

Edinburgh's Other Tattoo

Ellis D. Hayes

1995

Contents

GET BACK TO THE GUTTERS, YOU SCUM	3
NOR IRON BARS A CAGE	4
BOWED JOSEPH'S DRUM	5
OMNIPOTENT, CORRUPT, IMPENETRABLE...	5
CLASS WAR IN THE CLOSES	6
THE END OF BOWED JOSEPH	7
THE BEGGAR'S BIBLE	8
THE BEAT OF THE DRUM	9

Councillors were unable to nod off at the year's first meeting of Lothian Region on February 1. The walls of their plush chamber, like the square outside, reverberated to the rhythms of massed drums, beating out rebellion, paradiddling protest, rapping out a tattoo of rage at the violent eviction of the Council-owned Edinburgh Unemployed Workers Centre last December, during which 23 unemployed activists were arrested and charged.

As the drumming reached a crescendo the councillors could hardly hear themselves lie. The blood-stirring primal rhythms were laid on by the Sativa Drummers and the Women's Drumming Collective, a must at any good demo. Both outfits were involved in the occupation of the Centre. Scores of angry protesters accompanied the beat with whistles and yells of "Give us back our Centre!"

For 6 months the Broughton Street Centre had been occupied, as both a protest against the corrupt actions of Lothian Region and their lackeys and as a display of determination to keep the self-managed and unfunded community space open. A stone's throw from the centre of Edinburgh, which is now Europe's fourth business capital, unemployed and homeless activists barricaded themselves in and continued to run a cheap cafe, offer benefits advice, operate a creche, and maintain a wide variety of groups and workshops, while the Labour Council seethed with anger. Their eviction notice had been torn to confetti.

(For the full story of the fight for the Centre and its history see the last issue of Scottish Anarchist)

GET BACK TO THE GUTTERS, YOU SCUM

At dawn on December 1st the sleeping occupation nightshift was yanked from its slumbers by the sounds of the Centre's back doors being smashed in. The Emergency Phone Tree was activated before the nightshift was flung out by the invading bailiffs and pigs. Within half an hour Centre activists and supporters were tackling the police. A sympathetic *Herald* journalist takes up the story:

"Police and sheriff officers acting on the instructions of Labour-controlled Lothian Regional Council smashed their way into an unemployed workers' centre which was being used as a soup kitchen and shelter for the homeless.

The dawn action involved the ejection of four of the activists, who have been occupying the former school building in Broughton Street, Edinburgh, since last June when the council terminated their lease.

They have used the building 24 hours a day since then, as a cheap, vegetarian cafe during the day, a meeting place for community and political groups, and by night many of those who kept the occupation going were homeless people who would otherwise have been on the streets.

One of those present when sheriff officers and police arrived yesterday was a homeless man, who gave his name as Graham. "They came in about 7.30," he said. "They couldn't get in through the front door but at the same time they were breaking in at the back. They caught us on the hop.

"There were only four of us here. One guy spoke and there were two others in plain clothes plus several police."

Campaigns against the poll tax, Criminal Justice Bill, and VAT on fuel were operated from the building, causing resentment among regional councillors...

Ironically, one of the users of the building was the Beltane Fire Society, which will be involved in the council-sponsored Hogmanay celebrations. Other users included a women's drumming workshop, members of which gathered around the building yesterday to beat out their protest.

"The Centre has so much support that the only way they could evict us was to bring in the police," said one of the organising committee, Mr Michael Stevenson...

A police spokesman said they always back sheriff officers if they were advised that a disturbance is likely.

Councillor Keith Geddes, the leader of the ruling Labour group on Lothian Regional Council, dismissed criticism that a Labour authority should not be acting in this way.

He said: "We took a decision some time ago to terminate the lease. Since then, they have continued to occupy the premises and we felt it was time to restore the premises to council use."

He rebuffed the suggestion that it was wrong for a Labour authority to shut down a building which provided cheap food for the poor and shelter for the homeless.

Calling the occupiers "unrepresentative", he said: "Superficially, it might well appear ironic but, in the long term, we believe we will use the building far more effectively."

23 protesters were arrested and charged for taking part in the 6-hour struggle against 70 police officers, and hauled off to St. Leonard's police cells. The Labour Council had hoped for a swift and easy dawn eviction. They must have been disappointed.

NOR IRON BARS A CAGE

In the stuffy soundproofed single cells of St. Leonard's, the struggle continued. The stainless-steel cludgies [toilets] proved to be excellent drums and the rhythm of resistance rang around the copshop, made more effective by a 'scream-in' in the women's wing, while the big-gutted turnkeys [cell guards] fretted and yelled threats of dire retribution.

By 1am all the arrested demonstrators had been released. Coincidentally, the blacksmith's van which had turned up to lock the Centre Collective out was discovered near the police station with its windows done in.

The Crown Office dropped the charges against all but three of those arrested. Ten days after the eviction hundreds rallied outside the locked-up Centre to protest its closure while the drums rapped out their tattoo. And on February 1st they were back outside the Council chambers, deafening the toadying wretches within.

As the demo broke up and drifted away some folk were heard to ask "Who was the wee guy with the old-fashioned drum?" Others said that they'd seen no such person, that it must've been a ghost.

Indeed it was. Your reporter, who knows something of such arcane matters, can now inform that it was no less than the rebellious spirit of Bowed Joseph Smith, back from the grave with his drum, to haunt the Council.

BOWED JOSEPH'S DRUM

Around the year 1760 the Edinburgh Town Council and its well-heeled allies found themselves faced with a formidable opponent in the shape of Joseph Smith who was a frequent, if unwelcome, visitor to the Council Chamber. This was described by a contemporary as 'a low-roofed room, very dark and very dirty, with some small dens off it for clerks. Within this Pandemonium sat the Council, omnipotent, corrupt, impenetrable. Nothing was beyond its grasp, no variety of opinion disturbed its unanimity.' Some things never change.

Joseph Smith was a cobbler who lived in the Cowgate, an area of squalid tenemented poverty in the shadow of the Castle Rock. Deformed from birth — hence the 'bowed' — Joseph was possessed of 'great muscular strength in the arms' and an equal strength of character in the face of oppression which led to his becoming Auld Reekie's foremost and best-respected grassroots organiser.

Chambers, in his *Traditions of Edinburgh*, says that after Joseph

'had figured for a few years as an active partisan of the people, his name waxed of such account with them that it is said that he could, in the course of an hour, collect a crowd of not fewer than 10,000 persons...'

To rally a spontaneous demo Joseph Smith

'employed a drum...and, never, surely, had the fiery cross of the Highland chief such an effect upon the warlike devotion of his clan as Bowed Joseph's drum had upon the spirit of the Edinburgh rabble.'

Rabble? At the time the city's entire population was less than 80,000 and considering that the beat of Bowed Joseph's drum could muster 10,000 in an hour, that's quite a rabble. Robert Chambers was a respectable businessman whose brother later became Lord Provost so his bias is understandable. But even he admits that Joseph Smith

'was never known to act in a bad cause, or in any way to go against the principles of natural justice... it was apparent that almost everything he did was for the sake of what he designated fair-play. Fair play indeed was his constant object, whether in insulting the constituted authorities, sacking the granary of a monopolist, or besieging the Town Council in their Chamber.'

OMNIPOTENT, CORRUPT, IMPENETRABLE...

When word of council corruption or decisions adversely affecting the poor folk of Edinburgh leaked out it wasn't long before Bowed Joseph's drum could be heard beating out its tattoo of resistance beneath the town's towering 'lands' and up and down its fetid closes, while the townsfolk rallied to its call and besieged the Council chamber.

Bowed Joseph and a delegation would be invited in to the chamber for consultations.

'With one hand stuck carelessly into his side, and another slapped resolutely down upon the table — with a majestic toss of the head... he would stand before the anxious

and feeble council pleading the just cause of his compeers, and suggesting the best means of assuaging their just fury. He was generally dispatched with a promise of amendment and a hogshead of good ale...'

The ale was shared around. Direct action gets the goods.

But Joseph was no ego-tripping, careerist politician riding on the backs of the people. When the demo was over, and the cause won, Joseph would return to his Cowgate cobbling. He never sought any office or financial gain. He was a focus, a rallying-point of popular protest, nothing more. Nor did he need a crowd with him to make a point. When the High Court made a notoriously unjust decision, Bowed Joseph stopped the Lord Chief Justice's sedan-chair in the street and demanded of him, Scotland's highest judge, that he explain the justice of his decision. Later, when the House of Lords reversed the court's decision, Joseph dressed 15 scarecrows in rags and wigs, 'representing the judicial attire', one dummy for each of the Scottish Law Lords, and paraded them around the High Street on the backs of asses. There's an idea!

Nor was it only Establishment figures who earned Bowed Joseph's scorn. When the Guild of Shoemakers (which Joseph, as a shoe-repairer wasn't able to join) held their annual parade, Joseph met them at the city gates. Wearing a tin crown and carrying a wooden ruler like a mace, he stooped before the elitist guildsmen and apologised profusely for being only a mere cobbler. The onlookers loved it. The proto-trades unionists were deflated.

But there were more serious issues to contend with.

CLASS WAR IN THE CLOSES

The news filtered down to Joseph's dank den in the Cowgate.

'A poor man in the Pleasance, having been a little deficient in his rent, and in the country on business,' writes Chambers, returned to find that 'his landlord had seized and roused (pounded) his household furniture, turning out the family to the street. On the poor man's return, finding the house desolate, and his family in misery, he went to a neighbouring stable and hanged himself. Bowed Joseph did not long remain ignorant of the case; and as soon as it was generally known in the city, he shouldered on his drum, and after beating it through the streets for half an hour, found himself followed by several thousand persons, inflamed with resentment at the landlord's cruelty.'

The city guard, popularly known as the Town Rats, never interfered. They 'peeped forth like cautious snails on hearing his drum' then 'drew in their horns... and shut their door as he approached.'

The irate crowd rallied in a local park and decided on revenge. They marched to the landlord's house. He had already fled so they removed every article from the premises, heaped it up in a pile, and set fire to it

'while the crowd rent the air with their acclamations. Some money and banknotes perished in the blaze — besides an eight-day clock which, sensible to the last, calmly struck ten as it was consigned to the flames.'

It is noteworthy that none of these poverty-stricken townfolk thought of keeping the money, the clock or anything else for themselves.

On another occasion, during a food-scarcity, the Edinburgh slum dwellers, with Joseph and his drum to the fore, had forced all the meal-dealers to sell their stocks at a low price, or have their shops closed down.

‘One of them, whose place of business was in the Grassmarket, agreed to sell his meal at the fixed price, for the good of the poor, as he said, and he did so under the superintendence of Joseph, who stationed a party at the shop-door to preserve the peace and good order, till the whole stock was disposed of...’

The crowd gave three cheers then dispersed with their much-needed foodstuffs.

Next day the merchant boasted to his friends that he had used dodgy weights and short-measured the folk of a quarter of what they had paid for. His boastful words leaked back to the hungry townfolk. Bowed Joseph set about ‘collecting a party of his troops, beset the meal dealer before he was awake and compelled him to pay back a fourth of the price of every peck of meal sold; then giving their victim a hearty drubbing, they sacked his shop, and quietly dispersed as before.’ Justice was done.

THE END OF BOWED JOSEPH

For twenty years the poor of Edinburgh used Joseph’s drum as a rallying call to fight back against oppression and corruption in the Council Chambers. Landlords, monopolists and councillors shuddered at his name. The police could do nothing in the face of such massive popular resistance. Neither could the magistrates who ‘patronised him rather from fear than respect.’ It is a shining example of people power.

In 1780, while returning from the Leith Races, an annual gala beside the sea and a holiday for the Edinburgh folk, Bowed Joseph, drunk as a Lord, fell from the top of a coach and died. The powers-that-be exacted a subtle revenge. Joseph’s twisted skeleton was displayed in the city’s medical museum.

Bowed Joseph never exploited his popularity, never ran for office or took money. He never sold out. If the Auld Reekie establishment thought that Joseph’s death would mean an end to popular resistance, then they were in for a shock. Four years after his death there were massive food riots in the city. Joseph had been only a rallier, but an exceptionally good one. There have been many like him, men and women, who have disappeared into the mists of time, as Joseph would have had not Robert Chambers written of him. ‘History’ is the lie of rulers, kings and emperors and their lackeys. The full chronicle of popular resistance in Edinburgh remains to be told, from the tale of the Blue Blanket right up to modern-day accounts of the 70’s council-rent strikes, the 80’s occupations of council chambers during the DHSS strike which successfully forced the Council to issue food vouchers, to the demos and occupations against the Labour Council’s passive acceptance of the Poll Tax — right up to the 6 month occupation of the Unemployed Workers Centre and its smashing by Labour-run Lothian Regional Council.

That fight isn’t over yet.

THE BEGGAR'S BIBLE

As February's drumbeats boomed around that den of thieves called the Council Chamber, councillor Brian 'Killer' Cavanagh announced that the council had donated £2,000 towards the cost of a booklet called *A Guide to Surviving on the Streets of Edinburgh*. Cavanagh, the Labour chair of the social work committee and one of those most responsible for the smashing of the Centre, had reached the pinnacle of cynical hypocrisy. £2,000 towards telling people how to live on the streets? Bastard. The police recently admitted that the eviction of the Centre, which was unfunded and self-supporting, cost Lothian taxpayers £5,300. A recent request to the Region from the New Town, Broughton and Pilrig Community Council, who had supported the Centre, asking how much it had cost to guard the evicted centre day and night with a private security firm, was answered with '*this will be the subject of a future report*'. Bastards. These politicians are the real beggars, morally, ethically and socially.

Four months after the violent eviction, the once-thriving Centre building remains locked and bolted, degenerating into graffitied dilapidation, a symbol of politicians' determination to deny ordinary people a space to autonomously organise outside Party and Trade Union control.

The Council may have taken back the building — for now — but they have been forced to spend a small fortune to stop it being re-occupied, and have been unable to make good their promises that it will be used for council-approved community uses. The Centre collective's appeals for solidarity from other voluntary organisations have been widely reported in the press. The *Herald and Post* wrote:

'The Centre spokesman said...“Basically the Regional council is either going to have to keep the Broughton Street building locked and guarded...or rent it back to the community”...

“We are appealing to all charities and voluntary organisations that might be approached to use the building to refuse. If they accepted they would be co-operating with the Region in closing down the centre.”

And he warned that if any group did try and use the building, campaigners would take “peaceful direct action” to stop them.'

The eviction hasn't stopped the everyday resistance practised by the Centre activists. Subversion continues from an unlikely temporary home in the basement of a church hall. Advice and solidarity on benefits hassles and poll/council tax arrears, leafleting dole offices, benefit gigs including an extravaganza for International Women's Day, regular minibus excursions to the direct action against the M77 in Glasgow, alternative literature distribution — all are contributing to a continuing culture of resistance. So enraged are the authorities that the iron fist hasn't crushed the Centre that the police have waged a campaign of intimidation against the church where the Centre is based, threatening dire consequences if the Centre is not removed from the church premises.

Now the Centre collective plans a new initiative. The hunt is on for a cheap shopfront which can be rented and provide space for an info-shop, small cafe, meetings, and a general gathering point for the dispossessed.

THE BEAT OF THE DRUM

We look forward to the coming day when the beat of the drum will summon in half an hour 10,000 of those who are currently telly-hypnotised and mortgage-ridden onto the streets to fight for a better life, free from politicians and all of capitalism's stage-managers. Better, of course, if it were 100,000. Better still, a million, or more. Bowed Joseph lives.

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



Ellis D. Hayes
Edinburgh's Other Tattoo
1995

Retrieved on 21st December 2021 from libcom.org
Published in the *Scottish Anarchist* #2.

theanarchistlibrary.org