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Special Issue on Radical Bookshops

Freedom, Freedom Press and Freedom Bookshop A short history of Freedom Press

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Freedom and Freedom Press publications have concentrated on anarchist propaganda, and refrained from publishing anything about quarrels and splits in the anarchist movement. This essay, not being a work of propaganda, is largely about the quarrels and splits. I will not give the personal names of people who are, or may be, still alive.

This is *not* a piece of original research, but an amalgam of memories dating from the 1940s, and scissors-and-paste work using the following secondary sources: Heiner Becker, Nicolas Walter, Philip Sansom, and Vernon Richards (anonymously), in *Freedom a hundred years* (Freedom Press 1986); Heiner Becker 'Notes on Freedom and the Freedom Press 1886-1928' *The Raven* (1) vol 1, pp 4-24, Freedom Press 1986; Nicolas Walter (2007) *The anarchist past and other essays* edited by David Goodway, Five Leaves Publications 2007; Richard Boston 'Anarchy among the Anarchists' *The Guardian* 16 November 1996, reprinted as 'Mere Anarchy' in *Starkness at Noon* Five Leaves Publications 1997; Albert Meltzer (1986) 'Liars and Liberals' *Black Flag Supplement* no. 3; Vernon Richards (anonymously) (1986) *Friends of Freedom Press Ltd.*

Anarchism is an ethical doctrine 'a concept of what ought to be' which holds that nobody should be threatened into obedience, and seeks a society without intimidation. In Britain, the term anarchism has been claimed by three different schools of thought. *Anarchist socialism* or *anarchist communism* demands economic equality as well as (or as a requirement of) liberty for all. This is referred to simply as anarchism, without qualifications. *Individualist anarchism* (sometimes known as '*native American anarchism*', as it developed from the ideas of Thomas Paine and the drafters of the American constitution) opposes central government but allows trade, and differences in wealth that result from trade. *Anarcho-syndicalism* advocates democratic societies organised through trade unions.

The first anarchist newspaper in Britain, *Freiheit*, published and edited by Johann

Most from 1879, was in the German language. The first British anarchist paper in English was *The English Freiheit*, of which the first issue was a translation of *Freiheit*, sold outside the Old Bailey where Johann Most was on trial in 1881. Also in English, and available on subscription in Britain, was *Liberty*, an individualist anarchist paper published in America.

In March 1885 Henry Seymour, who had been prosecuted for blasphemy in 1881, started a paper in London called *The Anarchist*. Seymour was himself an individualist anarchist, but he recruited fellow editors who were anarchist socialists. One of these was Charlotte Wilson, a prominent member of the Fabian Society, who had written articles on anarchism for the magazine *Justice*, and was shortly to write a Fabian Society pamphlet on anarchism. Wilson persuaded George Bernard Shaw to write an anarchist article for the first issue of *The Anarchist*. Shaw told Seymour it 'was written more to show Mrs Wilson my idea of the line an anarchist paper should take ... than as an expression of my own opinions'.

In March 1886, the anarchist Peter Kropotkin was released from prison in France, and Charlotte Wilson invited him to London to join the editors of *The Anarchist*. This was too much for Seymour, who wrote to a friend that his anarchist individualism had been sidelined by anarchist communists who only wanted to write, leaving him to do the production work and bear most of the cost. They had a tiff. Seymour ceased publication of *The Anarchist* and told the anarchist communists to start a paper of their own, which they did. The first issue of *Freedom* appeared in September 1886 (bearing the date October 1889). Charlotte Wilson was editor and publisher, and Kropotkin the main theoretical columnist. *Freedom* never acknowledged its origin as a breakaway from *The Anarchist*, but its first issue denounced Individualist Anarchism as a round square, a contradiction in set terms.

Wilson arranged with Annie Besant for a publishing office at Charles Bradlaugh's Freethought Press, and with William Morris for printing services at the Socialist League. In January 1888, Bradlaugh decided he would not have anarchists in the Freethought Press building, so the *Freedom* group moved. In the next ten years there were seven more moves, during which, in 1895, Charlotte Wilson resigned and was replaced as publisher by Alfred Marsh, a violinist.

In 1898, *Freedom* acquired its own printing facilities. The nieces and nephew of the artist Dante Gabriel Rossetti had been printing their own paper, *The Torch, a journal of anarchist communism* at 127 Ossulston Street, near Kings Cross, since 1885. In 1898 they decided to cease publication and arranged for the *Freedom* group to take over the premises. The Rossettis printing equipment was bought and donated to *Freedom* by two sympathisers. *Freedom* Press stayed in Ossulston Street for the next thirty years. The hand-operated press dated from about 1820, and needed three operators; two to load the paper and pull the handle, and one to take the paper off. A comrade who was a trained compositor, Tom Cantwell, set the type in the room upstairs.

In 1902 Cantwell had a stroke which prevented him from working, and his place as compositor was taken by Tom Keell, a compositor at *The Spectator*. In 1907 the *Freedom* group started a second paper, *Voice of Labour*. Tom Keell then left *The Spectator* for a wage paid by the *Freedom* group, for which he acted as compositor of both papers, editor of *Freedom*, and manager.

Most members of the Freedom group were of the artisan class, but Wilson, a highly educated stockbroker's wife, and Kropotkin, a Russian prince in exile who wrote geographical articles for *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, were members of the liberal intelligentsia, and this led some to see the whole group as elitist. In 1897 a writer in an anarchist paper wrote that *Freedom* was 'a philosophical, middle-class organ, not intelligible to the working classes ... less revolutionary than *Comic Cuts* ... edited and managed by an inaccessible group of arrogant persons worse than the Pope and his seventy cardinals and written by fossilised old quilldrivers'. *Freedom* did not respond.

The first major split within the Freedom group itself occurred at the outbreak of the First World War, in a dispute about the lesser of two evils. Tom Keell, the editor, was for opposing both sides in the war of rival imperialisms. Kropotkin wanted *Freedom* to support the side of Britain and Russia. Tom Keell later wrote 'One doubted the judgement of those who supported the War, but one never doubted their sincerity'. Those who supported the War (with the honourable exception of Kropotkin himself) were less tolerant. At the national anarchist conference in April 1915, George Cores, a member of the Freedom group, denounced Keell as a dictator who had seized the group's assets. The national movement came out overwhelmingly in Keell's favour.

After the passing of the Military Service Act, which introduced conscription in 1916, *Voice of Labour* published an article which was also issued as a leaflet, *Defying the Act*, by one hiding out in the Scottish Hills. Keell and his companion Lilian Wolfe were charged under the Defence of the Realm Act, and found guilty. Keell was sentenced to a fine of £100 or three months imprisonment, declined to pay the fine and served the prison term. Wolfe was sentenced to £25 or two months and went to prison, but there discovered she was pregnant (at the age of 40), so paid the fine and was released.

After 1918, the British anarchist movement declined. Some joined the Communist Party, admiring the Russian revolution, and either forgiving or deceiving themselves about the Lenin dictatorship (the late Bonar Thompson told me there was money coming from somewhere to pay pro-Communist speakers). Others went to the pacifist movement and the women's suffrage movement.

Freedom kept going, with the aid of donations, including £50 (half a year's average wages) from Lilian Wolfe, until 1928, when the Ossulston Street building was demolished in a slum clearance scheme. Tom Keell retired to Whiteway Colony to live on his pension from the composers trade union, and for the next seven years, Freedom Press produced only an infrequent and irregular *Freedom Newsletter*. A newspaper headed *Freedom New Series* was produced by George Cores and others who had opposed Keell over his opposition to the war, but Freedom Press did not publicly acknowledge its existence.

When the Spanish civil War broke out in 1936, Vernon Richards, known as Vero, the twenty-two-year-old son of an Italian anarchist in Soho, started a newspaper called *Spain and the World* in support of the Spanish anarchists. After the first issue, *Spain and the World* became a Freedom Press publication, with Tom Keell as publisher and Lilian Wolfe, now aged 60, as administrator. Lilian often stayed in London with Vero and his companion Marie-Louise Berneri. She stayed on as administrator and manager of Freedom Bookshop until the age of 95.

When the Spanish civil war ended, the paper changed its name to *Revolt!*, and as World War Two started, to *War Commentary for anarchism*. Having been an established publisher before the war, Freedom Press had a licence to buy paper. In 1943 it published *The March to Death*, a book of cartoons by John Olday with anonymous commentary by Marie-Louise Berneri, which presents Hitler, Mussolini, Churchill, Stalin, and Roosevelt as engaged in a common conspiracy against all their subjects. It sold 5,500 copies, to people delighted by relief from the relentless war propaganda.

In 1942 the Freedom Press was offered the chance to buy a printing firm, Express Printers in Whitechapel. A rival printer lent some money on condition that he could take over the Hebrew type (effectively acquiring a monopoly of Hebrew type in a Jewish area), and the rest of the purchase price was lent by various supporters. The supporters' group, calling itself the Anarchist Federation, became the nominal owner of Freedom Press and publisher of *War Commentary*.

Anti-war as it was, the Freedom group was quite friendly with a pro-war group, the publishers of *Solidaridad Obrera*, a Spanish-language anarcho-syndicalist newspaper which was produced on a stencil machine in the Freedom Press office. The editors of *Solidaridad Obrera* would telephone whenever their stencils were ready, saying can we come round and run off *Solidarid Churchilliana?*

Vero, Albert Meltzer, and later Philip Sansom were refused registration as conscientious objectors. Albert was called up into the Royal Pioneer Corps, while Vero and Philip served prison sentences. John Olday, a deserter from the Royal Pioneer Corps, was captured and sent to a military prison. Freedom Press as such, however, was not prosecuted until almost the end of the War.

I came across anarchism in September 1944, when I was on a Ministry of Food scheme using schoolboys to pick hops in Kent, and visited Hyde Park speakers' corner. My subscription copies of *War Commentary* stopped coming in December 1944, so I wrote to ask what had happened and learned, in a letter from Lilian Wolfe, that the police had seized the files.

In April 1945 Vernon Richards, Marie-Louise Berneri, John Hewetson, and Philip Sansom were charged with conspiracy to contravene Defence Regulation 39A (i.e. to cause disaffection among members of His Majesty's forces). The anarchist art pundit, Herbert Read, later to be knighted, assembled a Freedom Press Defence Committee from those of the 'Great and Good' who were interested in civil liberties (the National Council for Civil Liberties, which might have been expected to take up such a case, was temporarily possessed by the belligerently patriotic Communist Party). Richards, Hewetson and Sansom were each sentenced to nine months in prison. Berneri was found not guilty on a technical point; she was married to Richards (to get a British passport), and the old law still stood that a wife conspiring with her husband committed no offence.

As the prosecution was being prepared, Freedom Press was subjected to a takeover attempt. *Freedom* of course said nothing about it, and it was months before we learned of it in Bradford. In 1949 I visited London and spoke to comrades on both sides of the split. Lilian Wolfe lent me a copy of a document, privately circulated in 1945, on condition that I kept it confidential. That was sixty years ago, so I hope my promise of confidentiality has lapsed.

As is the custom in anarchist groups, decisions in the Anarchist Federation (publisher of *War Commentary* and the Freedom Press books) were made by consensus. Among the most frequent writers for *War Commentary* were two anarcho-syndicalists, one of them a professional journalist. These two proposed, and got it agreed, that if the members of the Anarchist Federation could not reach a consensus, a majority decision would be accepted. It was also agreed that as the war was ending, differences about whether to support for the war had become less important, and Spanish comrades were invited to join. In December 1944, the editors of *War Commentary* left a Federation meeting before it ended, and after they had gone it was proposed under 'any other business' that they should be replaced as editors by the two anarcho-syndicalists. The motion was carried by a majority.

The plot failed. Earlier in 1944, some detectives had called at the Freedom Press office about a different case entirely, and tried to encourage co-operation by pointing out that Freedom Press was in danger of immediate closure, because its proprietors were not registered under the Business Names Act. That same day, Vero Richards and John Hewetson had visited the office of the Registrar of Business Names, and registered themselves as proprietors of Freedom Press. When they were sacked as editors, they just refused to go. The plotters were furious. A Spanish comrade told me in 1949 that he liked what was written in *Freedom* (the paper had reverted to its old name), "but not what they do".

Four men visited Richards and Berneri at their flat, pointed a pistol and refused to leave until Richards gave them a cheque for £25 (about six weeks' average wages) to start a new anarcho-syndicalist paper, *Direct Action*. Some comrades photographed the four leaving the flat. The four and two others, six in all, went to Express Printers with a sledge-hammer, evidently expecting to find a halftone block of the photograph ready for printing in the next *War Commentary*. There wasn't one because Freedom Press never published anything about the split, but they smashed the printing forme anyway, then met Richards in Angel Alley and beat him up.

The publishers of *Direct Action* called themselves the Anarchist Federation of Britain. The Freedom Press Group declared itself autonomous, but joined with others to form the Union of Anarchist Groups. At international conferences in the 1950s there were two separate British delegations, representing the AFB and the UAG. *War Commentary* (which reverted to the name *Freedom* in 1947) never mentioned *Direct Action*, but *Direct Action* was full of damaging references to *War Commentary* and *Freedom*.

People withdrew the loans they had made for the purchase of Express Printers, and Vero obtained an emergency loan from his mother, which he found quite embarrassing because his mother was not an anarchist.

In 1949 Marie-Louise Berneri died (aged 31) and George Woodcock, a prolific writer for *Freedom*, renounced anarchism and migrated to Canada. In the second edition of his Penguin book *Anarchism*, Woodcock wrote that British anarchism collapsed in the 1950s, following Berneri's death and his own departure. He was mistaken. Anarchism in Britain has always been a minority movement, but the 1950s was one of its most successful periods, with Albert Meltzer among *Freedom's* regular writers.

In 1961, while the weekly *Freedom* continued, Freedom Press began the monthly magazine *Anarchy*. In 1965, the advent of small offset printing made it possible to produce papers with little capital, and Albert Meltzer went off to start a paper closer to his own ideas, called *Wooden Shoe*, and a publishing group called Wooden Shoe Press.

In 1968, Whitechapel Art Gallery bought the Express Printers premises at 84a Whitechapel High Street. Before payment was completed, Vero borrowed the money, in his own name, to buy the freehold of 84b Whitechapel High Street, an empty building on the other side of Angel Alley. The publisher became 'Vernon Richards trading as Freedom Press'.

Albert Meltzer wrote to Vero with the proposal that Wooden Shoe Press should hire a room in the building, contributing to the mortgage repayments. Unlike the new Freedom Press building, the Wooden Shoe premises had a shop window. Jack Robinson, who was managing Freedom Bookshop and earning his living as a second-hand book dealer, visited the landlord of the vacated shop with a view to taking over the tenancy, and learned that Wooden Shoe had paid no rent for the three years and were being evicted. Vero might have written to Albert explaining what he had learned, but in the event he wrote a woffly letter, turning down Albert's offer without mentioning the real reason. Albert began a feud which lasted until both he and Vero were dead, and for some years after.

Co-operation did not entirely cease. In the early 1980s, *Freedom* and Albert's new paper *Black Flag* were both fortnightlies, published on alternate weeks. At weekends there were joint meetings in Freedom Bookshop, at which people from both publications would prepare subscription copies of whichever came out that week. Every edition of *Black Flag* contained some derogatory about *Freedom* or someone associated with Freedom Press. One of *Freedom's* editors did not entirely agree with the policy of no retaliation, and managed to sneak in a comment on *Black Flag's* attitude: 'We invite you into our house and you piss on the carpet'. Albert pretended to take the metaphor literally, as accusing himself in person of urinating on the carpet in the bookshop which had no carpet.

In 1982, Vero transferred ownership of Freedom Press to Friends of Freedom Press Limited, a company limited by guarantee and not having a share capital, whose registered directors were comrades long associated with Freedom Press. The existence of FFP was not made public until 1986, and Vero continued making all the business decisions. In the late 1980s he decided to pay stipends to two comrades, one (who had worked as a volunteer for years) to manage Freedom Press publishing, and the other (of whose background I know nothing) to manage Freedom Bookshop.

1986 was *Freedom's* anniversary year. A bumper anniversary number was produced and also issued as a book, *Freedom a hundred years*. Besides describing the history of Freedom Press, it was agreed that I solicit contributions from the whole anarchist movement of 1986. Of course I wrote to Albert, but he did not reply. He responded later with a pamphlet: *Black Flag Supplement No. 3, Liars and Liberals the other anarchism The Woodcock-Sansom school of falsification*, a classic of libellous abuse.

After 1968, *Freedom* was edited by a succession of editorial groups, not all of whom were very good. In the 1970s, the paper was set on an ordinary typewriter. One typist-editor took the opportunity to insert articles seen by no other editor, in praise of the Animal Liberation Front and the Irish Republican Army, until she was asked to leave by the other editors. No doubt Vero would have objected, but it seems that when he was not the editor, he did not even read *Freedom*. A feature article in a national newspaper, about the famous McLibel trial, mistook the name of one of the two defendants. The case was followed in every issue of *Freedom*, but Vero telephoned me full of praise of the defendant, using the wrong name.

Vero decided that he must return as editor, when a Christmas number featured on its front page a drawing of Death in a Santa Claus costume. The editor who commissioned the picture had resigned before the number was published, leaving as editors myself, the chap who was paid to do the books, and another comrade. Vero decided that the new *Freedom*, to his own design, should revert to being a fortnightly. Editing a fortnightly struck me as too much work, so I gave notice that I would resign as an editor. Vero published a number zero, denouncing the existing editors as incompetent, inciting another resignation. Only the comrade hired to do the books remained to be Vero's fellow editor.

Vero and Albert Meltzer met at the Anarchist Bookfair in 1995. During the twenty years they had worked together on *Spain and the World*, *Revolt*, *War Commentary*, and *Freedom*, it had been their custom to enjoy bantering arguments, and they took the opportunity to revive this custom. Among the insults, Albert told Vero he was senile (he was older than Albert by five years), and Vero replied I'll be writing your obituary. Albert died in 1996, at a conference of the syndicalist federation founded in 1945 as the Anarchist Federation of Britain, by the plotters who failed to seize *War Commentary*.

An obituary of Albert was published in *The Guardian*, written by one of Albert's legatees and evidently using Albert's reminiscences as its only source of information. It reiterated many of Albert's self-aggrandising fictions and scurrilous denunciations of the neo-liberals who dominated the movement in the late 1940s. Vero replied with an obituary in *Freedom*, headed 'Instead of an obituary', correcting some of the lies, recalling his joking prediction that he would write Albert's obituary, and deploring the damage Albert had done to the anarchist movement. Of course we would prefer anarchists not to be enemies, and Albert's malice certainly damaged the reputation of Freedom Press, and but it is not certain that it damaged the movement as a whole. Verbal attacks on Freedom Press have been a British anarchist tradition since Freedom Press was founded, and quarrels may increase the total output of anarchist propaganda.

In his last years Vero published four books of his photographs, at his own expense but with the Freedom Press imprint, and retired from activity. The editing of *Freedom* and the work of the bookshop fell to the two comrades hired by Vero. They meant well, but persisted with wasteful practices which Vero would probably have discontinued had he been present. The quarrel between Vero's friends and Albert's friends persisted, even after Vero died in 2001.

Rescue came in the form of a big, energetic, young man who had been working

with the Socialist Party of Great Britain (a Marxist party, but not Marxist-Leninist, with a constitution unchangeable since 1904). He persuaded Freedom Press to get rid of some drains on resources, and more importantly, to reach out in co-operation with other anarchist groups. Three years after he arrived he changed his allegiance again, and became an adherent of the Church of England, where we hear he is training to be a priest. This does not alter the fact of his importance to Freedom Press, while he was present.

Freedom Press is now going well, with a keen group of volunteers, and the prospect of a bright future.

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