

A Library for Peace: the Commonweal Collection

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Introduction

The Commonweal¹ Collection is a unique, independent, specialist library devoted to non-violent social change. Holding over 11000 books and pamphlets and over 100 journal titles, it was established in 1958 by David Hoggett, and moved to the University of Bradford in 1975, where one of the trustees, Nigel Young, was lecturing in the newly established Department of Peace Studies². This article tells the story of Commonweal and its remarkable founder and discusses the time it has spent in Bradford at the University, and also outlines two exciting new projects, the Children's Mobile Peace Library, and Treehouse (home to the Bradford Centre for Nonviolence). Commonweal is also, as Trustee Andrew Rigby wrote "A space of and for peace which bears witness to the life of its founder"³

David Hoggett

David Hoggett⁴ (1929-1975) was born in Bristol, later moving to Cheltenham, where he worked in the Public Library on leaving school. Aged 18 in 1947, he was conscripted for National Service. Although he reached the rank of Sergeant and apparently became a "crack shot", he had been interested in ideas of pacifism from his early teens and "the direct cause of deciding to leave Her Majesty's army was the reading of 'The power of non-violence' by Richard Gregg"⁵. He refused further service, becoming a conscientious objector, for which he was interned in Wormwood Scrubs, later, at a tribunal electing to work in forestry.

After National Service, he joined the International Voluntary Service for Peace, helping in work camps in post-war Europe. In 1952, he travelled to India, where he spent three years, the first two with IVSP and a further year

¹ *Commonweal* means the common good or the welfare of the community.

² University of Bradford, Department of Peace Studies *Website* [online] <http://www.brad.ac.uk/acad/peace/> [accessed 10th November 2006].

³ Rank, C., (eds.) (1997) *City for Peace : Bradford's story* Bradford: MCB, p. 155

⁴ This account draws extensively on the early chapters of Barlow, S., (1999) *The Commonweal Collection : the story of a library for a non-violent world*. Bradford: Commonweal Collection.

⁵ Hoggett, D., (1996). *Travels of an International Voluntary Service worker: a series of newsletters written to personal friends 1950-1960*. Bradford: Commonweal Collection, p.63.

building houses. India was to have a huge influence on David's thinking and later life, in particular the "Bhoodan" land gift movement, based on the Gandhian ideal of "Sarvodaya", a transformed society based on non-violence. On returning from India in 1955, David trained as a carpenter, believing that practical skills were a way to achieve such transformation and using these skills on his holidays to work for IVSP in Europe. In 1956, he was building homes for refugees in Austria, when he fell twenty feet from a roof onto a concrete floor, fracturing his fifth cervical vertebra.



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He nearly died. However, he recovered, paralysed from the chest down, with some feeling and movement in the right hand. After a year in hospitals, David was able to return to the family home in Cheltenham, where he learned to type using rods attached to his arms, and became involved in the local work of CND and of the Direct Action Committee. He also read widely and built up a fine collection of books, journals and pamphlets on peace and nonviolence, appealing to his wide circle of contacts to donate more to form this library. Alfred Heslegrave, another volunteer with IVSP, became his life-long companion and carer. In 1958, David's work on behalf of refugees was recognised by award of the Nansen Medal by the United Nations Association. David, typically, accepted it on behalf of all who did such work.

In 1959, Garthnewydd Community House in Merthyr Tydfil was established by David and friends from the Fellowship of Friends of Truth as "an experiment in applying the social philosophy of M.K. Gandhi, that is, in nonviolent living"⁶. With David and Alfred came the growing collection of books, now supplemented by the library of the FFT and further donations

⁶ Hoggett, D., (1996), p.79.

from friends in the UK and in India. By February 1960, it comprised 400 volumes, "primarily of value to those interested in Sarvodaya, pacifism, philosophy, world religions and mysticism"⁷. David called the library "Commonweal", which he considered to be the best English-language equivalent of "Sarvodaya". Soon requests to use this resource were received from peace activists across the country, and a postal library service began to take shape, masterminded by David, who arranged cataloguing and classification and sought donations from writers and publishers.

Eventually the Garthnewydd community dispersed. David and the collection moved with one of the families from the community to a cottage nearby, where he stayed for three years. He organised the Library to run very effectively on minimal resources (running expenses were £1 a week in 1963) and he also had the vision to look beyond his own lifetime to secure Commonweal's long-term future by creating the Commonweal Trust, to ensure the survival of the library and its Gandhian ethos when he could no longer run it. The original trustees were David himself, his cousin April Carter, and two friends, Donald Groom and Devi Prasad.

David later moved back to the family home in Cheltenham, where he devoted himself to the work of Commonweal. In 1965, he received a "POSSUM" typewriter, which he operated at first by a suck-blow mechanism and later by a rod attached to his hand. This wonderful machine freed him from reliance on others to type for him. With the help of Alfred and volunteers, David managed the loan system, wrote detailed and helpful replies to enquirers, appealed for donations of books and money, catalogued and indexed, and created bibliographies on key subjects. Sylvia Barlow's book contains many comments on David's incredible knowledge of the collection and the excellent service he provided⁸. The collection had now grown from 800-900 volumes at the creation of the Trust Deed to 3000 volumes in 1974.

In 1975, David fell very ill with a serious urinary infection: he died on November 15th. The power of the written word could be said to have changed his life, when he refused military service after reading Gregg's book; the Library he founded has continued to provide inspiration for others in the same way.

J.B. Priestley Library

Following David's death the Trustees⁹ of Commonweal looked for somewhere else for the library to be housed. According to Sylvia Barlow¹⁰ three options were considered; split the library and distribute it between other peace libraries, move the library to a communal living project in Tenbury or move

⁷ Hoggett, D., (1996), p.73.

⁸ Barlow, S., (1999), p.14-16.

⁹ The Commonweal Collection became an organisation governed by a deed of trust in 1963.

¹⁰ Barlow, S. (1999), p.19

to the University of Bradford with its Peace Studies department. After much debate the last was chosen at least in part because of the security and continuity of the collection, also because the "openness, sympathy and generosity of the librarians at Bradford is tremendous – they are really interested in it"¹¹. This has been shown over the last 30 years in housing the collection and offering a small amount of clerical support.

The agreement was that the Trustees retained ownership of the materials, but that they were to be permanently deposited with the University. The title "Commonweal Collection" was to be retained and the collection was housed separately within the library building¹². The University also undertook to provide a separate catalogue (once printed, now available online through the University catalogue <http://ipac.brad.ac.uk>) and maintain access for outside users, and that "the collection would be available for research and study purposes within the University Library for anyone wishing to use it".¹³ A "Joint Consultative Committee" of two Trustees and two representatives of the University was established to discuss matters concerning the collection.

The integration of a radical collection with a "traditional" University library was not an easy one, and circulation and classification both posed problems. The move to the University saw the end of the postal loans service, but did allow continued access to the collections through Inter-Library Loans.¹⁴ The housing of the Collection within the University did nothing to reduce the dependence of Commonweal upon donations. There has never been much in the way of an acquisitions budget, instead the collection is dependent upon the generosity of authors and publishers working on peace and nonviolence. The Trustees appointed a part-time paid co-ordinator in 1976 to oversee the move and re-establishment of the library in its new location. From 1977 a workgroup of volunteers was established, this group (comprised of local interested parties and also students and researchers from the department of Peace Studies) continued much of the maintenance of the collection. The use of a group of to undertake much of the "work" fitted well with the decentralist philosophy of Commonweal (if the University library viewed it as unconventional" library practice¹⁵). As much of the group was constituted from a transient student population this worked with limited success, regularly having large sections of the workgroup experiencing essay crises and long vacations away from Bradford and the collection.

The Co-ordinator's role has been funded by donations and grants obtained by the trustees, and money has always been in short supply. In 2004, funding for the co-ordinator's post ran out. This is not the only time the collection

¹¹ Young, N, (1976) letter to Bob Overy quoted in Barlow (1999) p.20

¹² Commonweal has its own classification system created by David Hoggett, an outline schema can be found at: <http://www.brad.ac.uk/library/services/commonweal/cwlclassificationlist.pdf>

¹³ Barlow, S, (1999) p.24

¹⁴ Barlow, S. (1999) p.22, for many involved in the peace movement interaction with an institutional library may not be as straight forward as an "anonymous" postal loan from a small sympathetic organisation.

¹⁵ Barlow, S, (1999) p.23

has been left dependent upon the work of volunteers alone, a five month period in 1984/5 also saw a lack of co-ordinator. The day to day running of the collection is now overseen by the workgroup co-ordinator (a paid role of only 10 hours per month), who cannot realistically undertake to do more than answer post and organise the workgroup of volunteers to undertake the necessary maintenance tasks. The Joint Consultative Committee still oversee the relationship between the J.B. Priestley Library and the Commonwealth Collection.

The Commonwealth Archives

Commonwealth has collected over seventy significant archive collections: "the heart of the archival holdings is made up of material donated by those who either knew David or shared his commitment to exploring and experimenting with the potentialities of nonviolence in all its many dimensions"¹⁶ The core collections are those concerning the nonviolent direct action movement of the 1950s and 1960s; other strengths include the 1980s anti-nuclear movement, archives of organisations such as Peace News, and the archives of individual researchers.

The lack of staffing continuity and, in particular, the loss of funding for the co-ordinator's role made the trustees realise the need to safeguard these important archives. Since 2000, the J.B. Priestley Library has had Special Collections staff, with the necessary practical, legal and user service expertise to manage the University's archive and rare book collections effectively. For Special Collections to manage the archives, with continued input from the trustees, seemed the obvious way forward. In September 2005, the Commonwealth Archives were formally transferred to the J.B. Priestley Library. There is much work on cataloguing and preservation to be done to make these resources widely available and external funding will be sought. It is in keeping with Commonwealth's mission that, as with all the Special Collections, these archives will be open to all¹⁷

Children's peace library

One of the new directions Commonwealth has taken in the last few years is the establishment of a Children's Mobile Peace Library. This was the brainchild of Heather Blakey, Commonwealth co-ordinator (2000-2001) and now a Trustee. She felt that it was important to provide access to a wide range of materials on peace for children and it was a gap which did not seem to be filled. The process of establishing the library took some time, after much work by co-ordinators Sally Fildes-Moss and Noa Kleinman, funding of £13000 was finally awarded by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation in 2004 for a co-ordinator for the

¹⁶ Rigby, A., (1997) Description of archives held by the Commonwealth Collection January 1997, reproduced in Barlow, S., (1999), Appendix B.

¹⁷ Further information about the Commonwealth Archives can be found on their web page: <http://www.brad.ac.uk/library/special/cwlarchives.php>

project 10 hours a week for 12 months. Peter Moore took on this role, Peter said "There is a hunger in Bradford for fresh ideas on how we can get children to live together peacefully. This Commonweal project allowed our storytellers to share these ideas and through fun stories build bridges for peace."¹⁸

The library was established to *travel to* children from particularly disadvantaged backgrounds. This aim was met through a series of community events and storytelling at the Bradford Central Library, in total 568 children attended the 40 events, of whom 56% were female, 69% BME¹⁹ and 2% disabled²⁰. A pool of storytellers was established, and the storytelling is continuing in the Library's new home at Treehouse.

The library holds books on "positive peace", so includes material not only on peace and nonviolence, but also on issues to help children lead a fulfilling life, such as dealing with bullying, self-confidence, "making a difference", and wider reality role models than are traditionally found in books in many public libraries. There are also a small selection, not on the open shelves, which deal with complex issues children sometimes have to handle too early in their lives, such as drug or alcohol dependency, sexuality and death.

As one of the volunteer storytellers with the project describes: "up to 20 children aged between 6 and 12 gather on a rug on a Saturday morning to take part in stories. Drawn into stories and pictures they started many discussions of what they saw and understood and how this related to their lives. I told stories from all over the world, of peaceful warriors, fighting animals, of the lives of little girls and boys and of the wisdom of old men and women. We made drawings, musical shakers, masks, badges and paper flowers. We made stories into games, running up and down ladders of legs, and games into stories. We mimed animals at the Peace and Craft Fair. We made circles and a gateway to enter at the Mela and we often make thunderstorms with the percussive sounds of our hands. With children and storytellers from different parts of the world we have explored our cultures and creativity, we have learnt words in each others languages, talked about food, families and relational and environmental issues. The books are beautiful and the stories subtly or, more obviously weave peace themes and questions through them. It's great to be creating spaces where children and parents share in these stories."²¹

The Children's Mobile Peace Library is looking to extend its work by lending book boxes on themed issues to local primary schools. "This project reflects the activist side of the Commonweal Collection's mission to be a resource for peace and social justice in Bradford and the United Kingdom"²²

¹⁸ Moore, P., (2006) *Personal email of reflections on the project* dated 19th November

¹⁹ Black and Minority Ethnic

²⁰ Children's Mobile Peace Library final report (2006)

²¹ Mundy, L., (2006) *Personal email of reflections on the project* dated: 15th November.

²² Arber, C., (2006) *Open Letter* in the Children's Mobile Peace Library final report

Treehouse (Bradford Centre for Nonviolence)

Treehouse is the home of the Bradford Centre for Nonviolence. The City of Bradford declared itself a City of Peace in 1997²³ and has long been attempting to establish a city-wide Centre for Peace. After a succession of false starts, a group of Peace activists working under the title Bradford Centre for Nonviolence (now renamed Treehouse) finally made it happen. Treehouse has its roots in a Fair Trade Café which was established in 1994 near the University, and operated successfully for 12 years. In 2005 the Diocese of Bradford (who owned the building) wanted to change the use of the building. The café closed until a new agreement with the Diocese was reached.

Treehouse opened its doors in September 2006, housing a fair-trade and organic café, meeting space and the Children's Mobile Peace Library. The centre also houses a portion of the Commonweal Collection on long-term loan. Neither the centre nor the Commonweal wanted to undertake a wholesale move, and it was decided to split the collection between the more theoretical material and the more activist material. The more activist material was to be taken to Treehouse.

Because outreach from Commonweal and access to the collection has always been one of the areas in which Commonweal has worked, the chance to relocate part of the collection to a locus of activists seemed too good to miss! The part of the collection that has moved is that on "non-violent social action". The workgroup, under the guidance of one of the trustees identified the material on non-violent social action. The moved stock remains on the University Library catalogue (so it is easily searchable), and there will doubtless be issues related to the maintenance of the collection in a new venue with no dedicated staff (although the Treehouse Co-ordinator has responsibility for overseeing the collection as part of their role).

Where to from here?

The Commonweal Collection continues, possibly not in *exactly* the way imagined by David Hoggett, but through its new involvement in the Children's Mobile Peace Library and the Treehouse it is more accessible to the public than it has been for some time, and it definitely fulfils the stated aims when the collection was established: "to promote the study... [of] all matters relating to the progress and development of communities and of mankind generally and especially relating to the solving of conflict and the progress of mankind towards nonviolence"²⁴

²³ Rank, C. (ed.), (1997) p.24

²⁴ Trust deed of the Commonweal Trust (1963), clause 1.

The Commonweal is still dependent on donations of materials, and of time and money. More details about how you can donate materials, money, or your time can be found at <http://www.brad.ac.uk/library/services/commonweal/index.php>. There is also a Friends Scheme for regular donations.

References and further reading

Barlow, S., (1999) *The Commonweal Collection : the story of a library for a non-violent world* Bradford: Commonweal Collection.

Hoggett, D. (1996) *Travels of an International Voluntary Service worker : a series of newsletters written to personal friends* Bradford: Commonweal Collection

Rank, C., (eds.) (1997) *City for Peace : Bradford's story* Bradford: MCB. *Acknowledgements*

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