

# RADICAL BOOKSELLING HISTORY

Newsletter

Issue 6, May 2023

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# Editorial

Welcome to the 6th issue of the *Radical Bookselling History Newsletter*, which continues to provide a vehicle for recording the history of radical bookselling, particularly in the 1970s–90s.

Our first article reports on Quiet Revolutions, the Bookfair and event on radical bookselling history held at London's Barbican in November 2022. It provided a unique opportunity to hear from current and former radical booksellers. This is followed by a reprint of a *New Statesman* article by Ken Worpole, one of the event's speakers, and by a number of links to radical bookselling histories online and, unfortunately, more obituaries. We have a review of the book *Queer Print in Europe*.

Workers from Publications Distribution Co-operative (PDC) and from Grass Roots Books in Manchester were inspired to record their histories by our October 2019 conference. We include a reprint of an article on Grass Roots, which a group of former workers put together for the *North West Labour History Journal*, alongside their account of the process of gathering together the shop's history from former staff and customers. PDC's history was told in Issue 3 and 4 of this *Newsletter* and here we have an article telling the story of producing a Wikipedia page on PDC. We also reprint an article on the radical book shops of Sheffield.

Once again Dave Cope has researched an area of bookselling history for us, this time the Anarchist Bookshops. We very much welcome more contributions on this topic and any aspects of radical bookselling history.

Finally, please note the announcement – on page 13 – of the talk by Ross Bradshaw of Five Leaves on the History of Radical Bookselling. It's at Nottingham Trent University, part of their Radical Print Summer School, on Thursday 18<sup>th</sup> May. Sorry for the short notice!

*Dave Cope, John Goodman, Rick Seccombe and Maggie Walker*

*Radical Bookselling History Group*

Please use this if you want to contact us: [rbh@phoncoop.coop](mailto:rbh@phoncoop.coop)

This Newsletter, and previous issues, can be downloaded from:  
[www.leftontheshelfbooks.co.uk](http://www.leftontheshelfbooks.co.uk) (Research Pages tab)

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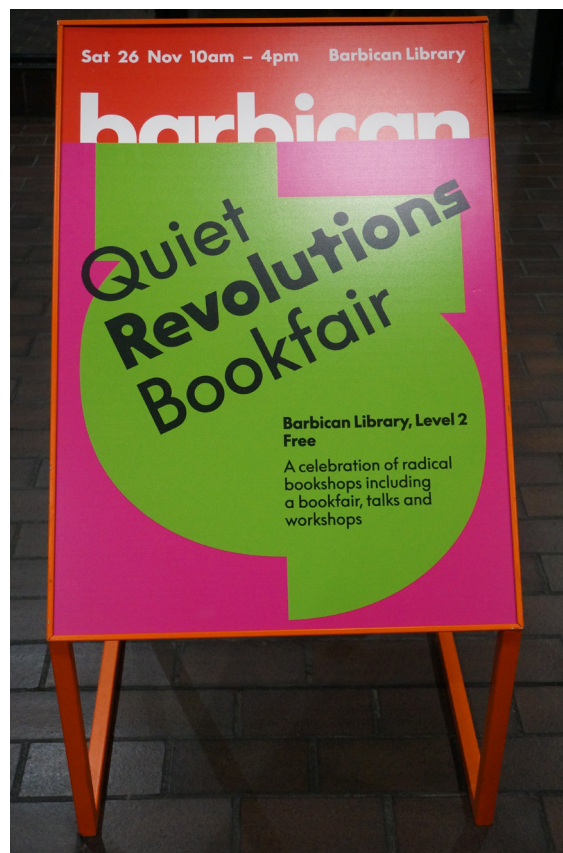
*[Ben Goodman](#)*

# Quiet Revolutions 2022

Maggie Walker

On 26 November 2022, Rosa Schling from *On the Record* curated a day-long event at the Barbican celebrating radical bookshops past and present called Quiet Revolutions.

Barbican Library hosted a bookfair with stalls from radical bookshops including **Housmans**, **New Beacon Books**, **Gay's The Word**, **Five Leaves**, **Shalimar Books**, **Round Table Books**, **Freedom**, **Bookmarks** and **Newham Bookshop** along with radical publishers and organisations such as **Pluto Press**, **Verso**, **the Feminist Library**, **Marx Memorial Library** and **Bishopsgate Institute**. The **Radical Bookselling History Project** and **Left on the Shelf** also had a stall and added to our mailing list. Volunteers from the oral history project **On the Record** collected information for their radical bookshop mapping project and there was a lino printing workshop. The two talks, **Radical Bookshops Present** and **Radical Bookshops Past** were audio-recorded (available at <https://on-the-record.org.uk/projects/mapping-radical-bookshops/quiet-revolutions-at-the-barbican/>) and are reported on below.



## Radical Bookshops Present

This was chaired by Ross Bradshaw (Mushroom Books/Five Leaves – Nottingham) with a panel including Jim MacSweeney (Gay's the Word – London), Vivian Archer (Newham Bookshop – London), Nik Górecki (Housmans – London), Meera Ghanshamdas (Round Table Books – Brixton) and Ray Larman (The Bookish Type – Leeds). While Ray and Meera were from current and relatively new shops, Nik, Vivian and Jim were from surviving, long-standing shops and Ross had experience of Mushroom books that closed in 2000 and Five Leaves which opened as a bookshop in 2013.

The discussion questions, would you define your shop as a radical bookshop; what had prompted new shops to set up, and relationships with the local community drew out the commonalities, differences and histories of the shops represented on the panel. **Gay's the Word** had started in 1979 and a visible and serious gay bookshop at that time faced fascist attacks, police raids and supported gays and lesbians who may not feel safe to be "out" at work or to their families. Later Waterstone's and other chain bookshops

started to stock gay and lesbian fiction and the shop no longer needed to be shuttered. Jim suggested that being a queer space in a heteronormative world was important and that while being lesbian and gay were now widely accepted this was not so for bi and trans people.

Ray, with Nicola, had opened **The Bookish Type**, a queer indie bookshop, in 2020 in the Merrion Centre in Leeds after a period running bookstalls at LGBT events. Ray felt that a multi-generational, day-time queer space was important to their customers and that their stock on intersecting issues such as race, environment and feminism was also indicative of being a radical bookshop.

**Newham Bookshop**, which has a children's and an adults' shop, had been set up 44 years ago by local parents and linked to literacy lessons in the community. They are keen to serve their local community and find that some customers embrace this and make donations to support them in getting books to local children. They operate in a changing community with many languages and also a big interest in sport. Vivian emphasised that it was important to know and respect the local community and run relevant events.

**Round Table Books** is an "inclusion-led bookshop" which celebrates under-represented authors. It aims to serve its local community in Brixton. It exists in part in response to the CLPE (Centre for Literacy in Primary Education) *Reflecting Realities* report of 2018 which had shown that only 1% of children's books published in 2017 had BAME main characters (<https://clpe.org.uk/research/clpes-reflecting-realities-survey-ethnic-representation-within-uk-childrens-literature-0>). They had crowdfunded for the shop with match funding from their linked publishers Knights Of. They are a non-profit and want to bring their carefully curated book stock to the mainstream in both their children's and adults' bookshop.

**Housmans** had the longest history, set up by the peace movement following WWII, giving it a national and even international community of the peace movement. It had also held its place in the community around Caledonian Road when the Kings Cross area was redeveloped. Nik felt that the word radical was tainted by its more recent use to describe extremists and could therefore seem unwelcoming.

Further discussion covered the ways in which radical bookshops do the "heavy-lifting" to bring important writing to wider attention. In the 1970's radical shops were importing feminist titles before Virago and Women's Press and others



started publishing these titles in the UK. They also sold the pamphlet *How the West Indian Child Is Made Educationally Sub-normal in the British School System: The Scandal of the Black Child in Schools in Britain* by Bernard Coard, published as a pamphlet by New Beacon Books and the pamphlet *Protest and Survive*, protesting against the nuclear bomb, which became a Penguin book. A current example might be *Abolishing the Police* edited by Koshka Duff (Dog Section Press). Ross felt that the Booksellers Association is now more supportive of radical shops as part of the independent sector than it was in the 20<sup>th</sup> century but Meera finds that it has a lot further to go on diversity. A question about magazine sales found that only Housmans gives space to magazines now although there are an increasing number of zines that are sold by The Bookish Type and others. This was an interesting session which emphasised the importance of the curation that booksellers do on behalf of their chosen audiences.

## Radical Bookshops Past

An evening session was held in a Barbican lecture theatre chaired by Ken Worpole. It started with an extract showing the Centerprise Community Bookshop from the 1980 film *Somewhere in Hackney* (which can be watched in full online here <https://player.bfi.org.uk/free/film/watch-somewhere-in-hackney-1980-online>).

The period was introduced by the historian **Sheila Rowbotham**. She spoke of the activities in the 1960s that responded to needs such as squatting and toy libraries and the importance to many of “the personal is political” which led to an emphasis on creating alternatives. From the USA came the radicalism (not socialism) that opposed the Vietnam War and worked for Civil Rights. Her *Big Red Diary* from 1981 showed in its “pink pages” how much was going on at that time and she welcomed efforts to create archives and records of the radical bookselling of the period.

**Ken Worpole**, who had been a key collective member at **Centerprise**, explained that it had been founded by Glenn Thompson, a black American draft dodger whose respect for the ideas of Saul Alinsky and Ivan Illich led to his commitment to supporting literacy, which was a focus of Centerprise throughout its existence.

**Farrukh Dhondy** spoke of his experiences as a teacher and a writer of the time working alongside the British Black Panthers and living above their squatted **Freedom News** bookshop at 74 Railton Road in Brixton until he had to jump out of the fire-bombed burning building on 15<sup>th</sup> March 1973.

**Jane Cholmeley**, one of the founders of **Silver Moon** bookshop in 1984, spoke of the 18 years that this feminist shop ran on Charing Cross Road to give space



Image from:  
[www.newhambooks.co.uk](http://www.newhambooks.co.uk)

to women's writing at the heart of the bookselling world in the UK. She is in the process of putting this experience into a book.

**Michael La Rose** spoke of the importance and efforts to survive of **New Beacon Books**, founded by his father John La Rose and central, with Bogle L'Ouverture and Race Today, to the International Book Fair of Radical Black and Third World Books that ran from 1982 to 1995. He also drew attention to the work of the **George Padmore Institute**, formed in 1991 to hold the archive of the black struggle in Britain.

**Lynn Alderson** spoke of founding **Sisterwrite**, a workers co-operative feminist bookshop, with Mary Coghill and Kay Stirling, in Upper St, Islington. Feminist solidarity meant that she was able to gather information on books to import from the USA from Women Books in New York; obtaining books from US publishers was very important as a source of feminist material. Sisterwrite aimed to make their books widely available through sending out a catalogue. The shop was also a Women's Centre, keeping women-only newsletters available under the counter and appreciating the support of feminist academics and librarians. The shop was too small to hold events but Lynn remembers hosting Marge Piercy at the nearby Kings Arms. The shop was a part of the women's movement addressing issues of class, race and disability and maintaining the importance of collective working.

There was only a short time for questions and comments from the appreciative audience, and the session ended with an appeal from the radical Bookselling History Group to ensure that the history of bookselling in the 1970s–90s is recorded and archived.

# Bookshop Stories

Ken Worpole

'Are you here for the filthy books?' was Bill Butler's opening gambit when customers entered Brighton's Unicorn Bookshop in the late 1960s. The exterior was brightly painted with star-studded blue skies, against which unicorns pranced amongst rainbows. The interior was even more surreal: not just another bookshop but another world. Butler sold anti-war posters, occult and esoterica, liberation politics, and gay imports from the USA (of which he was one). His principal interest was the international Beat movement, selling City Lights books published by Laurence Ferlinghetti in San Francisco, with whom he was in direct contact. The shop was patrolled by a large Alsatian dog, cool jazz played, and Butler rhapsodised knowledgeably on whatever customers were interested in buying.

In 1968, year after opening, the police came knocking and Butler was charged under the 1959 Obscene Publications Act with printing and distributing *Why I Want to Fuck Ronald Reagan*, a spoof psychological paper on political celebrity written by J.G. Ballard. Finding him guilty, the Chairman of the Magistrates, a certain Mr Slipper, extended his fears that a tide of filth was entering Brighton (hence Butler's ironic welcome to customers), by criticising the newly established Sussex University, several of whose lecturers had appeared in Butler's defence:

*May I say how appalled my colleagues and I have been at the filth that has been produced at this Court, and at the fact that responsible people including members of the university faculty have come here to defend it. It is something which is completely indefensible from our point of view. We hope that these remarks will be conveyed to the university authorities.*

Writers gathered in support, producing an anthology *For Bill Butler*, edited by Eric Mottram and Larry Wallrich, with contributions from Ginsberg, Ferlinghetti, Lee Harwood, Tom Raworth, Tuli Kupferberg and others. A costly but successful appeal broke Butler in more ways than one and he retired to a commune in Wales, dying soon after. Jim Burns, the venerable chronicler of British 'Beat' culture at The Penniless Press, later wrote that, 'It has always struck me that people like Bill Butler, who opened bookshops, published books, started little magazines, and organised events, and rarely made money out of these activities, never have had the recognition due to them.'

Butler's story belongs to a long history of radical book-selling and publishing: of clashes with government laws intent on sending publishers and booksellers to prison, or in defiance of those who wanted to burn dissident bookshops to the ground. In 1984 Gay's The Word Bookshop in



London was raided by Customs & Excise, a third of its stock removed, and the owners charged under imports legislation. Eventually a judge threw the case out of court and the books were returned, damaged. Centerprise, the Dalston bookshop where I worked between 1973 and 1978, was petrol-bombed twice. Black bookshops were targeted with even greater intensity: both Bogle L'Ouverture (later the Walter Rodney Bookshop) in Ealing, and New Beacon Books close to Finsbury Park, had their windows repeatedly smashed and graffitied.

The influence which Bogle L'Ouverture and New Beacon Bookshop as bookshops and publishers played in bringing Caribbean and African writing into the bloodstream of British intellectual life and literature can't be overstated. Eric and Jessica Huntley at Bogle and John La Rose and Sarah White at New Beacon were in close contact with all the established and younger writers and artists from the Caribbean through the influential Caribbean Artists' Movement – CLR James, Andrew Salkey, Edward Kamau Brathwaite, Walter Rodney, James Berry, Louise Bennett, Samuel Selvon, Althea McNish – helping them gain a footing in the artistic and literary world of the metropole. It was Jessica Huntley and John La Rose who pioneered the first International Book Fair of Radical Black and Third World Books in 1982. This soon became a major annual event, attended by tens of thousands from all over the world, with satellite festivals held in Manchester, Bradford, Leeds and Glasgow, with the organisers taking a firm stand in defence of *The Satanic Verses*.

While former Commonwealth writers began to get noticed at this time, the same was not true of Black American writers, particularly women. Jane Cholmeley, founder member of Silver Moon women's bookshop in Charing Cross Road in 1984, recalls the insularity of British publishing at that time, telling how Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, first published in 1969, was not issued in the UK until Virago's 1984 edition. Likewise, Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, first published in the USA in 1970, had no British edition until 1979. 'Things had caught up a bit by the time Morrison's *Beloved* was published on both sides of the Atlantic in 1987,' Cholmeley told me. 'When she came to London in 1988 to promote the book, Morrison was hugely welcomed at Silver Moon for a signing. It seems that Waterstones, Hatchards, and other big book retailers were not much interested, but we were!'

Book-selling as a radical enterprise emerged in the late 18th century, promoting the extension of the franchise, trade union membership, co-

operation and Chartism. Today's counterparts mix environmentalist polemics, treatises on sexual politics, Black and post-colonial writing, gay and lesbian fiction, anarchist and Marxist theory, veganism and animal rights and self-help manuals. At Housmans in King's Cross, home of Peace News and the early Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, Nik Górecki is bullish about the resurgence of the radical bookshop network. Black Lives Matter has made a real difference, he says, and the interest in the legacy of Empire (including the policing of black dissent across the world) has produced a flurry of titles in the past couple of years, as have controversies over trans rights. At Brick Lane Bookshop in east London, Denise Jones says Tik-Tok has generated a new generation of young readers and book-buyers, enthused by online video postings.

Times have changed for Gay's The Word too, according to Jim MacSweeney, who started work there in 1989. 'Since the film *Pride* (which featured the bookshop and told the story of the Lesbians and Gays Support the Miners group during the 1984 strike) and the gradual change in people's attitudes towards sexuality, people make special visits to the bookshop and take photos outside. Teens come in with their parents to buy books which was unthinkable back in the 90s.' Campaigning seems to come with the territory, but so do ambitious programmes of author events, book-signings and readings.

Reaching out goes further. In February this year, Gracie Cooper of Little Toller Books in Dorset started a scheme to send ten thousand back-packs filled with books, pencil cases and foodie treats – accompanied by cards written by West Country school children - to Romania, for children displaced by the war in Ukraine. The back-packs were filled by 250 volunteers over a single weekend in a disused factory and dispatched in five articulated lorries. Seventy-five thousand pounds was raised in the first few weeks, and donations eventually came to over one and a half million pounds. The scheme is now permanent.

Not all small, independent bookshops define themselves as radical, though both share much the same DNA. This year's Independent Bookshop of the Year Award went to Bookery in Crediton, Devon, *The Bookseller* trade journal commenting: 'Although there are different models here, from long-time family-run shops to a community-run not-for-profit, the common thread is constant innovation and unwavering support for local communities. It may be counterintuitive to say, but we just may be in the golden age of independent bookselling. They have met the challenges; indies are thriving and the number of shops is rising.'

As publishing becomes more corporate, the ‘indies’ have become the new talent-spotters, finding and promoting new publishers and new writers, and winning major awards. *Attrib. and Other Stories* by Eley Williams, from Influx Press, won the prestigious James Tait Black Award in 2018. Other Influx titles have been listed for the Dylan Thomas Prize, the Edge Hill Prize, the Jhalak Prize, and the Gordon Burn Prize. Influx’s founder, Gary Budden, stresses that independent bookshops have been key to their success: ‘Bookshops like Housmans and Burley Fisher in London, The Book Corner in Halifax, or No Alibis in Belfast, have consistently championed the work of the smaller publishers; they took a chance on us long before the corporate chains took any notice.’

The big bookselling chains with their ‘three for the price of two’ promotions remain risk-averse, counting units not titles. Ross Bradshaw at Nottingham’s Five Leaves Bookshop remembers how in 2017 a book rep told him there was no trade interest in *Why I Am No Longer Talking to White People About Race*, by Reni Eddo-Lodge, believing it doomed to oblivion. Bradshaw took ten copies, and ‘went on to sell hundreds’. In the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement, Eddo-Lodge’s book became the first by a Black British author to head the Nielsen UK Top 50 book sales chart, and was No 1 in a 2018 poll of the ‘Top Ten Books by Women that Changed the World’. At New Beacon, Michael La Rose says that ‘The resurgent 2020 Black Lives Movement with the murder of George Floyd translated into a flood of interest in books on the politics and history of Black struggle in Britain along with the literature.’

After reaching a low of just over 800 independent bookshops in 2016, growth has rebounded, with nearly 1100 trading at the end of 2021. Nik Górecki at the Alliance of Radical Booksellers is positive about the future, believing that independent bookshops are now as influential in stirring up political and literary life as they were in the 60s. Gone are the party-affiliated bookshops, stricter on what they didn’t like rather than what they did. Today’s ‘indies’ can’t afford to be sectarian or act as adjudicators in the culture wars. They are weather stations, alert to changing shifts and patterns in contemporary culture, trading locally but stocking the shelves from across the world, and also having a good time.

Ken’s most recent book is *No Matter How Many Skies Have Fallen: back to the land in wartime Britain*, which has already been reprinted by Little Toller Books. <https://www.littletoller.co.uk/shop/books/little-toller/no-matter-how-many-skies-have-fallen-by-ken-worpole/>

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This article was originally published in the *New Statesman* 22 November 2022, under the title ‘The radical bookshops shaping Britain’s literary culture’ Reprinted here by kind permission of Ken and the *New Statesman*.

# News items, old items, obits and odd bits

This time we bring you a more extensive collection of links to bookshop histories than we usually find for these Newsletters:

The stirring story of 121 Bookshop in Railton Road, Brixton, its predecessor Sabaar, and the London squatting and anarchist scene of the 70s:

<https://pasttenseblog.wordpress.com/2019/08/12/today-in-london-anarchist-history-1999-the-121-centre-evicted-brixton/>

(The whole website is full of treasures)

Brick Lane Bookshop and its 1970s ancestor THAP (Tower Hamlet Arts Project) <https://bricklanebookshop.org/history/>

History of Connolly Bookshop in Dublin <https://www.connollybooks.org/page/history>. Also this on YouTube, in which 'historian Donal Fallon sits down with Eugene McCartan of the Communist Party of Ireland to discuss the history of Connolly Books and look back on the centenary of communist activity in Ireland': [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_6RJQ7-3Mmk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_6RJQ7-3Mmk)

Article by Paul Bonnett who co-ran a bookshop called Solstice in Brighton – highly evocative for those of us who inhabited Brighton in the 70s. He says about half of the books they stocked were radical politics: <http://www.northlainehistory.me.uk/solstice-bookshop.html>

What it means to be a bookshop that is 'Independent' and 'Radical' and an answer to that perennial question for radical booksellers "What sort of books do you sell then?" Five Leaves Bookshop in Nottingham explains itself... <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aLFE7lrNxxE>



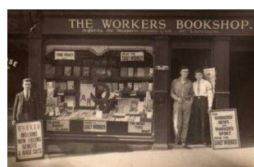
**Five Leaves Bookshop Presents**

**Changing the World, One Book at a Time. A short history of radical bookselling, with Ross Bradshaw**

Thursday 18 May, 7pm

£4 (Free to NTU Radical Print Summer School)

*Proceeds from this event will be donated to Nottingham Refugee Forum*



In this illustrated talk, Five Leaves founder and life-long radical bookseller Ross Bradshaw will dig deep into radical bookshop history in Nottingham and elsewhere, discussing what radical has meant to bookshops, and revisiting the highs and lows of this corner of the booktrade. These include the Communist Party book chains, the counterculture of the 1960s, police raids, seizures of lesbian and gay books by customs, attacks by fascists, huge international bookfairs and, sometimes, significant commercial success. He will also look at how outsiders have seen radical bookselling, which is almost as hilariously critical as we have sometimes described ourselves.

At a time when the radical booktrade is seeing significant expansion, the talk will end by discussing whether the label "radical" is still relevant when our views are shared by so much of the commercial trade.

**[Tickets at fiveleavesbookshop.co.uk/events](https://www.fiveleavesbookshop.co.uk/events)**

*In association with NTU Radical Print Summer School*

Five Leaves Bookshop 14a Long Row, Swann's Yard, Nottingham NG1 2DH | 0115 837 3097  
[www.fiveleavesbookshop.co.uk](http://www.fiveleavesbookshop.co.uk) | [bookshop@fiveleaves.co.uk](mailto:bookshop@fiveleaves.co.uk)

## Obituaries:

### **Judith Skinner**

We were saddened to hear of the death of Judith Skinner in 2022. Judith managed the Centerprise bookshop from 1993 to 1999. She joined at a time of financial crisis when grants for Centerprise in Hackney had been cut. Judith, who had previously worked at the co-operatively run feminist bookshop, Sisterwrite, and also at a Penguin bookshop, is credited with increasing the turnover of the bookshop, introducing computers and obtaining library orders.

This information is extracted from *Lime Green Mystery: an oral history of the Centerprise Co-operative* by Rosa Schling, On the Record, 2017. Available at [https://www.ahackneyautobiography.org.uk/uploads/The\\_Lime\\_Green\\_Mystery.pdf](https://www.ahackneyautobiography.org.uk/uploads/The_Lime_Green_Mystery.pdf)

We welcome other information about Judith's bookselling activity and the activities of others involved in radical bookselling.

### **Tom Wilson**

Tom, who worked at Mushroom Bookshop in Nottingham in the late 70s, died in January. He had previously worked in housing campaigns. At the bookshop he developed a range of postcards including the (in)famous "Help the Police - Beat Yourself Up".

### **Jackie Stevens**

Jackie, who worked at Wedge Co-operative bookshop and café – in Coventry – for most of its 20 years, died in October. We'll bring you an obituary in our next edition.

We'd be very grateful for any stories and recollections of people whose obituaries we've published – or whose passing we have failed to acknowledge.

# Review: Queer Print in Europe

Ross Bradshaw

Edited by Glyn Davis and Laura Guy, Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2022, £24.99 paperback

That the publisher of this book is Bloomsbury Visual Arts tells us something of what we might expect - lots of magazine covers, page illustrations and a design-led publication. Overall, a rather attractive, large format paperback.

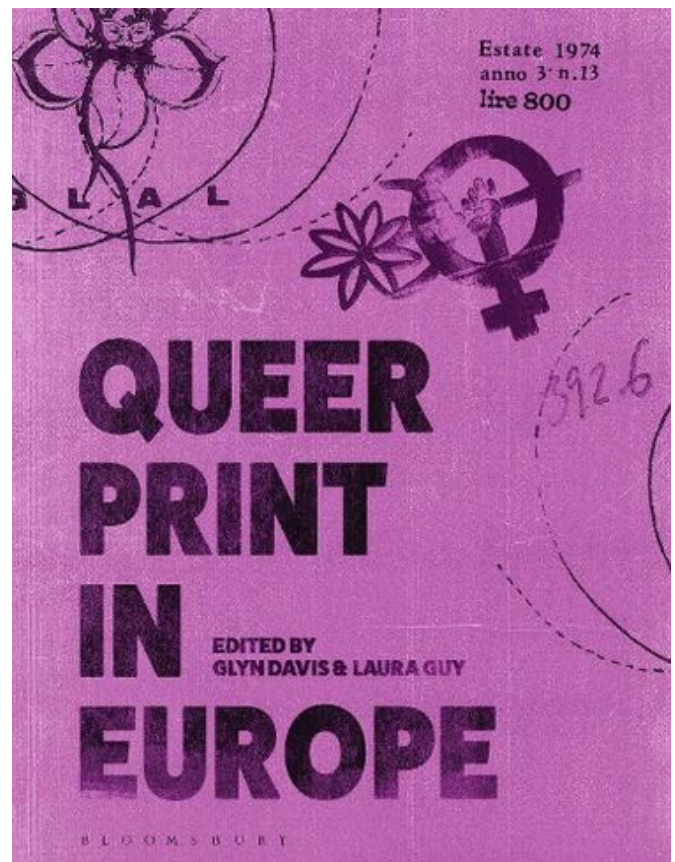
The title indicates the scope of the book and is particularly valuable because of the coverage of countries we might not think of when we talk of LGBT+ publications, Poland and Slovakia for example. The book does not attempt to cover everything and everywhere, comprising essays on publishing in particular countries, or strands of publishing within particular countries. Thus, for the UK, there is a long interview with Gail Lewis about material written by Black lesbians, a chapter on relevant reading for Trans lesbians in the 1970s, but no mention of *Gay Times* or the *Pink Paper* which were market leaders in lesbian and gay (well, mostly gay) magazine publishing in their day. Nor is there mention of Gay Men's Press, perhaps the best selling gay press ever stocked by radical bookshops in this country.

But that's fine, the book does not pretend to cover what it does not.

Most of the coverage is of small circulation magazines, some beautifully designed, like the Slovak *Aspekt* of the mid-90s, whereas *Lesbians Come Together* from 1972 looked mimeographed, a print technology some of those who used it might prefer to forget.

Several of the magazines came out of discontent with the feminist movement or feminist magazines - such as *Histoires d'Elles* which had one woman write in "I just want to bring up one topic: why such silence on homosexuality... Every month I hope to read about women whose joys and sorrows in life somewhat resemble my own, but nothing - complete silence." Others developed out of the political left, or, similarly, out of discontent at being ignored by the left.

The content of the magazines described was as varied as the print technology. Academic articles here, contact lists there and, in the case of *La*



*Pluma* in post-Franco Spain, a call for autonomy for homosexuals, but also “collaboration with other groups of socially marginalised people” and opposition to capitalism and the “commercial ghetto”. On the other hand Revolt Press in Sweden published *Tom of Finland* male erotica and fifteen niche interest magazines, some of which would not have appeared on the shelves of any bookseller reading this, for good reason.

And bookshops generally? Sadly missing, save for one chapter. There are traces, such as News from Nowhere publishing, in 1980, *Divided Sisterhood*, a rebuttal to Janice Raymond’s *The Transsexual Empire*. And an editor of the Dutch *Mietje* describes taking his journal to the communist bookshop in Amsterdam and being turned away by the owner, himself gay, because “... we don’t sell journals that discuss ‘bedroom’ issues, only political issues.”

But the last chapter, for those interested in radical bookselling history, is worth waiting for, a twenty page interview with Sigrid Nielson, Bob Orr and James Ley on Revisiting Lavender Menace. Lavender Menace - has there ever been a better bookshop name? - was the lesbian and gay bookshop in Edinburgh. The shop started off as a bookstall within the Gay Centre but got chucked out for being political. One of the criticisms was because the stall sold the card “The birth of a man who thinks he’s God isn’t such a rare event”, a quote from *Benefits* by Zoë Fairbairns (slightly misquoted in the book under review). I can claim a footnote in bookselling history here, being responsible for publishing the card at Mushroom Bookshop! But it was for the best as Lavender Menace opened in Forth Street, then a low rent area, making it the second radical bookshop in the street as the anti-nuclear Smiling Sun also lived there. And then later there was West & Wilde in Dundas Street.

The interview moves from the early days of the bookstall - Open Gaze to give its name - through to the afterlife of Lavender Menace in Ley’s play *Love Song to Lavender Menace*, in archiving LGBT life in Scotland, and the current iteration of pop-up stalls run by Sigrid and Bob, both now in their seventies.

*Queer Print in Europe* will interest anyone passionate about radical print history, but the excellent final chapter is catnip for those interested in radical bookshop history.

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(Ross Bradshaw worked at Mushroom Bookshop and now runs Five Leaves Bookshop, both in Nottingham)

# Producing an Archive of Grass Roots Books (1971–1990)

Maggie Walker, Rick Seccombe, Gay Jones, Fran Devine

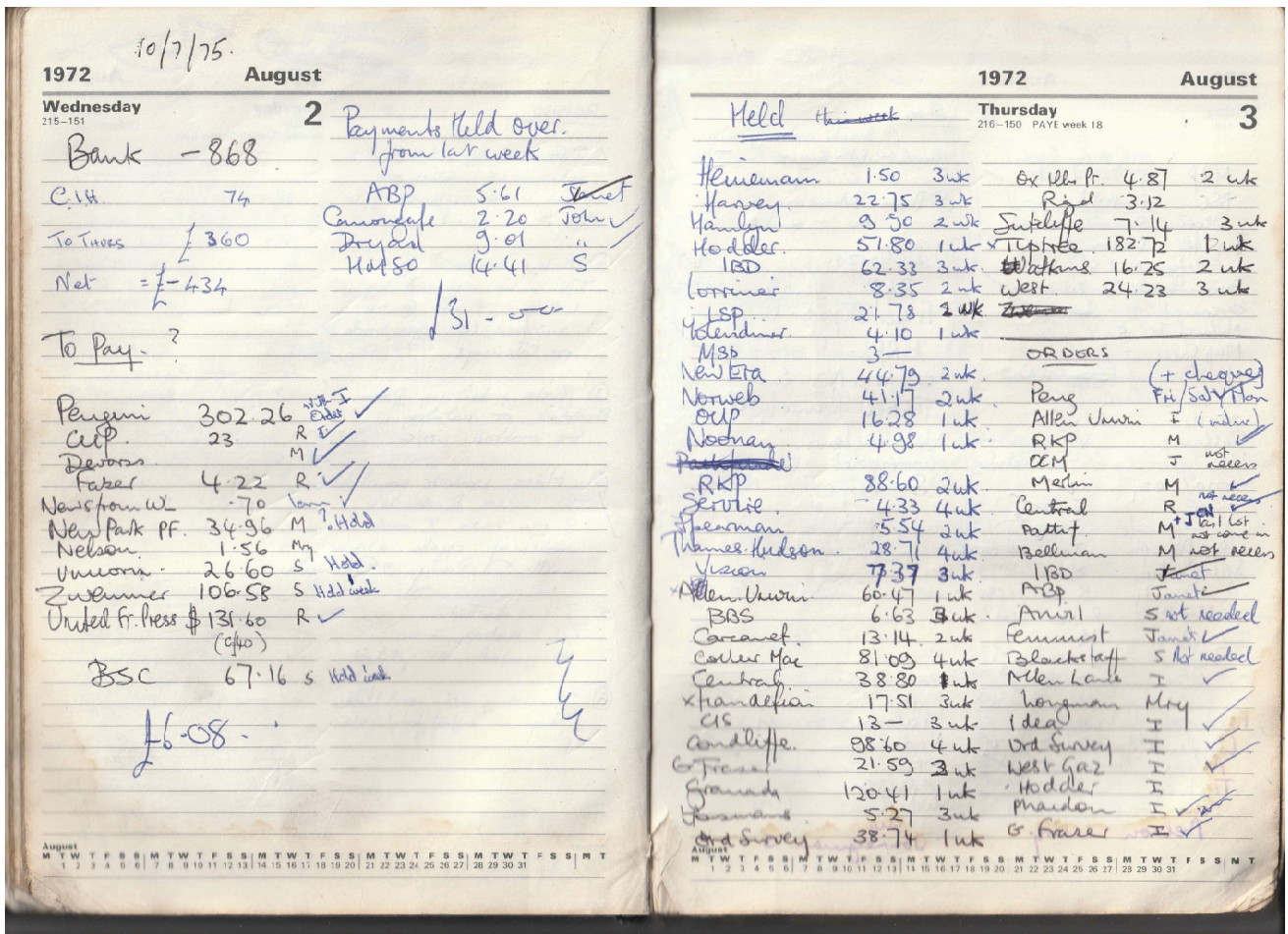
Grass Roots Books had been closed for nearly 30 years in 2019. Its 20-year history as both a hub for radical activity and making available a wide range of radical books in Manchester was available only in the memories of its workers and users. The conference held by the Radical Bookselling History Project in October 2019 provided the inspiration to create an archive for Grass Roots.

Rick Seccombe and Maggie Walker had each become involved in the organising group for the conference and other former Grass Roots Books workers including Fran Devine, Gay Jones, Jane McIver, Maggie Murdoch, Alison Page and Janet Slade attended and spoke of the Grass Roots Books that they remembered. Some of their memories are recorded in the report of the conference <https://www.leftontheshelfbooks.co.uk/pdf/radical-bookselling-conference-report.pdf> and the transcript of that conference which will be archived by the Radical Bookselling History Group.

An attempt to gather the history of Grass Roots and its successor Frontline Books had been made about 10 years previously. Fran Devine had initiated a meeting of those involved at the Working Class Movement Library (WCML) in Salford. We had an interesting discussion but were disappointed to find nobody available to record us. We planned a series of recorded meetings for people who were involved with the shop at different time periods. Rick Seccombe and Mike Don were later recorded talking about the early days of Grass Roots, but the WCML were reliant on volunteers and this wasn't followed up. Even more disappointingly when we asked WCML for access to that recording they apologetically admitted that they didn't have it, possibly because the recording hadn't worked! Our



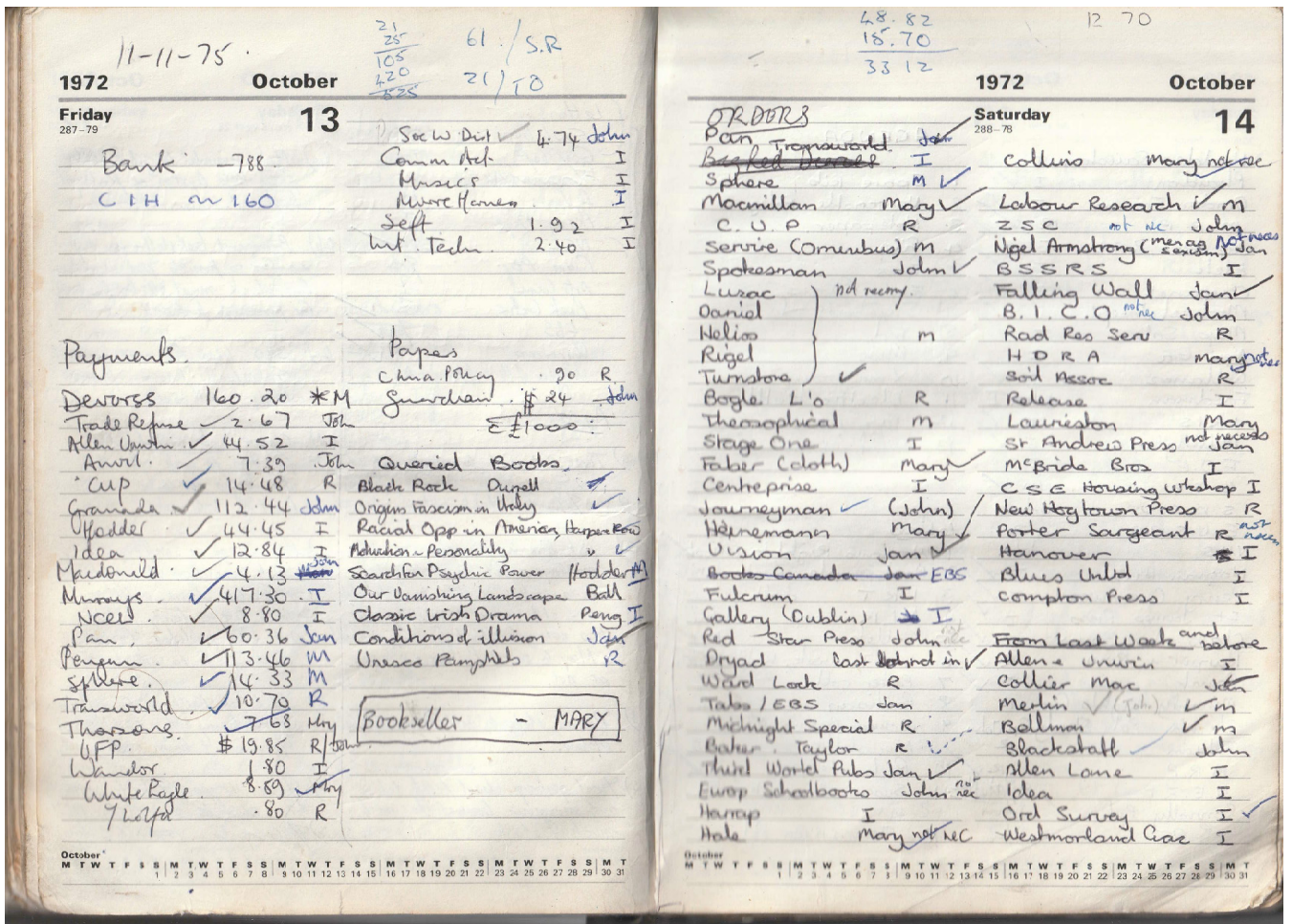




disappointment grew and the urgency of our project became obvious when we traced Mike (who had some notoriety for his alternative paper Mole Express) and found he had terminal cancer and, although willing, he wasn't able to do an interview with us before he died.

By the spring of 2020, four former workers, Fran, Gay, Maggie and Rick, were discussing how to progress. We met by video conference which meant an interested group could meet regularly regardless of our geographical separation. We considered holding recorded meetings of former staff on Zoom but worried that these would be unmanageable and unclear. Instead, we decided to trace former workers and ask them to individually either carry out an oral history interview with us or write down their memories. We spent some time developing a list of questions which we sent with the request. This had an excellent response. We had one recording and about 10 submissions by the spring of 2021. We also had a few items for the archive including the minute book from 1974-5 found in Rick's attic.

We now had the beginnings of an archive and set about contacting Manchester Local Archives (now known as Archives+ and based in Manchester's remodelled Central Library). We also came up with the idea of offering an article to the *North West Labour History Journal* (NWLHJ), an annual publication (that we used to sell) that accepts articles from amateur



historians. We were also aware that if we wanted to get a mention for Grass Roots on Wikipedia we needed references. The editor at NWLHJ turned out to be a former Grass Roots worker, Paula Moorhouse, and our proposal was welcomed.

To produce the article, we had more work to do. There were gaps in the history we had collected. We had had little contact and no response from people who had been involved at the time the shop closed through bankruptcy in 1990. We did have some material on this from the transcript of the radical bookselling conference attended by Neil Swannick and Alison Page. They had described the setting up of Frontline Books, a new co-operative that bought the stock and took over the lease from the liquidators. Rick had also been involved in establishing Frontline but we decided not to cover the history of Frontline in our work. We continued to try to contact people working at Grass Roots in its later years when it hit more intra-coop disputes and financial difficulties and when it closed. Some people felt scarred by the disputes of the time and didn't wish to contribute. Others had worked only a short time and were hard to trace. We've been pleased to be able to record interviews with some workers who worked near to and at the point that it closed. As there were parts of the recordings that were not approved for our archive, and as we have no audio editing skills, edited

transcripts that are approved will be placed in the archive.

We faced the challenge of collectively writing the article. We agreed a rough structure based on the timeline of the shop's 19 years and significant issues such as working co-operatively, addressing sexism and surviving attacks from the fascist group the National Front. We had a fairly free hand as the NWLHJ guidelines for contributors did little more than limit our word-length. We each wrote some sections and were able to use quotes from the written pieces other workers had provided.

We struggled to find photos. We had one of the exterior of 109 Oxford Road and Paula found one of the frontage of the bigger shop at 1 Newton Street. We had some snap-shots of the interior from around the time Gay was leaving to set up In Other Words in Plymouth. No digital photos in those days! We sought permission from the people appearing in these photos (including the relatives appearing as children) to use them in the Journal. The article was ready to be submitted in February 2022.

Our attention then returned to the archive. We decided that our next step was to collect memories from customers of the shop. This resulted in some more written pieces that drew attention to the wider role of the shop as a hub for radical activity and its importance for information on events and house-shares in a pre-internet world. We had regular customers who were famous at the time, such as the playwright Jim Allen, but they had passed away. We identified and traced a few people who used Grass Roots and who have since become famous. Val McDermid, crime novelist, responded and we were overjoyed to have a piece from her to include with the article and the archive alongside memories from other customers and supporters. The full article with Val's memories alongside those of Harry Rothman and Lizzie Gent is included in this issue of the *RBH Newsletter* with permission from the North West Labour History Society ([nwlh.org.uk](http://nwlh.org.uk)).

When we met with the Manchester Archives staff they were keen to put on a display in the library as well as to receive the archive. Our discussions led to an event held in November 2022 (undeterred by the train strike that day) in Central Library to launch our archive. A couple of the display



**Manchester IBRG**

The Irish in Britain Representation Group was set up in 1981 to foster a positive sense of identity for the Irish in this country and to give effective representation for our community at a national and local level. We are an independent, democratic and non-sectarian organisation with an equal opportunities policy respecting the rights of Irish people. We have branches in many parts of Britain.

Manchester IBRG is a very active branch and our activities have included:

- Supporting campaigns such as the Birmingham Six, Guildford Four, and Winchester Three.
- Initiating an annual Irish Film festival in conjunction with Cornerhouse showing films by and for the Irish including 'Hush-A-Bye-Baby', 'December Bride' and 'Behind The Mask'.
- Organising a speaking tour with the West Belfast Irish language group 'Glor na nGael'.
- Challenging anti-Irish racism in the media.
- Bringing to Manchester the liveliest and best of Irish culture including 'Gloucester Irish Theatre Group', 'Hairy Marys' and 'Jacket Potatoes'.

We meet every second Tuesday evening of the month at St Brendan's Irish Centre, City Road, Manchester 15.

Membership is open to every person who defines her or himself as Irish, whether born in Britain or Ireland.

For more information write to Manchester IBRG, Frontline Books, 1 Newton Street, Manchester M1 1HW.

**We may not have all the answers...**



**But at least we can help with the questions.**

**Manchester's New Radical Bookshop**



1 Newton Street, Piccadilly, M1 1HW  
Tel: 061-236 1101 Fax: 061-236 1103  
**OPEN MON-FRI 10-6, SAT 9-6**

SUPPORTED BY:  
North West Arts  
Manchester City Council

cabinets were set up with copies of pamphlets, badges, mugs and books typical of those we sold that we had gathered. These were displayed for 3 months. We included the story of the demeaning images that publishers put on books in those days. We had photos of the original cover of Susie Orbach's best-selling *Fat is a Feminist Issue*, a slim naked woman rising out of a pile of fat. Alongside it we showed the alternative cover that feminists in the book trade had produced and stickers that were used on that and other objectionable covers.

The event was lively. Manchester Histories ([www.manchesterhistories.co.uk/news-list/grass-roots-books](http://www.manchesterhistories.co.uk/news-list/grass-roots-books)) helped to publicise it and the WCML and NWLHJ had stalls. Attendees brought items for the archive or to share and told of Grass Roots Books' importance to them and their activism.

What now? We are continuing to collect memories from ex-workers. We have more confidence in the importance of collecting their memories. Several attended our event but have yet to contribute. Customers and users are important too and we were pleased that the event inspired Bernadette Hyland to write on her blog about the role of Grass Roots Books and its successor in Manchester Frontline Books as support for local organisations such as the Irish in Britain Representation Group and the Troops Out Movement (<https://lipsticksocialist.wordpress.com> posted on Nov 20th 2022). Local historian Michael Herbert (<https://redflagwalks.wordpress.com>) has helped find additional references.

It has been helpful that others have now read the article. Some can clarify things that were hazy on our memory. For instance Alison Read formerly of PDC (Publications Distribution Co-op) and Sheba Feminist Publishers directed us to the publication *Rolling Our Own: Women as Printers, Publishers and Distributors* by Eileen Cadman, Gail Chester and Agnes Pivot published by the Minority Press Group in 1981. This records that it was a Women in Bookselling conference held in Manchester that brought women together to protest against the *Fat is a Feminist Issue* cover (p25). Alison writes that "I loved the fact that it came out of the conference and that 3 of us - Sue who ran the women's section at Compendium, Denise who worked at Calverts printers and me as a distributor - put it together and got it out, through PDC of course." In the same publication Grass Roots Books' activity as a publisher is described (pp44-45).

We are working with the Manchester Archives staff on the deposit and display of the Grass Roots archive. They would particularly like more photos and audio clips to put in their open access digital displays. They

have material on anti-deportation campaigns, the local women's movement, Reclaim the Night, Greenham and community activism and want Grass Roots to be visible among these. We would also like Grass Roots Books 1971 – 1990 to appear on Wikipedia, but that may be a challenge. We welcome any references that readers can draw to our attention. We can be contacted at [grbhistory@gmail.com](mailto:grbhistory@gmail.com). We hope this record of our efforts will help others who are working on gathering memories and archives of other radical bookshops of the 1970s and 80s.

Working Class Movement Library <https://www.wcml.org.uk>

North West Labour History Society <http://nwlh.org.uk> The article on Grass Roots Books which is reprinted in this issue appears in Issue 47 of the *NWLH Journal* (pp6-14). This is available to buy at the WCML for £7.95 or by mail order from the NWLH website (£11 paid by Paypal). Issue 47 also includes "Getting Our Hands Dirty - Moss Side Community Press in the 1970s" by Jo Somerset (pp19 - 27), "News from Nowhere" by Jill Harris and Paula Moorhouse (pp16-18) and "Single Step Lancaster" (p15).

# Grass Roots Books 1971–1990

By Maggie Walker, Gay Jones, Fran Devine and Rick Seccombe

Reprinted from *NW Labour History Journal* Issue 47 (pp 6–14)  
with kind permission of the editors

I'm Paula Moorhouse, the current editor of *North West History*, the annual journal of North West Labour History Society. I'm particularly pleased to have this opportunity to share this article from the most recent issue as I worked at Grass Roots Books in the early eighties, formative years indeed. Maggie, Rick, Gay and Fran have done an excellent job of drawing together the history of the shop, really highlighting what it meant to the people who used it. All power to those involved in the book trade today, as vital now as in the days of GRB.

The North West Labour History Society was formed in 1973 to promote greater knowledge of the rich labour history from the North West of England, the stories of trade unionists, community activists and working class radicals who claimed, in the words of the great Irish Republican and socialist, James Connolly, "we only want the earth."

Later this year the Society will celebrate its Golden Jubilee. We're planning an event in Manchester Central Library on 11th November and an accompanying exhibition at the Working Class Movement Library, everyone welcome!

You will find more information about the work of the society - including how to join, write for the journal, buy the current issue or get back issues on the website: [www.nwlh.org.uk](http://www.nwlh.org.uk)

Contact us at [info@nwlh.org.uk](mailto:info@nwlh.org.uk) with any questions (including how bookshops can stock the journal).

## Introduction

Grass Roots Books was Manchester's radical bookshop from 1971 to 1990, and became, by the mid 1970s, the largest outside London. Like other similar shops in cities across the UK, it served a broad audience of activists, and people whose interests were not served by the mainstream bookshops. Dominant booksellers in Manchester in the 1970s were Haigh & Hochland,

a University bookshop, Sherratt and Hughes, Willshaws and the national chain of newsagents and booksellers WH Smith (WHS). The stock policy at WHS, which refused to sell titles from new feminist publishers Virago for a period, illustrates why radical bookshops were necessary.<sup>1</sup> Thousands of customers used Grass Roots Books to obtain radical literature during its 19 years existence.

This article has been written and researched by a group of former workers from Grass Roots Books, inspired by a national conference on the history of the 1970s-1990s radical book-trade, held in Manchester in October 2019.<sup>2</sup> The group aims to gather the history of Grass Roots Books, make it available and ensure that relevant material is archived locally. Former workers have

been traced and encouraged to record their memories of their time at the shop. This material, with contributions from former customers, has been used to produce this article.

Left-wing bookstalls and bookshops run by the political parties of the traditional Left often didn't provide for the wide radical interests of the 1970s. Independent radical or alternative bookshops developed and supported each other through a Federation of Alternative Booksellers.<sup>3</sup> Many larger shops were worker co-operatives, an egalitarian option promoted by the Industrial Common Ownership Movement<sup>4</sup> (ICOM) which was established in 1971. Through the ICOM model rules, adopted by Grass Roots in 1976, staff controlled the business, no profit went to shareholders and members' financial liability was limited to £1.00 (although personal guarantees for the lease or overdraft were sometimes required).



## Early History

Grass Roots Books first opened in 1971 on Upper Brook Street. In 1973 it relocated to 100 Oxford Road, a short-life community use building nearer to the University. In the spring of 1974, management of the shop was passed to a small collective who ran it from a basement room at 178 Oxford Road (Waterloo Place). This building belonged to Manchester University and was used by a Third World shop (Shanti) and other community activities.

After a year in the basement room, the collective of mostly male volunteers with one paid worker leased a shop at street level at 109 Oxford Road (then next door to On the Eighth Day wholefood shop).<sup>5</sup> This move enabled the shop to expand its stock considerably, as the new premises had a shopfront, about 1,500 square feet of shop space, and benefitted from 'passing trade'. It was near Manchester Polytechnic (now part of Manchester Metropolitan University) and, while further from Manchester University, was closer to the city centre and on a main road. Opening on 1st March 1975, the move brought a dramatic transformation in the shop's fortunes, with average weekday sales reaching £100 (over £2,000 at 2021 prices).

By the end of 1975, Grass Roots stocked many thousands of book and pamphlet titles, and more than 100 magazines. Its shelves contained feminist, gay and lesbian publications, books by Black and African writers, Marxist and Maoist texts, books on broader socialist themes, anarchism, peace and anti-racism, what was then known as 'Third World' politics and history, Eastern philosophies, hallucinogenic experiences, homeopathy and vegetarianism. As well as books, the stock included small pamphlets, magazines, posters and badges. There was general fiction and fiction from

# grass roots

## The Best in the North West lists



We've regularly been asked for a list of the titles that we carry. So as time permits we're starting to prepare them.

**AVAILABLE NOW :** Womens Liberation/ Gay Liberation/ Sexpol list.

Self-sufficiency list.

**COMING SOON :** POLITICS including anarchism.

## on the road

This is the time of year to think about summer holidays and summer travelling.

We have a comprehensive MAPS & TRAVEL section for: Britain/Ireland/Europe/The Ends of The Earth.



## REMAINDERS

OUR LIST OF REMAINDERS (THE NEW IN THING FOLK, IF YOU READ THE HEAVY SUNDAY PAPERS) IS STILL GROWING. WE CAN ONLY LIST A FEW OF OUR INCREDIBLE BARGAINS.

BEST OF PRIVATE EYE no.2	hardback 40p
MEROUAC/Ann Charters	90p
PRIMAL REVOLUTION/Janov	hardback £1
MY PEOPLE SHALL LIVE	
/Leila Khaled	hardback 95p
IN THE FIST OF THE REVOLUTION	
/Yglesias	hardback £1.25
AGE OF PERMANENT REVOLUTION	
/Trotsky	30p

### \*REMAINDERED PAPERBACKS ON ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES\*

POPULATION BOMB/Ehrlich; HOW TO BE A SURVIVOR/Ehrlich; DISECONOMICS OF GROWTH/Hodson; ENVIRONMENTAL HANDBOOK; CONSUMERS GUIDE TO THE PROTECTION OF THE ENVIRONMENT/Hoffman all 15p; CHANGING DIRECTIONS 25p.

GRASS ROOTS BOOKSHOP, 109 Oxford Road, Manchester M1 7DU. Tel 273 6541.





marginalised Black, gay or women authors, and children's books that reflected these same themes. Grass Roots stocked many titles in the Heinemann African Writers Series, such as *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe (now a Penguin Modern Classic), and the Penguin African Library series, including titles on African politics. Through a contact with Ruth First<sup>6</sup>, the shop sent books to the University of Mozambique in Maputo.

Numerous suppliers were needed to provide the varied stock. On an average week more than 50 orders would be sent off by post, hand-written in order books with carbon paper for copies. Mass-market paperbacks could be ordered from a couple of wholesalers, but most books and all pamphlets had to be sourced direct from their individual publisher. One pamphlet was *How the West Indian Child is Made Educationally Subnormal in the British School System* by Grenadian activist and London teacher Bernard Coard which identified the pervasive bias against Black children in the education system.<sup>7</sup> Another was Lisa Saffron's *Getting Pregnant Our Own Way: A guide to alternative insemination*<sup>8</sup> which helped lesbians and single women to have a child.<sup>9</sup>

US imports were a speciality. Orders were written out on airmail paper and posted to US suppliers after arranging an account. Shipping from the US averaged 6 weeks so orders were placed 2

## Memories of Grass Roots Books

The first time I visited Grass Roots it was housed in a basement of a house in the then rundown Waterloo Terrace which was across Oxford Road opposite my Manchester University department, Liberal Studies in Science, in the now demolished Maths Tower. That would be in the early 1970s when the political scene was both more vibrant and different from today's. The political contents of the shop were most important to me, and I very much welcomed its existence. At that time the alternative technology and green movement and feminist movement were beginning to take-off; left wing political debates were then dominated by various communist, Trotskyist and anarchist groups, and the student movement fall-out from 1968. The Soviet Union still existed, fighting a cold war with the US; in the contested space between them the anti-colonial struggles were successfully creating new Third World states. A colourful alternative press had emerged reflecting the views of these groups. As far as I could see Grass Roots, as it grew, seemed to stock most of them, everything from local productions like Mole Express, to international magazines reporting the anti-colonial struggles in the Third world, as well as theoretical magazines like New Left Review. I also appreciated their book sections which often carried stock not found elsewhere, and last but not least the shop acted as a distribution hub to which folk brought their pamphlets and leaflets.

Harry Rothman

months ahead. Grass Roots sold hundreds of copies of the US edition of the now classic women's health "bible" *Our Bodies Ourselves* before the publication of the UK edition.<sup>10</sup> Other major imports were works of Marx and Lenin in English imported from the Foreign Languages Press in China. These were very plain, but very much cheaper than other editions available in the UK. Posters and children's books from China and Mao's "Little Red Book" were also very cheap.



*Newton Street*

Some books ordered from the USA didn't arrive. Customs and Excise had extensive powers to seize titles that they considered offensive. Titles such as the *Joy of Gay Sex* and *Joy of Lesbian Sex* (on the lines of the best-seller *Joy of Sex* by Alex Comfort published in 1972) could be confiscated with little recourse available. Titles on psychedelic drugs were also seized, or at least that's what we had to assume when such titles were missing from a delivery. In 1984 the manager of Gay's the Word bookshop and colleagues were prosecuted for stocking supposedly obscene titles (many main-stream and literary) and a major campaign raised funds for the defence. The outdated Obscene Publications Act also gave the police power to raid shops for "obscene material" and Grass Roots had titles from the "drugs" section seized by the police on occasion.

During the years 1976-1978, Grass Roots stocked a selection of material that was critical of the dictatorial Shah of Iran, written in Farsi, the Iranian language. Many Iranian purchasers asked for their books to be bagged, fearful that there were SAVAK<sup>11</sup> agents operating in Manchester.

Another speciality at Grass Roots from 1975 were "remaindered" books. These were genuine publishers' overstocks such as hardbacks after the paperback had been published and allowed customers to buy feminist classics, vegetarian recipe books and art books, for example, at reduced prices.

Stock control was done entirely manually. Each title was written on stock control cards with staff checking books on the shelves at frequent intervals to inform decisions about re-ordering for their subject area. A notebook by the till recorded titles that were selling well for prompt re-ordering. All the accounting was done by collective members manually on ledger paper.

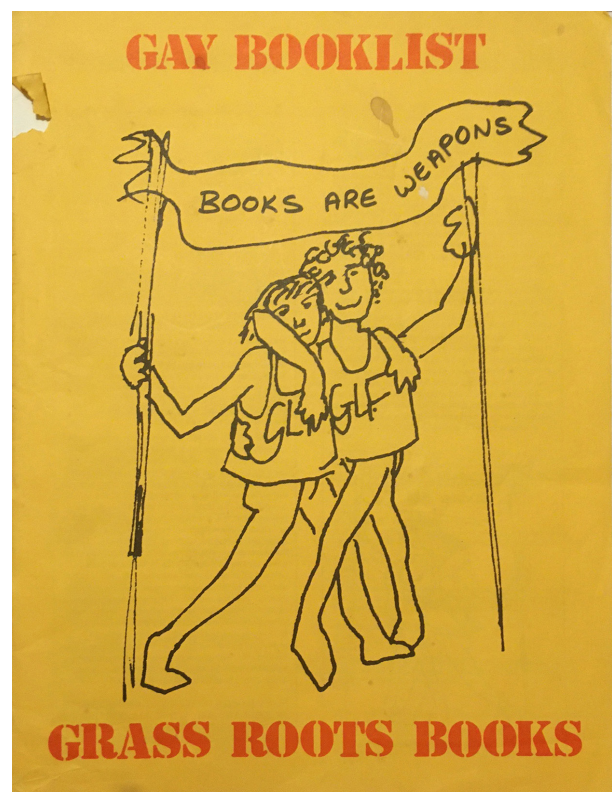
Because the shop was undercapitalised, payments to suppliers were made at the maximum credit period. Having a wide range of suppliers, rather than 2 or 3 wholesalers, was an advantage, as it gave flexibility in keeping accounts open within each supplier credit period. On occasion a particular supplier would not allow re-orders until the shop cleared overdue invoices. Staff became skilled in keeping supplier accounts open and not extending a particular supplier's credit period too often, which would have risked that credit facility. The disadvantage in having numerous suppliers was the extra time spent on accounting and payments.

Sale or Return arrangements with publishers helped cashflow when they were available. Sales of magazines, papers and pamphlets brought in by local activists would be paid for when they delivered the next issue.

### Rapid expansion and move to the City Centre

What had seemed an enormous space at the start of 1975 was bursting at the seams by 1976 and larger premises, ideally in the city centre, was sought. In the meantime, all the ground floor space was utilised for stock display by renting an upstairs office. In early 1977 Grass Roots opened a new shop at 1 Newton Street, a basement premises with a shopfront easily seen by pedestrians going from Piccadilly Station to the city centre. The Oxford Road shop also continued trading for 2.5 years, and the number of workers in the co-op grew.

One worker recalls: *"There were one or two blips in the early days at Newton Street when finances were stretched a bit too far, and some of us needed to be laid off. Those with higher education qualifications could sign on at the Job Centre on a 'professional register' and were less likely to be harassed about finding a new job. When it was necessary some members duly 'left', signed on for a short while and when finances picked*



*up again, were re-employed, having carried on working throughout anyway. There was little difference between our low wages and “the dole” in those days.”*

Another worker who joined in 1979 when there were about 12 members of the co-op describes the shop: *Physically, the Newton Street shop was big, which surprised a lot of people. The frontage was tiny, on a busy corner of Piccadilly, but the shop opened out down a flight of stairs into a big cellar space. The stairwell walls provided free noticeboard space for campaigns, events, meetings, demos etc, as well as shop publicity space. As a basement in an old Victorian building, it always had issues with water running down the walls, damp and smells from the drains. Mostly this was hidden from the public shop area, but the offices, toilets and unpacking areas were a bit grim sometimes. There was no lift, so people who couldn't manage the stairs were effectively excluded from the shop. We should have found a way to do this - the issue was raised from time to time, and research done, but it was always too expensive, and we never managed to find any grant money.*

### **Gender and collective working**

As the collective grew, more women were recruited, mainly from a particular Women's Liberation consciousness raising group. These women had high expectations of collective and open working relationships. As a worker co-operative each worker was theoretically equal, but imbalances in knowledge upset that ideal. Issues were discussed at a weekly meeting outside of shop hours, with an open agenda and members taking turns to record the minutes, and they were intended to share information including financial issues and stock control.

Relationships were generally friendly, at least on a superficial level, but complicated by the fact that a number of staff were involved in inter-personal relationships with each other. Surprisingly, this didn't derail the functioning of the collective as much as it might have done. Gender differences did arise. Most of the men were unaccustomed to confronting difficult personal dynamics openly, so the women came to feel that they provided most of the emotional energy for the collective.

Skill-sharing was also difficult to resolve. The process of skill-sharing was haphazard, dependent on individual inclination. New members of staff learnt as they went along - they were given subject areas to look after and reps to meet and buy from. Most women workers, especially those without middle class backgrounds

### **Memories of Grass Roots Books**

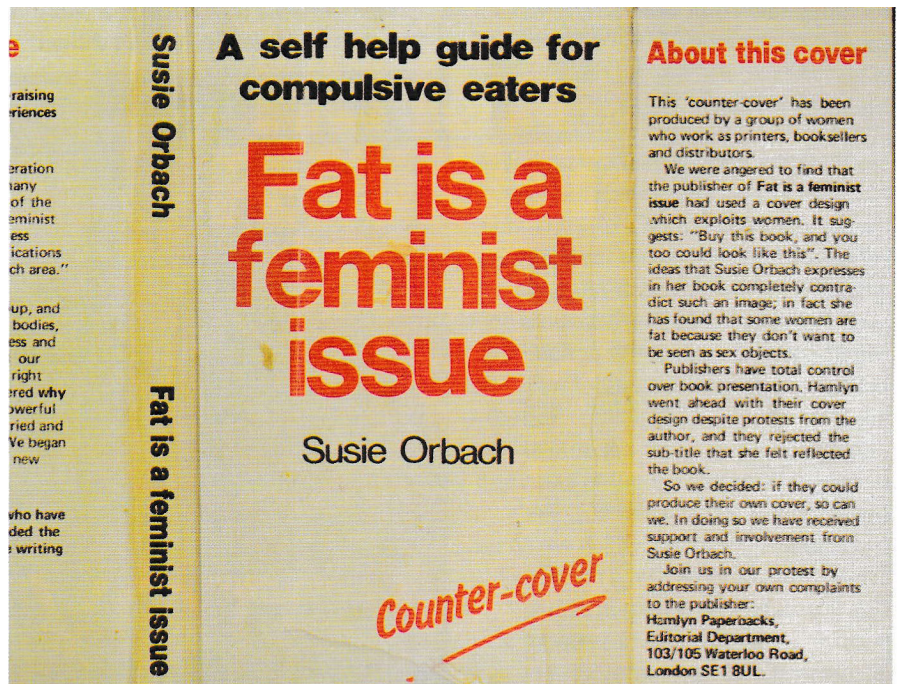
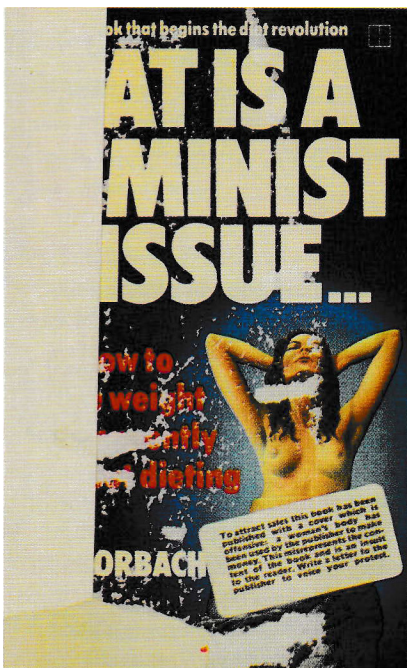
When I first came to Manchester in 1980 I quickly realised that here was a vibrant radical city where the opportunities to find out more about alternative life choices were infinitely more varied than in rural Dorset.

Grass Roots Bookshop was very much a part of this, and played an important role in my coming-out process during the following 12 months. Once I discovered the gay centre and Lesbian Link phoneline a whole new world opened up; one of the first things I learned at the Tuesday night support group that Lesbian Link ran was the existence of the radical bookshop where a cornucopia of books, newsletters, information and support was available.

Over the next decade I got to know members of the collective who have remained lifelong friends, and enjoyed many a brilliant author event and book launch. Grass Roots was a key outlet for selling the Manchester Women's Liberation Newsletter that I was involved with producing, and through the bookshop I got a job working for Scottish & Northern Book Distribution Co-op one summer.

A bookshelf full of black and white striped Women's Press and green Virago books, LPs, numerous badges and some very funny postcards, all attest to the deep affection and love I still hold for Grass Roots.

Lizzie Gent



or higher education, were intimidated by the expectations and lack of supportive training. In the late 70s the women started their own, informal shop evenings together, and wrote a statement about how they felt and their demands – for more structured skill-sharing and greater equality within the shop. The men were deeply shocked, some hostile – two decided to leave – and everyone found it very upsetting. The aftermath/repercussions took a long while to settle, but the statement did achieve its stated aims – a real attempt was made to structure some skill-sharing, and the women moved into more powerful roles within the mixed collective. Few workers had children and those who had, both female and male, felt that there was little support and understanding of their childcare responsibilities. Maternity leave was accommodated but this was unpaid.

Notably in the late 70s, there was an upsurge in discussion and campaigning around rape and domestic violence. Badges with the Susan Brownmiller quotation 'Every Man is a Potential Rapist' caused major arguments in the collective, as did the briefly displayed (in)famous Pen Dalton poster 'Free Castration on Demand'. As time went on, women formed the majority of the staff, and, later still, all collective members. While gender equality issues subsided, others came to the fore – of race, class and sexuality. Balancing the shop's commercial pressures with a feminist political position on what to stock and keeping some sections of the shop for women only were frequent points of tension.

### The stock and issues

By 1979 Grass Roots Books was the largest radical bookshop outside London, offering a platform to a new breed of radical publishers – Pluto,

*Left, the publishers inappropriate cover of Fat is a Feminist Issue and, right, the alternative cover which was used at Grass Roots*



Ian Canham with niece,  
Vicky

Verso, Virago, Women’s Press, Sheba, Central Books and many others. New radical titles were identified at radical book-fairs in London. As well as selling in the shop, staff ran bookstalls at conferences, public lectures, the annual Women’s Liberation conferences and other events. “We were regularly criticised by some of the more purist attendees for exploiting them by actually selling the books and making money.....one of the hazards of Left politics in those days.” says one former worker.

Another worker comments that: “Grass Roots did a roaring trade in badges and cards, which even someone on a very limited income could afford. There were Nuclear Power No Thanks badges in about 30 languages, and an excellent range of Leeds Postcards, which were political and witty. There was a case of feminist silver jewelry and a collection of records from Women’s Revolution Per Minute (WRPM) featuring American musicians such as Sweet Honey in the Rock and Cris Williamson. There was always music playing on the record player at the till, which whoever was on till duty controlled.” And another remembers: “We sold badges saying ‘Help the Police: beat yourself up’, which we sold by the dozens to police from the station up the road.”

Grass Roots produced booklists to enable stock to be sold by mail order.<sup>12</sup> A specialism was Community Information (CI) which included books on legal rights for women, gay people and immigrants, and on welfare benefits. These were published by local groups (often printed by Moss Side Press – later Amazon Press) and the national Child Poverty Action Group and National Council for Civil Liberties (NCCL). The community information

## Memories of Grass Roots Books

I spent the 1980s working in the Manchester newsroom of a national Sunday tabloid. It was not the natural environment of a lesbian feminist. I laboured under the illusion that if only enough people with a subversive turn of mind did jobs like this, we could change the world. Sadly, as Murdoch and Maxwell laid waste to my ideals, it turned out I was on the wrong side of history on that one.

I tried to balance the often frustrating and sometimes repugnant work I had to do with my choices of reading material. I was working towards being a writer of fiction and I understood that the best way to learn to write was to read the work of people who did it better than I was capable of.

But in mainstream bookshops, it wasn't always easy to find books that reflected the lives I felt in sympathy with. Sometimes there would be a couple of 'Lesbian & Gay' shelves tucked away in a corner, mostly filled with depressing books about AIDS and oppression. Mostly, there was nothing.

And then I had my oasis moment. No, I'm not talking about the Gallagher brothers. I'm talking about Grassroots. Shelves crammed with enough choice to make me salivate.

The first time I tentatively wandered in, I got some very strange looks. I didn't fit in at all. I would have been wearing my reporter's Burberry mac over (gasp) a dress. (The editor didn't like women in trousers; I was once the subject of a complaint from the man who employed the Yorkshire Ripper that I'd turned up to interview him on a snowy January day in trousers. No respect...) But I didn't care about the skeptically raised eyebrows that day. I walked out with a bulging carrier bag of books. I'd found the motherlode.

I spent a lot of lunch hours in Grass Roots rather than in the pub with my colleagues. Thanks to those shelves, I encountered the challenging science fiction of Marge Piercy and Joanna Russ; the wonderful crime novels of Barbara Wilson, Katherine V Forrest, Marcia Muller, Sarah Dreher and Mary Wings; indie publishers like Pluto Press, Virago, and the black and white spines of the Women's Press, who all promised interest. Sometimes authors did events there – Mary Wings once ended up in our spare room after one such evening.

There were magazines, pamphlets and other small publications that offered radical perspectives. I thought a lot of them were, frankly, a waste of paper, but among them lurked occasional provocations that made me reconsider my positions.

The shelves groaned with food for the soul. I look back from the vantage point of a successful literary career, and I know how much I owe to those writers who gave me permission to speak with my own voice. Many of them came to me through Grass Roots; without that one shop, I don't know how long it would have taken them to reach me. So thanks, Grassroots. You have been one of my significant foremothers.

Val McDermid

booklist was very popular with library services seeking this information to make their service more relevant to local communities and the resulting library supply service made a valuable contribution to turnover.

Grass Roots also did a bit of publishing itself. *The Law and Sexuality* was one of the good sellers on the CI list and a first book by local cartoonist Fanny Tribble was another success.

Radical bookshops affected the publishing world in other ways. Grass Roots and others campaigned to change the cover of Susie Orbach's first bestseller, *Fat is a Feminist Issue*. A mass market publisher had produced it with a shockingly inappropriate image of a thin glamorous woman emerging from layers of fat. Women from Sisterwrite in London produced

an alternative cover which was used at Grass Roots and other radical shops. When the book was reprinted, the publisher gave in and used a cover that was almost an exact copy of the guerrilla wrapper.

Author events and book-signings were a very occasional feature of Grass Roots in the 70s, with local authors sympathetic to the shop such as John Cooper Clarke. Later in the 1980s the collective was involved in organising a hugely successful event with Maya Angelou at the Free Trade Hall; hosting 4 Black Women Poets including a young Jackie Kay; a Jewish feminist evening; and welcoming the Lesbian Nuns behind the influential book *Lesbian Nuns: Breaking the Silence*, among others.

### **Fascist Attacks**

With its reputation as a centre of Left politics, Grass Roots was a natural target for the resurgent National Front of the 70s. Generally, there was no physical violence, although there was a firebomb threat on one occasion, and the front door locks were regularly superglued.

One worker writes: *“For a few years we learned to expect regular incursions into the Newton Street premises, usually on a Saturday afternoon, after they’d imbibed some courage at a local pub, and would then come down the stairs, shout abuse, turn over a few stands, sweep a few books off tables and then make a hasty exit”*.

But regular attacks by the NF caused immense stress, and ongoing discussions about how best to respond to them. Hours were spent in agonised debate about effective tactics, with considerable disagreement between the staff. One issue in particular which recurred was whether or not to sell copies of the anti-fascist magazine *Searchlight* to known members of the NF – some staff members refused to sell it if they were on the till at the time, which provoked threats and abuse but actually no further reaction. Others took the line that ‘free speech’ had to be defended, however much we disliked selling the magazine to fascists. In the end the fraught discussions came to no conclusion and individual staff took their own decisions.

The main concern was to avoid confrontation; NF members came into the shop to cause trouble when there were other customers in the shop too, and their safety had to be paramount. Not all of them would have been aware of the political dimensions of these attacks, though many were supportive of the staff. Over time, a tactic evolved of having the women



staff doing front of house duties when the NF came in, and the men leaving the shop floor. The Front barely noticed women – they were very much second-class citizens and ignorable in the 70s – and were mainly interested in scrapping with other street-fighting men like themselves. Without any worthy opponents in sight, they would eventually leave unsatisfied.

Another worker recalls: *“July 1978 seems to have been a particularly bad time for fascist activity – they came in to harass and cause trouble on ten consecutive days.”*

There was one memorable incident, on a Saturday in December 1979. Some local socialists had given prior warning of an attack by the NF, and requested that they be in the shop at the time to fight the fascists and ‘teach them a lesson’. Faced with the prospect of a physical fight on the shopfloor during the one of the busiest shopping days of the year, the shop staff were adamant that this couldn’t be allowed for one moment – though without much hope that the attack wouldn’t happen anyway. The NF arrived as expected, the women took over the shop floor as usual, and after the usual overturning of bookstands and shouting of abuse (one customer at least was hit on the head by a hurled book), the fascists were leaving when the socialists arrived and a fight ensued at the bottom of the stairs. One of the NF members was left bleeding copiously from a head wound, and, with a friend who bravely stayed to look after him, was taken to the back of the shop, clearly terrified, patched up and given hot tea while an ambulance was called.

The number of attacks declined after this incident. There was considerable discussion about whether or not the violence had warned them off; some staff felt that was most likely, despite disliking what had happened. Others, who had ties with the peace movement and a belief in non-violence as a tactic, were less convinced; the National Front was losing support at that time anyway.

On the whole, the non-confrontational tactics worked, and the shop was fortunate not to suffer more violent attacks than it did. Other bookshops suffered genuinely shocking violence; Housmans Bookshop in London received a firebomb, probably meant for the Peace News office upstairs, and one staff member was quite badly burned. Many others suffered broken windows, physical violence and arson attacks.

### **Grass Roots Closes**

Grass Roots folded in the summer of 1990. It could not pay its creditors without significant capital injection which it was unable to access. The

financial situation had not been easy for several years. The complexities of deciding what it was appropriate to stock in a radical and feminist bookshop became more intense. Workers describe trying to ascertain the position regarding the Chinese imports after Tiananmen Square in 1989. A principled decision to stop stocking items identified as sado-masochistic led to antagonistic coverage in *Gay Life* magazine. Sales declined when, in the late 80s, Mind-Body-Spirit books were considered unsuitable to the political perspective of the shop.

By the late 1980s most of the long-term workers had left to pursue other careers and a number of new workers had been recruited over a short period of time. One worker who was recruited in this period described it as “*almost a completely new collective*”. This created problems of continuity where business skills that had been accumulated over many years were not passed on to new workers.

Workers at that time describe how the stresses of running a business affected the collective “*there were a lot of arguments, lots of issues around mental health and how to sustain people who are off sick for six months and wanting you to wait to make decisions until they returned*”. The total staff team was never more than six people. On the other hand, a worker writes about the welcome she received when starting work after responding to an advert in *Spare Rib* magazine for collective members. Grass Roots was not alone in being defeated by being under capitalised, rising rents and the stocking policies of other bookshops now including feminist and other “*alternative*” material. Titles that had been only available as US imports were now being published by mainstream British publishers.

Grass Roots was succeeded by Frontline Books, another co-operative, who carried on its role in supplying radical books and

*Fran Devine with daughter, Helen*



magazines and hosting radical authors in Manchester for another 10 years. That collective has its own story to tell.

In the North-west, News from Nowhere in Liverpool has survived as a radical bookshop and workers collective to this day. Its longevity is likely to be due to a combination of factors, but its work in fund-raising to buy its premises in 1996 is surely one. In *North West Labour History Journal* no 40 (2014-15) Mandy Vere wrote of the revitalised Alliance of Radical Booksellers at the time of News from Nowhere's 40th anniversary. A current list of its members is available at [www.radicalbooksellers.co.uk](http://www.radicalbooksellers.co.uk). While the history of radical bookselling in Manchester in the 1970s and 1980s is recorded and archived, those who are still providing a vibrant hub and printed material to the left deserve every success as their work and support is much-needed.

## Legacy

People from time to time tell the authors of this article that going into the bookshop was an important element in their political and cultural education. Reminiscences of the bookshop collected on Facebook showed that the books and magazines not available elsewhere and access to notice boards advertising a house share or a group to join were two of the most valued roles of Grass Roots. The notice boards were of particular importance in a pre-internet world.

The author and broadcaster Stuart Maconie described how as a teenager in Wigan in the late 70s, he would take the train into Manchester to visit Grass Roots and browse the shelves.<sup>13</sup> Other former customers have commented: *"so formative for so many of us"*, *"it changed my life in lots of ways"*, *"it was a real social hub"*. Some remember the book readings, one remarked *"the happening place it was!"*. The memories of staff and customers alongside some artefacts from Grass Roots are being collected to deposit in Manchester Archives.<sup>14</sup>

The authors welcome comments, memories, artefacts from readers. Please contact us via: [GRBhistory@gmail.com](mailto:GRBhistory@gmail.com)

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- 3 The archive of the Federation of Alternative Booksellers (later the Federation of Radical Booksellers) is held at the Working Class Movement Library in Salford. It continues as the Alliance of Radical Booksellers <http://www.radicalbooksellers.co.uk/>
- 4 Industrial Common Ownership Movement (ICOM) was a UK national umbrella organisation for worker cooperatives, set up in 1971. It worked to increase the number of worker co-ops in the UK and published model rules in 1976 based on a de-centralised and collectivist concept of democracy
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- 11 SAVAK were the Iranian Shah's secret police. Some of these Iranian customers who were socialists intended to return to Iran if the Shah were to be deposed. After the revolution in 1979 they may have suffered under the subsequent Khomeini regime
- 12 We have a copy of a Gay and Lesbian booklist and hope that others will be found
- 13 Speaking about his walk (and the book he wrote about it – *Long Road from Jarrow*, Ebury Publishing, 2017) at the Timber Festival in 2019
- 14 The group would welcome any recollections or memorabilia readers have of events held at Grass Roots. Only one minute book and no accounts have been found for the archive

# Moved to Draft: Writing and Publishing a Wikipedia Entry

Alison Read, with assistance from Toby Johnson and John Goodman

Publications Distribution Cooperative and Scottish & Northern Books were an essential part of the history of radical and political publishing, bookselling and distribution in Britain in the 1970s and 80s. We all knew that – but would anyone else?

The impetus to write a history of PDC came at the Radical Bookselling History conference held in Manchester in October 2019. A group of former PDC and S&N workers agreed to meet (virtually, as it turned out, thanks to Covid) and the history of PDC was written in two long chapters (see *Radical Bookselling History Newsletter* 3 and 4) and from that we started to put together an entry for Wikipedia.

None of us had written for Wikipedia previously. Alison had made a couple of false starts to learn “How to wiki ...” over the previous few years, but had not continued. John had written one short Wikipedia entry, guided by Andy Mabbett, an eminent Wikipedian, to whom we are also grateful for advice and support, and lightly edited another. We had a lot to learn.

Wikipedia is extraordinary in that it is democratic and open access. All the information on how to write an entry is there to find, starting with ‘Help: Your first article’. Wikipedians strongly recommend learning to edit other entries first to get an idea of how it all works, which is useful and takes some of the initial terror away. It seems there are dedicated Wikipedians who follow up and check entries so it is unlikely you will do irrevocable damage, and anyway edits can be undone.

We needed help from an established Wikipedia editor to upload the completed entry and fortunately Toby Johnson had joined us by then and was willing to do that. We were very pleased with ourselves. But then – horror! The entry was ‘Moved to Draft’ by someone in the world of Wikipedia who claimed that the entry needed ‘more citations from independent sources’ and also ‘information that can’t be referenced should be removed’.

We think our mistake was naming members of the original PDC collective and founding group in the article and then quoting them and using citations from books and articles written by them. For example, Charles Landry went on from PDC to start Comedia, which researched and wrote about the radical press and publications. Distribution is not a hot topic for

research or discussion despite the essential link it provides, so the Comedia books and other articles by former PDC workers, including Gail Chester's book for Comedia on women's presses and publishing, provided important references. We don't know if this was the reason for this complaint but Alison removed the names of the original members of PDC from the entry so that the link was no longer obvious. We also scoured the internet for more independent mentions of PDC that we could include to increase the number of citations and yes, between us we managed to find and add many further citations.

Wiki has an admirable policy of not publishing work that is 'promotional in tone' but this does mean you need to be cautious of making claims which can't be verified – usually a change of emphasis and language can get round this. For example, we made a claim that PDC had helped improve the sales of many radical publications but had no published evidence to back this. We changed the sentence to '*The existence and growth of the co-operative coincided with the launch of many new radical magazines and journals, including [The Leveller](#); [Spare Rib](#)...*' etc., not the same but conveys an idea of the times and shows how active we were and the role PDC played.

We would encourage everyone involved with a project that contributed to the information/ideas history of that time to write an entry for Wikipedia. It doesn't have to be long or even tell the whole story, because you can keep adding to an entry after it is posted. Wikipedia requires the topic to have 'potential merit' so it is important to demonstrate that. If it is possible to link your entry to other entries on Wikipedia that helps to embed it, e.g. Alison went on the *Spare Rib* entry and added a sentence, "*it was circulated more widely through women's groups and networks. From 1976, Spare Rib was distributed by [Publications Distribution Cooperative](#) (PDC) to a network of radical and alternative bookshops.*" Not hard to spot the addition but it is true and then links to the PDC entry.

And with some dogged searching we managed to find more Wikipedia entries that we could link to, all the time learning Wikipedia. Citations are essential: it's surprising how much can be found out there with some digging around and the number of archives that are digitised is impressive. It helps to look at citations from entries on parallel projects, which can lead to relevant articles you can cite. The Wikipedia system works well to enter references if you have an ISBN or ISSN, although without one you can enter the information manually.

Try to write in a neutral tone suitable for an encyclopaedia – this is not always easy to remember when your whole purpose is to make sure your project is remembered. Wikipedia is alert to what they call ‘conflict of interest’ but who else is going to write an entry for PDC other than the people who were involved? Distribution was never glamorous.

Don’t despair if you are ‘Moved to Draft’ as we were. Draft status does not mean a rejection – it means you need to do more work and you will be directed as to what you need to do.

Toby Johnson’s help was essential, since none of us had the knowledge or accreditation to upload the entry. So try to find a sympathetic person to do this with you. Huge thanks to Toby.

We still need to do more work on the entry for PDC: to add links from other Wikipedia entries so people can find the entry; more photographs or visuals, and a summary box on the top right of the entry. And if anyone finds an academic paper on the importance of distribution let us know so we can cite it.

*The Wikipedia entry for PDC is to be found here: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Publications\\_Distribution\\_Cooperative](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Publications_Distribution_Cooperative)*

# The Revolution Will be Published

How Sheffield's radical bookshops fostered working-class activism

Lucy Brownson

From Chapel Walk, if you go up Church Street and down St James Row, you come to the deceptively-named Paradise Square (perhaps counting only as such for those looking for parking). At one end of the square a cobbled path takes you to a hulking block of student accommodation. But this is only 105 Queen Street's most recent incarnation. From around 1938, it was the site of the Workers' Bookshop — which did pretty much what it said on the tin, acting as a vital hub for workers to swap information and organise. It also acted as the former headquarters of the Sheffield Communist Party.

While this might sound like the sort of fact you could successfully deploy in a local pub quiz, it isn't some colourful anomaly. Examine Sheffield's political history and you'll find a persistent pattern. Head to an independent bookshop in this city or else read about one in the history books and as often as not, you'll often find a connection with working-class activism.

Communism's core demands — namely economic equality and workers' liberation — had seeded amongst Sheffield's working classes long before the Communist Party of Great Britain, or CPGB, was established in August 1922. One hundred years earlier, an alliance of six cutlery workers' unions founded the Sheffield Mechanical Trades Association, the city's first trades union council (indeed, one of the first of its kind in the UK). Chartism, widely regarded as the world's first mass movement for workers' labour rights, also found fertile ground here in the mid nineteenth century. In 1837 the Chartists founded the Sheffield Working Men's Association, a mass campaign for workers' rights and political suffrage. The Sheffield Trades and Labour Council was founded in 1858 to give local workers a voice and a political foothold, predating the Trades Union Council by a full decade. Because heavy industry has historically been so concentrated in Sheffield, those who wanted better working conditions have always found strength in numbers; as such, workers' uprisings have happened here with a frequency that's unmatched elsewhere.

Given this storied past, the CPGB thrived here in the twentieth century — despite attempts at state repression. Throughout the '20s and '30s, the local papers are peppered with reports of people being arrested and charged with sedition for publicly speaking or demonstrating against church and state — in one memorable incident from 1921, a local coppersmith was sentenced to three months' hard labour for declaring that World War I had been 'invented by capitalists for the purpose of hounding down the working classes.'





*The Sheffield Bookshop, 93 The Wicker, c.1972. Image courtesy of Picture Sheffield and Sheffield Libraries and Archives.*

As distributors of anti-capitalist literature, Communist Party booksellers were easy targets for such charges — which is perhaps why the Sheffield Workers' Bookshop relocated four times in the 1940s, eventually settling into premises at 20 Matilda Street around 1948. With this move came a new (less provocative?) name, The Sheffield Bookshop, and a new custodian, Charlie Eason, both of whom would stick around for many years.

Born in Oxford, Charlie moved to Sheffield in the 1930s and began managing The Sheffield Bookshop when he returned from his military service during WWII. On the face of it, Charlie didn't have a great deal in common with the men of industry who were prominent in the local CP — he was a vicar's son from a comfortably well-off family, and one can't help but wonder what his family made of his career choice.

His dedication to the workers' education movement was longstanding, though, and he manned the bookshop single-handedly for over three decades, until his death in 1971. After this, a local teacher and veteran Sheffield Communist Party member, Bill Moore, took over; by this point the shop was located at 93 The Wicker. Bill was a bookseller by day and a CPGB district organiser by night, a complementary duality which did much to further the cause of Communism in Sheffield.

Bill's friend and fellow radical bookseller Dave Cope tells me The Sheffield Bookshop remained in business for a remarkably long time, well into the 1980s, not least because they secured a contract to supply Sheffield's libraries with literature. Ever the educator, Bill managed to land a lucrative

contract to supply local schools — with Communist propaganda, I ask? Dave laughs. Not quite, he says. Rather, the shop could access and supply historical texts and multilingual books that more commercial sellers, such as W. Hartley Seed on West Street, couldn't — most notably books relating to the history of Eastern Bloc countries, as well as translated works of Soviet writers.

Another long-time fixture of Sheffield's independent and radical bookshop scene was the Independent Bookshop (originally called Ujamaa), an enterprise that grew out of two University of Sheffield student groups' bookstalls. In 1979, after several moves between derelict buildings in the city centre, Independent found a home at 341, Glossop Road (a couple of doors down from a regular altar of worship for today's students, the inimitable Falafel King).



*The Independent Bookshop at 67-69 Surrey Street, c.1995 (now Starbucks). Image courtesy of Picture Sheffield and Sheffield Libraries and Archives.*

By 1979, Dave Walton was the only paid staff member, a fact that didn't stand in the way of him registering Independent as a workers' co-operative — Dave was laying the foundations for expansion. In the '80s, Independent grew into a small, dedicated team which stocked radical literature alongside more conventional titles, university syllabus reads, as well as posters, cards, and later, children's books.

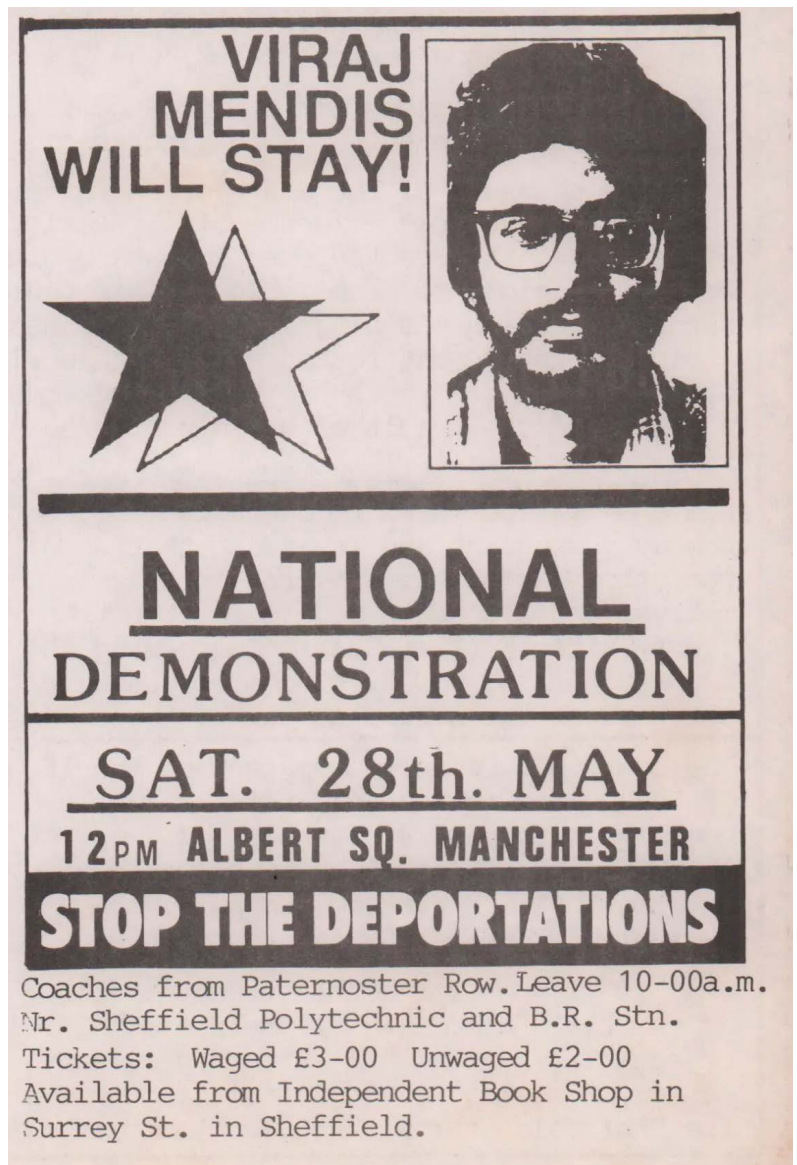
Writing in a *Radical Bookselling History Newsletter*, worker Rosalind Eve recalls joining the co-op in 1980 and 'buying a vacuum cleaner(!), swiftly followed by introducing, developing, and refining the Booksellers Association

stock control system an essential tool for all Independent Bookshop workers as they learned the book trade.’ She also remembers working the bookfair circuit and hosting book launches with writers including John Agard and Janina Bauman. ‘Listening to writers talk about their work and witnessing the impact their thinking had on their audiences was powerful stuff,’ Rosalind recalls, underscoring how Independent functioned as both a retailer and a place dedicated to activism.

As the Council ramps up its drive towards ‘regenerating’ the city centre and opening its purse to private investors today, these real, tangible spaces of activism seem irresistibly utopian — but of course, like anywhere else on planet earth, they had their own problems and tensions. At Independent, as at many workers’ co-operatives in the ‘70s and ‘80s, workers’ own (sometimes self-imposed) exploitation was a persistent issue.

Rosalind remembers working ‘many, many hours of unpaid overtime,’ an aspect of the job that sours her happier memories of those years. In being such a visible hub of hard left politics (literally: a hammer and sickle was painted on the shop sign), Independent was also frequently targeted by vandals who disagreed with what they represented. Smashed windows, graffiti and tar-daubed stock didn’t exactly make for a safe workplace.

On top of all of this, Independent’s relationship with their Council landlords wasn’t exactly peachy. The bookshop wasn’t ever a profit-driven enterprise, but the rent can’t be paid by ideas alone — and by 1986 it had grown so fractious that both parties wanted rid. The bookshop moved to 67-69 Surrey Street, a dilapidated Georgian end terrace which the workers and collective members duly restored; they would remain here until they ceased trading in 1998. Today, this site is a Starbucks, somewhere which Rosalind says ‘couldn’t be further from the ethos and values of the Independent Bookshop.’



**VIRAJ MENDIS WILL STAY!**

**NATIONAL DEMONSTRATION**

**SAT. 28th. MAY**

**12 PM ALBERT SQ. MANCHESTER**

**STOP THE DEPORTATIONS**

Coaches from Paternoster Row. Leave 10-00a.m. Nr. Sheffield Polytechnic and B.R. Stn. Tickets: Waged £3-00 Unwaged £2-00 Available from Independent Book Shop in Surrey St. in Sheffield.

*The Independent Bookshop supported grassroots activism in ways beyond books - for instance by selling coach tickets to protests, like this anti-deportation rally in Manchester, May 1988. Image from the Sheffield Defence Campaign Newsletter, courtesy of the Sparrows' Nest Library and Archive.*

Head back down Chapel Walk, where we started this essay, and you'll find more buried cultural treasure. The Walk has long been a vein connecting the city's main arteries, a small but rich seam of social history written into the built environment. Always a crucible of radical politics, by the early 1900s Sheffield was a stronghold of the women's suffrage campaign, and in 1908, 26-28 Chapel Walk became the local headquarters of the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU), who opened a ground-floor shop selling campaign literature and merchandise promoting their cause.



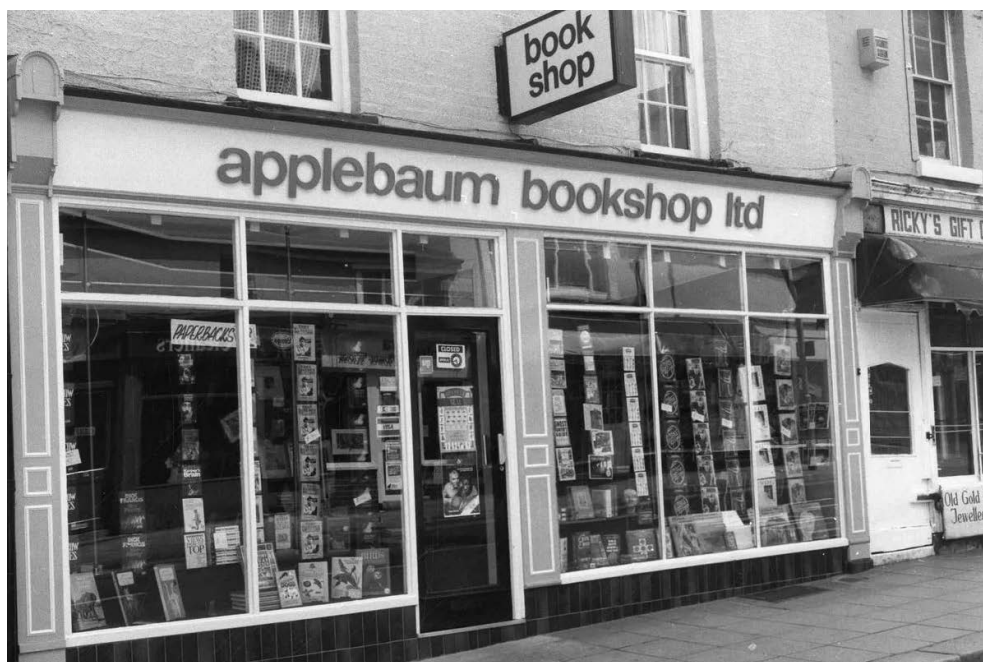
*Rosie and Sarah, the duo behind Juno Books, will open their doors at 24, Chapel Walk this autumn. Image courtesy of Juno Books.*

Fortunately for Sheffield, some things don't change. In 2022, the vacant shop unit just next door will become home to another grassroots feminist venture: Juno Books, a queer and intersectional feminist bookshop opening here in the autumn. Co-founders Rosie and Sarah have popped up at festivals and community spaces all over Sheffield in the last couple of years. When I met them at Sharrow Festival back in July, their stall of carefully-curated feminist reads was abuzz with shared excitement and questions about if and when they'd be setting up shop permanently. Having recently found a bricks-and-mortar home, the Junos (a collective noun they fully embrace) have plans to open their new shop as a place for communities to come together over a shared love of books. Their shop is the latest addition to a small but vibrant network of independent booksellers across Sheffield, from Kelham Island Books & Music to La Biblioteka's kiosk

inside Kommune, all the way over to the Porter Book Shop and Rhyme and Reason in leafy S11.

Of course, not every independent bookseller in Sheffield can be pinned to a physical space in this way. Many operate in a more transitory fashion, popping up at fairs and community events in much the way Juno Books have done these last few months. Flick through any remotely countercultural zine or publication produced in South Yorkshire in the '70s or '80s, and you'll very likely stumble across an advert for Sheffield Anarchist Bookfair, a semi-regular event organised by Sheffield Anarchist Group and related syndicates. This event is still alive and kicking(ish) in Sheffield, with the last one having taken place in 2017.

From Applebaum's on Division Street (a hub for local Esperanto speakers) to I&I on London Road (specialising in Black and Rastafari literature), Sheffield's radical bookshops have always existed outside of social margins and within very tight financial ones. It's not that these spaces weren't economically viable — but balancing the books *and* political commitments often brought about irresolvable conflicts of interest (should an anarchist collective be running a business, for instance? Should a communist bookshop be making a profit?). For those ventures that miraculously survived the rapid commercialisation of the market and the advent of online bookselling, SCC's sale of once-public property and astronomical rate and rent hikes have pushed many businesses out.



*Applebaum Bookshop, 25  
Division Street, c.1989.  
Image courtesy of Picture  
Sheffield and Sheffield  
Libraries and Archives.*

This is horribly sad, changing, as it will, the flavour of the city. Every twist and turn in Sheffield's political history is dotted with shopfronts and fringe spaces — some of them still retail units, some long gone, others having never had fixed premises to begin with — and all of them filled with books, pamphlets, directories and zines. All of this begs the question: why exactly have Sheffield's bookshops historically provided such fertile breeding ground for working-class struggles and grassroots activism? And where will this activism move to in the future, if bookshops are displaced from the city centre?

When considering this question, I wonder whether it's partly because, long before the internet, radical bookshops were an obvious place to find likeminded souls. After all, many such venues doubled as meeting places — and tripled as somewhere to hatch plans, build a community, maybe even locate a friend or lover across the stacks. A bookshop's noticeboard was a nexus of social and political networking, somewhere to find gig listings, flatshares, meetups and protests. Historian Lucy Delap argues that many of these spaces were born out of exclusion — feminist bookshops, for instance, were in no small part a reaction to (and rejection of) a publishing industry that sidelined women.

A bookshop was a physical site of community and resistance, a particularly memorable example being Gay's The Word in London, whose directors were put on trial on the grounds of Victorian obscenity laws in 1984. In so many words, these ideas also carry through in the reflections of people like Rosalind, who spent so many years cultivating power in the margins, and in the words of people like Rosie and Sarah, who have plans to do so too.

Where does activism unfold when its physical spaces are lost? As we endured long stretches of social isolation for the best part of two years, I'm sure many of us mulled over this one. I missed meeting in the pub with Sheffield Feminist Archive, the community archive project of which I'm a part. I missed Andro + Eve's iconic drag king cabarets and Foodhall's communal meals. I missed spending far too long browsing La Biblioteka's shelves. Some of these experiences I tried to recreate online, coaching less tech-savvy friends on how to unmute themselves and sending long-winded voice notes to pals about whatever new book or podcast I was onto.

The spontaneity was never quite there though, the spark dulled by a slow wifi connection or an hours-long delay between each message. When the city began to slowly awaken again this year, I was excited to return to the spaces I'd missed so much. On doing so, I noticed that some had moved to smaller,



*La Biblioteka's kiosk in Kommune, Castle House.  
Photo: Joe Horner.*

more affordable or short-lease locations during the pandemic — largely because their rents hadn't gone down, even though their incomes had.

Book sales have boomed throughout the pandemic, mainly for international firms — but smaller vendors, too, have defied the odds, with a host of new independents launching *during* the pandemic (Juno Books included). These physical spaces were dearly missed by readers and communities, as evidenced by the success of crowdfunding campaigns for independent bookshops up and down the UK. All of this is reflective of a widespread desire to gather together again and share our ideas with one another — and now more than ever, as every day brings more cranes, more luxury apartments, more bad news and manufactured culture wars, it feels vital to make the space to do so in Sheffield. When Juno Books opens its doors down Chapel Walk later this year, it'll offer books, first and foremost. It'll also be a welcome reprieve from the empty shops of Fargate or the bars of Tudor Square. More than this, though, it'll offer somewhere to meet, to talk, to find your community, or to build a new one.

*I'd like to thank Dave Cope, himself a longtime radical bookseller, for his time, generosity, and invaluable insight into the history of Sheffield's independent bookshops. Dave owns Left on the Shelf, an online and bricks-and-mortar emporium of left books, pamphlets and journals, and he's a member of the Alliance of Radical Booksellers.*

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# Anarchist Papers, Publishing and Bookshops: An Introduction

This introduction to anarchist papers, publishing and bookshops starts from two books - Rob Ray's *A Beautiful Idea: History of the Freedom Press Anarchists*, Freedom Press, 2018 and Albert Meltzer's autobiography *I Couldn't Paint Golden Angels*, AK Press, 1996 – representing two different trends of anarchism.

Ray was an editor of the paper, and so is fully supportive of the organisation, but he is very honest about its errors and weaknesses. He also gives space to voices from other anarchist traditions that were critical of Freedom and *Freedom* – and some of the disagreements and splits were very deep and bitter, but this will not be surprising to those who have followed our history of radicalism. Ray is a model of fairness in describing these events, which can be quite complicated, and gladly acknowledges the help of others and welcomes corrections. Meltzer was unapologetically sectarian, scornful of the Freedom tradition in particular, but he was active for over 60 years in the movement, read widely, knew many of the main activists in the different trends and had a sense of history and of the need to record it.

Quotes are from Ray or Meltzer unless otherwise stated and most will relate to the book list at the end.

I do not intend to engage, much, with the principles and practices of anarchism in this article – that sort of review would be better left to someone with a deeper knowledge of the movement or from the anarchist tradition. There is one such review of Ray accessible on the website of the Kate Sharpley Library – a great source for anarchist history.

I will concentrate on the publishing, the magazines - and the bookshops, of course, though there were very few for most of Meltzer's life, and in Ray's book only the Freedom shop is covered. I have yet to discover other sources for the bookshops but a more detailed reading of the anarchist press may help. Given the small numbers in the anarchist movement this is not unexpected. And we also know of the reluctance of bookshops to keep records, and to record memories - all understandable given the pressures activists are generally under. Sitting down to write a history is a rare luxury for an activist involved in a business who is often a volunteer or at best a poorly paid worker.

I will add comments on other anarchist magazines and publishers for context and comparison and a pointer for future research.

The first anarchist pamphlet, according to Ray, was *A Contribution Towards the Elucidation of the Science of Society* published in 1853 by the London

Confederation of Radical Reformers 'perhaps the first known overtly anarchist group'. The author was Ambrose Cuddon 'the first known anarchist in Britain'. Max Nettlau gives Joseph Lane's *An Anti-Statist Communist Manifesto* this honour (in *Freedom* October 1926).

Heiner Becker wrote a very useful 'Notes on *Freedom* and the Freedom Press, 1886-1928' in the *Raven* No.1, 1987. He lists three sources of British anarchism. Benjamin Tucker's magazine *Liberty*, published in America from 1881, and which was distributed in Britain. Secondly, the political refugees from Europe and the clubs they set up – the International Club in Rose Street then the Homerton Social Democratic Club. These early socialists or anarchists, the distinctions were very fluid, came from Germany, France, Italy together with the East European Jewish immigrants. In Britain, Lane and Samuel Mainwaring (who was to bring Tom Mann into the socialist movement) were the most influenced by this trend. And thirdly, the Jura Federation in Switzerland, an area bordering France, which became the political home for Bakunin and Kropotkin.

The anarchist movement really came into organised existence in Britain in the mid-1880s, as a split from the early modern socialist movement. Foreign language papers were being sold in London before this. French exiles who had participated in the Paris Commune of 1871 had well established support networks by 1872 and there were a large number of journalists among them; unfortunately, the sectarian political divisions were also imported. Some of these papers were anarchist. The *Arbeiter Fraint*, a broad-based Yiddish paper, was published in London from 1885. It came under anarchist control in 1888, and was relaunched by Rudolf Rocker, a German but not Jewish, in 1898.

The first regular English anarchist paper was Henry Seymour's *Anarchist*, started in March 1885, and it led to the creation of the Circle of English Anarchists later that year. Seymour was an interesting figure. His initiation into anarchism was through Proudhon and Tucker (he was an agent for *Liberty*). He was the owner of the International Publishing Company (with co-owner William Willis-Harris), which published and printed the paper and also an early unauthorised edition of the Communist Manifesto in 1886. This was on top of various anarchist classics by Kropotkin, Proudhon and Reclus. Seymour himself was a supporter of mutualism, which placed emphasis on the role of co-operatives in a post capitalist economy. He was also a very early member of the Fabian Society, and he wrote 50 years later that 'he was in friendly contact with...Edward Carpenter, Belfort

Bax, Walter Crane' and leaders of the Fabian Society. His paper carried articles by Bernard Shaw and his Fabian links helped its promotion. He must have also met Charlotte Wilson at this time - she was the first woman on the Fabian Society's executive, in 1884, and was one of the joint editors of the *Anarchist* with Seymour, Kropotkin, Francesco Saverio Merlino, and Nikolai Tchaikovsky. Seymour wrote that he 'soon found that...I had to do all the drudgery of production, supply most of the cost, while the others were content to *write*, excellently and otherwise. We had a 'tiff' and parted'.

Seymour was also the second editor of *The Adult: A Journal For The Advancement Of Freedom In Sexual Relationships*, following the arrest and imprisonment of the first, George Bedborough, a bookseller and journalist.

These links between individuals and organisations on the left, whether anarchist or socialist, are typical of the period before positions hardened with WWI (though anarchists, socialists and pacifists opposed to war did work together in mutual support) and then the Russian Revolution. The other British 'anarchist' paper was *Commonweal*, founded by William Morris as the official paper of the Socialist League in February 1885 and which lasted until May 1894. Many writers on this period consider this to have been the best socialist paper of the 19<sup>th</sup> century under Morris, who remained editor until 1890 when the anarchists within the organisation voted him out, but still accepted his monthly donation of £10 towards the cost of the paper. Morris resigned from the now anarchist Socialist League at the end of the year. Morris was without doubt a Marxist, but his anti-parliamentarism, his libertarianism and his non-sectarian attitude were, and remain, appealing to anarchists.

Morris's successor was David Nicoll, 'a simple, good-natured man' according to George Cores, who later helped set up the London Freedom Group. His naivety led him to be taken in by the French spy Auguste Coulon, who also persuaded Louise Michel of his anarchist credentials and employed him at her Socialist school in Fitzroy Square. Coulon's articles in *Commonweal* were a call to violence, the first of a series of examples of state infiltration and provocations, which continue today.

Nicoll provided an early summary of anarchist strategy in an article in the *Commonweal* on May 23, 1891: 'It must be our aim, as Anarchists, to stir up revolt on every possible occasion, and to bring the law and its officials into derision and contempt. Individual assaults on the system will lead to riots, riots to revolts, revolts to insurrection, insurrection to revolution'. He wrote ten pamphlets, most on contemporary anarchism and the police,

courts and prisons. All were self-published, apart from his first which came from James Leatham in Aberdeen, an important early socialist publisher.

Nicoll himself was imprisoned for incitement to murder - he had rhetorically asked if the Home Secretary and the judge in the Walsall anarchist trial 'were fit to live'. After serving eighteen months, the *Commonweal* group refused to have him back as editor, a decision which Cores deplored, and which deepened Nicoll's mental health problems, eventually leading to paranoia. Nicoll did edit the *Anarchist* between 1894 and 1897 in Sheffield, and produced, as publisher and printer, nineteen issues of a revived version of the *Commonweal* between 1896 and 1901. He ended his life in poverty as a street vendor selling his own pamphlets.

Sheffield was home to the first provincial anarchist paper, the *Sheffield Anarchist*, published by Dr John Creaghe for the Sheffield Anarchist Group. Cores writes that it was 'Probably the most outspoken paper ever published in this country'. Sheila Rowbotham in her biography of Edward Carpenter is more precise: 'It was defiantly anti-respectable, calling on unmarried mothers and prostitutes to join the movement and enthusiastically endorsing free love'. It was fortnightly and lasted for eight issues between June and October 1891. Unpriced, it stated 'Pay what you like' on the cover - a rather modern experiment. Sheffield had a comparatively strong anarchist identity. Others involved were Fred Charles, Cyril Bell - and Edward Carpenter, who was prepared to describe himself as an anarchist at the time, but he was closer to William Morris's position and he was furiously criticised by Creaghe.

A small group based around Kings Cross in London published the *Alarm* (ten issues in 1896), from 127 Ossulston Street. There was another local group in Hammersmith who produced *Liberty*, James Tochatti, a tailor whose shop was 'a centre for local propaganda' being the key figure in this as he owned a printing press. A monthly, it lasted three full years, 1894 to 1896. Contributors included Malatesta and Seymour among others. Tochatti 'circulated many thousands of pamphlets' in Cores' words but I can trace no publications by him.

To return to the original *Commonweal*, the next editor was Henry Samuels ('a nasty piece of work, disruptive and aggressive and dogged by persistent rumours that he was in cahoots with police spies' (Ray)). In 1894 Samuels' brother-in-law, a young Frenchman, died when a bomb he was carrying near the Greenwich Observatory exploded prematurely. The paper struggled on until the following year under Frank Kitz before collapsing, and some of

its volunteers including John Turner the publisher moved over to *Freedom*.

Charlotte Wilson, closely involved in *Anarchy*, became a key figure in *Freedom*, the first of a group of impressive women writers and journalists who joined the anarchist movement. She wrote on anarchism in *What is Socialism*, Fabian Tract No.4. She resigned from the executive of the Fabians in 1887 but retained her membership for another twenty years - unusual for an anarchist. *Freedom* appeared in October 1886, founded by Kropotkin and Wilson from the premises of the Freethought Publishing Company and printed at the Socialist League offices. It was subtitled a 'Journal of Anarchist Socialism' which soon became 'Journal of Anarchist Communism'. Most of the work - and financial support - fell on Wilson's shoulders as Kropotkin was not in good health, though she was ably assisted by Nannie Dryhurst, who was also a capable translator, which was useful in bringing in foreign contributors. Wilson was very open in her working practice - she submitted her articles to the group for comments.

The vast majority of contributors were not paid for articles in the paper. Becker writes that Frank Kitz was the only one paid before 1927, and this was in 1912. Kitz had worked for William Morris as a dyer.

Freedom Press as a business entity probably appeared in 1916. It started publishing pamphlets and books from 1889 - the very first pamphlet was Kropotkin's *The Wage System*. Among the earliest authors were Kropotkin (the world's best known anarchist at the time), Malatesta, Grave, Landauer, Nettlau, and from Britain William Morris wrote two pamphlets, *Monopoly* and *Useful Work versus Useless Toil*. It has been estimated that 80,000 copies of 49 titles were produced between 1886 and 1900.

Relations between the anarchists and other radicals soured somewhat from about 1889. Bradlaugh was hostile to anarchists and socialists and forced the paper out of his Freethought premises and Annie Besant did the same with the Socialist League office.

The period between 1900 and 1906 was the toughest yet for *Freedom* according to Becker. This was largely due to the Boer War and the difficulties of holding outdoor meetings, so crucial to sales of the paper. It did continue to appear, but in a reduced format until there was a gap of three months due to repeated office moves. Eventually in 1895, the year Alfred Marsh became editor, they moved to the famous premises at 127 Ossulston Street where they took over the lease from the two teenage nieces and nephew of Dante Gabriel Rossetti: they had run an anarchist paper called the *Torch*.

The premises were on a slum housing estate and conditions there, as later, on occasion, in the premises in Angel Alley off Whitechapel, were not very salubrious. The entrance was via a dim basement with a ladder going up to a larger and better lit room above. Johan Most's already old printing machine was purchased from the *Torch*, which closed down in 1896.

A group of syndicalists, the International Libertarian Group of Correspondence, influenced by the success of French syndicalism, did produce a short-lived direct action paper called the *General Strike*, October 1903-1904, which was priced at ½d. Samuel Mainwaring was the leading English anarchist involved, and it was assisted by *Freedom*. In 1904 *Freedom* again assisted with a single issue *Voice of Labour* for a group in Scotland.

By now *Freedom* was the only surviving anarchist paper. In 1904, a low point when the group was reduced to six members, Tom Keell offered to take over. He was a printer on the paper but had developed a good business sense. He kept the paper going for over twenty years, and he used money inherited from his father to fund publication of the group's pamphlets. Pamphlet sales increased from 1903. The best sellers were, according to Becker, Kropotkin's *Anarchist Communism* and *The State: its Historic Role*, and Malatesta's *Talk About Anarchist Communism Between Two Workers* and *Anarchy*.

Sales of *Freedom* had dropped from 3,000 at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to 1,500 in 1907, but they picked up in the period of industrial unrest between 1910 and 1914.

In 1907 *Freedom* started *Voice of Labour* (not linked to the earlier one-off with the same title), concentrating on industrial reports and advocating direct action. John Turner was publisher, Marsh editor and Keell the printer. Written in a more popular style than *Freedom*, it only lasted from January to September. Disagreements were appearing over the role of John Turner. He had been a member of the Socialist League and then came under the influence of Kropotkin. After the demise of *Commonweal* he joined the *Freedom* group in 1895 and was the official publisher of *Freedom* for twelve years, and one of the group's best known members. This was because he was a founder then General Secretary of the United Shop Assistants' Union. He was the first person to be deported from America under its Anarchist Exclusion Act of 1903.

In 1912 George Ballard, a contributor to *Freedom* under the pen-name 'Barrett', started the *Anarchist* in Glasgow (May 1912- January 1913).

Finance came from George Davison, the former European head of Kodak, who also supported *Freedom* and Guy Aldred's papers.

## **Aldred**

At this point I want divert briefly from *Freedom* to turn to Aldred (1886-1963), and then the Syndicalist movement - though the only thing they had in common was they were outliers of anarchism.

Aldred was another outsider of the radical movement who exhibited obsessive behaviour. He lived in considerable poverty, never had a holiday, and could not work with people in any organisation he did not control. He was a vegetarian and teetotaler, but this was not uncommon on the left at the time.

As a schoolboy known as the Boy Preacher he had produced his own leaflets. His first publication was a Christian pacifist tract on the Boer War in 1902, when he was 16. He called himself the 'Rev. Guy A Aldred – a Minister of the Gospel of Freethought' later 'the Gospel of Revolt'. He was a very strong speaker and could draw large audiences for much of his life.

He joined the SDF, very briefly, as speaker and contributor to *Justice* and *Social Democrat*. In 1906 he became associated with the Freedom Group, which printed a couple of his pamphlets.

He set up his Communist Propaganda Group and then the Bakunin Press, with help from Karl Lahr the German socialist, later known as Charlie Lahr, the bookseller and publisher. Walter Strickland, an eccentric millionaire, started his thirty year support of Aldred and Aldred renamed his Bakunin Press the Strickland Press - later to face opposition from the Typographical Society for 'employing' women and hence being non-unionised at the end of the war.

Due to his hostility to WW1 Aldred spent over two and a half years in prison during and immediately after the war. In this time he gave lectures and organised significant strikes and edited a paper from a labour camp. He returned to Glasgow where he reformed the Glasgow Communist Group he had helped found in 1912 (or early 1913), which became the Anti-Parliamentary Communist Federation in 1921.

The APCF was part of the Council Communism movement, based on the belief that councils in workplaces and the community that would spring up in a revolutionary situation could take power with no recourse to a

party or an election. Members initially described themselves as Marxist revolutionaries - they had roots in the Left Communist movement - and not anarchists.

However, the APCF did describe itself as an 'Anarcho-Marxism organisation'. Aldred split from the APCF in 1933 to form the Workers Open Forum. During the Barcelona May Days the APCF worked with the Freedom Group in publishing four issues of *Fighting Call*.

Aldred joined the ILP in 1934, and flirted with Trotskyism. He soon formed the United Socialist Movement – his own organisation but supported by his long-standing acolytes Ethel MacDonald, John Taylor Caldwell, and Jane (Jenny) Patrick (his partner after the death of Rose Witcop, the sister of Milly who was Rudolf Rocker's partner). All of Aldred's organisations had a minute membership.

He was later rescued financially by another eccentric millionaire - the Marquis of Tavistock (later Duke of Bedford), a pacifist and follower of Social Credit, and who was not far removed from pro-fascist sympathies. Yet Aldred spent most of his life in considerable poverty.

His feud with Freedom Press lasted forty years. He was a self-publicist and a self-publisher - he wanted his own organisation and control over publishing policy. During his lifetime he published about fifty titles, mainly pamphlets, some in parts - his autobiography, *No Traitors' Gait!*, came out in 19 parts between 1955 and 1963 and was unfinished. He published and promoted and sold only his own work. Sometimes he re-wrote articles and speeches several times. Meltzer summed up his life as an 'obsession with propaganda that never involved action'.

His publishing policy was idiosyncratic. His overprinting was legendary, as was his under-pricing (he parallels Vernon Richards in this). On top of this he made matters worse for himself by sending out large quantities of free copies. Working hours at the Strickland Press for his loyal little group were 9am to 9pm with one and half hours for lunch and 45 minutes for tea. The women were allowed Saturdays off - because they had the housework to do.

Aldred issued eighteen papers during his lifetime, some overlapping. The most important were:

*The Herald of Revolt* (1907-14); *The Spur* (1914-1921); *The Commune* (1923-9); *Special Anti-Parliamentary Gazette* (1926-9). *The Word* (1938-1965) was



the longest lasting, while several others only came out in one issue. He had a habit of posting free copies of these, too, in the hope that he would pick up regular orders.

He continued to speak and write to the very end of his life. Aldred died penniless in 1963. John Taylor Caldwell continued to publish *The Word* and *Word Quarterly* to 1967 and closed Strickland Press in May 1968. In Nicholas Walter's words 'Aldred left no viable organisation or tradition'.

### **Syndicalism**

Syndicalism, or anarcho-syndicalism, originated in America in organised form with the Industrial Workers of the World, the IWW, commonly known as the Wobblies. It reached Britain through the Socialist Labour Party, founded in 1903 by supporters of Daniel de Leon. It is also described as revolutionary industrial unionism and there is some debate about referring to it as anarchist. Some anarchist tendencies were, and are, totally hostile to trade unions. Others support rank and file activities only, while some are more supportive. Malatesta, one of anarchism's founders, said workers should join unions as defensive organisations and set up anarchist educational groups within them, but not seek to turn them into anarchist organisations which they could never be - and anarchists should never become functionaries of a trade union.

In the period 1910 to 1914, 'the Great Unrest', there was an upsurge in syndicalism. Several papers appeared reflecting this. The *Industrial Syndicalist* was a monthly that came out between July 1910 and May 1911, published by Guy Bowman and edited by Tom Mann. Both members of the SDF, they were converted to syndicalism after a visit to the CGT union federation in France in 1910. A further issue on the Transport Industry was planned but never appeared – probably due to the pressure on Mann with his leading role in the Liverpool transport strike of 1911. Bowman published the *Syndicalist Railwayman* for four issues later in 1911.

The Industrial Syndicalist Educational League was set up in 1911 by Mann and Bowman, who were President and Secretary respectively. At the inaugural meeting the first person to apply to join was George Lansbury, who had known Mann for a long time - though there was strong opposition from the more sectarian elements present. The League published the *Syndicalist* as the successor to the *Industrial Syndicalist*. Mann and Bowman dominated the paper in terms of contributions. It was a large format four page monthly.

The first issue in January 1912 published the famous 'Open Letter to British Soldiers' calling on them not to shoot fellow workers who were on strike. Bowman, Mann, the printers and Fred Crowsley, an activist who printed 3,000 copies of the Letter as a leaflet and then personally distributed them to soldiers in Aldershot, were prosecuted under a law from 1797. Bertrand Russell, who had not heard of the *Syndicalist* and claimed he didn't know what the term meant until the court case, wrote to the paper to express support. The case and ensuing publicity boosted circulation from around 3,000 to 20,000.

A rival syndicalist group, the Industrial Democracy League, issued a monthly paper, *Solidarity*, from September 1913. Jack Wills and Jack Tanner were editors. Tom Mann also wrote for it, but he was moving away from syndicalism, probably disillusioned by the sectarianism. This paper survived to 1921.

The shop stewards' movement produced various syndicalist pamphlets, but overall the movement had little effect on the strikes of the period. It did burst out again during WW1, especially in Scotland, but is more relevant to the history of the trade union movement than that of anarchism.

### **Freedom (cont.)**

A small group, the Anarchist Education Group, established the *Torch*, yet again with support from *Freedom*. Members included Mabel Hope, Ballard, Lilian Wolfe, Elisabeth Archer and Fred Dunn, who was the editor. It lasted from 1913 to 1914, having changed its name after No.5 to the old *Voice of Labour*. In December 1916 *Satire* took its place, produced by Freedom Press and edited by Leonard Motler. It lasted until April 1918.

When WW1 started, Kropotkin took the unpopular line of saying Germany must be beaten at all cost. Keell refused to print his pro-war article, causing more ructions in the movement. One contributor, George Cores, in his memoirs written much later, accused Keell of taking over the organisation: 'Keell took full possession of Freedom and all the literature'. However Keell prevailed at a national meeting.

The *Freedom* office was raided four times under the Defence of the Realm Act. Large quantities of books and magazines were seized, plus most of the paper's type and part of the printing press. After the second raid, which led to the arrest of three printers, the ILP came to the rescue and printed the paper in Manchester and there was also a generous response from the wider movement.

*Freedom* had secretly printed thousands of leaflets for the Anti-Conscription League.

Keell and his partner Lilian Wolfe went to prison rather than pay the fines, though she relented two weeks before the end of her sentence, being pregnant at the time. Wolfe was another of those impressive women. She was a telegraphist at the GPO, where her supervisor introduced her to the suffragette movement, before she moved to anarchism.

The decade after the war was a difficult one for *Freedom*. Keell retired and in 1927 had to close the paper down through lack of funds, at No.446. And the council gave notice to quit as the area was being redeveloped. His old protagonists, Cores and Turner, wanted to restart the paper (according to the former) but Keell refused and took the press and the stock of pamphlets to the Whiteway Colony, near Stroud, where he and Wolfe moved to. As the main breadwinner, Wolfe set up health foods shop in Stroud and then London, from which she presumably continued to sell the pamphlets. The link between bookselling and health food shops was reprised in the late 1960s and 1970s. The couple produced an irregular *Freedom Bulletin* between 1928 and 1932 and about 800 of each issue were distributed, but many subs were not paid for.

In the meantime, the pro-Kropotkin group of Turner (again as publisher) and Cores and a few colleagues, including Ambrose Barker, had started a rival edition of *Freedom* as an eight page monthly from May 1929, which lasted until August 1936.

It was events in Spain that were to revive the movement, through the launch of *Spain and the World* by a group of very active younger Italian anarchist refugees - Camillo Berneri,

**F R E E D O M**  
**B U L L E T I N**

No 4. SEPTEMBER-OCTOBER, 1928. Price 1d.

**FREEDOM PRESS LEAVES LONDON**  
**A NEW CHAPTER IN "FREEDOM'S" HISTORY**

**OUR NEW ADDRESS**  
after September 29th will be  
**FREEDOM PRESS**  
**WHITEWAY COLONY**  
**STROUD, GLOS.**

On September 29th the Freedom Press will be moved from 127, Ossulston Street, London. The district where the work of the Press has been carried on for so many years is to be demolished and reconstructed, and all tenants have received a final notice to vacate their premises. This closes a long chapter in the history of the Freedom Press; but the end of one chapter leads to the opening of another. After September 29th, and until the financial position will allow a new arrangement to be made, the address of the Freedom Press will be Whiteway Colony, Stroud, Gloucestershire.

Expulsion from Ossulston Street has not come as a surprise. It has been realised for several months that a move would have to be made, and much thought and discussion has been spent on planning for the future. Unfortunately all suggestions have had to be referred to the same central point—finance. At the beginning of this year hopes were entertained of debts being paid and the publication of *FREEDOM* recommenced. An appeal was made for funds. The response to the appeal made it possible for "Bulletins" to be published, but it was not large enough for these hopes to be fulfilled. What money remained after the "Bulletins" were paid for was consumed by a slight reduction of the debts and, principally, by overhead expenses. It was obvious that there was one way only of improving the position, that is by reducing overhead expenses. It was suggested that new offices should be opened in London. Investigations showed that this would mean a heavy increase in expenses, and the idea had to be abandoned.

In February a comrade very kindly offered free accommodation at Whiteway, Gloucestershire; but a belief was expressed that enough money would be found for the Press to be kept in London, and the offer was declined. The money was not found; our comrade repeated her offer; and it was recognised at a meeting at the Minerva Café on August 25th that there was nothing else to do but take advantage of the offer.

When the Press is removed to Whiteway, expenses will be almost nothing, and it is hoped that from contributions and profits from the sale of literature a fund will accumulate with which to pay off present debts and eventually recommence the publication of *FREEDOM*. When a removal from London was first suggested fears were expressed that such a removal would mean an end to all expectations of starting *FREEDOM* again. A close scrutiny of the position has revealed that, on the contrary, this removal is the only way there is by which these expectations can be realised. The new arrangement means that once the present debts are cleared all contributions and profits from the sale of literature will be devoted to publishing a "Bulletin" and accumulating a fund for a regular paper. If finances allow, the "Bulletin" will be published every two months. Let everybody interested in Anarchism and libertarianism help by contributions, by buying books and pamphlets, and by selling the "Bulletin," and it will not be long before a regular paper is again published.

The removal of the Freedom Press to Whiteway is no reason why propaganda should not be carried on in London and elsewhere. Plenty of literature is obtainable for sale and distribution. Meetings and discussion circles will be held throughout the winter at as frequent an interval as attendance justifies. And there are other means of propaganda by which comrades can help to stem the rising tide that threatens to engulf the individual with the coming of State Socialism.

The spread of Anarchist ideas is at a very low ebb to-day, which is due principally to the slackness of our propaganda of recent years. Let us face that fact frankly and make up our minds that henceforth we will intensify our efforts and try to build up a movement strong enough to bring its influence to bear where the interests of the workers are concerned, and combat the reactionary activities of the politicians.

B. B. W.

his daughter Maria Luisa (she changed her name to Marie Louise) and her partner Vero Recchioni (he was to anglicise his name to Vernon Richards), and Francesco Galasso. They raised the funds, thanks to the businesses of Richards' father and Galasso, and were joined by Keell and Wolfe, thus establishing a link with the original Freedom group. Camillo Berneri, described in a Freedom Press catalogue in 1942, which included one of his books, as the leading theoretician of the Italian anarchist movement after Malatesta's death, went to fight in the Spanish Civil War. Aged forty, he was assassinated in Barcelona during the May Days, almost certainly by communists.

*Spain and the World* came out fortnightly from December 1936 and was priced at 2d. Contributors included Max Nettlau, Emma Goldman, Rudolph Rocker, Herbert Read, Ethel Mannin and Augustus John.

The paper attacked the Spanish anarchists who joined the Republican government in September 1936, and it accused the French Popular Front of collusion with fascists, and called *Pravda* the official organ of the Spanish CP. The paper collapsed in December 1938. 'It had continually run with a whopping deficit averaging between £150 and £200 despite a solid sales base and regular donations'. A new paper, *Revolt*, came out in February 1939, set up by the newly formed Anarchist Federation of Britain. The editorial team consisted of M L Berneri, Richards, Ralph Sturgess (of the Anarchist Syndicalist Union) and Tom Brown. Support came from Frank and Mary Leech in Glasgow, the former editors of *Fighting Call*. Meltzer was co-opted to help with publicity and he wrote a few articles. It only lasted until June 3, so Ray is not quite correct to say it was killed off by the start of the war.

Beneri, Richards, Brown and Meltzer established *War Commentary* in November 1939, helped by the indefatigable Lilian Wolfe and contributors associated with the left group in the ILP like Mannin, Reynolds, Padmore and Dinah Stock – an unusually broad base for the anarchist movement. The AFB was an underground organisation now, with a paper *Workers in Uniform*. The AFB refused membership to pacifists and anyone who supported the war. And this included the group of Spanish CNT refugees who had managed to escape to England after the collapse of the Civil War and who, like most of the left in Britain, believed that the war was an anti-fascist one, though the hopes of the Spaniards that the Allies would turn on Franco after the defeat of Hitler were not realised. But the anarchist group in Glasgow did join the AFB and they were very helpful in the production

of the papers. The first issue was of sixteen small duplicated pages ‘and sold in just three bookshops’ – unfortunately not named (Flynn’s Bomb Shop in Bristol, Collets, and the ILP’s Socialist Bookshop would be my guess, on the basis that Freedom did not have an official shop until 1941 but they must also have sold pamphlets from the paper’s premises).

Meltzer estimated the readership of *War Commentary* as over 2,000 (rising to 4,000) and another 4,000 for *Workers in Uniform*. They brought in a new generation of activists: John Hewetson (future editor), Tony Gibson (‘Brylcreem model (later psychologist’), and George Melly, then in the Royal navy, who bravely passed Freedom pamphlets around his ship.

Richards later wrote that ‘booksellers - particularly W H Smiths and Boots - were desperately short of goods to sell (paper rationing) and their business interests came first when deciding whether to stock anarchist and anti-war literature!’ He claims that by December 1944 the number of shops stocking Freedom Press titles was over 300. This is surprising since most of the stock consisted of pamphlets and only four full-length books according to Freedom’s list at this time (see their website for this historical list of all their titles – why don’t other radical publishers produce theirs?). But his claim is backed up by a casual remark in the Introduction to the 1995 Freedom Press edition of Oldday’s *The March to Death* that Philip Sansom and Laurie Hislam ‘toured the country offering it (with other Freedom Press literature) to bookshops who were pleased to take anything which would fill up their half empty shelves’.

Later that year they were offered the chance to buy ‘a near-derelict printing firm, Express Printers’ when the owner died: another printer lent money on condition of keeping the Hebrew type, leaving the group to find the remaining £500 needed to buy the business, situated in Angel Alley, from members’ loans. The increase in printing business enabled the group to offer a wage to Lilian Wolfe to manage the Press. She could give up the



health food shop in Stroud and came to work for Freedom for another twenty-five years.

It also printed George Woodcock's *Now* from 1943 to 1947 - a cultural journal that, as Ray points out, initially printed fascist as well as anarchist authors, though Woodcock did change this policy as he turned it into 'a cultural review of the British anarchist movement'. Meltzer, never shy to express his disapproval of people or organisations, attacked Woodcock as a 'careerist'. But the latter brought a new group of writers within the anarchist orbit – George Orwell, Alex Comfort, Mervyn Peake, Herbert Read and Mulk Raj Anand.

Philip Sansom, mentioned above as the sales rep for Freedom, joined at this time, and quickly became a member of the core editorial group together with Berneri, Richards and Hewetson. The paper was clearly anti-fascist even if against the war effort but had managed to avoid state interference for most of the war. There is evidence that while the Home Office kept the group under surveillance it was reluctant to take repressive measures as they believed that Freedom would have relished the opportunity to be portrayed as martyrs, and anyway the anarchist movement was not that great a threat to the authorities. But in May 1944 an article headed 'Mutiny in the Army' urged soldiers to remember the mutinies at the end of WW1 to try to win better conditions, pay and speedy demobilisation. Unsurprisingly, the state started to look closer at the anarchists and a series of raids followed. Sellers of literature in Hyde Park were charged with obstruction. Meltzer, John Olday, and Tom Brown were arrested, the latter for distributing seditious leaflets. Freedom Press and Express Printers were obliged by the authorities to register under the Business Act, a legal formality never complied with previously. Documents and equipment were seized and held for months. In 1945 the editors were charged with sedition relating to three issues of *War Commentary*. The trial in April turned into a test case against censorship. The Freedom Defence Committee drew in an impressive range of figures: Read, Orwell, T S Eliot, E M Forster, S Spender, Mannin, Brockway, Bevan, Russell, V Brittain, B Britten, C Connolly, M Foot, V Gollancz, Augustus John, L Housman, H Laski, Padmore, Priestley among others

There was a simultaneous internal split. The AFB faction had developed a strong anti-war line and made inroads with pacifists, despite the ban on recruiting pacifists. They were allied to the exiled Spaniards and supported by the syndicalist-leaning Tom Brown and Ken Hawkes, the CNT's English spokesman. They changed the rules of the organisation to allow

majority decision making instead of the previous consensus. Ironically, Richards simply refused to accept this decision to hand over the business – and he could do this because he was now a legally registered owner – thanks to Special Branch forcing the company to register! The losers did not take this lying down. It appears that a group of them forced Berneri to go to the bank - one putting a gun to her head - and give them £25, with which they could set up a new paper, *Direct Action*. They also smashed up the printing press and beat up Richards. Some direct action! *Direct Action* appeared in May 1945, though the AFB had disbanded with part of the majority section forming the Syndicalist Workers' Federation in 1950, forerunner of the Solidarity Federation formed in 1990 from the Direct Action Movement and a few other groups. There were two later papers also titled *Direct Action*.

Richards was now the publisher of *War Commentary*, trading as Freedom Press. And the Freedom group set up the Union of Anarchist Groups.

1945: Freedom Press and AFB were at a low ebb – ‘almost every key organiser was in jail, not speaking to one another, had fled or was drafted’. *Freedom's* key figures of Richards, Hewetson and Sansom were only released from prison in January 1946, so the paper could not benefit from its recent notoriety. Some of those who had lent money to the paper asked for the return of loans believing that Richards had indeed carried out an ‘asset grab’ as claimed by the syndicalists.

*War Commentary* closed in July 1945 and relaunched in August as *Freedom*, again.

## Friends of Freedom Press

### Membership Form

To FREEDOM PRESS  
27 BELSIZE ROAD  
LONDON, N.W.6

For Office Use

No.	Lists
	A/c

I have read your leaflet on the Friends of Freedom Press and its aims and wish to become a member.

I enclose <sup>\*</sup> } 5/- being a year's subscription  
                              } ..... on a/c and will remit the balance  
  } in ..... instalments.

NAME .....

ADDRESS ..... BLOCK LETTERS PLEASE

.....

- I wish to be put in touch with local groups of the Friends of Freedom Press.
- I can assist in placing Freedom Press literature with booksellers and newsagents.
- I am prepared to assist in forming a local group of the Friends of Freedom Press
- Please send me..... Freedom Press leaflets and membership forms for distribution amongst my friends.

(Please add any other ways in which you feel you can help.)

(\*DELETE WHERE NOT APPLICABLE)

*Freedom* in the post-war period did exhibit a pacifist side, with its links to the PPU, despite the wartime policy; it also had strong links with the literary avant-garde through Orwell who was very close to Richards and Berneri and helped them set up as photographers.

It was helped by what Ray called 'the outstandingly intelligent oversight of Marie Louise Berneri'.

And fortunately it had attracted some talented younger supporters like Colin Ward and Alex Comfort. Ward joined the editorial group in 1947 and the fortnightly editorial meetings were 'merry, social occasions' he later wrote, and there was such trust that 'We did not read each other's contributions to check on their ideological acceptability'.

The Syndicalist Workers' Federation accused *Freedom* of having been hijacked by middle class intellectuals who opportunistically used their version of anarchism to further their own careers. This theme was repeated in the *Black Flag* in 1971 (originally established as the *Bulletin of the Anarchist Black Cross* in 1968 by Meltzer and Stuart Christie and which focused on supporting anarchist prisoners in Spain). In his autobiography Meltzer wrote: 'There was a demand for an anarchist newspaper, as *Freedom* had become increasingly bourgeois pacifist, partly because nobody else would work under the direction of Richards and his little group of self-styled intellectuals.' The acceptance of a knighthood by Herbert Read in 1953 appears to give some strength to Meltzer's line, and at the very least caused outrage in the anarchist community. This did not stop Nicholas Walter from suggesting that Read's books were 'probably the most influential Freedom Press publications,' as Read's contributions continued to be read.

*Freedom* defended itself by stating that it was not just the organ of one group but open to all trends, that intellectual debate was needed and welcomed within the anarchist movement. As proof it could cite its friendly relations with the Glasgow anarchists (often considered more hard line), its open lectures and its publishing business. Ray also argues that in 1946 *Freedom* carried 'a large measure of class struggle material'.

The movement was badly hit in 1949 by the death of Berneri, at the age of 31, after complications from giving birth to a stillborn baby. Ray believes that after this the paper struggled to engage with class war anarchism, though in the 1960s almost every issue carried a substantial article on industrial issues. And from 1963 it gave the Anarchist Federation of Britain a regular space. But Vernon Richards kept a very hands-on approach as



the chief editor and ‘ultimate arbiter’ between 1951 and 1964. He only partially retired in 1969 and was always ready to come back if necessary. He had access to donations from anarchists abroad, especially from the incredibly loyal Italian community in America, which kept the paper, and the publishing business, in existence.

Colleagues who worked with him described Richards’ arbitrary approach to pricing new books by Freedom Press – if it was an important political work he would be prepared to sell it at a loss.

The practice was that all writing, drawing and editorial work was voluntary, while production and some administration was paid for, as how Donald Room, Richards’ longest serving comrade, expressed it.

Richards had alienated some in the group, including Sansom and Hewetson. But on the other hand, his later donation of the premises in Angel Alley to the group was an important legacy. Several commentators noted the role of Freedom’s offices and bookshop as a first, and for long periods the only, port of call for anarchists and libertarians from all over Britain, and indeed from all over the world.

From May 1951 the paper became a weekly four page broadsheet selling at 3d.

In 1952, the Anarcho-Syndicalist Committee (Sansom and his partner Rita Milton, Meltzer and a couple others) launched the *Syndicalist* ‘a small but brightly produced little paper with contributions from various industries’ (in Sansom’s contribution to *Freedom: A Hundred Years*). It was not published by the SWF faction nor the Freedom faction, but the latter printed it free. After a year, Sansom closed it as it was losing too much money.

Freedom was involved in the League Against Capital Punishment which was initiated by two anarchists and which soon snowballed into a very wide campaign. Sansom was not always comfortable with some of those who were now on the same platform with him but he recognised the dilemma: ‘after all, what we were seeking was a reform in the law which could only be carried out by Parliament’. A breath of political reality some might say, or an unacceptable compromise with reformism for others.

## 1960s

The influence of anarchism in its broadest terms began to spread, though organisations remained very small. It becomes difficult to define what an

anarchist paper was. *Peace News* was then, and still is today, an anarchist paper. And there's no doubt the 'underground' press was heavily influenced (IT, Oz etc.); there were the Situationist publications; the radical Christian paper, the *Catonsville Roadrunner*, all reflected different aspects of anarchism – and opposition from other tendencies. *Resistance*, the paper of the Committee of 100, was 'anarchist in all but name' in Walter's words, and the Peace Pledge Union published *The Anarchist Basis of Pacifism* in 1970. Deference was disappearing; 'the establishment' and 'the man' were being mocked and worse; the hippy movement could be seen as a flowering of anarchist individualism, and it did lead to a revival of interest in anarchist communes. 1968 saw a political explosion on the left that extended way beyond the traditional social democratic and communist parties, as students and intellectuals stretched their muscles and became social forces. And the simultaneous upsurge in feminism, gay liberation and black power, and then environmentalism, while obviously autonomous were crucial influences on both the traditional movements and the new ones, leading to a new tendency to decentralisation, anti-authoritarianism, co-operation and libertarianism – all characteristic of most existing anarchist groups. Of course, some old traditions continued or did not want to adapt, including among some anarchists.

The influence of these new developments on bookshops will be discussed below.

### *Anarchy*

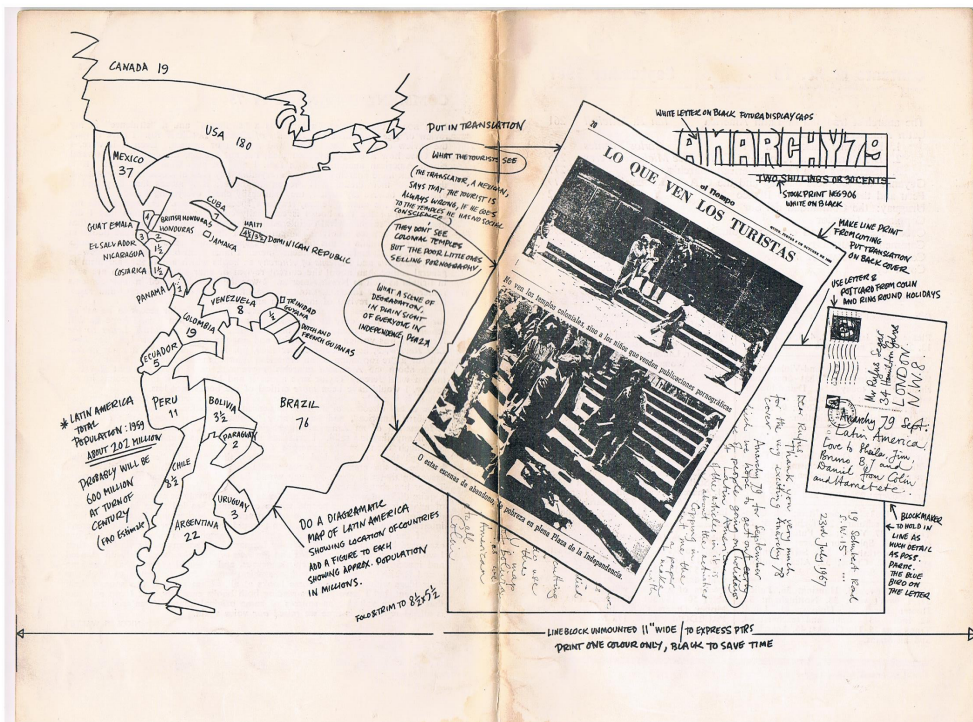
Colin Ward was the founder of the monthly journal *Anarchy* and its editor from the first issue in March 1961 to the last in December 1970. The concept of 'founder/editor' is interesting, as in most left organisations this joint function did not exist, after the earliest days of Robert Blatchford's *Clarion*, Kier Hardie's *Labour Leader*, or Lansbury's *Labour Weekly* and in the last two cases the position was owner/editor. Generally the editor of a paper was appointed by an elected body. There was one controversial exception in the Communist Party: R Palme Dutt was founder/editor of *Labour Monthly* and he went against the CP line over Czechoslovakia in 1968.

'As editor of *Anarchy* Ward had some success in putting anarchist ideas 'back into the intellectual bloodstream', largely because of propitious political and social changes' (David Goodway, a former member of Freedom, in *History Workshop* 79, 2014. Goodway believed that 'the nurturing of Ward's gifts was possibly Freedom's greatest achievement'. This view would not be held

by Meltzer who in a particularly unpleasant tirade in his autobiography wrote that ‘after ten years or so of trying to solve capitalism’s difficulties in terms of revisionist anarchism, Colin Ward gave up to write for political weeklies and the Guardian drawing on the anarchist past as if he belonged to it...’

Of the journal, Meltzer wrote: ‘(Anarchy) helped, as much as anything, to reinforce the myth of non-violent, sanitised ‘anarchism’ that could help capitalism out of its difficulties’. This sectarianism, the conviction that only his line was correct, and that he alone could define a good anarchist, is one of his most disagreeable characteristics.

In an early issue Ward wrote that he aimed at a circulation of 4,000 by 1970. The print run was 2,800 and only two dozen or so had sold out by June 1969, so he was disappointed and expressed the hope that *Freedom* and *Anarchy* would find someone whose sole task would be to push sales and find new readers (Ward in *Freedom* June 28, 1969 analysing the first 100 issues). He also made an interesting comment about the format: ‘The one-topic-per-issue policy which I have tried to keep to as far as possible has been intended to make the journal a monthly pamphlet to fill the gaps of contemporary anarchist literature. I am convinced that this is the most effective way to use an anarchist journal as propaganda’.



Ward was proud of the impact of the issues about workers' control, education, crime and punishment and housing. He also believed that having contributors from outside the normal circles that wrote for the journal, even if not anarchists and not necessarily 'politically correct', but generally had a sympathetic or similar approach, was positive.

The covers by Rufus Segar have become well-known - in fact a leading publisher in the field of design, Hyphen Press, produced a book about them *Autonomy: The Cover Designs of 'Anarchy'*. My favourite is that of No.79 which deconstructs the production process including the usual last minute postcard from the editor with the topic of the content he should illustrate, in this case Latin America.

A new series of *Anarchy* was set up under Phil Ruff in 1972. This became an independent production, moved closer to 'class struggle' anarchism but returned to the Freedom fold briefly in the 1980s.

The other journal produced by the group was the *Raven*. This appeared from 1987 to 2003 with 43 issues in paperback.

In 1960 *Freedom* moved out of Red Lion Street to Maxwell Road in Fulham.

*Freedom* had its first redesign since 1945, with the issue of March 4, 1961. There would be 42 issues a year. Sales approached 4,000 in 1964.

But these developments, including the move to Fulham, left a big hole in the organisation's finances.

Throughout the 1960s new anarchist papers appeared. *Direct Action*, *The Bridge*, *Anarchist Youth*, *Anarchist International*, *Solidarity*, *Black and Red Outlook*, *ABC Bulletin*, and many smaller ones, and a large number did not last long.

From 1965 to 1969 the key figures at *Freedom* were John Rety (who had a poetry column in the *Morning Star* towards the end of his life), Philip Sansom and Jack Stevenson. Another change in design in January 1965 followed Vernon's retirement, and was accompanied by a re-orientation of policy and style. It was more direct, there was a new back section on industry headed 'For Workers' Control'; there was an increase in anarcho-syndicalist articles, with Bill Christopher contributing regularly; more reports of direct action, especially anti-nuclear; there were more letters expressing varying ideas; a whole page was given over to a Scottish group once a month. In the September 15 1966 issue *Freedom* appeared in an eight page edition for the first time since the 1930s.

Nicholas Walter (whose grandfather had been involved decades earlier), John Lawrence and Cliff Harper became involved. The illustrations of Cliff Harper were to become a glory of the anarchist press and propaganda for decades to come, and way beyond the anarchist movement – the co-operative movement, book covers for Lawrence and Wishart, and illustrations for the Country Diary column in the *Guardian* since 1996.

But national organisation was still weak even with the AFB, which peaked with 85 groups in 1968. Its conferences tended to remain talking shops, though with a broad range of opinions and geographical representation. The SWF peaked in the mid-1960s with about 500 members.

Anarchist publishing's most damaging feud was the long-standing enmity between Meltzer (1920-1996) and Richards (1915-2001). Meltzer's paper *Black Flag* has been described by David Goodway as 'cantankerously militant'. This also describes his autobiography, *I Couldn't Paint Golden Angels*. Meltzer proudly claims he never changed any opinion from the age of 15, which is generally not a good look for anyone interested in politics. There are some very funny stories, and some poignant ones. He was a generous man and helped a lot of friends, comrades, anarchist businesses and papers, and especially solidarity causes - plus a few 'lame ducks' as he admits. His dedication to the branch of anarchism he espoused ('class struggle anarchism') is unquestionable, and he met most of the activists of his time. He was an activist and very well read but not a thinker and despised academics. He dismissed CND and the New Left as 'a diversion from the class struggle'. His endlessly repeated outbursts against the Freedom group do not help his cause: 'bourgeois-pacifist', 'Failed Mandarins', etc. just become a bore.

It is also harder to read than it should be because of a lack of dates – thanks to the police never returning his notes and diaries that they stole.

Through the London Anarchist Group he was involved from 1964 in the formation of the Anarchist Federation of Britain, becoming its press officer in 1965.

Also in 1965, with Ted Kavanagh, he started a new paper, *Cuddon's Cosmopolitan Review*, an irregular satirical magazine.

In 1967 during the dockers' strikes in London, Meltzer, with Joe Thomas, a printer and close friend, Pete Turner and Bill Christopher from *Freedom* and some SWF members, produced a free daily news sheet, *Ludd*, that was handed out at the London docks for a month.

It was probably in 1968 that the Coptic Street shop closed. Meltzer then got a job as a copytaker on the *Daily Sketch*, and then went to the *Daily Telegraph*.

We need to mention Meltzer's role in the Kate Sharpley Library. He played a large part in establishing it, and in starting its publishing programme of cheap reprints.

Donald Room's 'fat rat' in the *Wildcat* cartoon in *Freedom* mocked Meltzer. Vernon's 'infamous' 'Instead of an Obituary' in *Freedom* of May 16, 1996, following Meltzer's death, was obnoxious and widely criticised.

Ray, coming to edit *Freedom* after the death of both and keeping an open mind on this sort of dispute, believed that although 'poisonous' it did not impact much beyond their respective papers and had little effect on activities. Meltzer's uncompromising statements hide the complexities of the politics of his own praxis and that of *Freedom*. He continued to write occasional articles for it, and more often wrote letters to it. We have seen the help *Freedom* gave to other organisations. The Wooden Shoe sold *Freedom*; *Freedom* Bookshop probably always sold every other anarchist paper. And Walter gave a glowing review to Meltzer's work around Cuddon's *Cosmopolitan Review* and the *Wooden Shoe*. All this does back up Ray's analysis, though Ian Bone of *Class War* thought differently: 'the feud...had been a major factor in rendering the English anarchist movement impotent'. To me, it appears that the important divisions were political.

In 1967 the paper moved back to Angel Alley from Fulham. Express Printers had been at 84b Whitechapel High Street since the 1940s.

By 1968 the paper was almost breaking even, despite much higher expenses.

### ***Solidarity***

Straddling this period was another significant magazine, from the Syndicalist orientated *Solidarity* Group. Uniquely of all the other papers mentioned here, its roots were in Trotskyism – the Socialist Labour League to be precise. A small group was expelled in 1960, and they called themselves Socialism Re-affirmed and produced a paper called the *Agitator* (not to be confused with the LSE student paper of the same name in 1965-6). After six issues it changed its name to *Solidarity*, at the same time as the organisation. It ran to 89 issues. It was succeeded by *Solidarity for Social Revolution* (16 issues) then another version of *Solidarity*. There were six or seven autonomous regional groups with their own magazines, also called

*Solidarity*. Groups had to accept the general policies described in *As We See It* in 1967, clarified in the later *As We Don't See it*.

There was a short-lived *Solidarity for Workers' Self-Management*, produced nationally, but the organisation survived well in this decentralised format. Ideological agreement centred around the works of Cornelius Castoriadis ('Paul Cardan'), a Greek-French philosopher who headed the Socialisme ou Barbarie organisation, and had passed from communist to Trotskyist to libertarian socialism close to council communism, and those of Chris Pallis ('Maurice Brinton', 'Martin Grainger') in Britain. Other members were Ken Weller, Joe Jacobs (ex CPGB), and John Quail, the historian of anarchism. The group's politics were class based, and its influence was due to the series of pamphlets - over 60 - that it produced, many based on rank and file experience in factories. It was hostile to trade union 'bureaucrats' and constantly stressed 'self-management' as the way forward.

Among the most influential of these pamphlets were Brinton's *The Irrational in Politics* (printed in 4,000 copies), Ida Mett's *Kronstadt Commune* (3,800) and Castoriadis' *Modern Capitalism or Revolution*. The journals were issued in print runs of 1,200 to 1,400.

## 1970s

This was a lean decade for *Freedom*, writes Ray. The paper lost influence when the AFB declined; young activists preferred the direct action line of the *Black Flag*.

The price increased from 6d to 9d; proof-reading skills were lacking once Sansom finally left, though he did return 'to his first love'.

And on the publishing side a mere ten books appeared in the 1970s, compared to nearly thirty in the 1980s – but still better than the five in the 1960s.

Arthur Moyse started sending cartoons again, and Alan Albon wrote some articles before he went on to co-found *Green Anarchist*. By 1975, it was difficult to fill a weekly paper and it reverted to a fortnightly. Its coverage of the squatting movement was the best aspect, argues Ray, but it was still short of 'activism based content'.

More papers were being published, national and locally. *AFBIB* (an internal AFB bulletin), *Black Flag*, *Libertarian Struggle*, *Black and Red Outlook*, *Inside Story*, *Anarchy*, *Xtra*, *Liberty* (Yorkshire), the *Red Paper* (Ipswich). All were critical of *Freedom*.

Many radical local community papers display a strong anarchist influence, especially in articles on housing and local government bureaucracy and corruption. Squats helped groups to bond and mobilise support for papers and demonstrations.

Printing costs for the paper went up 50%, leading to the paper being set on a typewriter and posted to Vineyard Press in Colchester who had an offset litho instead of being printed on Freedom's own older printers. From 1976 Freedom was printed by Ian King at Magic Ink, now as an eight-page A4 magazine.

By the late 1970 there were only three on the production team – Dave Peers (he had started by popping into the shop then got roped in - same as Rob Ray and many others), Gillian Fleming and Francis Wright. The production process was chaotic: the paper was written up on Sunday and put on a train to Margate on Monday; the train came back with 2,000 copies which were taken by underground to Angel Alley for folding and despatch.

### **1980s onwards**

In the late 1970s there was the emergence of political anarchist punk, with Crass, which was to increase the impact of anarchism and its aesthetics – we will look at Class War below.

The 1980s saw a widening of political activity that was influenced by and influenced the anarchist movement. The Animal Liberation Front; road protests; environmentalism; rebirth of CND; Stop the Cities 1983-4. London Greenpeace and the McLibel campaign; 1981 riots; Peace Camps at Molesworth and Greenham.

The appearance of new anarchist distributors (Active Distribution from 1988, A Distribution) and a major new anarchist publisher/distributor (AK Press founded in 1987 in Scotland by Ramsay Kaanan, whose mother's initials explain the company's name) did change the profile of anarchism in bookshops.

Freedom Press, rather than the paper, was the driving force of the group, partly due to A Distribution which rented an office in Angel Alley and took on selling Freedom's stock in November 1980. Through this link Freedom played a role in organising the first London Anarchist Bookfair in 1981.

Stock control and publishing policy were not strict: it was estimated in



1986 that Freedom Press had a stock of 25,000 books and pamphlets in Angel Alley. Boxes of unsold copies of the journal *Raven* were later dumped in large quantities.

In 1982 *Freedom* became a monthly with 'readership falling towards the hundreds rather than thousands' (Ray p167).

A 1990 catalogue from A Distribution lists the publishers they handle and provides a useful snapshot of the range of anarchist publishing, though note it includes some foreign ones: Aldgate Press; Attack International; Black Rose; BM Blob; Canary Press; Cienfuegos Press; Elephant Editions; Freedom Press; Hooligan Press; Peoples' Publications; Phoenix Press; Pirate Press; Reaper Books; Rebel Press; Solidarity; Spectacular Times; Unpopular Books plus a long list of Miscellaneous titles from small groups or selected titles from larger foreign publishers.

In 1981 Freedom Press was finally clear of the debt incurred in the purchase of 84b Angel Alley, thirteen years earlier. Also in 1981 Aldgate Press was established as an independent co-operative, but with links to Freedom - it printed the paper for the next 30 years, free of charge as long as it made enough money through other business. It also printed *Black Flag* and *Direct Action*. It has thrived thanks to its professionalism and its turn to mainstream printing (especially for art galleries), though it has kept its radical publishers including, as well as Freedom, Rebel Press, Human Rights Watch and new ones like Ethical Fashion Forum, New Economics Forum, Extinction Rebellion.

By 1980 *Freedom* and *Black Flag* were appearing fortnightly on alternate Thursdays and despite their 'feud' they had joint meetings dealing with subscriptions.

Personnel/personal/political problems figure large in this history. In 1982 Gillian Fleming was expelled for inserting articles in *Freedom* supportive of the ALF and IRA without any discussion.

Between 1984 and 1986 Stu Stuart and Peers had control: the former inserted his own thoughts in response to articles by others and was 'retired'. Richards, who had returned to Freedom Press, arranged a new editorial group of Francis Wright, Dave Peers, Donald Rooum, and Charlie Crute as administrator.

Charlie Crute, following Richards' example, resisted attempts to open up *Freedom* to other trends.

1985: Subscribers totalled between 750 and 800, of which a very high percentage, 35%, were abroad.

Sales did increase during the 1984-5 miners' strike, though not as much as *Class War* and *Black Flag*.

In 1986 Richards, in some ways a control freak, protested strongly about the graphics and stopped them, as well as greatly reducing the numbers of cartoons and pictures. There was a return to the past of large expanses of text, but also a reduction in price.

*Freedom* was losing its role as a major source of news and events, together with *Peace News*. The Brighton-based *SchNEWS* from 1994 to 2014 used a free two-sided A4 sheet with 2,000 hard copies and 11,000 on the email list.

Then with the internet and self-publishing things changed. But *SchNEWS*, and [indymedia.org.uk](http://indymedia.org.uk) only exist on archive now.

On March 27, 1992 the premises were attacked by five men in balaclavas who smashed everything possible. Damage was estimated at £5,000, but nobody was hurt. On May 7, there was a break-in and most of the equipment installed to replace what had been smashed was stolen, but on June 4 an arson attack caused more serious damage, especially to Aldgate Press, estimated at £40,000. The solidarity response from the beginning was impressive and unexpected according to Ray's account. A year after the last attack an editorial in *Freedom* suggested that financially the paper was in a better position than before, as three supporters had made significant donations/bequests.

A 1993 survey of readers showed that 23% were over 60 (10% in 1960 survey) and 87% were either professionals or retired. The main criticism was that there was too much content from 'middle-aged, middle-class, white men'. A response to feminist criticism was 'we cannot accept that women comrades and readers are discriminated against in the pages of *Freedom*'. (p199).

## **2000+**

Opportunities abounded for protest and mobilisation with the G8 and G20 summits and alternative Social Forums. But numbers in anarchist organisations remained stubbornly low. The contrary positions they often took must have alienated wider support. For example, Bob Potter wrote an article titled 'The Trade Union - The Workers' Enemy' (*Freedom* October 2,

1971). Ray himself wrote of Labour's 1945 programme: 'NHS, a massive house building programme and the 'cradle to grave' welfare state, once again buying off the possibility of mass revolt'. There were individual anarchists in Britain who dreamt about or advocated violence (Bone succinctly called them 'the armed struggle fantasists') but the number is very small and the number who engaged in organised armed violence is infinitesimal – the Angry Brigade is the only example and their violence was specifically targeted against property. The violence of Class War members and the Black Bloc did turn to attacks on the police, and while one can argue about the tactics and strategy of this (Ian Bone came to the conclusion that if they went too far the Class War group would just fold with all its members in prison), it was a reflection of a contemporary widespread distrust of the police among many working class, and especially black and Asian, young people.

By 2001 the *Freedom* print run was about 600, though some of these were free copies sent to prisoners or long-standing supporters. This was the year that Toby Crowe, recently having left the SPGB hence with a class struggle background, walked in and worked almost full-time introducing many changes - to the extent that two other members of the editorial board left. However, Donald Rooum who had been involved from the 1940s was supportive of Crowe.

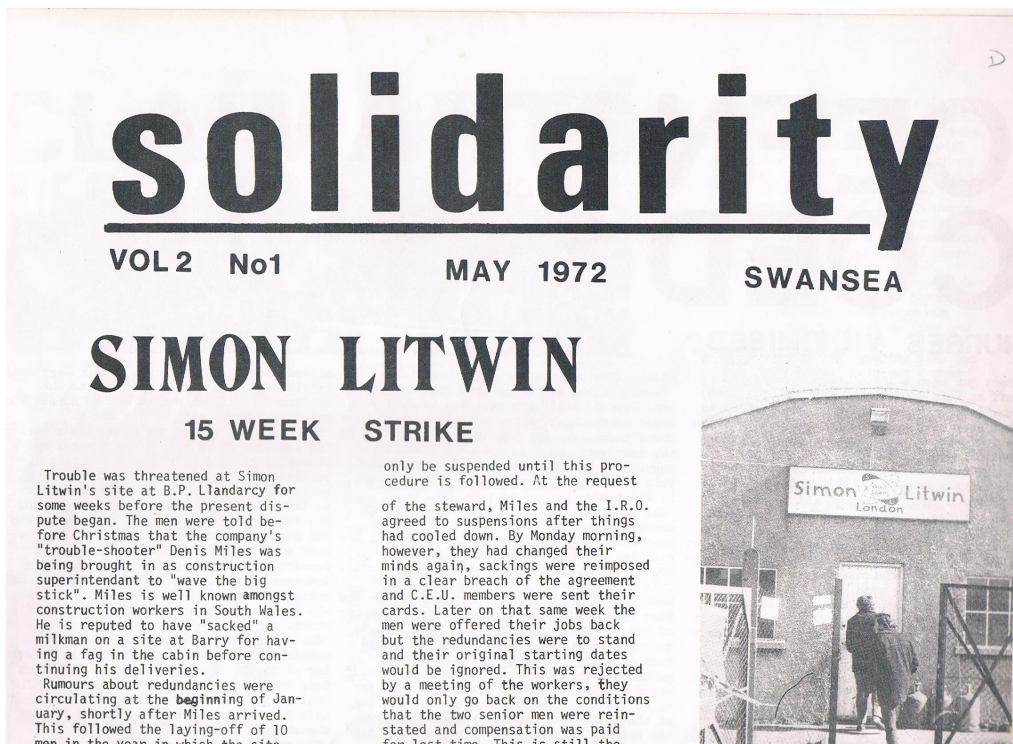
When Rob Ray arrives he is completely inexperienced: he had one meeting with Crowe before he left, so there was no chance of a proper induction, and he found himself with three others in their early twenties in the editorial group. And by December 2004 these three had also left. Ray, who lived 80 miles from London had a 'proper' job as a sub-editor on a local newspaper, for which he also wrote articles. In 2006 Ray wrote an editorial 'I'm on Strike' begging for someone to share responsibility for the paper by taking on editing alternate copies with him. To his amazement he got a response, from Matt B.

At this time the Press was losing £14,000 p.a., partly through excessive print runs and rising business rates. But some of the financial problems were self-inflicted. There was an unexpected invoice for £4,000 for photographs used in *Beating the Fascists*, published in 2010, which indicates a terrible lack of control over publishing policy. From 2007 rooms were let out to other organisations – Advisory Service for Squatters, London Coalition Against Poverty, Corporate Watch.

The last three editors of *Freedom* were Dean Talent (2009-2012), Matt Black (2012-2013) and Charlotte Dingle (2013-2014, when the printed version ended).

In 2013 the business was broke and was only saved by another arson attack in February which was helped by a failure to secure the premises by pulling down the metal shutters. Electricians were seriously damaged, hundreds of books burned, the bound archive copies of *Freedom* charred but not completely destroyed. The fire insurance had run out the week before, but massive media interest led to a huge number of donations from all over the world which covered the cost of repairs.

The paper was losing a lot of money, though down from £7,000 a year in 2009 to £3,000 in 2010 when it went to a monthly. At the end of 2012 the layout/admin person was made redundant before money ran out. There was no enthusiasm for selling the paper – even among the collective. An attempt to advertise publicly for a new editor was made: ‘although many people applied, only one turned out to be an anarchist!’ (Andy Meinke in *Freedom* announcing the decision to stop printing and go on-line). A meeting at the 2014 Bookfair to explain the decision drew only 30 of the remaining 225 subscribers.



After 2014, the website was relaunched as a daily 'newswire'. The paper became a free bi-annual. The digitisation of the archive of papers began. Work started on refurbishing the building and the publishing business was expanded.

### **Class War**

The paper *Class War* has been mentioned in passing. It is arguably anarchism's most successful paper despite its short life – the first issue was dated April 1983 and it ended with no.73, with the organisation disbanding itself, believing it had done all it could. It had an on-line presence since 2004-5, and curiously it did revive briefly as a party in the 2015 general election.

Ian Bone was the man who started it with a small group of friends. In Swansea as a student and after, he got involved with Solidarity, then flirted briefly with some of the extreme Welsh nationalists. Bone was a charismatic activist who loved writing, producing and selling radical papers, almost to the point of obsession. His early efforts included: *Swansea Solidarity*, *Penderyn*, the *Swansea SN8 Bulletin* (Bone and his friends were close to some of the Stoke Newington 8, anarchists accused of supporting the Angry Brigade, but who were found not guilty, others were). 'We wanted to turn to the working class but we didn't know anyone who was working!' A little exaggeration as he was, or had been, working in the Post Office. They set up a Claimants' Union and produced the *Dole Express*, a two-sided duplicated A4 sheet (the other side was titled the *Bun House Bugle*, referring to the local name given to the Social Security office) given out free, but they got donations which more than covered any expenses. A group of women from the local housing estate became involved and were very successful in taking up claimants' problems and organised sit-ins if necessary.

The Claimants' Union was so successful that Swansea was chosen as the venue for the first conference of the National Federation of Claimants' Unions. Bone then turned to the fight against corruption in local government completely dominated by the Labour Party. Having 'researched council minutes and Companies House' he wrote a twenty page pamphlet, *Swansea Mafia*, and got 5,000 printed and nervously distributed on all the estates in one night. It was effective and led to the jailing of six councillors though the corrupt businessmen escaped charges. It also led to the 'Ratepayers' taking over from Labour in 1978. Four Alarm candidates stood in the local elections but got nowhere despite the paper's popularity. The anarchist movement usually refused to stand in elections as a matter of principle, but

like the rest of the left outside the Labour Party could never come to terms with the dilemma, theoretical and practical, of how to transfer any local support they may have into 'power' (or, since anarchists don't want power, 'revolution'), and the same applied, and still applies, to national elections of course: if you can't persuade people even to vote for you how do you expect them to turn up on the barricades?

The next step was a paper that could deal with and follow up new cases of corruption, plus have other local news and gig guides. This was the *Alarm*. Nearly 30 years later Bone proudly wrote 'I can say without any doubt that *Alarm* was to become the most effective paper I have ever seen'. The first issue came out in October 1977, 50 copies of a 4 sided, duplicated and stapled leaflet that looked not much different to the Communist Party factory papers of the 1920s and 1930s. By Christmas they were selling 500 a week. It now had a scanned illustrated cover but the duplicating was so poor it could be difficult to read. There was some apprehension about the language: a council leader was probably used to being called 'a wanker', even a 'fucking wanker' but when that was in huge letters on the front page one seller said he couldn't show it to his wife, but he still increased his order. Bone admits, gleefully, that 'the paper was ferocious...with a vulgar humour' - but it worked. The new Ratepayer leader of the council was soon also arrested for corruption. The sellers had unofficial minders who protected them in the regular weekend evening pub sales - the fear of the local mafia had been broken, but they still existed. The sellers would know of the events that led to Tom Brown, one of the founders of anarcho-syndicalism, becoming a spokesman for local residents against the opening of gangster run brothels in London in the 1960s and being permanently incapacitated in a brutal attack.

It is clear that there was a big response from readers with news stories they wanted printed - from factories, hospitals, schools and even the world of local sport. Sales reached 5,000 just in Swansea and it continued for two years. But now Bone wanted to know if it was possible to produce a national paper along the same lines. He went to London in 1982, but still went back to Swansea regularly enough to produce another paper, the *Scorcher*, linked to the prosecution of a Welsh bomber.

Bone writes that *Extra*, a paper edited by Richard Parry, was a precursor with 'its humour and support for anti-police violence'. He produced his own version in 400 copies and called it 'Fuck Off'.

The first *Class War* was written over a weekend in Swansea, quickly printed in Cardiff for £75 lent by a sex worker in Ladbroke Grove where Bone lived (a group of sex workers were very supportive of the paper, possibly including Cynthia Payne), and the 1,000 copies were hauled back to London on the coach by Bone. His group of friends sold it on a Youth CND demonstration ('*Class War* – extremely violent anarchist paper' was the slogan shouted), at a May Day rally the next day and some were dropped off at bookshops - Compendium, Freedom, Collets, Housmans, 121 - and the final ones sold at a miners' rally in Cardiff. It had sold out in a fortnight, and another 1,000 were printed.

No thought had been given to future issues, but Bone managed to have No.2 printed by June. It was then printed by Phil Gard at Calvert's North Star Press at cost price. Early on each edition was written by different people, an experiment that was not entirely successful as the style and politics changed and Bone was clever enough to know that branding was crucial.

**YES! I'M A GENEROUS GIT!**

HERE'S MY £ \_\_\_\_\_ MY NAME IS: \_\_\_\_\_

DONATION, \_\_\_\_\_

So please send me...

Six issues of *Class War* free

Free copy of *Unfinished Business*

Free T-Shirt  
Choose from below

**JUST DO IT**

**LOGO**

**BY ALL MEANS**

**NEW HOMES**

and I live at: \_\_\_\_\_

my postcode: \_\_\_\_\_

Sorry! Short sleeve only      cheques etc payable to 'Class War'


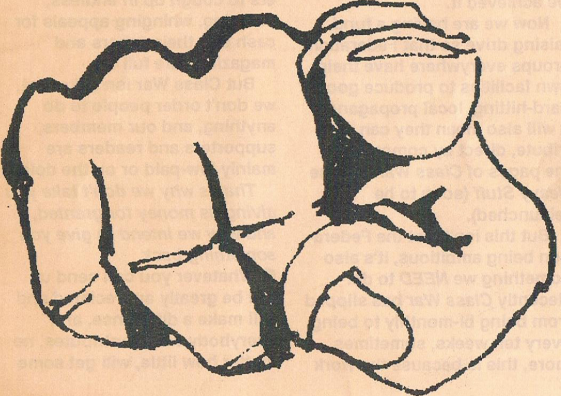
**please send to:**


**BCW**

**po box 772**

**bristol**

**bs99 1eg**



**NEEDS YOU!**

It was famous for its provocative covers: Beware the Mad Cow (Thatcher), We Want More Coppers on Our Streets (being beaten up), Community Shopping (looting), We Have Found New Homes for the Rich (mass war graves); and regular features: 'Mug a Yuppie', 'Hospitalised Copper of the Month' etc.

It had short articles, huge headlines, many photographs, crude photomontage and handwritten felt pen headlines all in the punk idiom. The language was rich in insults and swearing. But it had humour, and in this and other ways it was a wild mirror image of the tabloid press. In a publicity leaflet appealing for money, it called itself 'Britain's most unruly tabloid'. It was well described by Mo Klonsky and Chus Aguirre: 'reads as if the Sun had been taken over by Khmer Rouge' (*Tribune* 17 March, 1989). It was aimed at punk youth but it spread wider.

The paper was iconoclastic with no respect for the traditional wings of British anarchism. It was critical of *Black Flag* for being obsessed with international terrorism and Spanish syndicalism; critical of *Freedom* for being boring and irrelevant. It was even more critical of the Tory government, but also of all parties, the peace movement, even the peaceful Stop the City events organised by anarchists.

'Editorial discussions' were often held in pubs and *Bash the Rich* is full of details of very long drinking sessions, also enjoyed before and after confrontational events. So much so that Richard Parry's one-off magazine *Logo!*, which was a satire of the whole range anarchist periodicals, wrote of 'the alcoholic road to anarchism' in respect of *Class War*.

Sales reached 20,000 at its peak claims Bone, though regular sales were probably 15,000. Its humour and originality meant that it was very easy to sell. The 1,000 print of No.5 sold in three hours at a large student demonstration. Bone describes a sale at a miners' march in Mansfield when they sold out again, to the chagrin of the Trotskyist paper sellers who were present en masse, but they were helped because the cover had a photo of a miner with his hands on Ian MacGregor's throat with the caption 'We should've finished the fucking bastard off there and then!' – and he was a local miner. Recognised and told of the paper, he came up himself and bought twenty copies. Dave Douglass, a well-known anarchist miner and author, stated that it was the only left paper well received by miners all over the country during the strike. Most copies were sold by members of the Class War group, though this never exceeded 150 and was down to 20 near the end. Other good sales outlets were the numerous squats. The paper was



distributed nationally by Central Books to the radical bookshops that still existed.

Class War as a group did call for violence, but some it was, like the graphics, of a cartoon nature. 'If you want peace prepare for war' was the slogan of the Angry Brigade that they took up. They engaged in stunts. They thought violence against the property of capitalist institutions would be popular; they often used the slogan 'Bash the Rich' and they did have a day out at the Henley Regatta pushing and shoving 'toffs' and their tables over; they called for offensive attacks on the police, as opposed to defensive, and on occasion they engaged with violence, usually defensive, against fascists. They never threatened serious violence against individuals, despite the words written sometimes, and they had no military pretensions. Bone knew they had no comeback if they did. At the end of the book, he reflects on the resistance his Labour parents had shown in face of a rural Tory squirearchy and he recognises that 'we weren't the only radicals since 1945'. He still believed that if Class War had been able to mobilise more people on the streets that could have led to Thatcher's downfall, especially if it coincided with the miners' strike of 1984/5

The *Heavy Stuff* was their more 'theoretical' journal. The subtitle was 'The Thought Behind the Anger'. It also used simple language, and many photographs. And they had a gay magazine, the *Wolverine*, produced by Steve Sutton who argued that everyone should be bisexual.

## **Bookshops**

### **Freedom**

The first reference in Ray to a Freedom bookshop is in 1941: 'a bookshop with large storage basement at Red Lion Passage, run by Meltzer', though the latter writes that he just helped out. Most stock consisted of pamphlets brought back to London from the Whiteway colony.

Red Lion Passage was on the south-east corner of Red Lion Square, opposite Conway Hall. Shortly after it opened, on one of the last days of the Blitz, May 11, a bomb destroyed numbers 18-21 including Freedom's office and the stock of pamphlets. The office moved to 27 Belsize Road where there was just enough room for a small bookshop. Rents in London during the Blitz were cheap as many shops closed to escape the bombs. The group raised nearly £500 in less than a year to clear its debts and replace much of the stock. Lilian Wolfe ran the bookshop as well as the administration of the paper. In early 1945 the businesses moved to 27 Red Lion Street.

In 1944 a second Freedom shop was opened in Bristol at 132 Cheltenham Road. The only comment I've found is that it acted as the distribution hub for mail order. Ray thinks this closed in the late 1950s.

As stated earlier, in 1960 the Freedom premises had moved to Fulham. As well as the offices, there was room for the bookshop, and 'a stockroom and a 200 feet garden'. But the location was terrible for a bookshop.

Mary Canipa was the person mainly responsible for the bookshop in 1968. She had previously been a volunteer in Red Lion Square with her partner Jack Robinson in the 1950s.

She came back and was there in the late 1970s, being replaced by 'the more taciturn' Jim Huggon. This description was borne out by Martyn Everett 'The bookshop seemed terribly disorganised and dusty, and Jim Huggon, who seemed to spend most of his life in the bookshop, didn't really seem interested in chatting to people at all' (Ray, p160). This impression of poorly looked after stock was found in comments by other customers: the first job in London in 1952 of Alistair Graham, future trade union leader and Chairman of the Committee on Standards in Public Life, was near the Freedom Bookshop 'full of dusty anarchist pamphlets'. (*The People's Chronicle* No.9, Winter 1987/86). But at some stage most radical bookshops would have merited this description. One wonders what the customer described in this episode by Bernard Crick thought of the shop:

'In 1945, when *Animal Farm* was published and sold out almost immediately, Orwell became famous overnight. The fame extended to Buckingham Palace and a royal messenger was sent to the publisher but it had sold out. He was directed with horse, carriage, top hat and all, to the anarchist Freedom Bookshop in Red Lion Square where George Woodcock gave him a copy'. (*George Orwell: A Life*, p341).

Later bookshop managers, or volunteer managers, included Kevin McFaul in the 1990s, who was paid 'a stipend'. McFaul had resigned because of disagreements with Toby Crowe. Jayne Clementson took over, one of her many tasks in the Freedom office over thirty years.

Before he retired in 2003, Donald Rooum had been working in the bookshop on Saturdays, having taken over from Arthur Moyses 'whose idea of running the shop was to close it, leaving a note on the door telling customers 'We're in the White Hart. Join us.'" (Rooum quoted in Ray, p213).

In 2007 Mo Moseley then Andy Meinke, both experienced booksellers, arrived and ran the bookshop. A clearout of the storeroom at this time,

including old books and papers, meant that the bookshop could move to the more accessible ground floor 'after 40 years of being hidden away upstairs'.

## Other Bookshops

### Early shops

Our listing of Radical Bookshops indicates which are of an anarchist orientation. From the first half of the twentieth century the Flynn's Bomb Shop in Bristol, the Bomb Shop in Cardiff. The Eastern Branch in Glasgow of Guy Aldred's ACPF had a shop in Shettleston 'The Red Spot in the East', and there was a Bakunin Press Bookshop in Buchanan Street. A third shop belonging to Aldred was the Strickland Press (1939-1968) at 106 George Street, though this may have been a later incarnation of the latter.

In London, Henderson's and Lahr's Bookshop are the only ones that have come to light – and the owners of the former were in the ILP. The ILP's own shops and Collets may have been the major source of anarchist literature in this period.

From the second half of the twentieth century there are Housmans, and The Wooden Shoe Bookshop which precede the Federation of Radical Booksellers era. From Meltzer's account it appears that the Wooden Shoe at 42 New Compton Street was set up by his friends Anna Blume, Ted Kavanagh and Jim Duke and his own role in it is downplayed. In a cheaply produced pamphlet titled *Wooden Shoe* No.1, which was intended to be an irregular magazine but which only appeared once, Meltzer's presence is clear. Ian Bone in his autobiography *Bash the Rich* describes going into 'Albert Meltzer's Wooden Shoe Bookshop'. I would expect Meltzer put some funding into the shop.

The shop closed because they had insufficient money to pay rent and rates. Meltzer writes that a few years later it might have survived just selling anarchist material, but there was not much published at the time 'and what there was could be found on the bottom shelves in other establishments'. He continued 'To get customers it had to find more stock and this had to be Marxist or non-political literary and meant running up debts to publishers which eventually swamped the venture'. Meltzer was a poor business person and this quote shows some naivety about running a bookshop: all stock for any shop involved 'debts to publishers', and the feasibility of any shop just selling anarchist publications is questionable. Mo Moseley took over the Freedom bookshop in the mid-1980s and Ray wrote 'the bookshop was able to announce it had gone 'fully anarchist' with Mo Mosely (sic),

arriving for a temporary stint as main co-ordinator, drastically reducing the non-specialist stock while retaining similar sales' (Ray p184). Mo went on to manage Phoenix Press, an anarchist press, and also worked at Housmans, before returning to Freedom some twenty years later.

Looking at shops that were primarily anarchist or predominantly so, here are some of them from our Listing. From the FRB era, small shops include: Amamus in Blackburn; Single Step in Lancaster; the Other Branch in Leamington; the Anarchist Bookshop in Leeds; Black Flag in Leicester; Partisan in Luton; Red & Black in Middlesbrough; Revolt in Swansea. Considering that Ian Bone is such a great publicist, it is disappointing that we learn practically nothing from his book about this last shop that he set up.

While anarchist shops were often among the smallest, the most under-capitalised and thus short-lived, larger shops that had large anarchist sections would probably not define themselves as anarchist, perhaps with the exceptions of Agitprop and Rising Free. This group of shops might include Grass Roots, News from Nowhere, Days of Hope, Mushroom, Compendium. Partly this is due to needing a larger stock base to be financially viable, but is mainly a consequence of their desire to serve a broader community – feminists and women in general, black and minority ethnic communities, LGBTQ+, children, environmental activists, every variety of socialists etc. And their conception of anarchism might be broader than that of the anarchist groups. It could, for example, be tempered by feminism or different interpretations of socialism and green perspectives.

'Infoshops' were a feature of anarchism. Centres that may have sold books as a sideline, and that probably sold more

**56a Infoshop**  
100% volunteer run, not for profit radical social centre.  
Books, pamphlets, magazines, information for action.  
Tea, coffee & massive open access archive.  
Thursday 2-8pm, Friday 3-7pm & Saturday 2-6pm  
[www.56a.org.uk](http://www.56a.org.uk) 56 Crampton St, London SE17

magazines and pamphlets than books. They may have been advice centres, community centres or just drop-in centres for anarchist activities that may have provided refreshments or rooms for meetings. Many would be run entirely by volunteers. 56a Infoshop is the only one to have taken a decision to use the term in their name and they have been going for over 30 years.

There was a 'squatted bookshop' in Albany Street run by Tim Paine and 'Spike' – referred to in Bone but with no more details unfortunately.

Apart from anarchist shops mentioned, it is worth noting that a fair number of anarchists also worked as booksellers, though not necessarily selling anarchist material.

An early case is S Carlyle Potter who wrote regularly in *Anarchy* before he eventually became a Tolstoyan anarchist and became a bookseller in Southampton (Becker).

Meltzer, with no capital, rented a shop in Gray's Inn Road and set up a bookshop selling the remnants of the stock from Simpkin Marshall, who had gone into liquidation, which he acquired on long-term credit, together with remainders and second hand books. He also sold books as furnishing accessories, a specialised field that still exists. When rents were about to be dramatically increased, he did a runner to 7, Coptic Street and carried on there. Stuart Christie worked in the shop in 1968, on his release from prison in Spain for attempting to assassinate Franco.

## Conclusion

*A Beautiful Idea* is written by a participant activist not a professional historian, and has the strengths and weaknesses that often follow. I have mentioned some of the strengths. As for weaknesses, it is worth mentioning a few in the hope these can be avoided by other radical histories or perhaps even acted upon in a revised edition. First of all the author, with typical modesty, does not say very much about his own contribution. My major criticism is that the addition of various voices within the text, in itself an excellent idea, makes the chronology unclear at times and these passages are not always sufficiently demarcated from the main text to know who is writing or being quoted. There is also repetition with the large 'People' section of over 70 pages at the end of the book – though again some of that material is important. Given these weaknesses, the absence of an index is disastrous. It seems quite common in anarchists' memoirs – neither Meltzer, Bone or Caldwell have indexes.

All this indicates that the book would have benefited from a skilled editor with plenty of time to devote to it. The book is published by a militant publisher that is under-capitalised and under-resourced, with the strengths and weaknesses that this, too, entails.

The book's title is good. It is positive, as befits a politics that gives a prominent role to utopianism. At the same time it implies a politics that has not been realised and in this respect *A Beautiful Idea* could be appropriate for other left radical traditions, whether Communist, co-operative and even, perhaps, Democratic Socialist. We should all not lose sight of our own Beautiful Idea.

I need to say that I have not attempted to give a full account of bookshops here, mainly due to time and space. There is also very little written about anarchist bookshops and I'm hopeful that our Radical Bookselling History Project will be able to record more people who have worked in one – or more. Please contact us if you think you could help, or let us know of anyone we could approach.

There's a link to one bookshop's history below (121 Bookshop) for starters, and we will be putting more history up in future issues.

I am just beginning to immerse myself in the history of anarchist literature and periodicals – my project extends beyond bookshops to a history of the Radical Book and Book Trade from 1780, covering every radical movement.

If any reader is interested in helping me produce a comprehensive listing of anarchist magazines, publishers and books please let me know.

## Further Reading

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