



Five years of the Sparrows' Nest

KSL: Hello, comrades. What is the Sparrows' Nest, and how did it get the name?

SN: We describe the Sparrows' Nest as a centre for anarchist culture and education. It's a semi-detached house in an area of Nottingham called St. Anns. We'll call it the Nest for the rest of the interview – this name seems to have stuck. The Nest's main project is its archive and library.

After we opened in 2008, the local press (*Nottingham Post*) wrote the following which was surprisingly accurate – since then we've had regular opening hours every week.

A new centre for anarchist education and culture has opened in Robin Hood Chase.

The Sparrows' Nest is largely the work of local Anarchist Federation members, and was inspired by similar projects in Italy.

The centre is named after local anarchist publication The Nottingham Sparrow, which itself is a bastardisation of The Nottingham Arrow.

The library and archive hosts a large collection of material on anarchist theory, local struggles and workers' struggles, with books and pamphlets including the old news publication St Ann's News.

The centre aims to be generally open to callers soon, but in the meantime visitors are asked to contact the library on 07913 720136, or email info@thesparrowsnest.org.uk and arrange to view by appointment.

Members of the public are also being asked to lend or donate material.

Two of our founders had been involved with producing the *Nottingham Sparrow* as a local AF paper and we had a spoof letters column "Letters to the Sparrows' Nest" – note the apostrophe since there are multiple sparrows (real House Sparrows nest communally too, but we disgress...). The paper has not been published since the real Nest opened – it seemed like a natural thing to make a thing of fiction, real.

For the sake of completeness *The Nottingham Arrow* is a local council publication that is posted around the city to tell us how great the council is and seems especially to come around at election time, so is the kind of thing Eric Pickles would dearly like to suppress (our unitary council has been controlled by

Labour for years and this is unlikely to change in the near future, but again, we disgress...).

Italy refers to the 40 year anniversary congress of the International of Anarchist Federations in Carrara. Some of us in the AF had gone to this and were impressed by the way the FAI (Federazione Anarchica Italiana) were so well received for their connection with living and past working class culture and had several venues in the city. Of course in Britain there had been anarchist social centres for many years (including the Sumac Centre in Nottingham) but we were inspired to start something more specifically anarchist communist, although the project has evolved since then and is politically broader to focus on material about social anarchism, of interest to anarchists, and by anarchists.

Several of the founders of the Nest had their personal collections of publications and archive material, including books, magazines, and various organisational documents, plus material from local and regional campaigns which we realised early on were a valuable record of activism and politics. These formed the early stage of the Nest collection and we have either added this to our general collection or kept personal collections intact dependant on the wishes on the donator. As well as books we have posters, stickers, CDs and video and various artifacts such as t-shirts, lighters and even (empty) beer bottles with an anarchist theme or relating to social struggles.

KSL: You've been going for five years now. What are you most proud of and what's been your greatest challenge?

SN: We've had many challenges, not least cataloguing what we had at the beginning, which was a lot, when more and more was coming in. Thankfully after starting the Nest we managed to attract further hands and brains to work on the cataloguing and develop the collections. Over the 5 years we have been entrusted with such important collections as the Anarchist Federation archives, the personal archive of Ron M. (of the Solidarity Federation) and that of SolFed itself. Nick H. of the Anarchist Federation has donated a huge number of books and other important anarchist communist material from the 1960s and 70s. We have had many other small and large donations from individuals, and taken some material from the Sumac

The Sparrows' Nest

Centre as well. We are grateful to the people who have thought of us and suggested us to others. In part thanks to cross-over with the Peoples' Histreh radical history group which we are also involved with, we fostered a really good relationship with an archivist at Nottinghamshire Archives who helped us with preservation (who told us we'd passed the first rule of archiving which is to keep the stuff in the first place!) We have since spent a lot of money and time getting hold of the right kind of archive boxes and on staple removal.

We have been pleased to have hosted talks by a great number of enthusiasts and experts (many self-taught) and covering such topics as local housing, poaching and the anti-poll tax campaign. The latter coincided with donations of two banners from the period and for which we scanned in bulletins and leaflets and press cuttings from the period (all on our website) and showed unique video footage. We have also hosted talks about specialist areas such as the Third Revolution. We have also hosted international anarchist speakers from Belarus, Russia and Slovenia as part of UK/European speaking tours or one-off visits.

We think we have carried out a pretty good cataloguing effort over the 5 years, and most recently started our Digital Library project which is a systematic approach to getting some of the more one-off and unique material scanned in and available online. Students and researchers have used material in the archive and in turn contributed to the digital library by leaving us the scans of documents they were studying.

We have also attempted to interpret the material ourselves – Ron's archive in particular contains a treasure trove of correspondence (including carbon copies of letters sent from England) where we can find the Syndicalist Workers Federation asking about the effect on libertarians of the Cuban Revolution (sadly without reply) and find glimpses of day-to-day concerns of its members, with a good deal of wry humour. We have presented this material at various anarchist bookfairs which we hope some of your readers will have seen and found as interesting as we found it to be. At the London Anarchist Bookfair this year we will present more material from our archive boxes.

KSL: What recommendations would you make to people starting similar projects?

SN: We are aware of other library projects in Britain, some new and some that pre-date the Nest – early on we linked in to the Network of Radical Libraries and Archives (NORLA) and from this we have email contact with various people although network meetings have not taken place in recent years. A more

organised way to share skills and where appropriate to exchange material between libraries would be useful.

As a key recommendation we'd say put a lot of effort into cataloguing; build a detailed database and keyword everything to make it accessible. The Centre International de Recherches sur l'Anarchisme (CIRA) in Switzerland has created a widely used database format which we'd have used from the start if we'd known about it. Also decide what you want to collect, tell people what you are doing and promote it with outreach activities. Ask for stuff as people don't necessarily know what they have is worth keeping! We run a mailing list as well as the website where we write about our progress and we hope this all helps boost enthusiasm; it helps us too, to assess how we are doing.

KSL: How can people help you out, and how can they get in touch to use the library?

SN: Our website has <http://thesparrowsnest.org.uk> contains contact details; email address and phone number are above; just email to get on our mailing list and to visit the Nest just phone first. We'll happily accept donations of texts, documents and other artefacts and we'd be pleased to curate and look after further donations, either adding it to or keeping it distinct from our general collection. One recent collection we scanned in and gave back so this is also possible. We use a '40 year rule' for material that could identify individuals which we apply to the digital library project; our full donations policy is on the website. Preservation does cost money; acid-and lignin-free boxes are really expensive! We have a few regular donations from organisations and individuals and we could definitely use more – see our 'Spare a twig' appeal on the website (Donations area) which includes bank details and a form to fill in. We are happy to discuss in advance any donation of material or funds. Thanks for this opportunity to tell your readers about the Nest; KSL publications and newsletters are part of our collection too!

Library Notes, October 2013

No reviews yet of *One Hundred Years of Workers' Solidarity : the History of "Solidaridad Obrera"* – also available on our website – but it has been pointed out to us that *Soli* is the paper of the CNT in Catalonia, not the 'voice of the CNT'. *CNT* is the paper of the CNT across Spain.

We're glad to see that AK Press have just published *Anarchism and Workers' Self-Management in Revolutionary Spain* by Frank Mintz. We hope to review it soon.

(continued on page 6)

Albert Meltzer

Albert Meltzer and the fight for working class history

Albert Meltzer was a central figure in the development of the Kate Sharpley Library, both practically (laying out and distributing the bulletin and pamphlets) and also philosophically. His concern at seeing the history of anarchism rewritten to suit other people's agendas was part of the motivation for the founding of the Library.¹ It also connected with the rest of his anarchism: class-conscious, committed to liberation from below, sceptical of 'experts' and unafraid of criticising them.

His historical writing, like all of his writing, was punchy, humorous and anecdotal. 'Our historical judgement was criticised as based only on anecdotal history from veterans but knowing how conventional history is concocted I doubt if it suffered from that.'² Albert wrote anarchist history from his own experience and the accounts of comrades he knew. He did not have the leisure (or the patience) to comb through archives. He also knew that relying on published sources could write the people who made up the anarchist movement out of history. To Albert, most academics had proven themselves incapable of understanding the anarchist movement: 'Working-class theoreticians who express and formulate theories are totally ignored as of no consequence: what they say is attributed to the next available "Intellectual".'³ Albert was sceptical of both academic methodology: "'Research'" often means looking up dated reference books, and passing it off as knowledge.'⁴ and also their motivation: 'Anarchism has become fair game for those eager to climb on the academic gravy train'.⁵

History, and the writing of history, was deeply political to Albert. 'Many would like to filch the history of the Anarchist movement.'⁶ A shining example of this – and the 'sectarian' riposte – came in *Black Flag*'s response to Keith Paton's 'Alternative Liberalism : in search of ideological neighbours' suggesting Young Liberals adopt 'non-violent' anarchism. Paton wrote "'I'm not talking about the violent or destructive currents of anarchism or the anarchism that tail-ends Marxism and is obsessed with preventing the 'emasculatation' (sic) of the revolution... We claim a long and largely honourable tradition: e.g. it was we anarchists whom the Bolsheviks first attacked in post-revolutionary Russia, April 1918; e.g. the social creativity of the anarchist influenced workers and peasants in Spain in 1936-37, before snuffed out by the troops of right and left; May 68 to some extent[...]" *Black Flag* responded 'Humbug! "We anarchists" whom the Bolsheviks attacked, "we anarchists" who fought in Spain, and struggled ever since – what have "we" to do with you? Or are you pretending that it was "Peace News" types

that fought in Russia and Spain? What with, bunches of posies?'⁷

Albert pointed out the positive value of history – and its contested nature – in his review of *British syndicalism* by Bob Holton: 'The histories of whole peoples were wiped out for precisely the same reason that the history of the working class movement in recent times is wiped out: it does not suit the conquerors for it to be known, because traditions keep alive the spirit of revolt.'⁸

The study of anarchism has ballooned since Albert's death. Much solid history has been written and, importantly, published (not all of it by academics). Those of us who work on the history of the anarchist movement – a history from below if ever there was one – will keep digging. If we move on from Albert's anecdotal approach to history, we would do well not to forget his scepticism. It would be unfortunate to leave history (or theory) to the 'experts' only to find ourselves lamenting, like the 'uncontrollable' from the Iron Column, 'maybe we have failed to make ourselves understood'.⁹

Notes

- 1, See 'The Kate Sharpley Library Then, Now and Next: An Interview with Barry Pateman' *KSL: Bulletin of the Kate Sharpley Library* No. 63-64, October 2010 <http://www.katesharpleylibrary.net/0vt50w>
- 2, Describing *Cuddon's Cosmopolitan Review*, in chapter 12, pages 182-3 of *I couldn't paint golden angels* (1996) <http://www.katesharpleylibrary.net/ngf32q>
- 3, Albert Meltzer 'Only a few intellectuals' *Black Flag* vol.3, no.19 page 7 (April 1975)
- 4, Albert Meltzer *I couldn't paint golden angels* chapter 9, page 166 <http://www.katesharpleylibrary.net/6djj4k>
- 5, Albert Meltzer *Anarchism: arguments for and against*, 2nd edition (2000), page 18.
- 6, Albert Meltzer 'What is the anarchist movement?' *Black Flag* vol.7, no.7 page 36 (Autumn 1984)
- 7, Anonymous but probably Albert Meltzer 'Roon 'n' about : Keith Paton knew my father' *Black Flag* vol.4, no.13 page 4 (1977)
- 8, *Cienfuegos Press Anarchist Review* no.2 page 16 (1977)
- 9, An uncontrollable from the Iron Column, 'The Iron Column, militarisation and the revolutionary future of Spain' [AKA *A day mournful and overcast*] in Abel Paz *The story of the Iron Column* (2011) page 188.

Harry Kelly

Prospectus of the Melbourne Anarchist Club, 1886

To the people of Australasia

The Melbourne Anarchists' Club extends its greetings to the liberty loving citizens of these young colonies and appeals to them to assist its members in their efforts to remove those public sentiments and public institutions, which have been transplanted here from the northern hemispheres, retard social progress and happiness; and to substitute in their place the enabling principles of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity!

The objects of the Melbourne Anarchists' Club are:

1. To foster public interest in the great social questions of the day, by promoting inquiry in every possible way; to promote free public discussion of all social questions; and to circulate and publish literature, throwing light upon existing evils of society, and the methods necessary for their removal.

2. To foster and extend the principles of Self Reliance, Self Help and a Spirit of Independence amongst the people.

3. To uphold and maintain the principles of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity. By Liberty we mean 'the equal liberty of each, limited alone by the equal liberty of all.' By Equality we mean 'the equality of opportunity for each individual.' And by Fraternity we mean 'that principle which denies national and class distinctions, asserts the Brotherhood of Man and says "The world is my country"'. .

4. To advocate, and seek to achieve, the abolition of all monopolies and despotisms which destroy the Freedom of the Individual and which thereby check social progress and prosperity.

5. To expose and oppose that colossal swindle, Government, and to advocate Abstention from Voting, Resistance to Taxation, and Private Co-operation or Individual Action.

6. To foster Mutual Trust and Fraternity amongst the working people of all ranks, and to turn their attention to their common foes: the Priests and the Politicians, and their co-adjutors, attacking principles rather than individuals.

7. To invite the co-operation of all, who have realised the innate evils of our governing institutions, and desire their speedy dissolution for the general benefit of Humanity.

8. To promote the formation of voluntary institutions similar to the Melbourne Anarchist Club throughout Victoria and the neighbouring colonies, and, with their consent, to eventually unite with them forming the Australasian Association of Anarchists.

From the original *Prospectus*, quoted by S. Merri-field, 'The Melbourne Anarchist Club, 1886-1891',

Labor History, no. 3, November 1962, pp.35-36
Reprinted in David Lovell, *Marxism and Australian Socialism before the Bolshevik Revolution*, pp.250-251

Remembering Harry Kelly

A fundraising campaign has been started to buy a new gravestone for Harry Kelly: American anarchist, printer, lecturer, Modern School worker ...

"It would hardly be possible to enumerate all the occasions on which Kelly participated during the years he spent in the revolutionary movement, at protest meetings, in strikes and demonstrations; and, in the all too often underestimated work of organizing, he always stands in the forefront. A staunch friend of Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman he worked with these comrades through many years, ere our wise rulers made the decision to deport them from the shores of America to Soviet Russia on the day of the tercentenary of the landing of the Pilgrim Fathers from the Mayflower. We humans realize only a small part of our dreams; Kelly is fortunate to have realized one of his supreme dreams: a social community and a school for children of proletarian parents in the country, far from the nerveracking influence of the modern city." (From *Harry Kelly, an appreciation* by Hippolyte Havel)

http://dwardmac.pitzer.edu/Anarchist_Archives/coldoffthepresses/havelkelly.html

Kelly was a great starter of colonies. The constitution of the Mohegan Modern School Association gives a flavour of their aims:

"We are organizing this settlement in the hope that we may free ourselves and our children from at least some of the diseases of city life; to give free rein to our thoughts and ideals; to offer our children a libertarian education which will fit them to be fighters for a better world." [Harry Kelly "On the constitution", *Colony News*, August 23, 1935. quoted in Avrigh, *The Modern School Movement* p290.]

The best source for the life of Harry Kelly is Paul Avrigh's *The Modern School Movement : anarchism and education in the United States*. His unpublished autobiography, *Roll back the years : odyssey of a libertarian*, is in the Tamiment Library (New York). His essay 'An Anarchist in the Making' is available online at

<http://library.libertarian-labyrinth.org/items/show/1918>

You can contribute to the campaign at <http://www.indiegogo.com/projects/a-new-gravestone-for-harry-kelly> (open until October 29, 2013)

Italian Anarchists in London

Pietro Di Paola: The Knights-Errant of Anarchy: London and the Italian Anarchist Diaspora 1880-1917 (Liverpool University Press, 2013)

Whether anarchists forced by repression to live abroad for many years and sometimes for the rest of their lives felt homesick for their country of origin, we cannot say. As for anarchists who sought refuge in London, the sources provide no answer to this question. The many spies and police authorities had no interest in that side of things. What concerned them was monitoring a sizeable and cosmopolitan anarchist community that included (thanks to England's liberal policy on political asylum) some of what were deemed the most dangerous of anarchists – Kropotkin, Malatesta, Merlino, Malato, Most, Rocker, Louise Michel and [Emile] Henry. That community was made up of dozens of lesser known militants who helped weave an organisational network and web of personal relationships that linked hundreds of militants scattered around the globe: in Paris, Chicago, Lugano, Marseilles, Rio de Janeiro, Cairo, Patterson (New Jersey) ... That web revolved around experience of exile that allowed the Italian anarchist movement not only to survive repeated waves of savage repression but also to come into contact with libertarian groups of different nationality and to enrich itself theoretically and to contribute towards the spread of the workers' and trade union movement elsewhere. The story of the anarchist communities in exile is therefore an integral part of the history of the Italian anarchist movement, not to mention the international movement. The Italian anarchist community in London started to expand in the later 1870s. Early internationalist immigrants linked up with political immigrants from earlier times: the exiles from the days of the Risorgimento and refugees from the Paris Commune. The first internationalists hung out in the taverns run by older republicans and anti-clericals. The anarchists settled in the poor Italian immigrant society in Soho, Clerkenwell and Holborn. With their countrymen, they grappled with the same problems of finding work and a place to live. In one of the earliest periods of his stay in London, Malatesta lived off his earnings as a mechanic. A curtain divided his lodgings: on one side was the straw mattress on which he slept, on the other the workshop in which he laboured. One of a host of spies reported that Rava, Ceccarelli and Alvin had been forced to sell a pair of shoes just to feed themselves. Over the years, with the spread of repression to traditionally hospitable countries like France and Switzerland, the anarchist community in London grew. The refugees were joined by their wives. They often plied a trade that they had plied before leaving Italy (tailoring, shoe-making); many found work as cooks and waiters. Some sold edible goods. Families

expanded as children came along. Like every other community, the Italian community established its gathering points, its own recreational and social locations. Such Clubs also served as propaganda centres with meetings, discussions and debates. It was in the London clubs that, according to police Inspector Sernicoli, the subversive ideas that raced around Europe and the wider world within days were hatched. The clubs were also cultural production sites. This was a counter-culture that reached out to exiles and which was crucial in creating and bolstering a sense of belonging and identity and tightened ideological connections. The theatre was a showcase for such productivity. Pietro Gori used to send the London comrades his plays to perform, but locally-produced plays were staged as well. One of the most prolific authors in the community was Federico Lauria who was actually an informer for the Italian consulate (as 'agent Calvo'). In 1893 his comedy was successfully staged at the Italian-Swiss Club. Saverio Merlino acted as prompter, helping the evening to turn out a great success. The clubs were often run in conjunction with other nationalities (Germans, Russians, French, Italians) who pooled their efforts in more international celebrations: the annual May 1st and commemoration of the Chicago Martyrs, the Paris Commune, the death of Francisco Ferrer. These soirees were often set out along the same lines in other exile communities: opening address, poetry readings or monologues, revolutionary songs (inevitable including the Carmagnole), operatic extracts or mandolin performances and finishing off with a big dance.

Another important means of propaganda was the newspapers that made it possible to trade news with Italy and other exile communities. Those publications, though short-lived, nevertheless made their contribution to theoretical debates and the elaboration of the movement's line of policy, as for instance in the controversy between organisers and anti-organisers (in *L'Anarchia*, 1896) or in the wake of the assassination of King Umberto (see *Cause e Effetti*, 1900). However the fact that all the London-published newspapers of the Italian anarchist community right up until the end of the First World War were in the Italian language posed a problem as far as the host country was concerned. In fact, the mother country still remained the chief focus of the Italian anarchists in London.

Not that their small world lacked for deeply divisive polemics and splits, especially between organisers, headed by Malatesta and Merlino, and the anti-organisers led by Luigi Parmeggiani, an anarchist who led a double life. Parmeggiani was known under his real name as the head of a gang of anarchist expropriators, but as Louis Marcy he was the respected

Italian Anarchists in London

owner of an antiquarian art gallery in Bloomsbury Square and in Paris.

The British police kept a close eye on the activities of the anarchists and in 1894 arrested Francesco Polti and Giuseppe Fornara aka Piemonte for possession of explosives. Many of the break-ins carried out by Parmeggiani's gang were pulled off thanks to false keys made by Fornara. The pair were sentenced to ten and twenty years' penal servitude, respectively. When Fornara's release date was approaching, the British authorities, with the agreement of their Italian counterparts, wriggled out of releasing him by referring him for psychiatric problems. The issue rose again once his time had been served. Fornara was diagnosed as mad and committed to an asylum for the criminally insane from which he would never be freed.

He died there in 1941, over half a century after sentence was passed on him.

In order to keep tabs on the anarchist colony, the Italian authorities relied upon plenty of spies and informers such as De Martjis, Lauria, Bellelli and Rubino. This practice, was not without its complications however: it generated serious diplomatic incidents as in the case of Rubino who, having been exposed as a spy in 1902, then tried to assassinate the king of Belgium in order to prove his bona fides to his ex-comrades.

The outbreak of the First World War and the divisions generated by the stances adopted over the war, the internment of anarchists from enemy nations and the repatriation of many Russian anarchists come the outbreak of the revolution, Malatesta's return to Italy all signalled London's demise as one of the leading anarchist exile centres.

in *Bollettino Archivio G. Pinelli* No 40 (Milan) December 2012

Library notes continued

Please keep an eye on our website as there is material posted there regularly that we don't have room to print in the bulletin. In particular, anyone interested in women in the anarcho-syndicalist movement should read 'The Cazalla de la Sierra CNT's Female Domestic Staff Union' by José Antonio Jiménez Cubero at <http://www.katesharpleylibrary.net/5dv508>

Another major piece is a newly translated account of the Petrograd Anarchist Federation, written in 1924. "Thus the Communist authorities have managed, by way of unjustified terror against old anarchist fighters, to destroy the Federation as a legal organisation, they managed to throw the best, most energetic anarchist comrades overboard from social life, but these madmen should not think that they have strangled anarchism. The seed, thrown by the skilled

Anarchism and Moral Philosophy [Book Review]

The appropriation of the term 'anarchism' by academic philosophers to describe ultra-liberal free-marketism has to be one of the most audacious of heists. The essays in this books aim to challenge that, from within academic philosophy. So, really it is one for the philosophers – deep thinking, examining assumptions, sounds good – but I have to confess some of it was very alien.

Samuel Clark's chapter (subtitled "Anarchist perfectionism and the conditions of independence") wonders if "living in an anarchist utopia of freedom and non-domination might leave one's independence stunted". (p39) Once we're living without domination and exploitation, surely there will be other challenges to develop our independence?

Shared assumptions are a feature of anarchist discussions but I suspect that philosophers sometimes lean on them too. Nathan Jun assures us that "anarchist theory was very much a product of literate, mostly middle-class minds." (p60) Which is true, but only if you define theory as the content of a book which is quoted by academics. Yes, Kropotkin was posh. Did he learn radical social ideas at Prince School? Did they generate spontaneously from his genius? Or did he do an apprenticeship in the workers' movement and learn them there? [1]

I was pleased that Malatesta snuck in with the final word. "If it is true that the law of Nature is harmony, I suggest one would be entitled to ask why Nature has waited for anarchists to be born, and goes on waiting for them to triumph". (p241) Hopefully that (and this book over all) will give a better grounding to philosophical discussions of anarchist ideas.

1, See *The anarchist way to socialism: Elisée Reclus and nineteenth-century European anarchism* by Marie Fleming for an interesting discussion of "where does anarchist theory originate?"

Anarchism and Moral Philosophy edited by Benjamin Franks and Matthew Wilson. Palgrave Macmillan ISBN 9780230580664

Library notes continued

and experienced hands of old anarchists, has found favourable ground for itself in the representatives of the growing generation, and some of them went into exile and concentration camps as bravely, as fearlessly and as free from worry as their spiritual fathers did. The others, giving thanks to the old fighters for their old deeds, are forging their new swords for new battles and new struggles in the times of Communist reaction."

<http://www.katesharpleylibrary.net/gxd3d2>

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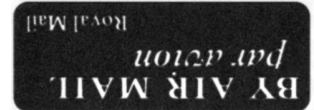
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