

Slaughter or slander?

Notes on the Albert Meltzer-George Woodcock conflict

Anonymous

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London anarchist Albert Meltzer was a longstanding critic of non-revolutionary and ‘intellectual’ trends described as ‘new anarchism’ or ‘militant liberalism’ (depending on your point of view). Part of this was his conflict with the Canadian writer George Woodcock. I want to examine that conflict and when and how it arose in particular.

Detour 1: When is anarchism ‘new’?

The phrase ‘New anarchism’ crops up once in Woodcock’s 1968 essay ‘Anarchism Revisited’, with much more attention paid to the ‘new anarchists’: ‘They were militant pacifists. They represented a trend which had appeared from outside Old Anarchism.’¹ The rise of the tendency can be traced through Albert’s critiques. In 1949 it was only a possibility: ‘there is a danger that some anarcho-pacifist-surrealist cult might arise, having about as much connection with anarchism as the Freemasons have with building.’² By 1968 Albert was criticising ‘the sociological school of advanced liberalism which finds its expression in the magazine “Anarchy”’.³ Also in 1968 he identified the tendency as ‘Liberal Anarchism’ ‘which seeks to adjust to present day society, without the need for overthrowing the State (regarded as an unlikely contingency).’⁴ By 1970 it was described by Albert and Stuart Christie as ‘militant liberalism’.⁵

Did the conflict begin in the 1940s?

I want to look at and try to improve on accounts of the conflict between Albert and Woodcock that claim it began in the 1940s. Both had been members of the (British) Anarchist Federation and connected with the Freedom Press Group during the Second World War (though in 1942 and 1943 Albert was working outside London). Woodcock was the subject of a special issue of *Anarchist Studies* in 2015 containing ‘George Woodcock’s Transatlantic Anarchism’ by Allan Antliff & Matthew S. Adams. They combined autobiographical writings by both Albert and Woodcock to produce an ‘agreed version’ of when and why the two fell out:

‘Within the [Anarchist] Federation, Woodcock’s views soon brought him into protracted conflict with Albert Meltzer, whose conviction that violent working-class revolution was the only path to anarchism grated against Woodcock’s pacifist convictions. Pointedly and haughtily describing Meltzer as a “pompous young man of undefined education”, Woodcock retrospectively deemed their animus a product of Meltzer’s desire to be the unquestioned “authority on anarchist history”. For his part, Meltzer characterized Woodcock as a “bourgeois ‘intellectual’” who joined the movement to advance his literary career by utilizing its resources (the press) to publish *Now*. Worse still, his pacifist theorizing reduced anarchism to a “marble effigy of utopian ideals, to be

¹ ‘Anarchism Revisited’ *Commentary*, August 1968 <https://www.commentary.org/articles/george-woodcock/anarchism-revisited/> It’s reprinted in Woodcock’s collection of essays *Anarchism and Anarchists* (1992). Some academics apply the term ‘new anarchism’ retrospectively to ideas in the 1940s; others use it for twenty-first century developments.

² ‘Dilettantes’ (letter) *Freedom* 19 February 1949 <https://www.katesharpleylibrary.net/4f4s7t>

³ p.8, *Aims and principles of anarchism : an essay at defining what the Anarchist Movement is and how wide a field it covers*. London: Coptic Press, 1968. <https://www.katesharpleylibrary.net/ns1th7>

⁴ ‘Statement by the Black Flag Group to the Liverpool Conference of the Anarchist Federation of Britain, Sept., 1968’ reprinted in *KSL Bulletin* 97-98 <https://www.katesharpleylibrary.net/5x6bpx>

⁵ p.103 of 2010 reprint of *The Floodgates of Anarchy*

defined and even lived up to by some chosen individuals within the framework of a repressive society.”⁶

The same issue contains ‘Pacifism, Violence and Aesthetics: George Woodcock’s Anarchist Sojourn, 1940-1950’ by Mark Antliff which relies on Woodcock’s memories from 1974:

‘Woodcock later recounted “the anarcho-syndicalists connected with Freedom Press objected that avant-garde poetry and literary criticism had nothing to do with the workers’ struggle”. These advocates of “revolutionary purism” led by anarchists Albert Meltzer and Tom Brown instituted a compromise that continued until the journal’s demise in 1947.’⁷

I have doubts about much of this and suspect that there’s a large amount of hindsight in these autobiographical accounts. This is partly based on the Kate Sharpley Library’s study and chronology of the events leading up to the 1945 split in British anarchism, based on primary source documents.⁸ That research shows how hard it is to write history without letting published versions of the past control the narrative; but also how using primary sources can enlighten us (or simply not answer the questions we want to ask). I have tried to provide a better account of the dispute, but this is provisional, since new primary sources would help to clarify what happened when.

Questioning the ‘agreed version’

1. Did Woodcock’s pacifism lead to friction? Woodcock at the time clearly identified as an anarcho-syndicalist: see ‘What is Anarcho-syndicalism?’⁹ and *Anarchy or Chaos* (1944). His *What is Anarchism?* is a straightforward recommendation of ‘working-class revolution’: ‘It is clear, then, that if men are to become free and are to enjoy anything approaching a complete development of their faculties, the state must be abolished, together with the system of property, and other means of exploitation, such as the wages system, which are contingent to it.’¹⁰

If Woodcock embraced revolution, was it an explicitly pacifist one? In *Anarchy or Chaos* his brief discussion of nineteenth century anarchist political violence treated it as a past stage, but did not condemn it on pacifist grounds: ‘the bombs thrown by anarchists have been very few and have always been directed against those who were guilty of the oppression and murder of their subjects [...] the practice of individual terrorism was virtually abandoned by the anarchists some forty years ago, when the advent of anarchist syndicalism opened up the possibility of the more satisfactory tactic of revolutionary mass economic action.’¹¹

There is no evidence of Woodcock renouncing his pacifism (he wrote about it outside of *War Commentary*) but he seems to have ‘fitted in’ by ignoring or downplaying whatever differences

⁶ ‘George Woodcock’s Transatlantic Anarchism’ *Anarchist Studies* v.23, issue 1 (Spring 2015). The quotes from Woodcock come from *Letter to the Past: An Autobiography* (1982) p.245 and p.246. The ones from Albert from *I Couldn’t Paint Golden Angels: Sixty Years of Commonplace Life and Anarchist Agitation* (1996) p.95.

⁷ ‘Pacifism, Violence and Aesthetics’ quoting ‘Now: An Heir of the Thirties’ p.6-7; (typescript ms. Dated 1974) George Woodcock Archive, Queen’s University, Kingston, Canada.

⁸ See <http://katesharpleylibrary.pbworks.com/w/page/139511268/The%201945%20split%20in%20British%20anarchism>

⁹ ‘What is Anarcho-syndicalism?’ an extract from *Railways and Society*, 1943 <https://www.katesharpleylibrary.net/f4qs9m>

¹⁰ p.9 <https://libcom.org/article/george-woodcock-what-anarchism> Originally published *War Commentary* in May 1942, reprinted in *War Commentary* 1945-03-24 and as a pamphlet in 1945

¹¹ p.21 *Anarchy or Chaos* (Freedom Press, 1944) http://www.thesparrowsnest.org.uk/collections/public_archive/2303.pdf

there were between his idea of revolution and those held by other members of the Anarchist Federation. His 'Editorial minority view' on the subject did not appear until 1947 as part of the discussion stirred up by Herbert Read's call for an 'educational' and 'non-violent' anarchism. Even then, Woodcock did not sound strictly pacifist: 'I think that violence is such a danger to the revolutionary cause that we should discard it as far as possible, and in no circumstances should indulge in the kind of romantic glorification of it which seems to tempt many revolutionaries.'¹²

2. Was *Now* a source of friction? The research on the 1945 split has thrown doubt on the idea that Woodcock's editorship of *Now* was a major source of friction at the time: 'There appears to be little contemporary discussions about the financial relationship between the FPG [Freedom Press Group] and *Now* in the various collection of papers we have seen.'¹³

Home Office files contain a letter written by Albert to the exiled Spanish Anarchist paper, *Tierra y Libertad* on 6 December 1944. Distributing *Now* is mentioned as one of the achievement of Freedom Press: 'Our books and pamphlets are sold out in a very short time after appearing, and Freedom Press has probably published a wider range of classical and new literature on Anarchism than any other Anarchist pre[ss], during the war. Freedom Press also distributed the literary review "Now":'¹⁴

3. Did Brown and Albert unite to oppose Woodcock? It is hard to imagine Tom Brown seeing *Now* as an asset to the anarchist movement. But it is unlikely, given their conflicts at the time (recorded in the chronology), that Albert would have supported him.

4. Was Albert jealous of Woodcock writing anarchist history? Between 1939 and 1945 only a handful of Albert's articles in *War Commentary* dealt with history ('Sacco and Vanzetti (Pages of revolutionary history)', December 1943; 'Anarchism in Cuba', August 1944; 'Anarchism in France', October 1944). In 1952 Albert discussed 'The lessons of history' without mentioning or criticising 'professors' for distorting or profiting from anarchist history as he would later do.¹⁵ The writing of history became a bone of contention later, as we shall see.

When did the dispute between Albert and Woodcock arise?

Freedom in 1947 contained articles where Albert and Woodcock disagreed (on the commune, on public opinion) but nothing foreshadowing what came later.¹⁶ In 1949 Woodcock moved from London to Canada and established a successful literary career. In 1965 Albert made a passing dig at Woodcock's careerism: 'I recall that when George Woodcock was making the grade as a litterateur – he worked hard enough at it, poor lamb – and had built his coterie of writers, using us poor anarchists as a stepping stone (thanks to "Freedom", "Cuddon's" was temporarily out of publication at the time) it became the fashion to call him brilliant.'¹⁷

¹² 'Anarchism: past & future; the editorial minority's view' *Freedom* 23 August 1947

¹³ From the biography of Woodcock at <http://katesharpleylibrary.pbworks.com/w/page/139511268/The%201945%20split%20in%20British%20anarchism>

¹⁴ 'Letter from Albert Meltzer to Tierra y Libertad' National Archives, HO 45/15553. LON/SE/5176/45 p.4 <https://www.katesharpleylibrary.net/mgqqg2>

¹⁵ 'The Lessons of History' *The Syndicalist*, vol. 1, no.2 June 1952 <https://www.katesharpleylibrary.net/dncm2p>

¹⁶ Albert Meltzer and George Woodcock 'Controversy: The Commune: a factor in a free society' *Freedom*, 26 July 1947; and Albert Meltzer 'The Fight against public opinion' *Freedom*, 6 September 1947.

¹⁷ 'Old lag' ie Albert Meltzer 'Shits that passed in the night, 1: Colin Wilson' *Cuddon's Cosmopolitan Review* no.6 p.13 (November 1965) <https://content.wisconsinhistory.org/digital/collection/p15932coll8/id/40337>

In 1962 Woodcock published *Anarchism: A History of Libertarian Ideas and Movements* (the British edition came out in 1963). It is mentioned in Albert's first memoir, *The Anarchists in London 1935-1955*. Albert damned much of Woodcock's writing with faint praise but also criticised him for slandering anarchists:

'Under the tutelage of [Marie Louise] Berneri (possibly [John] Hewetson also) he wrote several pedestrian pamphlets on anarchism in the mainline of the general discussion at the time, and went on to write a number of books on related subjects: Kropotkin, Winstanley, Proudhon (whom he patronised). Aphra Behn, and inevitably Oscar Wilde. His book, ultimately appeared in 1963 as a Penguin, "Anarchism", passes off as being an unbiased study; but its inaccuracies are hard to bear. Some of his later writings are downright lies, and include war atrocity stories against the Spanish and Russian Anarchists to demonstrate the breadth of his charitable Tolstoyanism.'¹⁸

The Anarchists in London was published in 1976 but a manuscript of it was in circulation by 1967. It is mentioned as forthcoming in *Wooden Shoe* (1967) and described as 'sure to cause a controversy' in *Freedom* in 1968.¹⁹ While both Albert and Woodcock were willing to 'back-date' their feud to the mid-1940s, Woodcock's publication of *Anarchism* in 1962 possibly marks the beginning of the breach. 'Some of his later writings' suggests that what Woodcock wrote in the 1970s was more important. Before we get to that, I want to examine what Woodcock said in 1962.

Makhno

Woodcock's *Anarchy or Chaos* (1944) devoted a chapter to 'The Russian Revolution and the Machnovist Movement' which said of Makhno 'To-day, in Russia, his name is name is obscured and sullied by scandal, and the Anarchism he represented is driven into the recesses of men's hearts by one of the cruellest oppressions in history.'²⁰ There's nothing in the chapter to suggest it was written by a pacifist.

In *Anarchism* (1962) Woodcock's account of Makhno had changed greatly and he quoted Volin: 'Under the influence of alcohol, Makhno became irresponsible in his actions; he lost control of himself. Then it was personal caprice, often supported by violence, that suddenly replaced his sense of revolutionary duty; it was the despotism, the absurd pranks, the dictatorial antics, of a warrior chief that were strangely substituted for the calm reflection, perspicacity, personal dignity, and self-control in his attitude to others and to the cause which a man like Makhno should never have abandoned.'²¹ Woodcock went on to state that 'the Makhnovists and the anarchists in the Spanish Civil War [...] Both lost the purity of their ideals when they became involved in military activities.'²²

Woodcock was mistaken to describe Volin as an 'admirer' of Makhno, given their 'war of words' in exile. Historian Malcolm Archibald has written about this conflict (and its consequences): 'Makhno was able to mount an able defense to Volin's attacks during his lifetime, but

¹⁸ p.25 *The Anarchists in London*

¹⁹ p.7 *Wooden Shoe* <https://www.katesharpleylibrary.net/83bmcw> ; p.3 *Freedom* 17 February 1968.

²⁰ p.74 *Anarchy or Chaos*

²¹ p.421 *Anarchism* (1962). <https://libcom.org/article/anarchism-history-libertarian-ideas-and-movements-george-woodcock> (the quoted text can be found on p.706 of *The unknown revolution* (1974))

²² p.422 *Anarchism* (1962)

after his death Volin had the field to himself and did much damage to Makhno's reputation with accusation of drunkenness and debauchery.²³

Barcelona

Here is Woodcock's 1962 story about the Spanish anarchists:

'It was such groups [ie 'small groups acting on their own anarchic responsibility'] too who carried out many of the summary executions of suspected Fascists which took place during the same initial period; these acts were usually committed, not by the ordinary working men of the C.N.T., or even by the more responsible F.A.I. militants, but by relatively small groups, sometimes of professional pistoleros, but more often of hot-headed young fanatics belonging to the Libertarian Youth organization. Their favorite victims included priests and monks on the one hand, and pimps and male prostitutes on the other; both classes they shot from a moral bigotry that was characteristically Spanish – the priests having, in their eyes, mocked the ideal of human brotherhood and the pimps and male prostitutes having offended against the Law of Nature. [...] On this level there is not really a great deal to choose between the anarchist minority who killed priests and pimps in Catalonia and the Falangist minority who killed trade unionists in Granada; both were the products of Spanish history rather than of the political philosophies they claimed to represent.'²⁴

Detour 2: 1968, nothing happened

In 1968 Woodcock published his polemic 'Anarchism revisited' in *Commentary* (of New York). I have not found any responses (either from Albert or other British anarchists) at the time. I cannot imagine Albert not responding if he had read it.

1972 onwards

The dispute reached its peak in the early 1970s. In 1972 George Woodcock reviewed Victor Peters' *Nestor Makhno: The Life of an Anarchist* for *Anarchy* (second series). Woodcock claimed 'The kind of coldly conceived "executions" which the Makhnovists and later many of the Spanish anarchists perpetrated, the slaughter of defenceless men who happened to be in their power just because of their social backgrounds, their beliefs or even their sexual predilections (for it is established that Barcelona anarchists at one time rounded up male prostitutes and liquidated them), are in effect demonstrations of the illusory nature of anarchist beliefs.'²⁵

Albert responded in the next issue of *Anarchy* with 'The Nature of Non-Violent Fascism and the George Woodcock Myth'. It attacked Woodcock's 'idealisation of the cult of non-violence', careerism and willingness to use slander: 'He himself, for reasons of radical chic, is prepared to let his name go on the snob-appeal lists of "distinguished sponsors" put out by Spanish refugee

²³ p.xiv Malcolm Archibald, 'Translator's introduction' to Nestor Makhno, *Under the Blows of the Counterrevolution* (Black Cat Press, 2009). The falling out between Makhno and Volin is examined in *The Makhnovshchina and Its Aftermath: Documents from the movement and its survivors* (Black Cat Press, 2021).

²⁴ p.388-389 *Anarchism* (1962)

²⁵ p.28 'Review' *Anarchy* (second series) #10 [1972] <https://www.katesharpleylibrary.net/zs7k80>

organisations. Yet these are the very people one would not touch with a bargepole if the accusations he now makes against them are true.' 'How, in Spain, could a witch hunt for homosexuals have taken place unnoticed? How could the anarchists, above all, have conducted one?'²⁶

To Albert, for Woodcock to claim without proof that Barcelona's anarchists killed male sex workers or gay men was slander; and the killing of pimps 'had nothing to do with the anarchists.'²⁷ Regarding Makhno, Albert asserted 'Makhno could not help fighting, but he directed his fighting to the anarchist cause and the peasant revolution. [...] Or he could have laid down and died [...] He chose to arm the peasants, to fight for freedom, and to battle against impossible odds, in the course of which some mistakes may have happened but in which he managed to keep the banners of freedom flying before two great totalitarian armies pressed in on him.'²⁸

Strangely, Woodcock's 'Reply to Albert Meltzer' referred back, not to the review which was criticised (where 'many of the Spanish anarchists' were accused of 'slaughter of defenceless men who happened to be in their power just because of their social backgrounds, their beliefs or even their sexual predilections') but to the similar accusations from *Anarchism* (1962) that 'pimps and male prostitutes' were killed for 'having offended against the Law of Nature': 'What intrigues him, and leads him into the fascinated speculations which innate puritans devote to such matters, is my statement in ANARCHISM regarding certain "executions" of [imprisoned] prostitutes by self-styled anarchists in Barcelona early in the Civil War. I made it clear [...] that the acts were not committed by "the ordinary working class men of the C.N.T. or even by the more responsible F.A.I. militants", but by "professional pistoleros" working with the anarchists and by a few "fanatics". [...] I based my statement that they did take place on the evidence of a reputable anarchist who was in Barcelona as representative of the French movement and who was troubled by what happened and by the way the propagandists of the movement covered it up. He was André Prudhommeaux, who wrote as André Prunier.'²⁹

'The Nature of Non-Violent Fascism and the George Woodcock Myth' also led to a letter from Nicolas Walter. Normally keen to correct any writing on anarchist history, Walter ignored Albert's accusation of slander in order to defend Woodcock's pacifism. 'The term "non-violent fascism" gives rise not to great offence, as you claim, but to great amusement, and not because "fascism" is a bogey word, as you claim, but because "non-violent fascism" is a self-contradiction.'

The response, presumably by Albert, states 'it is such cliches as [...] "by using violence you become the same as those you are using violence against" – that illuminate the phrase "non-violent fascist" since the issue of "violence" is the one thing the person concerned is objecting to in fascism.'³⁰

²⁶ p.28, p.29 'The Nature of Non-Violent Fascism and the George Woodcock Myth' *Anarchy* (second series) #11 [1973] <https://www.katesharpleylibrary.net/fqz7qc>

²⁷ p.30

²⁸ p.31

²⁹ p.23-24 'Reply to Albert Meltzer' *Anarchy* (second series) # 14 [1974] A small collection of Prudhommeaux's articles is at <https://www.katesharpleylibrary.net/80gbk1>

³⁰ [Nicolas Walter Letter on 'non-violent fascism'] *Black Flag*, v.4, n3 (August 1975) <https://www.katesharpleylibrary.net/93210v>

Were male sex workers or gay men killed?

Woodcock did not produce any further ‘proof’ nor retract his accusations. Despite his claim about Prudhommeaux, the accusation that Barcelona anarchists killed male sex workers or gay men appears nowhere else. I ran the accusation past Paul Sharkey who had never seen anything to suggest a particular targeting of homosexuals but provided two references to gay men in 1930s Spain. The Giménologues (quoting José Mariño) mention ‘La Joconde’, a CNT jeweller, friend and possible lover of Justo Bueno who, ‘back in 1934 had been a member of the same affinity group, made up of about fifteen metalworkers close to or members of the FAI, that his homosexuality was common knowledge and that no one made any slighting remarks to him because of it.’³¹

The second was from Augustin Souchy, the exiled German anarcho-syndicalist and ‘kind of “Foreign Minister” of the CNT-FAI’,³² concerning his time in Barcelona: ‘One day, a commission of journalists from abroad came to me to ask for my intervention in favor of the German-Italian journalist Ludovico Strauss who was under arrest because of a homosexual affair. I picked up the telephone and said to the corresponding officer: “Bed affairs are no counter-revolutionary conspiracy; Tell Strauss that I expect him tomorrow in my office. Okay?” “Entendido (agreed),” it came back. The next morning Strauss thanked me personally for his release.’³³

I asked Richard Cleminson (who has written extensively on attitudes to same-sex desire in the Spanish anarchist movement) if he had come across any mention of anarchists killing gays or male sex workers. He replied ‘I haven’t found any evidence to suggest that anarchists shot either male sex workers or gay men. That said, as you know, there was still a lot of prejudice against same-sex behaviour and this was voiced, for example, in many libertarian publications. But homosexuality was generally viewed as a misfortune, not something to be punished. For this view, we can turn to Félix Martí Ibáñez, among others, to see how he believed that homosexuality was a deviation that would be “cured” in time. Despite this, he steadfastly disapproved of repression. There is also the case of Lucía Sánchez Saornil, one of the founders of Mujeres Libres, who was openly lesbian and her fellow ML militants knew this and apparently accepted it.’

To Albert, Woodcock’s disregard for historical accuracy established him permanently as an enemy; not simply a political opponent, or someone who had changed his mind, but a liar:

‘In Anarchy No. 10 George Woodcock made a positive allegation which, he stated illustrates the “illusory nature of anarchist beliefs”. This was that “many of the Spanish anarchists perpetrated the slaughter of defenceless men who happened to be in their power just because of their social backgrounds, their beliefs or even their sexual predilections (for it is established that Barcelona anarchists at one time rounded up male prostitutes and liquidated them).”

‘These allegations of vicious murder by professed libertarians, many dead, many living, are either true or false. If true, they do not necessarily establish the “illusory nature” of anarchism but they condemn those whose sympathies are with the Spanish Anarchists. If false, Woodcock is a vile libeller and the acceptance of him as an impartial historian is an illusory belief.

³¹ p.576 *Sons of Night* by Antoine Gimenez and the Giménologues (AK Press and Kate Sharpley Library, 2019)

³² see ‘The Foreign Legion of the revolution: German anarcho-syndicalist and volunteers in anarchist militias during the Spanish civil war’ by Dieter Nelles <https://libcom.org/article/foreign-legion-revolution-german-anarcho-syndicalist-and-volunteers-anarchist-militias>

³³ p.91-2 *Beware! Anarchist! A life for freedom* by Augustin Souchy <https://libcom.org/article/beware-anarchist-life-freedom-augustin-souchy>

‘In his attempt at self-justification, he no longer says that people were murdered merely for their sexual predilections – which presumes moral vigilantes, thought police and so on – he brings in “pimps”. The late Prudhommeaux (who edited a paper on Spain during the civil war and was silent on the subject of the killing of “homosexuals”) is supposed to have told Woodcock this in 1950, and “these statements were published”, “most anarchists in England” knew about them and “Red Lion Street” (which was dear old Lilian Wolfe and arch-pacifist Jack Robinson, unless he includes Vernon Richards) found them unwelcome. It is a long way from the positive “it is established” to “someone told me!” [...]

‘Everyone knows that “pimps” may well be the subject for killing in a busy seaport, in Barcelona as in London. Nobody would in 1936 find it necessary to “cover up” the shooting of Mafia types. On the contrary they would make great play of it. But Woodcock is deliberately deceiving for he has brought the “pimps” in together with the homosexuals, pretending that he does not know really what the latter are and confusing the two – (pointing this out is just “puritan” prurience).’³⁴

‘Opposite conclusions from twentieth century history’

After 1949 Woodcock grew increasingly strident in his attacks on historical anarchists. In 1944 Woodcock wrote of Makhno as an anarchist. By 1972 ‘I do not think that his pretensions to being an anarchist can be accepted. He was a peasant insurrectionary’.³⁵

For Woodcock, writing about the past was an opportunity to distance himself from the revolutionary ideas he was ashamed that he once embraced: ‘the collectivist viewpoint still exists in the form of a mythology that looks towards “the masses” and “the working class” as the saviours of society. I have subscribed to absurdities of this kind in the past.’³⁶

‘Anarchism revisited’ (1968) was partly Woodcock’s settling of scores with ‘those who fawned most upon me when I was a young and promising writer who also appeared to be a true believer.’ It was also an attack on ‘old’ anarchism: It contrasted the boring and inoffensive working class adherents of ‘the syndicalist cult of romantic death’ with the ‘conscience-stricken middle class’ who knew better than to try and make revolutionary changes to society. It seems to me that Woodcock in 1968 and again in 1972 resented that the ‘old anarchism’ had not laid down and died. Perhaps his slander arose from a feeling that for the ‘new anarchism’ to live, the ‘old anarchism’ had to be killed off.

Albert never shied away from defending his comrades. His frequent references back to this dispute show his anger, but also suggest how that anger could provide motivation in ‘the fight for history’. Being published by Penguin gave Woodcock huge status as *the* historian of anarchism, but a status he did not deserve: ‘Woodcock’s *Anarchism* is issued all over the world by Penguins, perpetuating lies and myths’.³⁷

Woodcock was one of the main targets of the 1987 *Black Flag* supplement ‘Liars and Liberals’.³⁸ Accused by Malc of Bradford of ‘venting certain people’s personal vendettas’, Albert responded: ‘We dislike him for his atrocity stories about our Spanish friends not for the colour of

³⁴ ‘Wooden horse’ *Black Flag*, v3, n17 (Jan/Feb 1975) <https://www.katesharpleylibrary.net/s1rq77>

³⁵ see *Anarchy or Chaos* quoted above and ‘Review’ *Anarchy* (second series) #10 [1972]

³⁶ ‘The root is man: part 1, the durable polemic’ *Resistance* April 1954

³⁷ ‘Truth or dare’ *Black Flag* no.169 (6 April 1987) <https://www.katesharpleylibrary.net/83bmpf>

³⁸ ‘Liars and Liberals’ went out with issue 166 (25 January 1987). See <https://www.katesharpleylibrary.net/msbf8d>

his eyes. You may call it “vendetta”; we call it “solidarity”; Woodcock calls them murderers, we call him a liar and a swindler, and put that in the historical record as fact.’³⁹

Albert’s warm words for Ethel Mannin showed he could respect individual pacifists who had contributed to the cause.⁴⁰ But he had no time for attempts to create a ‘non-violent anarchism’. ‘The subject [of ‘violence’ v ‘non-violence’] is irrelevant to anarchism but the imposition of the pacifist ethic upon it always implies an abandonment of class struggle and the acceptance of middle-class values. Not because middle class values are “non-violent” – they are not – but because by qualifying, hyphenating and diluting anarchism, a non-demanding excuse of a philosophy can be manufactured for the disenchanting liberal.’⁴¹

In the 1990s, Albert looked back to the 1940s and saw the beginning of the division between competing ideas of anarchism – either it was ‘a marble effigy of utopian ideals, to be admired and defined and even lived up to by some chosen individuals within the framework of a repressive society, or it was a fighting creed with a programme for breaking down repression.’⁴² Tobias Kelly’s 2022 study of British pacifists contains an echo of this. Kelly quotes Martin Ceadel’s discussion of a ‘rift between those who saw socialism as a struggle for economic and political power and were therefore only opposed to capitalist and imperialist wars, and those who saw socialism as a more personal moral transformation.’⁴³ If you substitute ‘anarchism’ for ‘socialism’ and ‘social change’ for ‘economic and political power’ you have a suggestion of why the conflicts around the rise of ‘new anarchism’ or ‘militant liberalism’ were insoluble.

Albert and Woodcock drew opposite conclusions from twentieth century history. To Albert it was necessary to resist (even in the face of certain defeat): ‘let us at least go down fighting in our own plumage, the Last of the Mohicans’.⁴⁴ To Woodcock, only pacifists could claim to be anarchists and they could do nothing but hang on until ‘the moral forces that depend on individual choice and judgement can reassert themselves’.⁴⁵

Phil Ruff suggested how successful Albert was in defending the idea of a revolutionary anarchism that remained a ‘fighting creed’: ‘Albert’s refusal to kowtow to the pacifist-liberal Mafia who sought to re-invent anarchism in their own image after the war, and his scepticism of the New Left in the 1960s, have earned him a reputation for “sectarianism”. Paradoxically, it was the discovery of class struggle anarchism through the “sectarianism” of *Black Flag* under Albert’s editorship that convinced so many anarchists of my generation to become active in the movement.’⁴⁶

Albert saw Woodcock’s rewriting of anarchism and its history as an example of the working class being pushed out of its own movement. Anti-elitism was always a key part of his politics and drove his disputes with other ideologies (from populism to Trotskyism): ‘We do not “idealise”

³⁹ ‘Truth or dare’

⁴⁰ See ‘Ethel Mannin (1900-1985)’ from *KSL: Bulletin of the Kate Sharpley Library* No. 9, 1997 <https://www.katesharpleylibrary.net/mpg58h>

⁴¹ ‘Putting the record straight’ *Black Flag* v3, n18 (March 1975) <https://www.katesharpleylibrary.net/r229z5>

⁴² p.104 *I Couldn’t Paint Golden Angels: Sixty Years of Commonplace Life and Anarchist Agitation* (AK Press and Kate Sharpley Library 1996)

⁴³ p.44 *Battles of conscience : British Pacifists and the Second World War* quoting p.48 Ceadel *Pacifism in Britain* (1980)

⁴⁴ ‘To hell with liberalism’ *Anarchy* n.59 (January 1966) <https://www.katesharpleylibrary.net/73n7c8>

⁴⁵ p.475 *Anarchism* (1962)

⁴⁶ p.5 ‘Introduction’ to *I Couldn’t Paint Golden Angels*

the workers. But the most reactionary class existing are the intellectual pretenders who take hold of their ideas and try to write them out of it.’⁴⁷

The dispute with Woodcock was not the initial trigger for Albert’s interest in anarchist history but certainly was a major factor in it. This dispute cannot be disentangled from the broader political conflict about ‘new anarchism’/‘militant liberalism’. To Albert, Woodcock’s slander vindicated not only his own opposition to ‘militant liberalism’ but also his approach to history: ‘Our historical judgement was criticised as based only on anecdotal history from veterans but knowing how conventional history is concocted I doubt if it suffered from that.’⁴⁸

Notes

Special thanks to Paul S., Richard C and everyone who expressed an interest. A partial archive of *Freedom* can be found at <https://freedomnews.org.uk/archive/>. *Black Flag* and *Anarchy* (both series) can be found on Libcom.org and <https://www.thesparrowsnest.org.uk/>

⁴⁷ ‘Bridge of asses’ *Black Flag* v4, n4 (Sept/Oct 1975) <https://www.katesharpleylibrary.net/q575j7>

⁴⁸ Describing *Cuddon’s Cosmopolitan Review*, p.182-3 *I Couldn’t Paint Golden Angels*; quoted in ‘Albert Meltzer and the fight for working class history’ in *KSL: Bulletin of the Kate Sharpley Library* No. 76, (October 2013) <https://www.katesharpleylibrary.net/qz62j9>

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