

An Interview

Charlie Baird Snr

6th June 1977

Before the war I'd been sympathetic to the Communist Party, as early as 16 or 17 years of age. It wasn't until the war, when Russia had signed the pact with Hitler, that I started to have my doubts about the CP. But even prior to that I'd drifted away from them. When the war started, I took up the Conscientious Objector position, and finished up, of course, in jail. It was in jail – I hadn't been conscious that there was such a movement as the libertarian movement, the anarchist movement – I thought that the CP was the last thing in left-wing movements.

I met two lads in prison (I also knew one prior to going in, who'd told me to look out for these two lads) ; one was Jimmy Dick. He'd managed to get some anarchist literature in. I went through that and discovered that was what I'd been looking for. It was what I'd believed, even when I was in the CP ; I was dissatisfied with the centralised character of the movement.

Then, of course, when we came out, there was an anarchist movement in Glasgow at that particular time. We came out of jail and teamed up with them. It was around 1942 when I came out of jail, and there were about 40 active members of the group. By 1944–45 it was probably around 70–80 members.

The peculiar thing about the Glasgow group was that there was no such thing as recognised members of the group. The only way you could recognise a regular member of the group was by his activities ; there were no things like membership cards or anything like that. The 70 or 80 would include the lads from Burnbank and Hamilton – miners, the small groups out there with 3 or 4 members. They organised meetings and we supplied them with speakers.

Edinburgh was the same. We'd contacts in Edinburgh who organised meetings and we supplied them. There was an old diehard there, but you couldn't say there was a group. There were many sympathisers, right enough, who were always there at the meetings. They were active insofar as during the meetings they would go round with literature and a collection. They were sympathetic and that was good enough for me. There was an Italian lad who was the original contact ; he had a cafe on Leith Walk, but his father was very reactionary – pro-fascist – while the lad was very revolutionary, very keen, but obviously under his father's influence. Nevertheless, you went through and saw him, and organised the meetings at the Mound in Edinburgh.

We had the members in Glasgow, plenty of speakers : Jimmy Raeside, Eddie Shaw, Jimmy Dick, Sammy Lawson, Frank Leech, Johnny Gartmore. But Raeside and Shaw were the main speakers, they seemed to enjoy it. They were good propagandists. Shaw was more the humorous type ; he was a satirist – he ridiculed the system in a humorous fashion which went down big with

the public. They got entertainment, and at the same time they got the message. Raeside was a more serious type, very logical, and enjoyed a debate — SPGB, Marxist Study Group. Raeside was the main speaker ; he'd an extensive knowledge of the movement. Even apart from that he was an incredible speaker, very convincing. There were even occasions when he was taken up on aspects of the struggle which he wasn't aware of. He could carry the audience with him.

Shaw and Raeside were highly developed social animals. Even in the company of opposition they were very friendly — no chip on their shoulder. They could walk into the company of Communists or Trotskyists, who you'd find would be very careful, but Shaw and Raeside would walk in, they wouldn't have to be introduced. Shaw especially — he would just wade into a company, any company at all.

Shaw was called up, but he'd made up his mind that he wasn't going into prison. So his case went to the High Court of Appeal in Edinburgh. Even the "Evening Citizen" gave him a big front-page write-up "Glasgow Anarchist Wins Case in High Court". He defended himself. Incidentally, he was briefed by Guy Aldred — Guy prepared the case, but he handled it himself. You can have the best case in the world, but you've got to face the three highest judges in the land. The "Evening Citizen" said he handled the case with force. That would be around 1944–45. I was with him when he went to Edinburgh ; it must have been about May or June.

His case was very simple. He went through the usual process of being called-up. They took you into custody when you were registered as a conscript, the next you'd hear from them was when you had to go to court. If you're political you've no chance. Shaw went to the Sheriff Court for sentence. You're called into court twice, the first time there was a CID man who was instructed to take you down to Dumbarton Rd and the Army Doctor ; you'd refuse to go through the medical and they'd bring you back to court a month after that. The CID man had been told to take him down at 2pm, but he didn't take him down until 4pm — and this was Shaw's case. When he got back to court, the judge sentenced him to one year and Shaw said "I'm asking for a stated case". The judge said "On what basis ? You've no basis for a stated case". Shaw said "You instructed the CID man to take me before the doctor at 2pm but I didn't get to the doctor until 4pm."

That was the case. It took them over an hour to settle it. Lord Thomson presided and, what do you call him ? they called him the Bloody Judge at the time... Anyway there were the three of them. After Shaw had stated his case "Are you going to allow CID men to flout the law ; you're going to end up like Germany or Italy, where the people have no rights, you know..." Lord Thomson said "Look Mr Shaw, you know you've no intention of going to the army" and Shaw said "That's right, but it's the facts of the case, not whether I'll go to the army". A precedent had been set, perhaps during the First World War, and it was Guy Aldred who'd dug this one up. He'd told Shaw, if you have any trouble ask for access to the court library and you'll be able to get the chapter and page. They were about to dismiss him when he did this and the three judges hummed and hawed, and Lord Thomson said "All right then". The court clerk went down and then handed it on to Thomson. Thomson just looked at it with a look of disgust on his face and passed it on and said nothing. So the appeal was upheld with expenses and the CID man was called into the dock and given a dressing-down. When Shaw had mentioned the basis of the case I'd said "Ach, no chance".

You'd people in the services who were anti-war and at the same time were unattached. There was a common danger during the war which was the common ground for people with political views like my own. We must admit this — we'd huge meetings, particularly in Glasgow and

Edinburgh, but I think this was due to the fact that there was always the danger of someone being arrested, something violent happening, something sensational. It was a very precarious position to take during the war, especially in public when you'd troops, etc. You can imagine the atmosphere. What did matter was that you recruited members at these meetings, and, if not members, at least sympathisers who took papers into the factories.

Judging by the attention that you got from the troops, apart from a few hotheads, particularly the Americans and Canadians, the other lads used to come and buy the paper and discuss it. We'd contacts with them too, mainly the Air Force, I don't know why the Air Force. There was no war fever as such during the war, even among the troops and their families. My own experience with the public was "Aye, that's right, but what can you do about it? The war's there and Hitler's there, and you have to face up to him". The usual answer to that one was "You can't beat fascism by greater military force; fascism is inherent in the capitalist system". It was the Empire, not the fact that Hitler was killing the Jews or Poland — they sold Poland.

"War Commentary" was the paper at that time. It had tremendous sales in Glasgow. And we'd all the Freedom Press literature — the pamphlets, the books. We'd a bookshop in George St. (originally, I believe, with the Marxist Study Group, but that was all over by the time I'd come out of prison). Shaw and Leech had broken away, and later linked up with the other groups in England and contacts in Scotland. The Anarchist Federation of Britain was formed just after that.

The relations with Guy Aldred were very strained. I think one of the main reasons was that Guy was a loner: he was a movement in himself. There's no question about the man's integrity. He'd built up his movement, made his international contacts. I suppose Guy was afraid that someone could infiltrate and take over the movement by a process of building up support and them getting a vote. His relationship to the Anarchist Federation wasn't very good. In spite of Guy's help, Shaw often attacked him, especially on the question of the ballot box. We knew that Guy had no intention of going to parliament, but, in my opinion it was stupid, you know, there was nothing to gain. He'd built up such a reputation of integrity and consistency that I thought it was awful foolish that he should sacrifice all this.

One of Guy's old members was a man by the name of Frank Leech, a peculiar character. He was bourgeois through-and-through. He'd a good-going business, a general store. He was very friendly with the Freedom Press and used to make contact with Freedom Press in a private capacity. I was the Secretary of the AFB at that time and all correspondence was supposed to go through me, but Leech would never accept this. Personally, it didn't matter to me — as long as the movement was there and was working. You'd never get a group where that wouldn't happen, but it all depends on the extent to which it goes on.

We were a great source of income to Freedom Press, but they didn't seem to put any account on that at all. We thought they had a function, they thought we had a function, and that was just to distribute the literature and send the proceeds down. This didn't go down at all with most of the members.

When the split took place it wasn't at a business meeting or a conference. It's difficult even now to understand how it happened the way it did and why it happened. It was just suddenly that a section didn't turn up at a business meeting — that was Leech, Shaw, Raeside and some followers. That would be around November 1944. The reason was a general disillusionment with the way the group was being run. Leech was the source of all this and Shaw supported him — he was somewhat dependent on Leech. The big fellow had a lot of money and Shaw was taking time of work to do meetings up and down the country. Raeside had got married and bought a

horse-drawn caravan and travelled up and down the country. Shaw and Raeside decided to go abroad. Shaw had boys of 13 and 15 and for the boys sake he was clearing out, of course you'd have conscription in Canada anyway. And Raeside went to Australia.

Anyway we carried on, me and the wife and some other lads, we carried on for a year. This must have been shortly after the war. We held meetings at the corner of Wellington St. It took a toll on me, the outdoor speaking, it's a hell of a strain physically. Mentally it didn't bother me, in fact latterly I began to enjoy it. Then one of the other speakers, a lad called Bill Gollan, fell into bad health and died in Knightswood Hospital of tuberculosis. When the war ended the common danger ended too. And finally the wife and I were left... By this time the breakaway group were about finished too. They held meetings in Maxwell St. Leech died suddenly. He was a big heavy man, he'd heart trouble, and Shaw and Raeside went to Canada and that was the end of that.

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