

Obituaries

Remember Axel

Martin Gilbert supplements the obituaries that have appeared in Freedom.

On 3.1.'96, Axel Ney Hoch died.

He was one of the best Hyde Park speakers, able to hold huge crowds for hours with his sparkling wit & erudition. In the early to mid '60s, I mainly knew Axel, as one of hundreds who regularly went to hear him speak about nuclear disarmament and anarchism. I am sure I am not the only one whom he helped to relate those two concepts.

When he needed a break other speakers would take over from Axel. On one such occasion, I took over a large gathering from Axel, which soon melted away due to my lack of experience. On returning he was patient & generous enough to mount his stand, placing it next to mine; only talking quietly as he gave me tips about public speaking.

In '94 I 'phoned him. He had, as expected, no recollection of me, his fan of 30 years ago. However Axel seems to have appreciated the call, speaking of his experiences and opinions for more than an hour.

Martin Gilbert, March '96.

O B I T U A R Y

GORDON COLLINS was irrepressible in life.

Sadly he died of lung cancer on *December 1995* aged only 51.

In the late fifties he drifted into peace movement communes in South London trying his hand as plumber's mate, then lab. technician, finally to opt for full time protest as one of the anti-Malaria canoeists at the Holy Loch. Despite lack of qualifications and physical disabilities he got into the Co-op College and qualified as a lecturer. Having found a good use for his personality and skills he gave twenty five years to his students at Lowestoft College of Further Education. He married Anne with whom he had three children and adopted a fourth, bringing them up in a cottage in Ikenham, Suffolk.

Totally committed to his local community he became a councillor.

On important issues of principle he became a thorn in the side of so-called political pragmatists never failing to speak out ~~again~~ when necessary.

At the time of the miners' strike he ran a support stall in Lowestoft and was placed under surveillance by a private detective

hired by the Council in an attempt to prosecute under a no selling bye law. This failed and rebounded on the Council when he appeared in a documentary made by Granada Television exposing the Council's attempts to discredit one of their own Council members.

He was instrumental in establishing the first Council Environmental Charter in the country, getting a One Stop Advice Centre set up by the Council and initiating the employment of a Council Welfare Rights Officer.. He pressed for and got established a local Theatre, initiated the opening of a Women's Refuge, and worked with Nic Raynsford M.I. in ensuring that any compulsory competitive tendering of Council services would be done with maximum control staying with the Local Authority.

Gordon was a fighter both against his own adversity and for justice for others, and for wider peace and environmental issues.

He was a dear friend and comrade and will be sorely missed by all who knew him.

Jan Dixon

Ellis Hillman - polymath - & a book
that never got written, but should have been.

Preparing synopses for History Workshop, eighteen months ago, & reminiscing about the early days of CND, it dawned on me that at the time of the first Aldermarch (Easter 1958) the Newsletter, then edited by Peter Fryer on behalf of the Healy Group, was still operating, [as its original perspective had promised, the Summer before,] as a contact journal for a wide section of the emergent New Left. That the Healy contingent on the Aldermarch - though no doubt it had some distinctive slogans - nevertheless displayed none of the hostility to the rest of the March, that in later years came to characterize Healyites.

But that a week later, when DAC, New Left & Healyite contingents went down to put the (otherwise neglected) unilateralist case at a Labour Party "peace" rally, the Healy contingent treated the rest of the unilateralists with the same hostility that it showed to the Gaitskellites. Moreover just after that the Newsletter had an editorial attack on the DAC, for not having called for workers to black the Aldermaston base.

They did however, then, - as they later would not have done, - publish Mike Randle's reply, which inter alia said that:

(a) the DAC had intended the March should call for such action, when however the March was taken over by a wider sponsoring group, - the Aldermaston March Committee, - Frank Allaun had insisted that the original leaflet be scrapped. *[He didn't (but could have) add(ed) that the Healy Group only endorsed the March, when Allaun & others did, so effectively it had voted with Allaun on the matter.]*

(b) however the DAC had also organized a separate vigil at the base, for the duration of the March; (& it also had plans to have a nine week picket there for the Summer; & the original leaflet was (& would be again) used there.

Obviously there was a fundamental change of line at that point; during that week the Healy Group took the decision that was in time to set themselves totally apart from & hostile to the rest of the Left; a position which, - despite the previous hostility of Healy to others on the Left, - had not characterised the Healy Group for the previous nine or ten months. For anyone who remembers the Left of the Sixties & Seventies; anyone who thinks about how things might have been, if the tremendous energy & organizational flair, that went into the SLL, had been channelled into the wider Left; anyone who thinks about all the comrades soured by the bitterness engendered by the various SLL splits; that change in policy has to be a pretty momentous event.

Perhaps one day, someone like Peter Fryer, Peter Cadogan, Bob Pennington or Bryan Behan, will write an explanation. It is needed. When I worked it out, I turned for an answer to Ellis. He, on reflection, agreed that there had been a change then & gave me a partial answer but said I would have to wait for the full one as he was writing a book on the Healy Group in the Fifties; & would save the full discussion for this. Ellis died on the 21st of January, so that book will never be completed. The book, like the author, will be a great loss.

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It can't be often that a relatively small circulation anarchist mailing list contains the name of the Mayor of a London Borough; but Ellis Hillman defied all normal characterization or categorization.

As a thirty year old geology student, Ellis [who certainly hadn't wanted to take on the additional work of a councillor,] was put up as a Labour candidate for the LCC, in what was thought to be an unwinnable Ward, & won. [His interest in geology, & LCC position, led him - besides writing an history of earthquakes - through a study of London sewers to explore the whole of underground London, & his work "London under London" is more or less the definitive work on the subject.]

Initially attracted to the SPGB; (Bob Barltrop once claimed - in Freedom, - to have initially converted Ellis to socialism;) he was in the Fifties an independent minded Trot, capable, at one & the same time, of deep theoretical insights, & of laughing at the absurd complexities, into which Trots traditionally tied themselves. He was expelled from the SLL, - *he had (at Healy's orders, against his own wishes & judgement,) voted with the majority of the Labour Group to cut the wages of council employees, - when the latter organization first went public in 1959.*

Thereafter he was briefly linked to Grant, & attempts to promote unity between disparate Trot currents; but in the late Sixties became one of what later were called the Municipal Left of the Labour Party & dropped out of Far Left circles only to reappear in the 80s. He had by that time (though the first Labour Mayor of Barnet,) shed both the belief that Labour would ever do any good & any trust in vanguardist solutions; he trawled the pages of hundreds of radical journals for the doings & discussions of small libertarian, socialist & green groupings; seeing in these the only hope for the future.

But that account leaves out more than it puts in; as a county councillor he managed to preserve his honesty while at the same time earning a deserved reputation as a Mr Fixit. He really did get things done, & they were always the thing that honest constituents needed done.

It might be thought that his geology, his study of London's underground, his council work, would be enough to keep anyone busy; but beyond that he found time to be a leading authority on Lewis Carroll, [he was President of the Lewis Carroll Society,] to write (in Hebrew, though he would under protest consent to send English translations to correspondents,) an acclaimed commentary on Esther; he would lecture on the history of socialism, (inter alia, on Jewish socialism & on christian socialism.) & certainly knew his stuff; and when - following the launching of moon rockets, & the pictures of the earth from space, - the Flat Earth Society could no longer attract any members, let alone academics prepared to hold office; it approached this Geographer-Geologist, who felt himself duty-bound to accept the Presidency so as to allow another group freedom of expression.

Eric Harrison

S.B. is sorry to learn of the death of Eric Harrison, [c.f. reproduced letter to P.N. from Len Gibson enclosed,] comrades who were active in the C of 100 will know as much of him as we, for those who were not, he was a Coventry (Standards) shop steward (subsequently convenor,) who was active in the Industrial sub-committee of the 100.

As such he was part author of (attempted to distribute) an industrial leaflet that was translated into Russian, & distributed by Committee members within the Soviet Union; [Eric was amongst those who were detected at the port of entry & barred, & who consequently engaged in civil disobedience in the customs' house.]

Naturally the Establishment & the Media, (always so anxious to say to opponents of British weaponry, "why don't you go & demonstrate against Russian bombs,) did not choose to publicise this act.

The C of 100 arose, at the beginning of the Sixties, out of discontent within CND & the New Left at the Labour Party & constitutionalist orientation of the leadership; it did not, initially, have any direct connection with anarchism; (though it was estimated that thirty of the original hundred named members were Freedom subscribers, these were for the most part no longer active as such, & were not to prove the most militant of committee members.)

However the Committee attracted several thousand supporters, spawned local groups & sectional sub-committees, many of whose activists were already beginning to think on anarchist lines, (the process being then fostered by experience of police & prisons.) The anarchist movement was hardly

strong at the beginning, (the London Anarchist Group was then the only such group in Freedom, Direct Action was re-launched, in 61, after several years,) but it grew rapidly. Eric was one of those then attracted; he never used the label "syndicalist" so though he subscribed to DA & supported us, he never joined either the SWF or S.B.; but we nevertheless mourn a comrade.