

GUY ALDRED

(1886-1963):

THE SOCIALIST AS LIBERTARIAN

CHRIS R. TAME



In the many contemporary considerations of the history of anarchist thought and action the name of Guy Aldred is notable only for its virtually complete absence. Yet Aldred deserves to be rescued from the obscurity to which he has, since his death in 1963, been so rapidly and thoroughly consigned. He merits a place in the historical gallery of such figures as Gustav Landauer and Domela Nieuwehuis, those who fought to maintain an anarchist or libertarian meaning for socialism in an age when its predominant interpretation and implementation was as authoritarian statism.

LIFE ...

Born in London in 1886, Aldred made his first public impact at the age of 16 as a child evangelist of the sort common at the time. By the age of 18, however, he had become an atheist and shortly thereafter embarked on his life-long career as an exponent of anarcho-communism. Aldred's life was characterised by a remarkable vigour and dedication to the furtherance of "progressive" causes. By the time of his death he had edited five periodicals — *The Herald of Revolt*, *The Spur*, *The Commune*, *The Council*,

and *The Word* —and had engaged in such diverse causes as that of Indian independence, the distribution of birth control literature, and anti-war agitation before, and anti-conscription agitation during, World War II.

... AND WORK

But rather than the memory of a life of undaunted activism, it is Aldred's *intellectual* heritage with which I am primarily concerned here. He was a prolific writer and left a large body of work which includes autobiography, biographical and critical studies of other libertarians (his works *Bakunin* and *Richard Carlisle* are still concise and valuable introductions to their subjects), commentary on current events and numerous polemics and theoretical statements. And what is remarkable throughout the large proportion of this work is the timeless quality and relevance of its libertarian message.

SOCIALISM, COMMUNISM AND FREEDOM

Aldred generally spoke of himself as a socialist or communist (he used the terms synonymously) without the addition of the "anarcho-" tag — for liberty was always a basic and indispensable part of his conception of socialism. In Aldred's view, just as Noam Chomsky has more recently argued, socialism was a fundamentally libertarian phenomenon, the rightful inheritor of the Classical Liberalism and Radicalism of the eighteenth century and the Enlightenment. Following Bakunin he declared that "*Anarchism*, the negation of authority, the negation of priestcraft, was the essential factor in all real Socialism ... *Anarchism* defines Socialism as Submission defines Capitalism."¹ Although, again like Bakunin, Aldred accepted historical materialism and Marxian economics, he could only deplore both Marx's personal authoritarianism and his intellectual ambiguities and the subsequent "authoritarian conceptions of communism for which the ultra-Marxians stood."

Thus, although in 1940 he still entitled one of his collections of essays *Studies In Communism* he felt constrained, as he put it, because "Soviet Russia (had) identified Communism completely with authority", to retitle one of its

Libertarian Heritage No. 12

ISSN 0959-566X ISBN 1 85637 254 5



An occasional publication of the Libertarian Alliance,
25 Chapter Chambers, Esterbrooke Street, London SW1P 4NN
www.libertarian.co.uk email: admin@libertarian.co.uk

© 1994: Libertarian Alliance; Chris R. Tame.

Chris R. Tame is the Director of the Libertarian Alliance. He broadcasts regularly, and has contributed to a wide range of scholarly journals and magazines.

A version of this essay first appeared in *The Match*, Vol. 6, No. 1, 1975.

The views expressed in this publication are those of its author, and not necessarily those of the Libertarian Alliance, its Committee, Advisory Council or subscribers.

Director: Dr Chris R. Tame
Editorial Director: Brian Micklethwait
Webmaster: Dr Sean Gabb

FOR LIFE, LIBERTY AND PROPERTY

major theoretical pieces, “The Case for Communism”, as “The Case for Anarchism”.

For Aldred, then, it was Bakunin who logically complemented Marx, and to those who asserted that Bakunin “was Proudhon adulterated by Marx and Marx expounded by Proudhon,” he replied that “(t)o my mind, it means that Bakunin is an excellent guide, philosopher and friend to the cause of Communism.”²

CRITIQUE OF THE ‘LEFT’

Aldred, in fact, never ceased his denunciation of the directions which the major parts of the ‘Left’ had taken. He gave short shrift to the twin reformisms of trade unionism and parliamentary socialism, indicting both as reactionary, statist, and disastrous in their consequences: “trade unionism has accomplished nothing so far as the well-being of the *entire* working-class is concerned.”³ Similarly, “parliamentarianism has ended in militarism and war, and has wasted this long struggle toward a new order ... The Labour leaders have sold their birthright, loyalty to peace and freedom, for a mess of potage, place and career within the national constitution of capitalism.”⁴

And while virtually the entire ‘Left’ rushed to prostrate itself before the monstrous statism of the Soviet Union, Aldred never hesitated to denounce what he saw as a travesty of all he had believed Communism to stand for. He frankly identified the “mediaeval terror” to which “scientific socialism” had descended and called upon the workers “to organise to destroy the Communist Party and Stalin terrorism, and to rank it with Fascism and all other terrorism.”⁵

FEMINISM

We should not neglect to mention, albeit in passing, Aldred’s rejection of sexual collectivism and the hypocrisy of marriage. His pamphlet *Socialism and Marriage* (originally published in 1907) was especially notable for its incisive attack on Christianity’s role in the repression of women. “For a thousand years the insane and inane denunciation of women has been the teaching of Christendom.” Proclaiming the self-sovereignty of women over their own lives and bodies he was quite resolute in his belief that “(t)he function of women is not to share barracks with man and bear his children.”⁶

SOCIALISM AND FREEDOM

But what is most vital and significant in Aldred’s work, however, remains his never ceasing proclamation of what he saw as the libertarian essence of socialism, his belief that socialism “can only have its expression in an era of freedom”.⁷ While the Soviet Union had made the term communism “identical with dictatorship and totalitarian oppression, assassination and darkness”,⁸ Aldred looked back to the struggles and ideals of so many in earlier times. “It is impossible to believe,” he wrote, “that the working men who rallied round John Burns at Trafalgar Square or marched in procession past the Carlton Club, conceived of Socialism meaning the perpetuation of persecution, firing squads, and the supremacy of the State.”⁹

Certainly, Aldred never manifest that pathological and reactionary hostility to individuality which has so undeniably and unfortunately characterised such a large proportion of the socialist “mainstream”, that is, the “communism” and “kind of ‘oceanic’ yearning for the shucking-off of one’s

individuality” which Hal Draper once commented upon.¹⁰ Rather, he declared outright that “(u)nderlying progress is the first law of Nature, the law of self-preservation ... it (is) self-interest which dictated (man’s) growth in wisdom and in moral righteousness. Selfishness lies at the root of all social and industrial development.”¹¹

While advocating “social ownership based in social production and distribution” and a “sound and sane collectivism”,¹² this was done for the sake of, and in terms of, a “practical individualism”¹³ and *not* in the reactionary holistic terms of the alleged ethical necessity of the suppression of the individual for some ‘higher’ end or for some alleged collective entity.

SOME CRITICISMS

But, of course, whether Aldred’s “practical individualism” and “social ownership” could, in practice, really attain the liberty he so desired is another matter. He may have believed that he had effectively synthesised individualism and liberty with collectivist organisation, but his own writings never really descended from the level of glittering generality, never evidenced any appreciation of the difficulties involved, nor portrayed any concrete proposals as to how those difficulties might be overcome. And is it really overly cynical to ask, after long experience of the *actual*, demonstrated preferences of the masses, whether Aldred’s vision of a “real”, libertarian socialism as the “genuine socialism of the proletariat” is anything more than a naive and pretentious illusion?

Nevertheless, Aldred undoubtedly deserves a place in the minds and memories of those concerned with the struggle for liberty. Whether his own ideal of anarcho-communism constitutes more than a fruitless and ultimately untenable synthesis will be, however, a question to which classical liberals, free market anarchists and collectivist “anarchists” will give very different answers.

NOTES

1. “Bakunin”, in *Pioneers of Anti-Parliamentarianism*, The Strickland Press, Glasgow, 1940, p. 6.
2. *Bakunin*, The Strickland Press, Glasgow, 1940, p. 47.
3. “Trade Unionism and the Class War”, in *Studies in Communism*, The Strickland Press, Glasgow, 1940, p. 26.
4. “Foreword” to *Pioneers of Anti-Parliamentarianism*, *op. cit.*, p. 4.
5. “Against Terrorism in the Workers Struggle”, in *Studies in Communism*, *op. cit.*, p. 53.
6. In *ibid.*, pp. 42, 49.
7. “Representation and the State”, in *ibid.*, p. 21.
8. “Foreword”, *ibid.*, p. 21.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 21
10. Hal Draper, “The Two Souls of Socialism”, *Our Generation*, January 1969.
11. “The Case for Anarchism”, *Studies*, p. 9.
12. “Representation and the State”, p. 18, “The Case for Anarchism”, p. 8., *ibid.*
13. “The Case for Anarchism”, *ibid.*, p. 8.

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Since this essay was first published two longer and more detailed studies of Aldred have appeared: Nicholas Walter, “Guy Aldred (1886-1963)”, *The Raven: Anarchist Quarterly*, Vol. I, No. 1.; and John Taylor Caldwell, *Come Dungeons Dark: The Life and Tikes of Guy Aldred*, Luath Press, Ayrshire, 1988. These, and some of Aldred’s writings, are available from Freedom Press, Angel Alley, 84b Whitechapel High Street, London, E1 7QX.