoriety among libertarians, as it was as unusual then for anyone *young* to be an anarchist as it is now for anyone *old*. The reason was purely coincidental (the glamour value of the Russian Revolution captured a generation and it took a long time for it to rub off) but needless to say there were those who generalised from the fact then as there are now. ("The older socialist is an anarchist because..." "After forty years many militants come to cynicism and anarchism..." etc). Charlie took great delight in introducing me to the Communist intellectuals of Bloomsbury when I called, bringing in the three (to them, incomprehensibly contradictory) points, that I was still at school, that I was an amateur boxing champion and that I was an anarchist.

I remember one (was it Tommy Jackson?) saying, "But you *can't* be an anarchist! There *aren't* any anarchists any more. I proved it!" Charlie cut in, "The trouble is he didn't read your book which proved it."

Not all the Bloomsbury intelligentsia were left-wing, of course. The most right-wing of them all was the King of Poland - Count Potocki. I think his claim to the royal title had some substance. "I am *nearly* an anarchist," he told me. "Democracy is government by lots of people. Monarchy is government by only one. Anarchy is government by no one."

In the back parlour (surrounded by books which fell on top of us) a few would gather to whom Charlie would apologetically chuckle about his odd customers - I should be able to remember some distinguished names which fluttered about the shop. But I cannot recall any. For Charlie the "Bloomsbury set" was a joke: he presented his writers and artists to us with the deprecatory air of an off-duty teacher pointing out his former pupils.

The back parlor circle-- I don't suppose it was the only one--was anarchist-cum-ILP-cum-anti-Imperialist and included George Padmore, the African revolutionary who kept the faith--and a lot of other African leaders who didn't. Other members were Chris Jones (another black pioneer of the anti-Imperialist movement), Gerry Kingshott ("the queen of Soho" and a fantastic character), Arthur Ballard (an ILPer), especially Reg Reynolds: the "doyen", Frank Ridley, Jomo Kenyatta and A.G. Stock (I can't remember what the initials were for, but she was called Dinah. She was a remarkable woman in many ways and I thought very highly of her). How well I recall Krishna Menon, was particularly hard-up when in London (a St. Pancras councilor nevertheless) until he got on to the staff of Penguin Books. The time before last I saw him was at Charlie's, when he borrowed my last half-crown; the last time was when his diplomatic limousine stopped at the traffic lights and he democratically enough waved to me through the window.

It would perhaps today be a heresy of heresies to say "Trotskyism" started only as a joke. But its original proponent, Max Eastman, was a flyweight politically whatever his literary standing, and the idea of a Bolshevik Party out-Bolshevizing the Communist Party was an appealing idea to some intellectuals in the U.S.A. and Britain - it only coincidentally embraced the cult of Trotsky, to which he himself later agreed, and stepped out of the role of godhead to lead. The early Trotskyists all foregathered in Lahr's bookshop. Most of them were Anglo-Catholics, and clergy at that - the most famous of all, John Groser, was so important to the CP in the capture of the East End that they did not dare expel him even after he admitted his "deviationism." Father Stewart Purkis was the most ardent in building the new Trotskyist movement: the curious will find more in Red Groves's *The Balham Group* which deals with the rise of Trotskyism, only the Anglo-Catholic fathers are transposed into "railway clerks" in his account. This was the first political matter I heard Charlie chortling about. Soon after Trotsky switched the South African Fourth Internationalists to London where he felt they had a role to play - he preferred to leave South Africa to the CP rather than be represented in Britain by the dissident orthodox clergy.

I always suspected my old friend Charlie Lahr of encouraging them: if he played no part, it wouldn't be for want of trying. And I am sure that all the literary gossip and anecdote around the "Bloomsbury set" came from the "village bookshop" in Red Lion Street... The inconsequential trifles of theirs he published and disposed of for coppers must put him in the category of the poor Indian who tossed away the pearl that would have bought his whole tribe...

Except of course that he knew it.

But they, poor devils, will never know how he used to laugh about them and their literary eccentricities when he was among the anarchists again. ("and this will probably be worth fifty quid when he's been dead long enough and all that sordid story sounds romantic...") The first thing I did when I finally went to Haworth was to see if his story was true, that local chemist's announced proudly that it pushed the opium that finally killed off Branwell Brontë. (It's a bookshop now. But it is true). Charlie had a list of places where X owed the publican, Y bought the dope and Z got thrown out of: it was a guide to evocative "Bloomsbury" that would now reach high figures at Southeby's. Maybe if someone has got through all his piles of book, it has.