

Ethel Mannin (1900–1985)

Albert Meltzer

1977

Ask who is the writer who has contributed most in the English language to the spread of libertarian ideas and you will get some peculiar answers, probably one of them some obscure Canadian professor whom nobody reads except as prescribed in the university curriculum. You might well get the same answer from Ethel Mannin, but for my money it is she who deserves the maximum credit, and seems to have received none that I know of. She was writing on sex and women's liberation fifty years ago and has introduced anarchist ideas in numerous works of fact and fiction.

Alas, she has committed the major literary sin: her novels have been successful, and the higher critics cannot possibly evaluate her.

Dig into the novels of Ethel Mannin and you will find anarchism, the Spanish Revolution, Emma Goldman, women's lib., the colonial struggle, the Arab guerrillas, all dealt with: her factual works include *Women and the Revolution* and many others.

At 75 she has announced she will write no more. The great quality in her novels was a zest for life. She owed a lot to her father, an old-time socialist who kept the faith. The drive for freedom, the resentment of injustice, and also the occasional ideological muddle (one of her best books was *Christianity or Chaos?*, an oddly titled book for an agnostic talking about purely secular matters) were all very typical of her British working class background. She was in her way a skilled craftsman, her trade was with words. Now she has retired, her works, of consummate craftsmanship if not great art, are there to be admired. Thank you, Ethel Mannin.

Ethel Mannin the novelist in fact did a great deal of work for the anarchist movement, in particular during the Spanish struggle, and continued to give us support during the war.

I would like to recall in connection with Ethel Mannin, once on a train journey discussing anarchism with a Communist shop steward and his young wife. He knew nothing of it beyond party line defamations (wasn't it Trotskyism?) — she, on the contrary, knew quite something of the subject, and was quite proud to think that she, for once, could carry on a political conversation while her husband was at a total loss. (She was not unaware how maddened he was). He asked her, amazed, What do you know of Alexander Berkman? When she asked if I had met him she smiled and explained that she was not as dumb as he evidently thought she was. I realised — as much from the occasional mistakes she made as the from the general knowledge of anarchism she showed — that she was a reader of Ethel Mannin, who had come to her political books via her

novels, and indeed, probably learned a lot from some of her better novels too. I naturally did not give this away to the husband, who was probably the better for the chastening experience. Before this I might have criticised Ethel Mannin's emotional approach to anarchism, but not since.

Ethel Mannin's works include *Red Rose*, *Comrade*, *O Comrade!*, *Bread and Roses*, various travel books including *South to Samarkand* and 7 volumes of autobiography.

She used to write for Pelican at the start of her writing career, and during the thirties contributed to *Spain and the World*.

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These two pieces were both written by Albert Meltzer. The first appeared in the *Cienfuegos Press Anarchist Review* (1977), the second in *The Anarchists in London 1935–1955*, 1976

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