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A Visit to London

Ben L. Reitman

1910

Ever since I came in touch with the Anarchists I have been hearing of Kropotkin, Malatesta, Tcherkesov, Rocker, and others. Therefore when I arrived in London last July, my heart was overflowing with eager expectancy. It was my fifth trip to London, two of which were made as a tramp. I spent my time then studying the underworld, that is nowhere so awful and interesting as in London.

On my third trip I started as a medical student, making hospitals and clinics my world of study. The fourth voyage I made as a tourist and, as such, the gaieties of England's capital attracted me mostly.

But never before did the city reveal itself to me in all her possibilities. It was, indeed, a revelation. How was I, a man living a careless life, to know that London surged with the spirit of revolt, or that it contained so many interesting personalities.

On my arrival, I called at the office of Freedom, the leading English Anarchist paper, that has been proclaiming the message of liberty to the world for nearly twenty-eight years. Dozens of publications have come to life and died, but Freedom has weathered all difficulties.

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Retrieved on May 26, 2012 from libertarian-labyrinth.org
From *Mother Earth* 5, no. 8 (October 1910): 250–254.

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The man who has charge of Freedom and publishes all the Anarchistic pamphlets is Tom Keell, a jovial, hardworking, and devoted soul, whose entire life is consecrated to his cause.

He gave me a truly comradely reception and bade me make myself at home in the office. Nor did his cordiality diminish during my entire stay. Gloomy or cheerful, Tom always greeted me with kind words and a cup of tea. And when I incurred the curiosity of Scotland Yard, members of which were eager to locate my place of "conspiracy," it was Tom Keell who beat them off my track and took me to his home.

The next English Anarchist I visited was a man who had been warmly recommended to me in America—John Turner, whom my country honored by deporting for "disbelieving in organized government."

For many years organizer of the Shop Assistants' Union, Turner has a wealth of information on trade union matters, so that in our short and pleasant chat I learned much of the condition of organized labor and co-operative societies in England.

In a small cottage in one of the charming suburbs of London there lives and works a man who is to-day not only the greatest exponent of Anarchism, but also one of the leading scientists of the world,—Peter Kropotkin.

During my tours with Emma Goldman I had more than one occasion to witness the love and esteem entertained for this man by radicals, Socialists, and Anarchists alike. In many a household Peter Kropotkin's photo is cherished, and his numerous pamphlets furnish the principal asset of every radical library.

My reception was not as jovial as that at the Freedom office. No doubt Kropotkin is annoyed by many visitors, which circumstance has probably made him rather cautious and reticent. His family, however, especially his daughter, has the more democratic and easy manner.

The conversation, though instructive, was brief and guarded, and centered entirely on the growth of Anarchism, which my

Over two hundred books on Anarchism, and many hundreds dealing with the subject, but not listed under it, cannot help but prove that Anarchism does not rest on ignorance. When I remembered that a monarchical country treated this world idea and its exponents with respect, I blushed for being an American.

London, great mysterious London, I shall never forget thee.

host measured by the ever increased output of Anarchist literature. Kropotkin expressed his fears that some of the Anarchists in America lean towards respectability and utilitarianism. He strongly urged the necessity of carrying the message of Anarchism to the workingmen.

I left the Kropotkin household in a depressed state of mind, but a few minutes with another great Anarchist, Enrico Malatesta, put cheer into my soul. So wonderfully kind and childlike is this much-feared rebel that it is impossible to feel gloomy in his presence. Like Kropotkin, Malatesta is of aristocratic origin, but he is much more one of the people. He knows them not merely through theory, but through actual daily contact with all their struggles, their fears, and hopes.

He, too, spoke to me of the great advance of Anarchism in Europe and of its influence on every phase of human thought, not so much in a direct as in an indirect manner. He said Anarchism is exerting an influence on Socialism, trade unionism, on literature, the drama, and education.

During the two days of my visit Malatesta unrolled before my eyes the wonderful constructive possibility of Anarchism. Yet the details of his own remarkable life held me more than anything else. After all, is not the life of Malatesta a history of Anarchism?

Supplied with a collection of old and valuable pamphlets, and full of love for this simple but truly great teacher, I went on to learn more.

T. Tcherkessov is known throughout the radical world as the author of "Socialist Pages of History." A little big giant he is, small and dainty of stature, but a veritable encyclopedia of historic information. He, too, was very hospitable and comradely.

Through him I learned much about the Russian revolutionary movement, and the reasons for its seeming defeat which, he said, are due to the fact that Russia is not undergoing a mere political change, but a complete reconstruction in every phase of life. In speaking of English trade unionism as compared

to our own, Tcherkessov expressed the view that although in America certain trades are more completely organized, the English workingman is much better prepared to carry on the Co-operative Commonwealth after the Social Revolution.

Although myself of Jewish extraction, I rarely manage to get close to the Jewish radicals. No doubt it is my fault. I have never been much with Jews until I took up radical lecture work. Somehow I fail to grasp their psychology, and they mine. Thus I gained little from my visit to Jubilee street, the headquarters of the Jewish Anarchists in London, and they gained even less.

Rocker, the editor of the *Arbeiterfreund* and *Germinal*, two Anarchist publications which, I understand, are the best in that language, is not a Jew. His fame as an educator and writer is far and wide, but as I do not read Jewish and my bad luck would have me find him in a non-communicative state of mind, my visit was of little value. Still, I do not wish to convey the impression that Rocker is not a force. He must be if through his help the Jewish agitation in London has borne such fruit. Many Jewish Anarchists I have met in America have been pupils of Rocker.

In connection with my free speech activities it has been brought home to me more than once how little liberty we Americans really have. But never did I realize how terribly curtailed we are in this democratic country until I came to London. Hyde Park, Regents Park, and all the other open-air meeting places,—how wonderful compared with our own prison air, where one dare not breathe properly without the consent of the bully in the blue coat. If only to have escaped the latter, it was worth while going to London.

Some one once said, "You Americans are born talkers, but you do not always know what you are talking about." That may be true, but that is only because we are always afraid lest we offend the good taste of the policeman. The English bobbie neither hears nor sees; he's not there for that; hence the various speakers who daily inflict themselves on the English listening

public give full vent to their feelings. Needless to say, I made generous use of it. I am not prepared to say that my hearers gained anything from me, but I do know I gained much from them. Besides, to be able to say what one pleases is a treat one cannot afford to miss.

With me at all times was a wonderful boy, Guy Aldred, an Anarchist.

Although a bit too precocious for his age, and too prolific in his devotion to the use of the pen, he is nevertheless very remarkable. A brilliant speaker, enthusiastic and daring, he is the mainstay of the public agitation carried on in London now. Guy Aldred has just paid his toll to the British Bull for his connection with the Indian propaganda. His great zeal and fire should serve as a lesson that prisons do not "reform." Would to goodness we had such inspiring workers here. It might help to put a little life in some of the American parlor radicals.

Guy Aldred and his companion Rose, both through their spirit to each other and their solidarity to me, have shown me the beauty of true comradeship.

Space will not permit me to make mention of all the people I have met, most of them—the Socialists especially—are so uninteresting and conservative, they would take the first prize at a lawn party of the Women's Christian Association.

I must, however, speak of one who, while in bad repute in the radical ranks, has nevertheless impressed me deeply. I know he is accused of being a renegade. He may have gone back on his revolutionary ideals. I know also that he is charged with betraying the workingmen; that, too, may have foundation. But it is not the agitator nor educator, John Burns, I have reference to, but the man.

His simplicity, his kindliness, his remarkable joviality, touched a chord in my being, and as such I shall always remember him.

Last but not least was my visit to the British Museum, where I realized for the first time how truly great a force Anarchism is.