

Religious intolerance

During the 1998 pre-Christmas festivities, a little girl of our acquaintance asked her school-teacher, was the baby Jesus story true, or was it pretend like the Father Christmas story. The teacher replied, "It is true for some people".

Forty years ago, a teacher asked the same question might have replied, unequivocally, that the baby Jesus story was true. But this was an inner-city teacher in 1998, faced with a class of children from atheist, Muslim, Hindu, Sikh, Confucian and Christian families. She could not declare Christianity true without offending the parents who believed otherwise and anyway as an educated young adult she was probably an atheist herself.

So she came out with the religiously tolerating, fashionably relativist answer "It is true for some people", which is nonsense.

Opinions differ about what is true. Some particular opinion about life, the universe

and everything may be correct, or all opinions may be wrong. But truth is not a matter of opinion. Whatever is true is true, whether or not any person knows it or believes it. As the saying goes, 'the truth is out there'.

A sensible answer to the child's question would have been 'Some people believe it is true, and some don't' (and it would not have been intolerant for the teacher then to state her own opinion, 'I don't').

Religion gives meaning and purpose to life for many people. We cannot disapprove of that in itself. We derive meaning and purpose ourselves from an opinion which we know is not shared by everybody, that a non-coercive society is feasible, at least to the extent of being worth struggling for. Like people with religious beliefs, we believe we are right and those who disagree with us are mistaken.

But the religious often derive meaning and purpose from the opinion that those of different opinions should be reviled,

rejected, killed or forcibly converted. Hinduism is not a single belief but a complex of widely varying beliefs, lumped together by outsiders. It is internally tolerant, and therefore supposed by some to be tolerant of religions not classed as Hindu.

But in Gujerat, Christians among the Adavasi forest dwellers are being forcibly converted to Hinduism and their churches burned. It is said that the Hindu persecutors, the Jagran Manch (Awakening Movement) are a front organisation of the BJP political party, and that their forcible conversions are part of their conflict with the Congress Party, whose current leader Sonia Gandhi is an Italian-born Roman Catholic. But the BJP declares itself to be a Hindu party, in the way that European right-wing political parties often declare themselves to be Christian.

Christianity has always been intolerant, not only to non-Christians but also to Christians of slightly different persuasions. Saint Hippolytus in the early third century railed against the followers of Sabellians who believed that Father, Son and Holy Ghost were different aspects of the same person, while Saint Athanasius in the fourth century railed against the Arians who believed that they were separate persons. They are both saints because they held the orthodox belief that Father, Son and Holy Ghost are neither the same nor different, and at the same time both the same and different.

If Christians believed the truth of Christianity to be self-evident, they would of course encourage the widest examination of self-evidently false alternative beliefs. But in fact they have discouraged thought, at least since the Roman Emperor Theodosius IV ordered the destruction of all books critical of Christianity or supportive of alternatives.

(continued on page 3)



MOSES GETTING A BACK VIEW

And it came to pass that I will put thee in a cleft of rock, and I shall take away my hand, and thou shalt see my back parts – Exodus xxxiii, 23

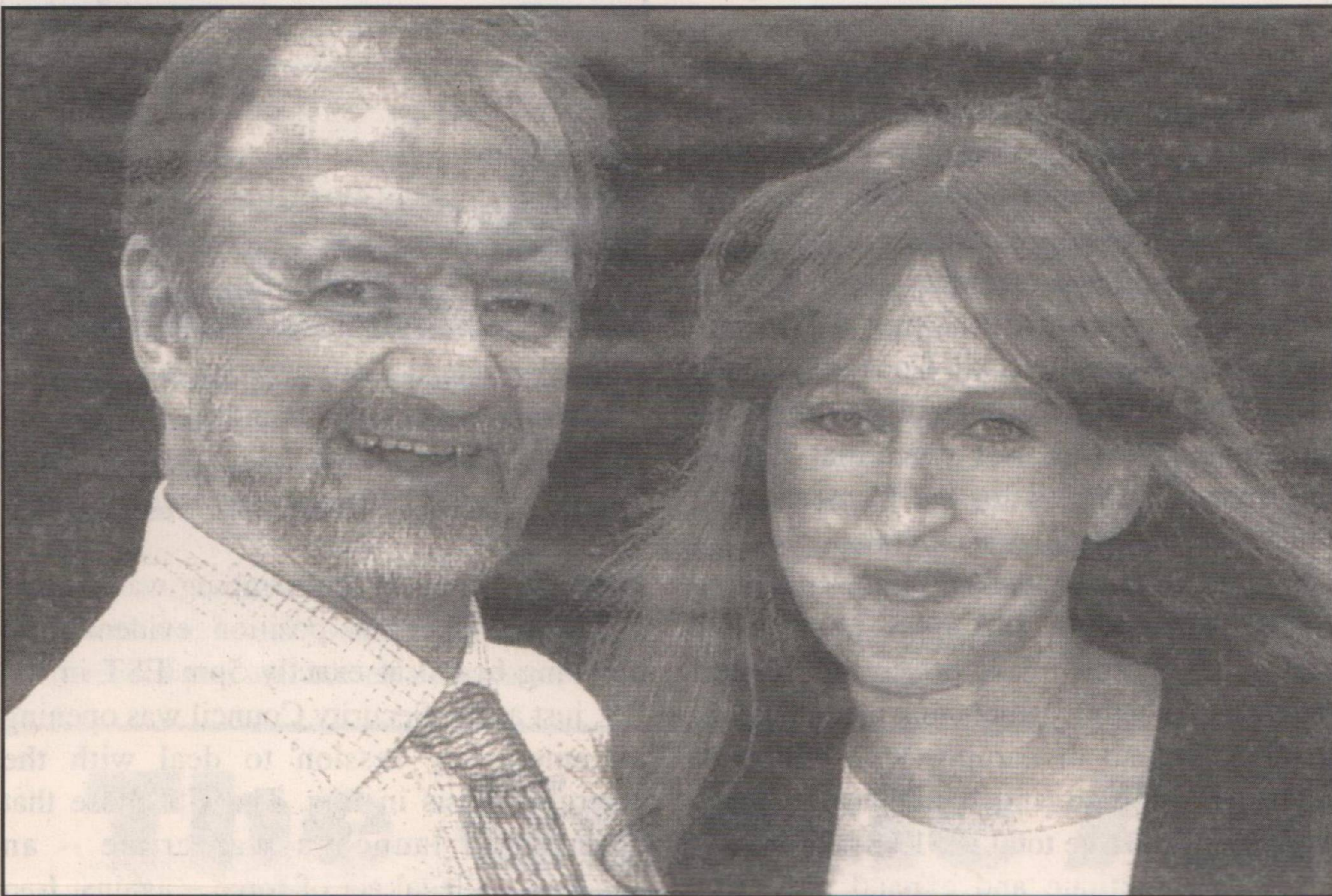
anarchist fortnightly Freedom

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New Labour's gossip column politics



Foreign Secretary Robin Cook with his second wife Gaynor

Last week the Prime Minister Tony Blair tried to grab back the initiative for New Labour after a grim gossipy Christmas in the media, first about Mandelson's mortgage and latterly Dr Margaret Cook's autobiography *A Slight and Delicate Creature* about her life with the Foreign Secretary Robin Cook. Mr Blair declared that press reports about 'who said what to who', as in Dr Cook's book, only has the effect of "diminishing politics to a gossip column".

To get away from the stories of dodgy deals and loans from the generous Geoffrey Robinson, former Paymaster General, to Peter Mandelson, former Industry Secretary, and Mr Cook's philanderings, the Prime Minister announced a 'harsh' New Labour re-launch. The theme is to be 'personal responsibility'; lock-up more burglars and tougher jobless benefit rules.

Countering the claim that New Labour is a patchwork of incoherent poses rather than policies based on substance, the Chancellor Gordon Brown stated: "It is to Tony Blair's credit that in the '90s each policy we have unveiled is rooted in lasting values – equal opportunity for all, self-improvement, personal responsibility". New Labour signifies principles, not a patchwork, claim the party leadership.

To prove it Mr Blair has come up with a re-launch regime that he himself calls 'harsh and authoritarian'. Slogans to grab the inmates of Middle England – a £300 million drive against burglars and stricter benefit rules.

Heralding the time when *The Observer* reports "every claimant, including the disabled, the bereaved, single parents and those caring for elderly relatives, will have to prove that they are willing to take paid employment, or risk losing benefit. Only a few, like people awaiting major surgery, will be exempt".

Hence we get the Social Security Secretary Alistair Darling announcing a £100 million scheme in which all those who claim benefit in a given area will get a personal minder to guide them to look for work.

Ancient Rome and New Labour

The government wants to show it means business and shake off the accusations that New Labour is all 'wind and piss', or style and presentation. So what does it do? Put the boot in on burglars and benefit scroungers. Good instincts – amid the painful pay-offs for Mandelson and Charlie Whelan, the Chancellor's former aide – for what *Private Eye* called "The Wages of Spin".

But will it distract us from all the gossip about Robinson's financial wheeling and dealings, Mandy's thwarted ambition or Cook's lust? I hope not. One of the few things left to enjoy in politics under New Labour is the fuel it now provides in the gossip columns.

Margaret Cook, former wife of the Foreign Secretary, accused 'Randy Robin' of being a womaniser who "would have gone with anyone who was sufficiently compliant and presentable". She presents him as a kind of egomaniac who, when he was not drunk and depressed, was calling his colleagues in the New Labour leadership but who finished up having to "choose between his principles and his career". He, she says, chose his career, though he believed Tony Blair had "sold his soul to the devil".

David Aaronovitch, the journalist, described Dr Cook's book as a savage attack, but it is pale compared to earlier historical accounts. Procopius (a senior civil servant in the Roman Empire, born in about 500AD) saw fit to record the ghastly tale of the Christian Emperor Justinian and his wife Theodora in his document *The Secret History*. Dealing with the early life of

Theodora, Procopius relates that "often in the theatre ... she would throw off her clothes ... with [a] minimum covering she would spread herself out and lie face upwards on the floor. Servants on whom this task had been imposed would sprinkle barley grains over her private parts, and geese trained for the purpose used to pick them off one by one with their bills and swallow them."

This tale would seem to top anything the English tabloids have come up with in recent times. Spicier than toe-sucking or even the post-war court reports in the *News of the World* which Orwell used to read avidly. No wonder it was locked up in the Vatican library for so long.

If the *News of the World* court reports could shed light on the nature of English murder for Orwell and Procopius give Gibbon clues on the history of ancient Rome, why shouldn't Dr Cook's book on her life with the Foreign Minister give us insight into some of the shenanigans of New Labour.

Left lacks libertarian vitamin

However repugnant it may be to us, New Labour is more attuned to our times than the state socialists of old Labour. We need to understand the triumph of New Labour 'mystique' over old socialist 'materialism'. Mandelson and the spin-doctor's skills at media management has been an obvious advantage, as is the shiny trendy imagery attached to the party and the glossy rhetoric.

New Labour is the spiritual home for a civilisation steeped in high technology and watching too much television. A regime like that of New Labour does not appear out of thin air. No, for this kind of system to make headway and remain popular the culture has to be suitably supine and the conditions right.

Before New Labour came to power we were told that once in office the left will assert itself. In opposition we were told the Prescotts, the Cooks, the Blunkets were all sitting on their hands waiting to force through a left-wing programme once Labour got in. Instead now we are told that Robin Cook readily sold his soul to the devil to keep his job. Blunket seems to be happily in the New Labour mainstream, while no one seems to know what Prescott is up to.

Lesser figures – like the new Paymaster General (formerly Wedgwood Benn's secretary) and hitherto a left-winger called 'Red Dawn' – have been no less obsequious once office beckoned. Asked about her change of tune and new designer clothes and politics of a 'Blair Babe', she said her experience had made her "less raw" and able to "put things better". She told *Woman's Hour* that, although she couldn't afford Armani clothes, "fashions had changed since the '80s" and she was just keeping up with the new style.

This sense of style has given the New

Labour mystique an edge over the old socialists. Them that stop while society moves on are trampled to death – which seems to be what has happened to old Labour and many on the left in British politics. The fault in old Labour and the British left in general has long been that it is conservative.

In times of social change like ours, the most utopian political position is the defence of the status quo. Most of the British left are trying to uphold the status quo – defend the welfare state or bring back old legislation to protect trade unions. The miners' strike in 1984-85 was about upholding the status quo, as was the recent Liverpool dockers' dispute.

This is the problem of the British left. Behind all their rhetoric, which mostly divides them from the English people, they have no real ideal to fight for. A command economy, more state control, nationalisation of this and that, will not rally a sizeable public.

The reformist left is paralysed and unable to enact worthwhile reforms, and the revolutionary left is anything but revolutionary. The TUC can only talk about lowering interest rates, in chorus with the CBI employers.

There is no serious alternative to New Labour with any credibility. The left in this country, although it has long had a syndicalist tradition, has been conservative and lacking a spirit of libertarian socialism or having an anarchist vitamin. Without an injection of anarchism the old socialists seem doomed to go on stumbling around proposing inadequate remedies in a plague.



Robin's former wife Dr Margaret Cook

The function of Iraq in international affairs

Before rational discussion of Iraq can become possible, a tangle of lies and misinformation must be cleared away. The web of lies covers both the issues of bombing and sanctions.

Regarding the bombing, it is claimed that the recent US/UK bombing campaign was centrally concerned with the defence of UNSCOM and was the reluctant last resort of states who had exhausted all other means of supporting the inspection process – in the face of Iraqi ‘disarmament’ of UN inspectors.

It was clear even before the recent revelations concerning US intelligence penetration and exploitation of UN inspection teams that UNSCOM would not survive the bombing, at least in its present form. This outcome was predictable beforehand – and in fact was predicted beforehand by numerous commentators. One unnamed US official was reported as saying on 7th November 1998, “I think you have to assume that UNSCOM doesn’t survive a strike” (*Washington Post*). President Clinton himself explained that he did not order the threatened November bombings in part because they would “mark the end of UNSCOM” (*Daily Telegraph*, 20th November). It follows inexorably that the bombings could not have been motivated by the desire to support UNSCOM, whose destruction was a predictable and predicted outcome of the attack.

As for the bombings being a last resort, Tony Blair claimed to have “bent over backwards” in trying to accommodate any reasonable demands from Baghdad – negotiations had been exhausted, claimed the Prime Minister. In fact, Britain and the US destroyed the prospects of a negotiated solution to the inspection crisis. On 30th October, the day before Iraq ended cooperation with UNSCOM, “the US rejected proposals by Russia, France and China that would have clearly committed the security council to a lifting of the oil embargo if Iraq complied with requirements to eliminate its weapons of mass destruction” (*Financial Times*, 2nd November). “Iraq interpreted this as confirmation of its long-held – and plausible – belief that, even if it did come clean on all its weapons, no American administration would lift the oil embargo so long as Mr Hussein remained in power” (*Economist*, 7th November).

Mr Blair has made much of Iraq’s responsibilities under UNSCR 687. But he himself has helped to undermine the same resolution. Article 22 of UNSCR 687 says that once nuclear, chemical, biological and missile disarmament has been verified, the oil embargo will be lifted. The US – and Britain – refused to reaffirm this. The 30th October Security Council clarification which refused to clearly commit the Security Council to paragraph 22 was “drafted by Britain”. It “triggered Saddam’s decree on 31st October that stymied UNSCOM entirely. Saddam had some reason for anger – the integrity of Article 22 is crucial for him” (*Independent*, 13th November).

So far from bombing being the last resort of powers committed to a negotiated solution, it is the first resort of states opposed even to the reaffirmation of promises made in the ceasefire resolution.

On Iraq’s non-compliance with the inspection process, it is now clear that Richard Butler’s December 1998 report on Iraqi disarmament was little more than a propaganda weapon. Butler said that because of Iraqi obstruction “no progress” was made either in disarmament or in accounting for Iraq’s prohibited weapons programmes in the preceding month. Both China and Russia subsequently pressed for Butler’s dismissal “on the basis that the report he submitted ... which triggered the strikes, unfairly characterised Iraqi work with inspectors” (*Independent*, 23rd December). For example, Butler obscured the fact that only five incidents in three hundred inspection operations over the previous month had problems. In connection with the famous stand-off at the regional Ba’ath Party Headquarters in Baghdad on 9th December, Butler failed to make clear that the dispute was really over the number of inspectors allowed to enter the building, and that the refusal of entry, was not simply an act of defiance. The *Financial Times* reported that inspectors were turned away “because modalities for inspections agreed in 1996 stipulated that a limited number of inspectors would enter such sensitive sites”. Butler argued, on the other hand, that “these modalities had been revised in subsequent discussions with Iraqi officials”. The *Financial Times* concluded by quoting an unnamed ‘senior Western diplomat’ in Baghdad: “The revised modalities for inspecting sensitive sites, and allowing more inspectors to enter, had been targeted at large military installations, whereas the Ba’ath party building over which Iraq and inspectors clashed was located in a Baghdad house” (17th December).

When the Butler report was circulated to Security Council members, there was a covering letter from UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, in which he described the document as presenting a “mixed picture” (*Financial Times*, 17th December). “When the American delegation in New York received its copy of Annan’s letter [on 15th December], a senior delegate explained simply, ‘We tore it up?’” (*Observer*, 20th December). “According to a senior diplomat in Baghdad, Mr Butler’s conclusions, while pointing to serious problems, should not necessarily have been construed as presenting a fatal blow to the system of inspections or monitoring. ‘The whole: diplomatic community, which has been closely monitoring these inspections, was

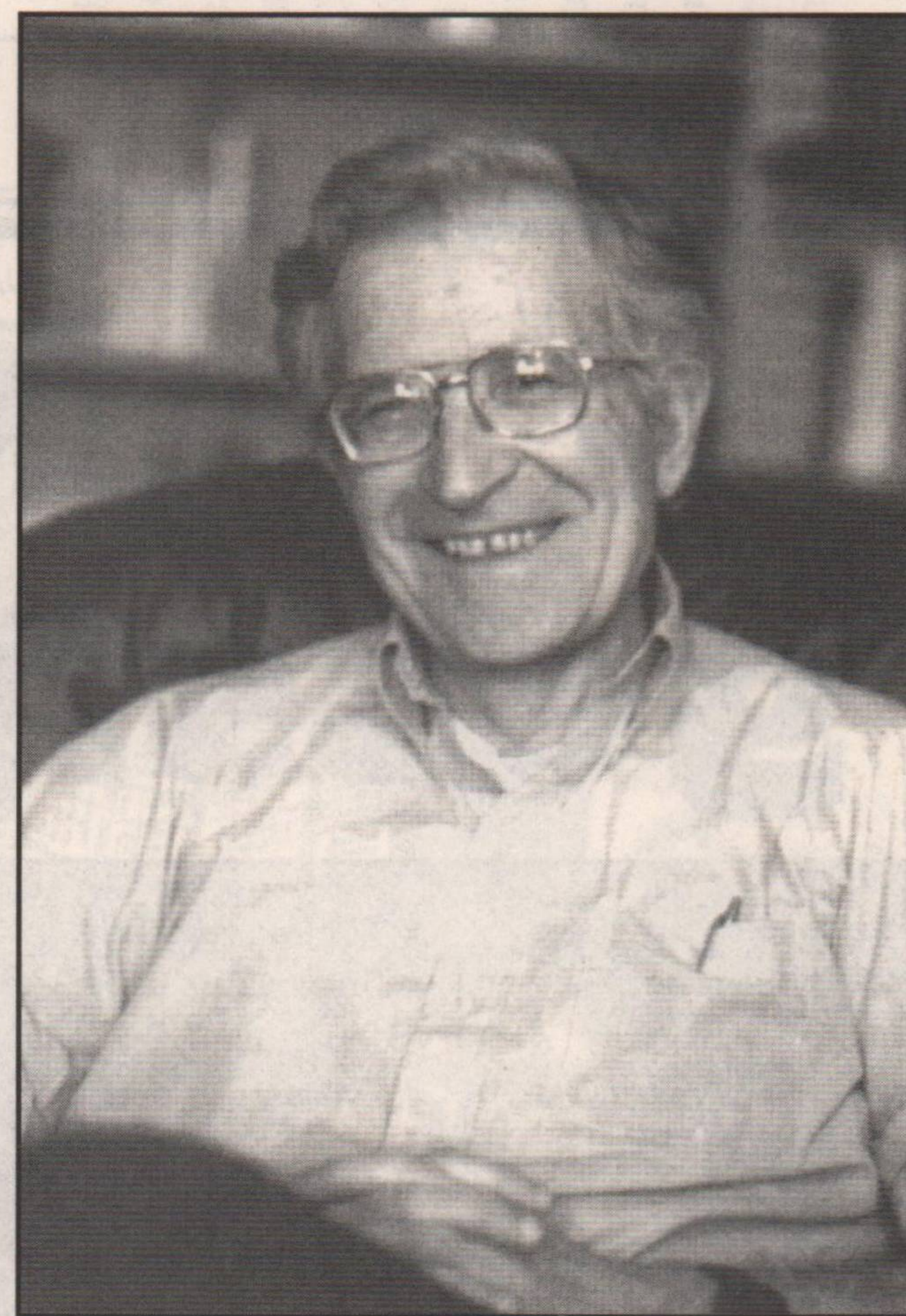
surprised by the report’, said a senior Western diplomat. ‘We did not consider that the problems reported during the one month of inspections were major incidents ... we are not justifying Iraqi actions, but many of the problems encountered point to the need to establish clearer rules for inspections’, he said. ‘UNSCON’s mandate says it should have full access but take into account Iraq’s sovereignty, dignity and national security concerns. This leaves room for questions, and will always give rise to problems’.” (*Financial Times*, 17th December).

Turning briefly to sanctions, the lies covering this issue are truly staggering and quite irrational. There are a number of serious arguments one could make in defence of the government’s decision. Instead they have a habit of repeating that Baghdad can sell over \$10 billion worth of oil every year to pay for food and medicine (implying that this sum is sufficient to solve the humanitarian crisis). Robin Cook, who made this statement in the House of Commons on 3rd November, was well aware that 30% of this sum is deducted for the Compensation Fund, and that deductions are also made for UN operating expenses in Iraq, including UNSCOM expense, and, more importantly, that a sharp drop in oil prices has slashed revenues. The end result is that in the past six months, instead of earning \$5.2 billion of revenues for food and medicine (as Cook suggested) the true total is \$1.68 billion.

The lies continue and expand from this point onwards.

If all these lies and obfuscations are cleared away, what actually *does* motivate US and British policy towards Iraq. Obviously control over oil, and the profits that flow from oil, is an abiding concern of both governments. The immediate concern, argues Noam Chomsky, is to reinforce US/UK dominance in the region. Chomsky notes (in 2nd January interview with the Indian magazine *Frontline*), that rather than bombing Iraq, the two states had the option of pursuing the path set out in the UN Charter, of appealing to the Security Council to take non-violent action. This step was not taken, and the bombing was actually timed to start at exactly the moment that the Security Council opened a meeting in an emergency session to discuss Iraq.

Chomsky comments: “The US and Britain have simply announced, very clearly and loudly, that they are violent criminal states that are intent on destroying totally the fabric of international law, a fabric that has been built up laboriously over many years. They have announced that they will do as they please and will use violence as they please, independently of what anyone else thinks. In my view that is the sole significance of the bombing and is probably the reason for it.



Noam Chomsky has argued that the US and Britain are violent criminal states. This photograph is taken from *Noam Chomsky: a life of dissent* by Robert F. Barsky (MIT Press, £10.95)

Even the timing of the bombing was chosen so as to make this position evident. The bombing began at exactly 5pm EST in the US, just as the Security Council was opening an emergency session to deal with the emerging crisis in Iraq. The US chose that moment to launch a war crime – an aggressive illegal act of force – against Iraq without even notifying the Council. That was surely intended and understood to be a message of contempt for the Security Council ... This action is in fact a call for a lawless world in which the powerful will rule. The powerful happen to be the United States and Britain, which is by now a pathetic puppy dog that has abandoned any pretence of being an independent state.”

Chomsky also comments that “it is worth remembering that the US is isolated internationally, not only on the issue of Iraq but also on the issue of Iran. There is a growing conflict between the US and Europe about bringing Iran back into the international system. While Europe and Japan are strongly in favour of doing so, the US is opposed, and if Saudi Arabia, the Gulf Emirates and Egypt improve their relationship with Iran, the prospect is a threatening one for the United States. The use of force and violence is intended as a warning to these countries that they should not proceed too far because the United States will act with extreme violence if it has to. In my opinion, the bombing of Sudan and Afghanistan a few months ago – Sudan was the more blatant war crime – was probably intended to send the same message.”

Milan Rai

— COPY DEADLINE —

The next issue of Freedom will be dated 6th February, and the last day for copy intended for this issue will be first post on Thursday 28th January.



If possible contributions should be typed using double-spacing between lines, or can be sent as text files on disc.

INFORMATION
LIBERATION

Brian Martin

FREEDOM PRESS

Information Liberation: challenging the corruptions of information power by Brian Martin

Information can be a source of power and, as a consequence, be corrupting. This has ramifications through a number of areas. These is a need for a radical critique that is accessible and oriented to action. Several topical areas are addressed, including mass media, intellectual property, surveillance and defamation. For each topic, a critique of problems is given, examples provided and options for action canvassed. Not every topic relevant to information power is addressed – that would be an enormous task – but rather a range of significant and representative topics. This book will fill a major gap in a very popular field.

Freedom Press

192 pages

£7.95

Seasonal Offensive

Christmas and the New Year saw a spate of anarchist activity this season. In a coordinated project several alignments of anarchists, in various groups and under umbrella names, staged a series of neo-situ style events in Central London. The central theme was an attack on consumerism and the spectacle of a capitalist Christmas.

Santa Claus was a particular target in these events, symbolising Christmas Consumerism (the modern Santa who haunts department stores everywhere was an invention of the Coca Cola Company, carrying its red and white livery around the world), Patriarchy, Impersonal Charity, Moralism (originally children only got presents if they were good)

and more subtly the memory of Saint Nicholas and Xtian hegemony. It also gave a new spin on the Situationist stunts of the '60s and '70s who recuperated the image for their own ends, giving away store goods for free before being arrested under the name of Santa Claus.

The first event was carried out by the Dionysian Underground (an alliance of Neo-Situ and Po Mo anarchists, 'counter culturalists' and libertarian pagans), who staged a radical Solstice ritual in Green Park in which images of Santa were burnt, capitalism denounced and a new age of freedom and anarchy invoked.

This was paralleled by a final event on 6th

January in which The Dionysian Black Masque, the most radical wing of the above group, combined with the Anarchist Nihilist Accords to hold the spectacular 'Burn, Santa, Burn' demonstration. Here a life sized effigy of the notorious bearded patriarch was spat on, lynched and finally burnt on a pyre, while charges against him were read out. A symbolic and deeply cathartic event billed as being "for everyone who ever felt like throwing a grenade into Santa's Grotto". The evening was rounded off by a barbecue of Rudolf burgers (and mistletoe salad for the veggie Nihilists).

In between this various other events allegedly occurred, such as the handing out of leaflets in Oxford Street preporting to be announcing the plans of Coca Cola to rename Christmas Day Coke Cola Day (as they had done so much to create its modern image), the leaflets carried the company's phone number for public response.

Another group going under the name of the XLF (Xmas Liberation Front) called for parties every day of the year, except Christmas when consumerism was to be attacked and the old year denounced. Their activities are said to have included a stink bomb attack on Harrods in the January

Sales. Their anonymous spokesperson also claimed they had planned to extinguish the Christmas advertising lights of Oxford/Regent Street this year but had to call off the plan. However it was noted on 21st December that the most offensive illuminations at Oxford Circus "Christmas Is The Time To Be Tango'd" was damaged in a way that extinguished the word Tango'd leaving a more positive message in its place.

The organisers of the original events have declared they had no knowledge of any 'illegal' activities of the XLF and were only informed after the event anonymously, being self declared "nice, law abiding bourgeois anarchists, who would never dream of offending anyone let alone parasitical capitalist scum". They also urged anarchists to be "sweet and fluffy and to avoid breaking the law at all times".

The organisers are also rumoured to have held a debauched, decadent masked orgy celebrating their successful campaign.

Both the Dionysian Underground and the Anarchist Nihilist Accords plan further activities in the spring and summer of 1999, and are planning apocalyptic events for the millennium.

Prometheus Rex

Voices in the Wilderness delegation to Iraq, December 1998

'You want the oil, take the oil - but don't kill our children'

Voices in the Wilderness has just sent through its nineteenth delegation to Iraq, breaking the sanctions by transporting medicines and toys to Iraqi children's wards without an export licence. The delegation, which returned to the US at the end of December, travelled in solidarity with the people of Iraq, and entered Baghdad in the middle of the US/UK bombardment. The delegation was particularly significant as it was the first Voices delegation since the US Treasury Department issued the organisation a pre-penalty notice of an impending \$120,000 fine (with additional \$10,000-plus fines for tour named individuals).

It is still unclear how many civilians were killed by the December bombs. The Voices delegation visited a village north of Basra where they discovered the impact that one bomb can have on a community. On Christmas Day, the delegation visited Al Deir village, just north of Basra. This is their report:

"Sajad, a four-year-old child, is held by his brother on the rooftop of their home. Most of the windows were blown out when a bomb hit the nearby microwave station that served as a telecommunications centre. The blasts were so frightening that all of the neighbours began together to wail and cry in sheer terror. Little Sajad still has trouble eating and tries to fall asleep sitting up. He seems to fear that if he lays down the bombing will resume.

Outside the home, Karim, a tall young soldier, joins us. He was very fortunate to have been sleeping in the room next to the one hit by the bomb in the telecommunications centre. He was not harmed. Neighbours then bring us a fragment of the missile, a big chunk of metal, quite heavy, with a serial number printed on the side. An unusual Christmas gift ...

The initial round of bombing in Operation Desert Fox was referred to as 'the first package'. This portion of the package, 'delivered' at 4am while the village slept, caused twelve women to abort their babies.

One person suffered a heart attack. People in the nearby homes screamed and cried in terror as their windows were shattered. Some speculate that more money was spent on the four hundred cruise missiles that were fired against Iraq in the combined 'packages' than will be spent in repairing the damage.

But no amount of repair can bring back the aborted babies or take away the trauma inflicted on children."

In Basra, the group visited the Paediatrics and Maternity hospital. Chief Resident Doctor Abdul Firas Abbas told them: "We heard that 70% of the American people were for the attack. I want to hit every American citizen. Now, we are completely responsible to end the embargo ourselves. You can only transfer the disaster by pictures. This last attack generated the aggression in myself. Tony Blair is glad that Iraq has no power to hit back and says the embargo will continue. They have no heart - for the oil they kill the children, kill the future. What about the children? They are harmed psychologically, educationally, nutritionally. We need everything - knowledge, connection with the outside world. What is the quality of our life?" Alan Pogue, a Voices delegate, showed Dr Abdul a copy of a recent article about a previous visit to Basra and printed in a peace movement newsletter. Firas points at the newsletter's heading: 'Austin Peace and Justice'. "Where is the justice?" he asks. "You want the oil. Take the oil. But don't kill our children".

Milan Rai

(continued from page 8)

Minority religions, however, have to be tolerant in order to demand tolerance of themselves, and over the centuries Christianity has become more tolerant as it became weaker.

Apostasy, the renunciation of a religion into which one was born or converted, is discouraged. But the last execution for apostasy in this country occurred in the thirteenth century to a young man who converted to Judaism in order to marry a Jew.

The last execution for heresy, in this country, occurred in 1558 when the English Queen Mary Tudor was married to the king of a fiercely intolerant Spain. The last imprisonment for atheism in England was in 1842, and in Scotland (for selling *The Freethinker*) in 1885. The last conviction for blasphemy was in 1977, but although the conviction was upheld by the appeal court and the law lords, it was widely considered ridiculous.

The atheist minority in this country has

been growing apace since the 1950s, and is now estimated at 30-35% of the population (an estimate to be tested by the census of 2001, which will include questions about religious belief), and the Christians are now too weak to persecute anybody.

The urge to intolerance today comes largely from within a recently immigrated and converted group, Islam. There are those who call for the assassination of the author Salman Rushdie, since a death sentence for apostasy was passed on him in his absence, in another country. That sentence has now been rescinded, but Rushdie is still under threat and under police guard. A group of British Muslims, in contact with an Imam in Finsbury Park, are on trial in Yemen charged with murder in pursuit of a campaign to make Yemen even more intolerantly Muslim than it is already.

Most British Muslims are as tolerant as most British Christians, but intolerance still threatens.

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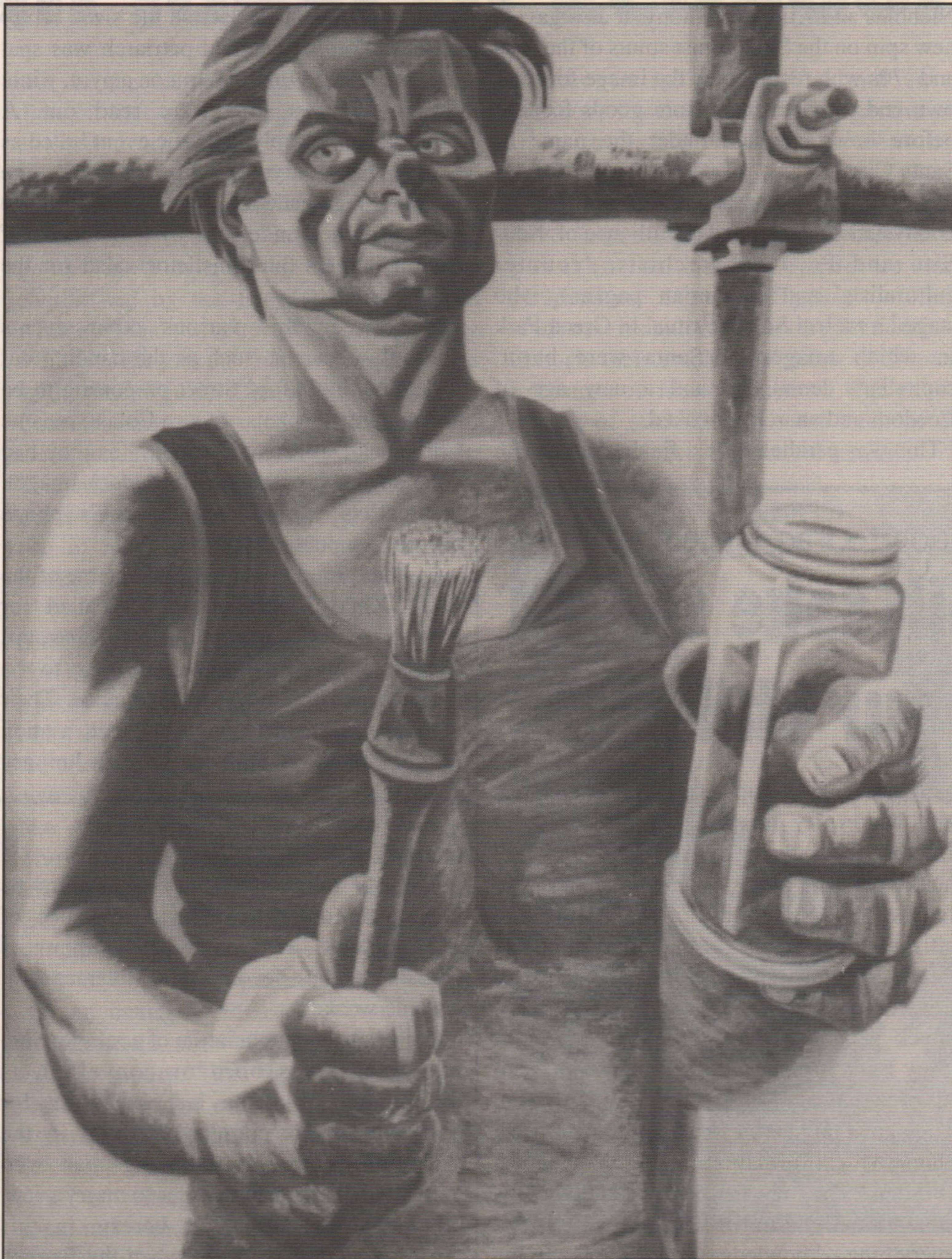


Winter Book Sale

The list below comprises titles which have previously been available from our mail order service and in the Freedom Press Bookshop, but which have been out of stock for quite some time. We are pleased to announce new stocks of all of them, now at a fraction of their original prices. Where postage is payable, calculate this on the original price in brackets.

Anarchism by David Miller, published by Dent (Modern Ideologies series). For many people, anarchism is nothing more than a recipe for violence and disorder; yet anarchists themselves believe that their ideas are peaceful and constructive. To make sense of this and other paradoxes, Miller has surveyed the whole range of anarchist thought and practice, and produced the first general critical study of anarchism as an ideology. Part I of the book lucidly expounds the central ideas of anarchism, with particular reference to the anarchist critique of authority and the state. This is followed by a detailed consideration of individualist and communist anarchism, and of the contrasts between them. In Part II Miller looks at the ways in which anarchists have attempted to translate their ideas into an effective revolutionary movement. He explains why anarchists reject the Marxist belief in a revolutionary party, and then examines the strategies that anarchists have advocated in its place: mass insurrection, individual violence, militant trade unionism. A chapter on the New Left considers the problems facing anarchists in the late twentieth century. Finally the book offers an overall assessment of anarchism, giving detailed attention to its constructive achievements, including experimental communities and the Spanish collectives. The idea of a stateless social order may present insuperable difficulties, but there is still much to be learnt from the anarchist experience both about the abuses of power and about the problems and possibilities of free social relations. 216 pages with preface, notes, bibliography and index for £2.00 (£4.95).

Ray Walker, The Ray Walker Memorial Committee. A wonderful collection of much of the life work of the well-respected painter and mural artist who, though he died before he had reached 40, contributed enormously to, and was one of the pioneers of, public mural art in this country. He worked in a variety of mediums – oil, watercolour, charcoal, pencil and house paint – and the photographs here, both colour and black and



Ray Walker in self-portrait, shortly before his death in 1984

white, are from an exhibition in his honour at the Royal Festival Hall. They include oil paintings, individual portraits, sketches for his murals, and the murals themselves, including of course his last and most famous one, 'The Battle of Cable Street', showing anti-fascists fighting the police in London's East End to prevent Moseley's blackshirts from marching through this densely-populated area of immigrants and refugees. All his murals show his commitment, socially and politically, to ordinary working people and in particular to the East End, where he settled in the late '70s, and where most of the murals are to be found. These include the Chicksands Estate, the Bow Mission, the Peasants' Revolt, Protest and Survive, and two for the Newham and Whittington Hospitals. The book's accompanying text includes four separate biographical sketches of Ray, plus an interview, by various friends and colleagues. One, who collaborated on the Cable Street mural (which also graces the book's cover) says of him: "Ray Walker's death was a tragedy, not only in personal terms but also in artistic ones, for we are denied the full extent of the achievements he would undoubtedly have attained had he lived longer. As it is he leaves behind a body of public work that is a significant and powerful contribution to the idea that art, once more, can be a dramatically powerful and radical form of democratic human social expression." 98 pages, £1.50 (£5.95).

Syndicalist Legacy: trade unions and politics in two French cities in the era of World War One* by Kathryn E. Amdur, University of Illinois Press (The Working Class in European History series). Another valuable book at a fraction of the original price. This one's

a handsome hefty hardback and seriously academic. The author has produced an important counter-balance to some of the more superficial writings on syndicalism, full of highly detailed information on syndicalism, anarchism, anarcho-syndicalism and anarcho-communism in Limoges and Saint Etienne. Amdur sheds new light on how revolutionary syndicalism competed with Socialist and Communist ideologies for control of the trade union movement in France from World War One through the nation's post-war labour schism. Revolutionary syndicalists were committed to union independence from all party politics. Rather than depend on party leadership or parliamentary negotiation, syndicalists advocated strategies of direct action, including sabotage and the general strike, to achieve their goals. This commitment prevented many syndicalists from embracing the post-war Communist Party as their revolutionary ally. By examining these ideological conflicts and strategies in two very different French cities – Limoges and Saint Etienne – Amdur reveals both deep regional differences in the French labour movement and the reasons for the continued appeal of a 'syndicalist legacy', despite the war-time growth of new revolutionary ideas. For the studios there are copious footnotes, an appendix packed with charts, graphs and tables, a huge bibliography and a large well-ordered index. 476 pages, £7.95 (£29.00).

Authority and Delinquency: a study in the psychology of power by Alex Comfort, Zwan Publications (Libertarian Critique series). First published in 1950, this classic essay on the criminology of government is reissued here unaltered. Originally written in the

aftermath of the Second World War, *Authority and Delinquency* was concerned to illustrate that deviant behaviour – unacceptable in the public at large – had become the norm in the political and military area. Paranoia, delusion, a sense of grievance, psychosis – these have become the hallmarks of government, and Comfort's thesis is as horrifyingly relevant today as it was nearly fifty years ago. In moving beyond the platitude that power corrupts, *Authority and Delinquency* provides a convincing study of the sociopathology of modern government. In his preface to this edition, Comfort says: "I have not altered this book, either to modernise its psychiatric ideas or to take in subsequent events. The relation between power and delinquency has changed remarkably little: in America the interpenetration of government and organised crime, especially through the 'security' services, is now almost institutional – hoods, official secret agents, *agents provocateurs*, 'spoiled' agents and soldiers of fortune are interchangeable and indistinguishable. The hiring and installation of thugs, from Pinochet to the leaders of Right and Left insurgencies, has become a general instrument of great-power policy. With this exception, which is hardly new, but which is now more prominent than before, most of what I originally wrote seems to me to remain applicable. In Britain we are seeing the steady conversion of a reluctant civil police into a paramilitary goon squad, with the adoption of 'colonial' policing against protesters, trade unionists and minorities. Whether this will be allowed to continue, or be reversed by a less extremist government, remains to be seen. On the positive side, more of us are now recognising the interactions of office and psychopathology, and are drawing political conclusions. I hope this now-old book may reopen the debate." 126-page hardback with introduction and notes, £3.99 (£8.95).

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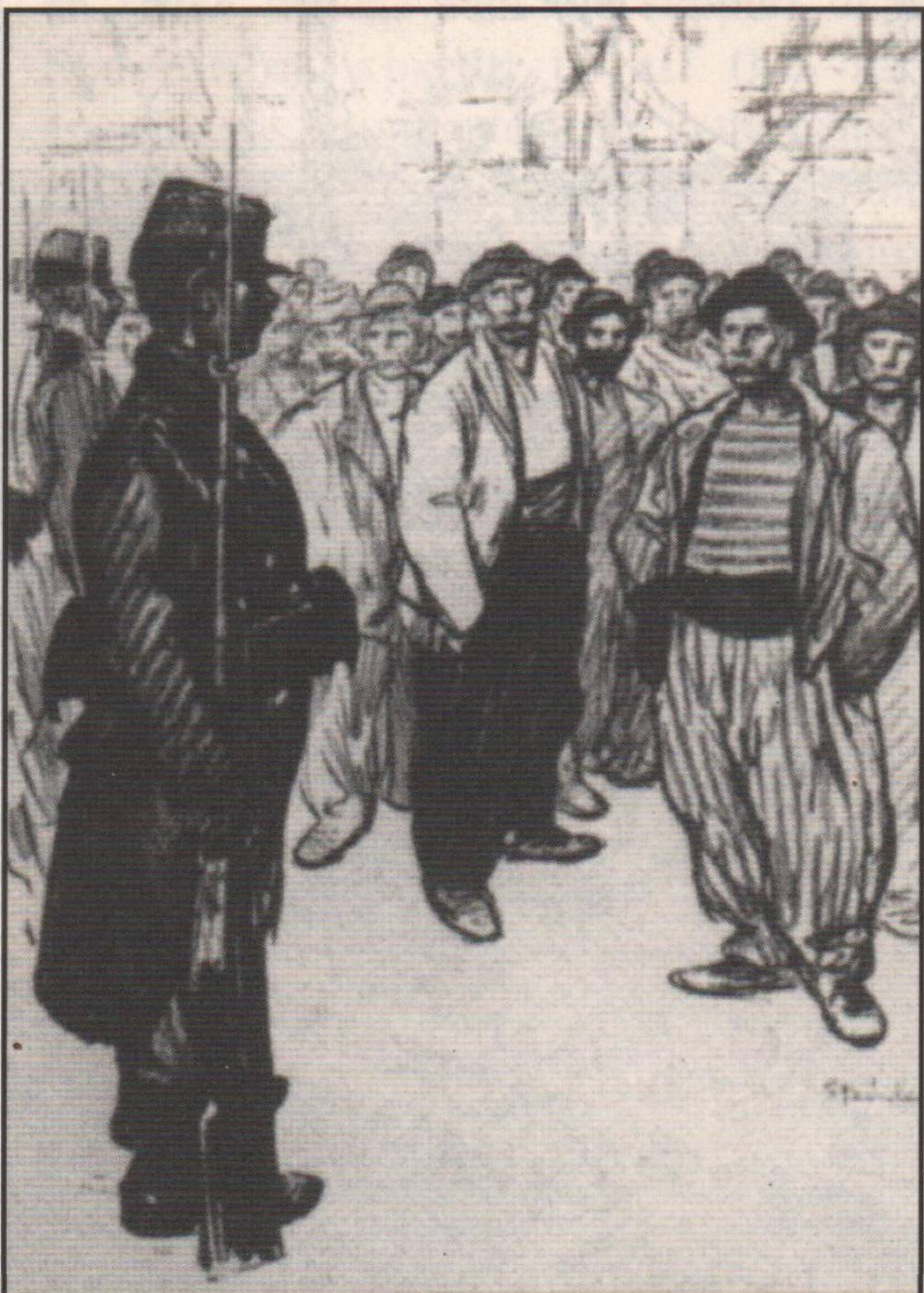
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'On Strike' by T. Steinlen, jacket illustration taken from *Syndicalist Legacy*

— ANARCHIST NOTEBOOK —

A child of their time

We have fellow-grand-parents at Rodenkirchen, south of Cologne in Germany, who are active members of the local choir and orchestra, doing annual performances of the Bach Passions, and oratorios by Handel and Mendelssohn. They sent us as a present the CD of their performance on the 9th and 10th of Michael Tippett's *A Child of Our Time*. The label is headed 'Music against Power and Intolerance', in remembrance of the 60th anniversary of the *Reichspogromnacht*.

It was in 1992 that the Rodenkirchener Kammerchor and orchestra, directed by Anselm Rogmans, first decided to break with their own traditions and insert this work in their repertoire, and to link the three sections with a plain narrative of the events of 1938 and a mime performed by schoolchildren. On the same night, in Cologne and other German cities, there were big public demonstrations against the revival of right-wing racial violence.

At the time of that performance I managed to solicit a message of support from the very old composer for the Rodenkirchen performers. On that anniversary of the Kristallnacht, Christabel Bielenberg, selecting her *Desert Island Discs* on Radio 4, described how the response of the citizens of the city where she then lived, Hamburg, had been neither of support nor of horror, but of embarrassment, as they picked their way through the broken glass and merchandise outside Jewish-owned shops in the city.

She reminded listeners of the famous remark, many years later, from Martin Luther King: "We shall have to repent in this generation, not so much for the evil deeds of the wicked people, but for the appalling silence of the good people".

The day in November 1938, when Ernst vom Rath, third secretary of the German embassy in Paris, was shot by a 17-year-old refugee, Herschel Grynszpan, was the detonator for the events that the then Berlin correspondent of *The Times* described at the time as "scenes of systematic plunder and destruction which

have seldom had their equal in a civilised country since the Middle Ages".

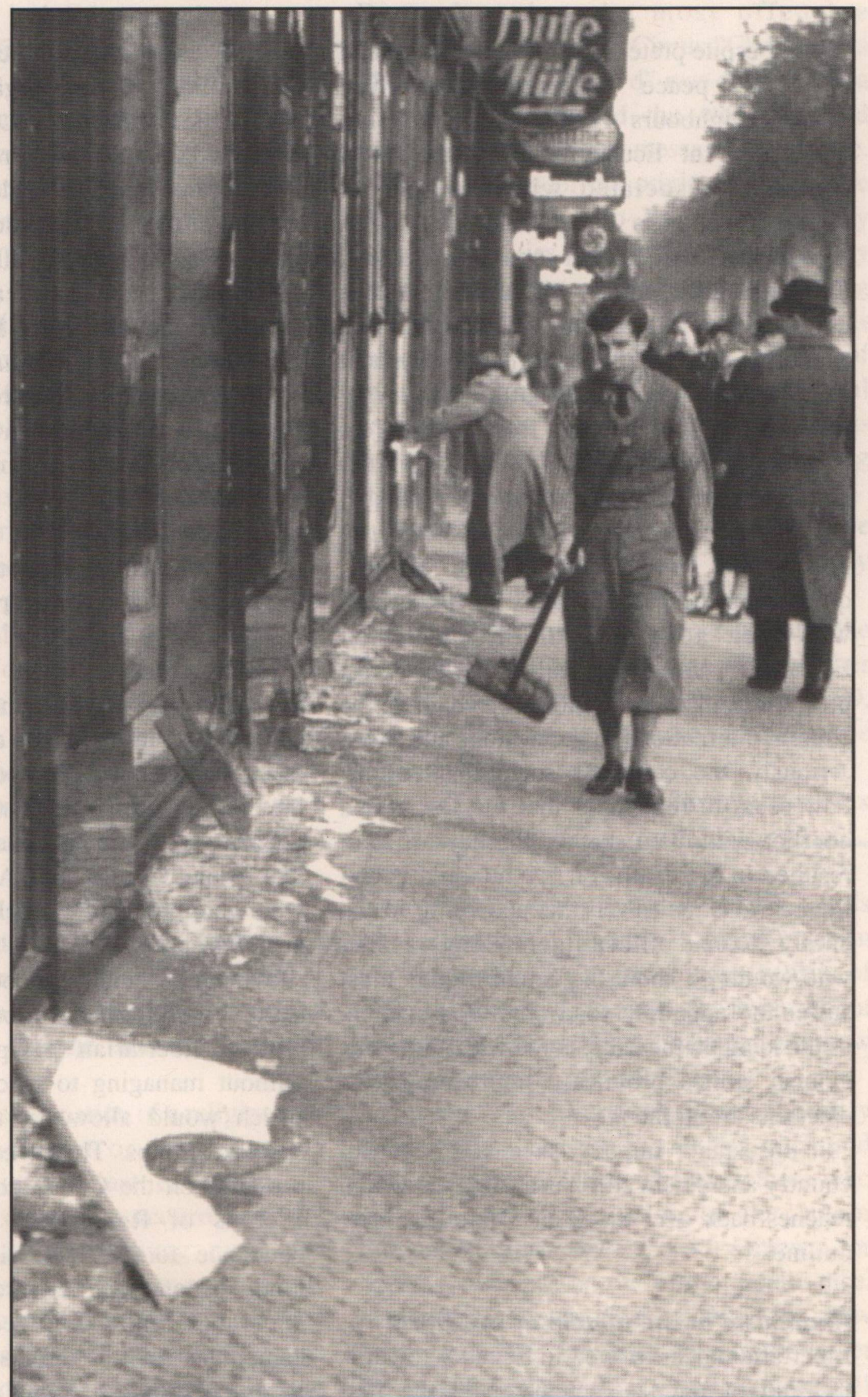
He reported that: "During the entire day, hardly a policeman was to be seen in the streets where the 'purge' was in progress, save those few who were directing the traffic. Army officers in uniform did try to bring the fanatics to reason, but were forced to leave because of threats". Sixty years later, knowing how the appalling silence led to an atmosphere in which mass extermination became accepted policy in one of the most advanced and best educated nations in Europe, the good people are still troubled by the task of finding an effective response. And so am I.

In 1939 the anarchist poet Herbert Read responded with a lyric about Grynszpan: "This beautiful assassin is your friend / walking and whispering in the night beside you". And in the same year, Michael Tippett tried to universalise the message in *A Child of Our Time*, feeling that, "although the artist appears to be locked away, doing his particular thing", he needed to draw in an audience by punctuating the story with familiar choruses, in the way that Bach introduced well-known hymn tunes. "I felt I had to express collective feelings, and that could only be done by collective tunes such as Negro spirituals, for these tunes contain a deposit of generations of common experience".

He had to wait until 1944, after his imprisonment as a war resister, for the first public performance of *A Child of Our Time* in March that year at the Adelphi Theatre in London. This was several years before I heard it, but, hundreds of miles away, I paged into a notebook the detailed account of the work by Jack Wade in the April 1944 issue of the anarchist journal *War Commentary*. He noted how "the sentiments which permeate the whole of this work are essentially anarchist,

yet it is by no means political propaganda. By the insistence upon the perennial value of human pity the oratorio achieves universal application." I pasted into the same notebook the account from *The Observer* by William Glock, who saw it as "the most moving and important work written by an English musician for many years." Like many other veterans of that generation, I found Tippett's attempt to do justice to the occasion just as significant today and I rejoice in my German friends' determination to make their performance a more-than-musical event.

Colin Ward



Clearing up following the Nazi 'Kristallnacht' attacks on the Jews, 1938 (taken from *Jewish Socialist* No. 39)

Riding the Wind

Riding the Wind: a new philosophy for a new era

by Peter Marshall

published by Cassell, £16.99

Although he has written several readable travel books, Peter Marshall is best known for his historical studies of anarchist and ecological thought and his biographical studies of such libertarian writers as William Godwin and William Blake. But now, like Løvborg in Ibsen's play *Hedda Gabler*, he has written a book about the future; one might reply, like Tesman in the same play, that this can't be done: but it has to be tried. As Winston Smith might have said in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, who controls the future controls the present.

Marshall has considerable virtues. *Demanding the Impossible: a history of anarchism* and *Nature's Web: an exploration of ecological thinking*, which appeared in 1992, were big books covering a great deal of ground and containing a great deal of material, often in bewildering detail. *Riding the Wind: a new philosophy for a new era*, which appeared in 1998, is a small book with little direct reference to other writers, though echoes will be recognised by readers familiar with the subject, and with no notes or bibliography. The style is unusually clear and simple, and the exposition is generally positive and optimistic. Marshall describes the world as it is not, but as it could and

should be, perhaps as it must be if we are to continue to live in it. From a combination of anarchistic and 'Green' doctrines he offers a synthesis which he calls 'libertarian ecology' (a phrase which has unfortunate echoes of 'libertarian theology'). Unlike most revolutionary ideologies, this one is presented not only without obscurity or obscurantism but without bitterness or malice.

Marshall states that "libertarian ecology is holistic, deep, social and libertarian". Its philosophical basis is an ambitious attempt to combine reason, intuition, imagination, contemplation, meditation, dialectic, emotion, mysticism into a syncretic unity. Its scientific basis is a romantic version of vitalism or even panspsychism – the belief that the universe has a soul or spirit, that nature is harmonious and benevolent, that the earth is alive and purposeful, that humanity is fundamentally good and should be free. Its ethical basis is the religious doctrine of reverence for being, in animate and indeed inanimate things. Its economic and social conclusions are those of the ecological and libertarian traditions, and its political implications are those of non-violent anarchism.

Marshall also has considerable vices. His subtitle assumes that we are entering a genuinely new era as we approach a new century and a new millennium, and that he is offering a genuinely new philosophy for it. But arbitrary changes in the calendar have no

real significance, and most of his positive arguments, which belong to the category often described as 'New Age', actually derive from the oldest ages we know. He invokes Daoist writers from ancient China and Hindu and Buddhist thinkers from ancient India, and he could just as well have invoked Pre-Socratic philosophers from ancient Greece, especially the 'hylozoists' who taught that all matter is alive. He wrenches his sources out of context, ignoring the contradictions between the transcendental preoccupations of ancient mystics and the mundane concerns of contemporary libertarians. At the same time most of his negative arguments against "the prevailing mechanical and materialist worldview", "the old reductionist, mechanistic paradigm", "the fundamental assumptions of Western society" and so on, seem to be directed at imaginary enemies; it is noticeable that he is glad to invoke 'modern science' when it confirms his prejudices, and it is probable that he welcomes the production of his book by modern technology and the receipt of monetary reward for writing it. His narrative is so bare that much of it consists of a series of dogmatic assertions rather than logical arguments, and most of them are open to obvious objections. And his practical proposals are so few and elementary as to be negligible.

Yet Marshall's manner is so attractive that his virtues outshine his vices. His apparently

ingenuous ideas may actually be disingenuous, but they are expressed in such a winning way that they could well be the basis of a series of constructive and productive discussions both about the general questions in the Gauguin painting reproduced on the jacket – *Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?* – and also about the many particular questions raised throughout the book. Indeed it is very much a book which demands to be read collectively rather than individually and to be used not so much as a source of information but rather as a stimulus for debate.

There is a final paradox. Marshall's title comes from the Daoist idea of 'riding the wind', flowing with nature, from which the Daoists invented kites – rather as other Chinese used the discovery of gunpowder to invent fireworks. However, just as the West learned to use gunpowder to make guns and bombs, the West learnt how to ride the wind by mastering the theory and practice of aeronautics. Would you prefer to ride the wind on a kite or in an aircraft? Perhaps in the end materialism and mechanism may do more than mysticism or metaphor can to justify the ways of the world to man. Perhaps the book should have been called *Flying a Kite*. It could certainly benefit from a strong dose of old-fashioned science and hard-edged logic; but its readers will surely benefit from one of the most cheerful and charming books on its subject ever written.

NW

The vitality of the libertarian ideal in Ecuador

Despite pretensions of being an 'island of peace' between its warring neighbours Peru and Colombia a quick look at Ecuador reveals the usual problems associated with the region: corruption, deep economic inequality, repression, political assassinations, disappearances and a big etcetera. In a country gripped by a well established economic crisis, the Ecuadorian government can imagine no better a solution than trying to distract the people from their real problems with the smokescreen of a border conflict with Peru over a scrap of jungle. Whenever the opportunity arises the government evokes the spectre of war, quickening the patriotic pulse of its citizens who feel, according to the polls, the Ecuadorian armed forces to be the most prestigious institution, more so even than the church, international organisations and, most seriously, the country's social institutions. Few seem to remember that the last armed conflict with Peru, barely three years ago, resulted in the deaths of five hundred young Ecuadorians, and even this according to the hardly credible official figures. Any traveller who would go about the country today must suffer the appalling road conditions which, as the icing on the cake, come with numerous cynical smiles promising improvements – elections are in the air.

In this small, impoverished and beautiful country anarchism still has a presence which reaches back over the years. Here is a brief outline.

Anarchism in the middle of the world

Libertarian ideas arrived in Ecuador towards the end of the last century with the first groups appearing on the coast. At that time there were journals such as *La Prensa* and later, in the '20s, there was *Alba Roja* and *El Proletario*, both organs which promulgated ideas which, at times, were mixed confusedly with marxism. At that time the FTRE (Federacion de Trabajadores Regional Ecuatoriana) was set up. With its anarchist inspiration it quickly supplanted the reformist COG (Confederacion Obrera de Guayas). In the space of one month thousands left the COG to swell the ranks of the Federation, overwhelming the group which, scarcely two years old, did not yet have the infrastructure and experience which it needed.

In 1922 the railway workers in Duran went on strike which, with the support of the Federation, spread to all the other associations, leaving the town in the hands of its workers. The governmental response translated itself into the deaths of hundreds of strikers at the hands of troops which were

sent to the area and the persecution and dismantling of the organisations which existed at the time. Libertarians thus embarked on a period of recovery (this time with clearer ideological definitions) and by the end of the decade could count five active groups in Guayaquil, all of which were coordinated by the Federacion de Grupos Anarquistas 'Miguel Bakunin'. They published the journal *Tribuna Obrera* and set up the theatre group 'Ricardo Flores Magon'. Constant state oppression crushed many of these experiments and most of the main libertarian activists ended up in exile on the Galapagos islands. By the end of the '30s the rise of marxist throughout South America marked the demise of anarchism in the area.

Modern times

For nearly forty years the only libertarian activity was in the hands of a small number of intellectuals who escaped the influence of the 'Soviet orbit'. Still in the 1970s some veterans from the early years had survived, like Alejo Capelo and Alejandro Atencia who were publishing articles in the Mexican anarchist press. It wasn't until the '80s and '90s that a small number of individuals started working in various political areas with a libertarian perspective, although without managing to reach a critical mass which would allow for the setting up of specific groups. Thus there is an anarchist presence on the Committee for Families of Victims of Repression, which seeks to denounce torture, assassination and other kinds of outrage perpetrated by the state apparatus and involved in important campaigns such as the disappearance of the Restrepo brothers. Some are also active in the campaign to decriminalise homosexuality and the movement for Artistic Freedom, which calls for freedom of action and expression using their mouthpiece musical groups (mainly 'heavy' and 'punk') who have to live with censorship and the forced cancellation of concerts. Within these groups there are many self-professed anarchists, although in some cases the definition of anarchism is surprising and borders on the bewildering. Within the framework of popular music we have to mention the name of Jaime Guevara who for more than twenty years has been spreading the anarchist word through the lyrics of his songs, taking part in all struggles of value and animating any hint of an anarchist organisation. His popularity has allowed him to get his message across to a wide variety of audiences (indigenous peoples, students, grassroots organisations, etc.). Along with his own publications, where he publishes his lyrics, there are

commentaries on political and social questions from a libertarian perspective and these constitute the only anarchist publication in Ecuador.

The demise of marxism and its adherents (who have sought refuge in NGOs or the government itself) opens up new perspectives: a group of young university students recently discovered anarchism through their studies and have initiated an exchange of ideas and texts. Out of this linking of students and some veterans has arisen a nucleus of some fifty people who

want to take action and as part of this the recent elections saw a campaign for a 'null vote' (calling for this is illegal in Ecuador). There is also the beginning of work with respect to human rights which has amounted to non-violent actions against institutions which are responsible for aggression, as in the occupation of police premises. Also in a country where the military fever is strong, the Ecuadorian comrades wish to carry out actions in the area of conscientious objection.

With these first tentative steps to organise themselves, our comrades are calling for friends in the Spanish state, and indeed throughout the world, to send correspondence and publications which can serve as a reference and as a recognition of what is going on in other parts of the world.

From these pages we seek to break out of the isolation our friends find themselves in. We therefore call for people to write to Jaime Guevara, Iquique 20-94, Yyaguachi (El Dorado), Quito, Ecuador.

Libertarian ideas are re-emerging in Ecuador. Let us give them our support.



Disappearances, illegal arrests, torture and killings continue in Ecuador, reports Amnesty International. Pictured above are the parents of Consuelo Benavides with a picture of their daughter who has 'disappeared'. Right are five of seven peasant farmer prisoners of conscience tortured whilst in custody and eventually released in September 1996.



Venezuelan Notes

Venezuelan society can be summed up as a country where the state is rich and the people poor. Most of the population is concentrated in and around a few metropolises whilst other folk live in the *ranchos* or shanty towns which are scattered in the hills and the valleys. Caracas itself is unique in that a higher percentage of its population live in *ranchos* around the city than the number of people living in the city itself. There is next to nothing in the way of facilities for these people and violence rates are among the highest in the world.

Oil brought in some \$270bn between 1976 and 1995 (the post World War Two Marshall Plan cost \$13 billion) but the revenue has not been used to provide even a basic infrastructure let alone to help lessen social inequality. Meanwhile, those who profit, have salted \$100 billion away in foreign banks whilst 71% live in poverty, 21% are unemployed, 2,000,000 children live in hardship while 200,000 beg. No wonder some 40% are estimated to be dependent on the informal economy.

Due to a colonial twist of history the oil wealth in Venezuela has always belonged to that state. The monopoly PDVSA saw Venezuela into second place as an oil producing nation in 1976. No serious attempt was made at the time to industrialise and people were bought off with a minimum income policy and dependency started to set in.

Despite a recent burst of the privatisations key sectors remain in state hands leaving Venezuela as one of the most state dominated economies in the world. The people have seen little benefit. Instead of health,

education and public services the state squanders money on useless megalomaniac projects.

Caldera, the current president since 1993, tried to distance himself from the IMP and he appointed a seasoned 'lefty' – Teodoro Petkoff – in charge of economic planning. International finance organisations and Washington put the pressure on and Caldera caved in in 1996, accepting a severe Structural Adjustment Plan which is now being implemented by born again free-marketeer Señor Petkoff.

Oil prices and interests went up and the bolivar came down. Privatisation dominated the political agenda. So much so that the historically state-dominated oil industry started to inch into the hands of foreign owners.

Is it surprising then that we find a former military man – Hugo Chavez – riding high on a wave of popularity? The two main political parties Copei (Christian Democrat) and AD (Social Democrat) have been too chummy for too long and the people are fed up with broken promises. The outcome on 8th November in an election where barely half the population turned out was Colonel Chavez's party the MVC – in second position behind the Social Democrats. However, the patriotic groups within the Congress have a potential working majority. A new round of corruption and horse trading seems to have begun but in reality it will turn out to be simply another episode in another South American soap opera.

Information from *Le Monde Diplomatique*, December 1998

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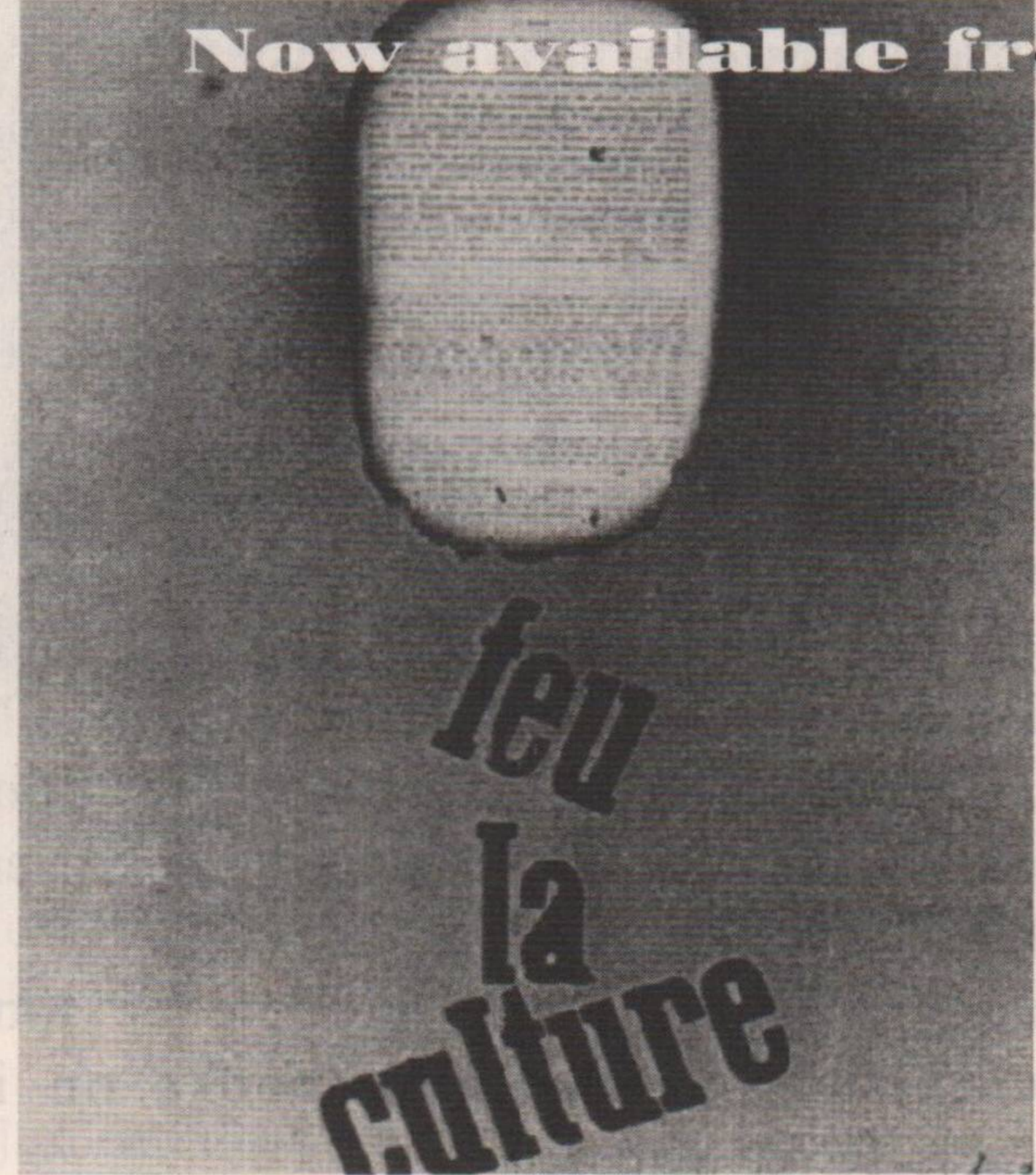
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Freedom or Genetic Engineering

Dear *Freedom*,

Room must be even older than I am, so I would have thought that he would have cottoned on to the idea that 'facts' are not the safe, irreducible objects he seems to maintain they are. If he sends up to Monsanto for 'facts' on GE he will get a quite different list from that from Greenpeace. The facts about the Spanish Civil War in, say, Hugh Thomas' book, are quite different from those that anarchists accept. When Marie Curie researched radium she didn't know the 'facts' about it, and the officially trumpeted safe dosage of radiation – always backed up by 'scientists' – diminished extraordinarily between the end of the Second World War and the '80s: the scientific 'facts' of one generation are very often the exploded myths of the next. Why should GE be any different? I prefer to find out whose facts I am dealing with – who paid for it being a fact – and, like most anarchists, will always bank on the small, sincere, oppositional fact rather than the well-publicised scientific, conglomerate one. Monsanto – the people who brought you Agent Orange and PCBs, now banned after having caused untold damage through being released as soon as developed for profit reasons – had its scientists analyse data on rBGH (recombinant bovine growth hormone) which Monsanto wants to sell. Three independent British scientists analysed the same data and found the hormone was linked to increased pus and bacteria counts in milk,

something Monsanto's scientists somehow hadn't noticed. More, Monsanto tried to block publication of these new 'facts'.

A recent study (*Proceedings of the National Academy of Science, USA*) found that a certain gene was shared by hundreds of plants as distinct as banana, coffee, cucumber and the Brazilian rubber tree. They decided that the presence of this gene could only be explained by lateral transference – something up until now considered absolutely impossible by 'scientists' (especially those employed by transnationals). This new 'fact' was happened on, according to my paper, quite by chance. Nobody pays to find out 'facts' that contradict prevailing beliefs. Lateral transference means, of course, that GE plants' resistance and characteristics may be carried to weeds or to other crops. Another study has found that bees (which, of course, pollinate crops over wide areas) have been radical affected by GE crops. As to Monsanto's wishing to make it impossible for anyone to grow crops not controlled by them, a reading of the special edition of *The Ecologist* (October 98) – which I recommend to everyone – will lead to this conclusion. The following are relevant:

- The terminator gene, by which Monsanto ensures that farmers can't use seed from their crops.
- Overspill from genetically modified crops (see above) makes it difficult to preserve purity.


• Roundup – the agrototoxin that Monsanto makes a billionaire fortune from – can be used lavishly on their GE crops, and will, of course, through wind and water affect neighbours and the basic soil.

• Monsanto fights with all its corporate might to stifle rival 'facts', hoping to create (as it has in the US) a falsely optimistic and trusting public opinion within which it can spread its monopoly until it is too late to object.

• When a farmer buys a bag of Roundup-Ready he pays a special 'technology fee' and signs a contract that he will not use any of the harvested crop as seed for the next year.

I have no faith in a person who believes one set of 'facts' being convinced by another set, but Room might ponder all this.

Jon Roe

Please keep
sending in your letters
and donations... 
... and see page 2 for
the next copy deadlines

More on the Guardian's 'State of Anarchy'

Dear *Freedom*,

Like Mary Lewis (Letters, *Freedom* 9th January) I submitted the following letter to the *Guardian*, which of course was not published. *Freedom* readers of that journal may be interested.

Dear Sir,

Okay, the dictionary defines anarchy as "absence of government; disorder, confusion". Your Professor contributor, John Gray, uses *anarchy* to describe the failures of governments all over the world. As an anarchist for more than sixty years and as a reader of your journal for as many years, surely you should have told your professor and whoever produced the headline 'State of Anarchy' that anarchy is a political philosophy which has been exposing governments and capitalism for a very long time. The trouble with people like the professor, and many other learned professors, is that *anarchy*, the alternative society to that of central government, alarms them. Real democracy is not *more* government. It will only come about when we the people will take the trouble to run our own lives. And this means cooperation, mutual aid, solidarity. And this is *anarchy*.

Vernon Richards

The Gentle Anarchist

The Gentle Anarchist: a life of George Woodcock

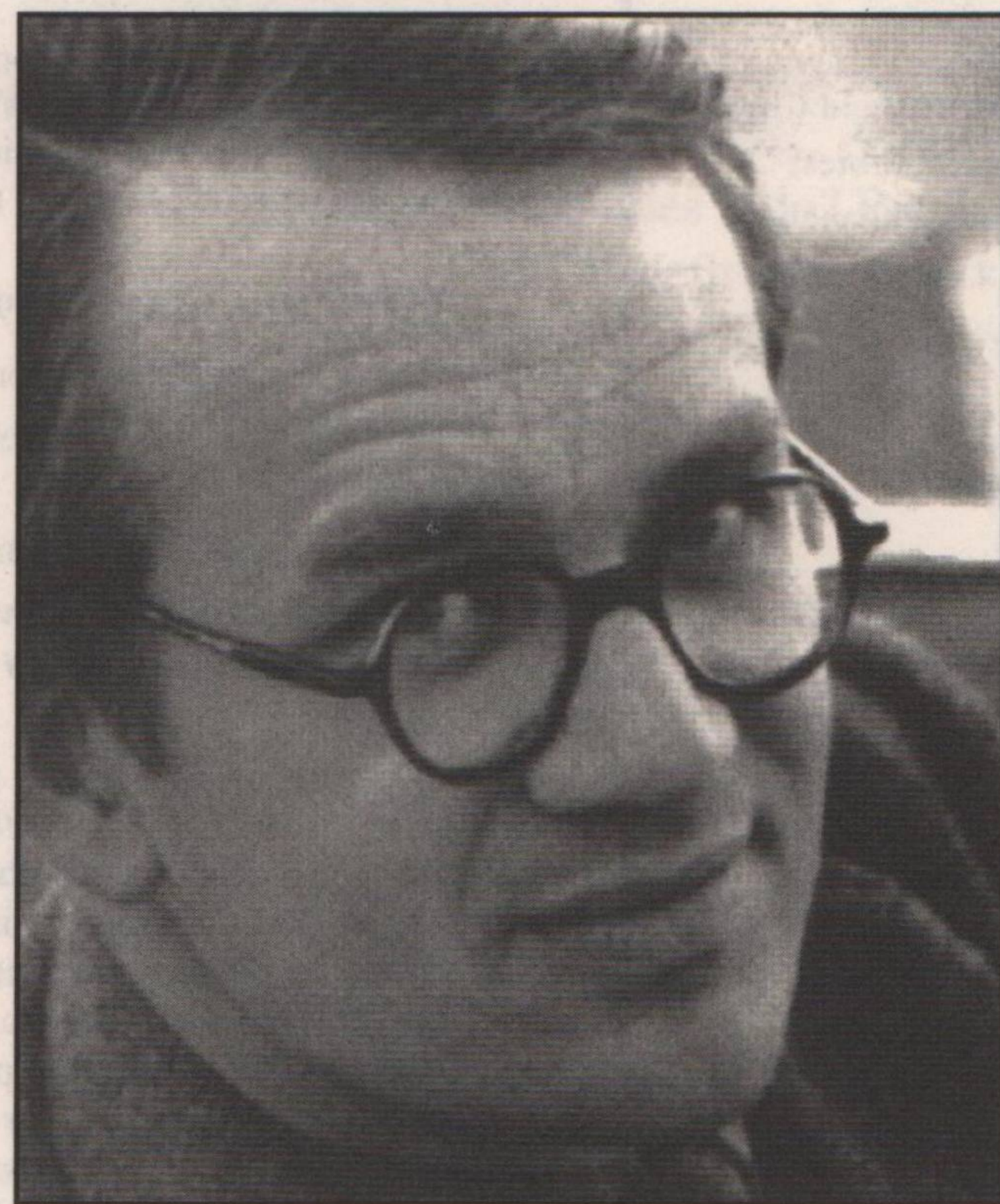
by Douglas Fetherling

published by Douglas & McIntyre / University of Washington Press, \$27.50

This is the first biography of George Woodcock, who was the most prolific and popular writer on anarchism in English after the Second World War. Douglas Fetherling, a Canadian writer who was a friend and colleague, has inevitably used Woodcock's three volumes of memoirs – *Letter to the Past* (1982), *Beyond the Blue Mountains* (1987), *Walking Through the Valley* (1994) – but has additionally used letters and other papers in the George Woodcock Archive at Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario, as well as his own memories.

Woodcock's career is fairly familiar. He was born in Canada in 1912 to Anglo-Welsh immigrants who immediately returned to Britain, where he lived for 37 years. This part of his life fills less than a third of the book. He went to a good school but not university, and worked as a clerk for the old Great Western Railway for twelve years. He began to write as a boy and to publish when he was 20, and he soon joined the literary bohemia of wartime London. He was associated with such writers as Alex Comfort, Roy Fuller, Charles Lahr, George Orwell, Herbert Read, Derek Savage, Julian Symons, Dylan Thomas, and he achieved personal distinction by producing the little magazine *Now* (1940 to 1947). He had long been a pacifist, registered as a conscientious objector in 1940 and had a rather fugitive life until 1945. He also moved towards anarchism, and was involved with the British anarchist movement for eight years. He wrote and edited articles and pamphlets for *Freedom Press* and its papers from 1941 onwards, and helped to edit *War Commentary / Freedom* while three of the editors were in prison during 1945-46. But

he became increasingly ambitious and began to concentrate on books from 1946. He also became discontented in Britain, and in 1949 he and his German wife emigrated to Canada where he lived for 46 years. He became a leading man of letters there, and died in 1995. This part of his life fills more than two-thirds of the book.



Woodcock divided his later life between several careers, each of which would have been enough for one person but which he somehow managed to combine, despite increasingly serious heart trouble. He worked as a university teacher of English literature, mainly at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver; he was the founding editor of the prestigious quarterly *Canadian Literature* for eighteen years; he was a frequent writer and broadcaster on Canadian radio and television; he was an indefatigable traveller all over the world; he was a very busy contributor to all sorts of periodicals, also all over the world; he was an equally busy author and editor of books, commonly producing four or five a year; and he was a devoted philanthropist, giving away to good

causes much of the money he earned and working hard to persuade other people to do the same. He eventually accumulated several honorary degrees and official awards, and became the subject of profiles and interviews and academic studies, and now a biography.

He remained an anarchist and continued to write articles for anarchist papers for the rest of his life. He also wrote articles about anarchist topics elsewhere, including several standard reference books, and above all he produced many books on libertarian subjects. There were biographical studies of Gandhi, Godwin, Huxley, Kropotkin, Orwell, Proudhon, Read and Wilde; there were collections of articles – *The Writer and Politics* (1948), *The Rejection of Politics* (1972), *Anarchism and Anarchists* (1992); and of course there were *Anarchism* (1962) and *The Anarchist Reader* (1977), which had an enormous sale around the world. He probably introduced more people to anarchism than anyone else since the end of the Spanish Civil War sixty years ago. Whatever his doubts and disappointments, he never repudiated his past.

Fetherling is a much inferior writer to Woodcock, whose own autobiography is more readable than this biography, but he has worked hard to describe the events of Woodcock's life and the background of his work. He is especially successful in explaining such things as Woodcock's home life, his academic and journalistic career, his finances and his health, his friendships and enmities. As he admits, using Woodcock's private letters may endanger his reputation, since they were often badly written and bad-tempered, but they do add a revealing perspective to the calm and elegant profile he presented in public.

However, while Fetherling has no difficulty in describing the later career in Canada, he has many difficulties with the earlier career in Britain. His accounts of British culture,

society, politics, history, topography are vitiated by often ludicrous ignorance, and he has made little attempt to check Woodcock's frequently imaginative versions of such things. His account of Woodcock's involvement in the anarchist movement is similarly distorted, and although he took the trouble to interview some survivors during a visit to Britain in 1992 he didn't take the opportunity to establish a reliable narrative. The treatment of Woodcock's infatuation with Marie Louise Berneri is almost as embarrassing as Woodcock's own, and the accounts of Woodcock's writings are almost completely uncritical. There are several references to bad feeling between Woodcock on one side and "the *Freedom* crowd" and Albert Meltzer on other sides, and to some of the petty sneers at an anarchist intellectual who dared to become successful, but there is no recognition of the more serious and substantive criticisms of his writings on anarchism (such as those which I wrote in *Freedom* in 1976 and in *The Raven* in 1987). There are some real absurdities, such as the claim that Woodcock was the author of the circular letter which was the occasion of the prosecution of the *War Commentary* editors in 1945, or the description of Woodcock's shoddy eleven-volume edition of the *Collected Works* of Kropotkin (published during 1989-1995) as "the labour of which he would be proudest". And Fetherling doesn't realise that much of Woodcock's research was already old-fashioned when he did it and was anyway out-dated by subsequent work, though he does note Woodcock's carelessness with factual detail.

But this is a pretty modest book about a rather immodest man, and it should be accepted on its own terms, as a first attempt to describe Woodcock's life and work as a whole. William New's festschrift, *A Political Art* (1978), is a more penetrating book, but *A Gentle Anarchist* does well to offer a single view of a remarkable person and also fills several gaps.

NW

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Anyone interested in giving a talk or
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Peter Neville
for London Anarchist Forum

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- 4.45pm Tea
- 5.15pm Future organisations

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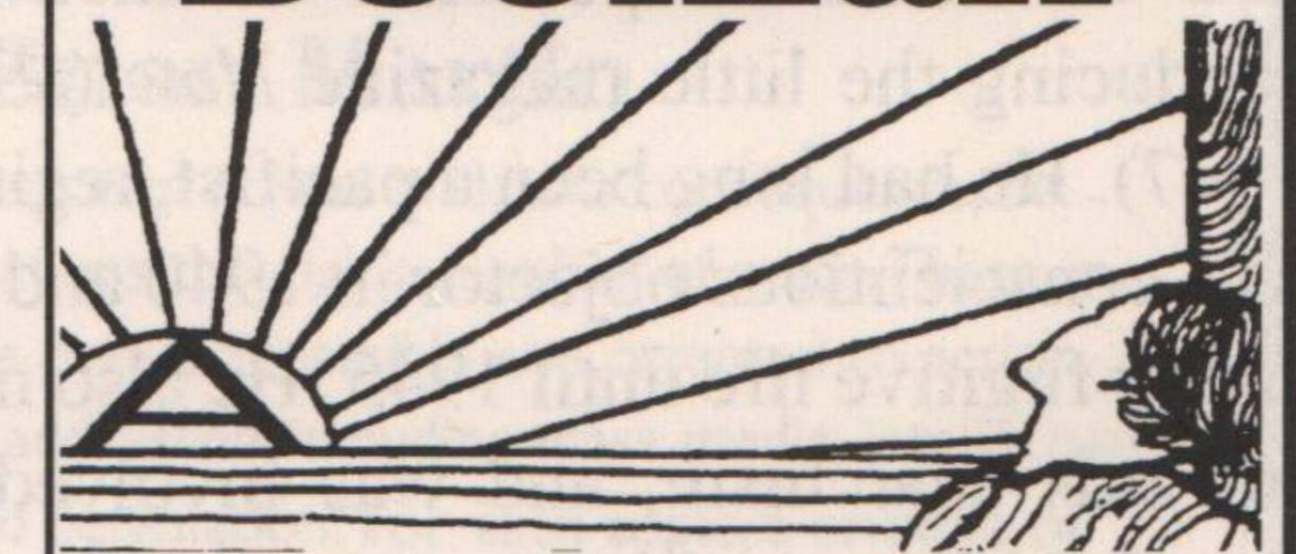


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