

Albert Meltzer and the fight for working class history

An article on British anarcho-syndicalist Albert Meltzer's attitude to anarchist history.

Albert Meltzer was a central figure in the development of the Kate Sharpley Library, both practically (laying out and distributing the bulletin and pamphlets) and also philosophically. His concern at seeing the history of anarchism rewritten to suit other people's agendas was part of the motivation for the founding of the Library. [1] It also connected with the rest of his anarchism: class-conscious, committed to liberation from below, sceptical of 'experts' and unafraid of criticising them.

His historical writing, like all of his writing, was punchy, humorous and anecdotal. '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.' [2] Albert wrote anarchist history from his own experience and the accounts of comrades he knew. He did not have the leisure (or the patience) to comb through archives. He also knew that relying on published sources could write the people who made up the anarchist movement out of history. To Albert, most academics had proven themselves incapable of understanding the anarchist movement: 'Working-class theoreticians who express and formulate theories are totally ignored as of no consequence: what they say is attributed to the next available "Intellectual".' [3] Albert was sceptical of both academic methodology: "'Research'" often means looking up dated reference books, and passing it off as knowledge.' [4] and also their motivation: 'Anarchism has become fair game for those eager to climb on the academic gravy train'. [5]

History, and the writing of history, was deeply political to Albert. 'Many would like to filch the history of the Anarchist movement.' [6] A shining example of this – and the 'sectarian' riposte – came in *Black Flag*'s response to Keith Paton's 'Alternative Liberalism : in search of ideological neighbours' suggesting Young Liberals adopt 'non-violent' anarchism. Paton wrote "'I'm not talking about the violent or destructive currents of anarchism or the anarchism that tail-ends Marxism and is obsessed with preventing the 'emasculatation' (sic) of the revolution... We claim a long and largely honourable tradition: e.g. it was we anarchists whom the Bolsheviks first attacked in post-revolutionary Russia, April 1918; e.g. the social creativity of the anarchist influenced workers and peasants in Spain in 1936-37, before snuffed out by the troops of right and left; May 68 to some extent[...]" *Black Flag* responded 'Humbug! "We anarchists" whom the Bolsheviks attacked, "we anarchists" who fought in Spain, and struggled ever since – what have "we" to do with you? Or are you pretending that it was "Peace News" types that fought in Russia and Spain? What with, bunches of posies?' [7]

Albert pointed out the positive value of history – and its contested nature – in his review of *British syndicalism* by Bob Holton: 'The histories of whole peoples were wiped out for precisely the same reason that the history of the working class movement in recent times is wiped out: it does not suit the conquerors for it to be known, because traditions keep alive the spirit of revolt.' [8]

The study of anarchism has ballooned since Albert's death. Much solid history has been written and, importantly, published (not all of it by academics). Those of us who work on the history of the anarchist movement – a history from below if ever there was one – will keep digging. If we move on from Albert's anecdotal approach to history, we would do well not to forget his scepticism. It would be unfortunate to leave history (or theory) to the 'experts' only

to find ourselves lamenting, like the ‘uncontrollable’ from the Iron Column, ‘maybe we have failed to make ourselves understood’. [9]

Notes

- 1, See ‘The Kate Sharpley Library Then, Now and Next: An Interview with Barry Pateman’ *KSL: Bulletin of the Kate Sharpley Library* No. 63-64, October 2010
<http://www.katesharpleylibrary.net/0vt50w>
- 2, Describing *Cuddon’s Cosmopolitan Review*, in chapter 12, pages 182-3 of *I couldn’t paint golden angels* (1996) <http://www.katesharpleylibrary.net/ngf32q>
- 3, Albert Meltzer ‘Only a few intellectuals’ *Black Flag* vol.3, no.19 page 7 (April 1975)
- 4, Albert Meltzer *I couldn’t paint golden angels* chapter 9, page 166
<http://www.katesharpleylibrary.net/6djj4k>
- 5, Albert Meltzer *Anarchism: arguments for and against*, 2nd edition (2000), page 18.
- 6, Albert Meltzer ‘What is the anarchist movement?’ *Black Flag* vol.7, no.7 page 36 (Autumn 1984)
- 7, Anonymous but probably Albert Meltzer ‘Roon ‘n’ about : Keith Paton knew my father’ *Black Flag* vol.4, no.13 page 4 (1977)
- 8, *Cienfuegos Press Anarchist Review* no.2 page 16 (1977)
- 9, An uncontrollable from the Iron Column, ‘The Iron Column, militarisation and the revolutionary future of Spain’ [AKA A day mournful and overcast] in Abel Paz *The story of the Iron Column* (2011) page 188.

Taken from KSL: Bulletin of the Kate Sharpley Library No. 76, October 2013
<http://www.katesharpleylibrary.net/qz62j9>