

Review: All (Wood)Cock and Bull

Anarchism and Anarchists by George Woodcock. (Quarry Press) £9.95

Dermot Sreenan

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The year 1992 saw a lot of changes. There was the disappearance of Czechoslovakia into two separate countries, the infamous Maastricht treaty, the war in Yugoslavia, the limited victory for women's rights in Ireland and our gold medal for boxing in the Olympics. However an event which you may have missed was the eightieth birthday of George Woodcock. To celebrate this, a book was published of Mr Woodcock's collected essays, entitled "Anarchism and Anarchists".

The noted academic and intellectual covers a broad range of topics in his book, from the revolutions of 1848 to the prospects for anarchism. One surprise for me was the mention of Ireland in the first paragraph of the initial essay. However the author is only referring to the unrest which spread through Europe in 1848.

"Anarchism Revisited" is by far the most interesting essay in the first half of the book. In this Woodcock tries to defend the position which he adopted in his book "Anarchism" which was first published in 1961. His position was that the Anarchist movement was effectively dead. He wrote "nor is there any reasonable likelihood of a renaissance of anarchism...". Yet within seven years of these lines being typed by Woodcock, Europe erupted in a social revolt in which many of the participants identified with Anarchist politics.

Woodcock had decided to leave the Anarchist movement so as not to be infected by the "orthodoxy of belief". He readily admits that to stay in the movement "would probably ruin me as a writer and stepped aside to become a free wheeling radical of my own kind". Since then the radical has never stopped trying to be yet another intellectual to write the obituary for Anarchism.

So how does the man who dogs the Anarchist movement like the perennial undertaker in a spaghetti western waiting to measure us up and nail the lid on our coffin defend his position. In 1968 Woodcock quietly got on his typewriter (while the battle of the barricades was being fought in Paris) and decided to plaster over the gaping holes in his premature prediction of the death of Anarchism. "Anarchism Revisited" is the fruit of a man who refuses to admit he was wrong and is well worth a read.

Like all great historians or hurlers on the ditch he left an escape clause or trap door in his 1961 book. In order to clarify this he claims that the movement of Anarchism is dead but the idea "which was alive two centuries before Bakunin", or the theoretical core of Anarchism "may still have the power to give life to a new form under changed historical circumstances".

Woodcock goes on to quote from some obscure survey in *Freedom* in 1962. He seems to have a very narrow cloth cap and clogs definition of the working class in that he excludes teachers, health and welfare workers, and anyone involved clerical or administrative/clerical posts. A majority were also very young. The Anarchists were a movement of “dissident middle class youth”.

Yet in 1968 twelve million workers were on strike in France (120 factories were occupied) and the people of Czechoslovakia and students of Germany were on a collision course with the authorities. For such an esteemed historian surely Woodcock knows that he can't base an argument on the results of a survey of 457 people in Britain in 1962.

The book also covers briefly, an appreciation of Proudhon and his theories. It also has a short account of the fascinating life and work of Michael Bakunin. The majority of anarchists (with a small a) covered in the second half of the book are the intellectual types like Goodman, Read, and Thoreau. Not being familiar with their work I found these accounts to be interesting introductions to their works. However I am far more likely to read books by people who are or were involved in class struggle than the ivory tower academics.

In the space of four pages Woodcock attacks Chomsky for not being anything more than a left wing Marxist. The attack is pursued on the basis of Chomsky's introduction to Guerin's book “Anarchism” (a book which is reviewed in this magazine and one which I would read before anything by Woodcock). The basis of Woodcock's gripe with Chomsky is that he puts the working class (economic matters) at the centre of anarchism. Woodcock on the other hand sees anarchism as a mish-mash, liberalism, community politics and minority rights. Under his definitions I am a member of a dead movement and I am reviewing a book on Anarchism which has no mention of Malatesta or Macknov.

This book was published on the occasion of Mr Woodcock's 80th birthday. I wish him a happy peaceful retirement. The last thing the Anarchist movement needs is an active grim reaper waiting to write an obituary. I would recommend this book to people who treat it for what it is. A collection of essays written through the eyes of an intellectual Historian who decided to leave the Anarchist movement in the 1950's or risk “being ruined as a writer”. Notice the priorities. Mr Woodcock since 1961 has done for the Anarchist Movement what Chernobyl did for chicken Kiev.

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