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Book Review: A Girl Among the Anarchists

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A Girl Among the Anarchists By Isabel Meredith Publisher:
Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press Edition: 1992
(first published 1903)

From its advent as a modern worldview anarchism was always too pure a faith to be properly judged by the conduct of its adherents and practitioners. Or so it would seem from *A Girl Among the Anarchists*, one of several novels that lifts the lid on that simmering cauldron that was the Victorian anarchist scene. First published in 1903, the University of Nebraska deemed this rare book of the *belle epoch* worthy of reprinting in 1992. The fact that it was written by insiders is the virtue that sets it apart from other topical sensationalist novels that deal with anarchists, including that perfect folk devil the dynamitard. In this case the insiders, writing under the *non-de-plume* Isabel Meredith, are Helen and Olivia Rossetti, nieces of the poet Christina Rossetti and the artist Dante Gabriel Rossetti and cousins to the novelist Ford Madox Ford. Even more extraordinary, Jennifer Shaddock explains in her introduction to

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the present-day edition, was the fact that the two sisters based the story on their autobiographical experiences of publishing an anarchist journal, *The Torch*, while they were still teenage girls. How far and which events in the semi-autobiographical novel are based upon first-hand experience, however, is unclear, even doubtful.

A Girl Among the Anarchists, therefore, provides an expanded (albeit fictionalised and subjective) account of some of the figures that John Quail mentions in his classic account of the Victorian anarchist movement *The Slow Burning Fuse*.¹ A brilliant but eccentric father home-schools and raises his three gifted children with modest comfort and social privilege, yet outside of prevailing Victorian social conventions. These young people, Sarah, Raymond and Isabel, are orphaned on the threshold of adulthood. They inherit sufficient property and money to enable them to choose their own destinies. Sarah becomes an international opera star, Raymond pursues a successful career in the medical profession, while Isabel follows an early ambition ‘to die on a scaffold or a barricade, shouting “liberty, equality and fraternity”’ (p. 10).

Isabel first becomes a radicalised youth by reading Kropotkin’s *Appeal to the Young* (as did Helen and Olivia Rossetti in 1891, coming to know Kropotkin personally when they began their journal) and other anarchist and socialist tracts. One of her brother’s friends puts her in contact with some comrades in whose company she rapidly makes herself indispensable to the production of journals called *The Bomb and The Tocsin*. In the engaging events that unfold, Isabel fully immerses herself in her role as an anarchist propagandist. Her absolute devotion to the ‘Cause’ over-rides any initial reservations when encountering the various drunks, incendiaries and fanatical émigrés that make up the anarchist network.

¹ John Quail, *The Slow Burning Fuse: The Lost History of the British Anarchists* (London: Paladin, 1978).

I would question that this was necessarily the implication. It is not clear what Isabel's next stage in life will be when she steps out into the London street. Whatever the sadness of the conservative denouement to these semi-autobiographical revolutionary adventures, an even bleaker coda to the novel should be added if we are to identify the fictional character of Isabel Meredith with her creators. The political journey of the Rossetti sisters did not end there. What Shaddock's introduction does not tell us is that the reality, at least in the case of Olivia Rossetti, was even more surprising and shocking. She did not retreat into the home after youthful activism co-editing *The Torch: A Revolutionary Journal of International Socialism*. She took a political trajectory that led her from involvement with international organisations such as the League of Nations to support for corporatism that expressed itself in active support for Mussolini's fascism and co-authorship of a book entitled *The Organization of the Arts and Professions in the Fascist Guild State* (1938). Unlike her protagonist, it seems that the sequel to the story for Olivia Rossetti at least, was not wiser but certainly much sadder.

Steve Hunt

Some of the culs-de-sac that have historically beset the movement are exposed through the natural history of the several species of anarchist with whom Isabel becomes acquainted. Prominent among these in the genus anarchist are the varied adherents of individualist lifestylism, The well-to-do Isabel steps out of her comfort zone to attend her first meeting at the 'Myrtle Grove Tavern'. Alice-like, she climbs up a 'break-neck' ladder to the attic of this disreputable alehouse, entering a new world where a chaotic crew are producing a paper called *The Bomb*. Isabel's discomfort is in part due to the affront to her class sensibilities but also because rotting food, chaos, clutter and lack of sanitation seem an unpromising pathway to utopia. Isabel enters this discouraging wonderland – 'the centre of English anarchy' (p. 41) – only to meet several alcoholics, misogynists and brawlers, engaged in their individual fights against the world, for the most part more casualties of the existing order than a force able to contribute effectively to a coordinated revolutionary struggle. Rather than building a social movement against state, capital and hierarchy, the anarchists are alienated from, and even fighting, wider society.

The lazy, dirty and curmudgeonly character of Jacob Myers best represents this genus of anti-social individualism. Myers' behaviour is more an expression of personal pathology than political commitment. Nevertheless while he spends his time sleeping, ranting and not washing on principle, Myers finds a suitable habitat and, for the most part, a non-judgmental haven within the anarchist scene (even though several suspect him of being a police spy). He first appears as 'an indistinct inanimate *something* enveloped in a red flag', leading Isabel to ponder 'what section of the animal kingdom it [authors' emphasis] was from I was quite at a loss to decide' (p. 44). The description of the Jewish Myers as sub-human, along with anti-Semitic references such as 'fishy and non-descript characters of the Hebraic race' (p 47), are unsettling for present-day readers given Olivia Rossetti's later political sympathies and the posthumous irony

we recognise due to our knowledge of the fate of Europe's Jewish people.

An initially more sympathetic and reliable figure, Dr Armitage, also misconstrues anarchism, appearing to think of it as a 'party' that eschews organisation and speaks of 'our war against society' (p. 32). He adopts the causes of rational dress, vegetarianism and teetotalism in keeping with a reformer like Edward Carpenter. Armitage's enthusiasm for 'sandals of a peculiar make' immediately recalls Carpenter, yet the doctor increasingly loses touch with the social dimension and collective project that remained an intrinsic part of Carpenter's vision, informed by socialism and anarchosyndicalism, of a social revolution.

The next variety of anarchist is represented by the dynamitard and other comrades committed to 'propaganda by the deed'. Would be assassins and self-sacrificing martyrs indulge in fantasies of power and revenge with the great levelling power of dynamite, futilely attempting to blow up social and economic relationships. In *A Girl Among the Anarchists* Matthieu and Giacomo Giannoli are based upon notorious historical dynamitards such as Émile Henry and Ravachol. The credo of Giannoli, for example, finally leads him to carry out an atrocity in Barcelona:

To destroy utterly the fabric of existing society by all possible means, by acts of violence and terrorism, by expropriation, by undermining the prevailing ideas of morality, by breaking up the organisations of those Anarchists and Socialists who believed in association, by denouncing such persons and such attempts, by preaching revolution wherever and whenever an opportunity occurred or could be improvised, to these objects he had blindly devoted the best years of his life (p. 209).

Despite Isabel's increasingly critical account, and the clear distance of such an ideology from social anarchism, she supports Giannoli practically and morally without hesitation. It is unclear to what extent the Rossetti sisters' fiction is informed by personal encounters with dynamitards or insurrectionists or whether accounts of 'outrage-mongers' (preface by Morley Roberts, p. xxi) in the well developed genre of Victorian dynamite literature and penny dreadfuls provide the sources for the novel's later chapters. Isabel increasingly spends her time playing cat and mouse with police detectives and *agents provocateurs* as she assists monomaniac and paranoid characters such as Giannoli and the insurrectionist, Kosinski.²

Finally, however, following a short period of soul searching and self-scrutiny, Isabel abandoned *The Tocsin* to free herself of the philosophy of liberation that, ironically, she felt had come to constrain her. Out of the maze of culs-de-sac of this most amazing and scintillating of philosophies, she abandons her passion and commitment, disillusioned with a 'Cause' that promised so much and delivered so little. As the novel is a bildungsroman, the *A Girl Among the Anarchists* is transformed by her youthful excesses experiences and leaves the anarchist movement as the final line states to walk 'forth into the London Street a sadder if a wiser woman' (p.302).

In her introduction to the novel, Jennifer Shaddock concludes that Isabel retreated into the home to become a domesticated angel in the house:

A Girl Among the Anarchists ironically envisions the New Woman coming of age in Britain only to condemn her to perpetual adolescence within the paternalistic ideology of the home (p. xvi).

² Such paranoia was well placed. See Alex Butterworth, *The World That Never Was: A True Story of Dreamers, Schemers, Anarchists, and Secret Agents* (2010).