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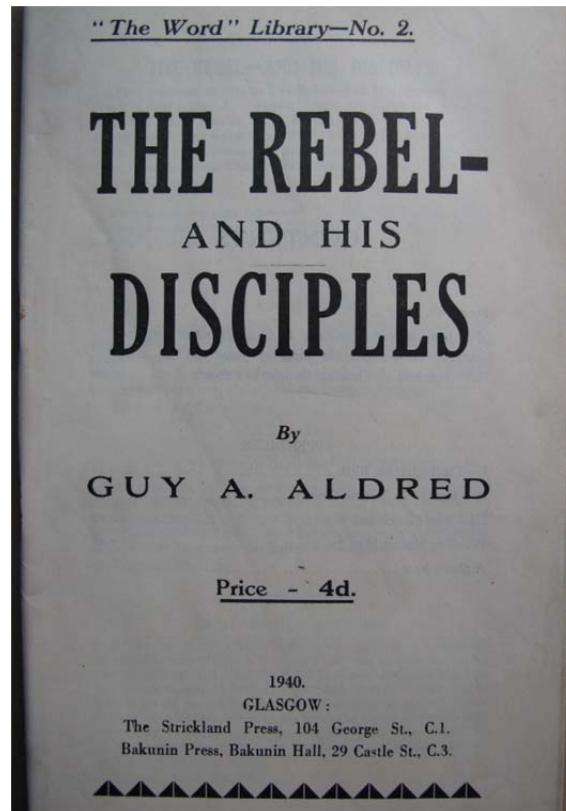
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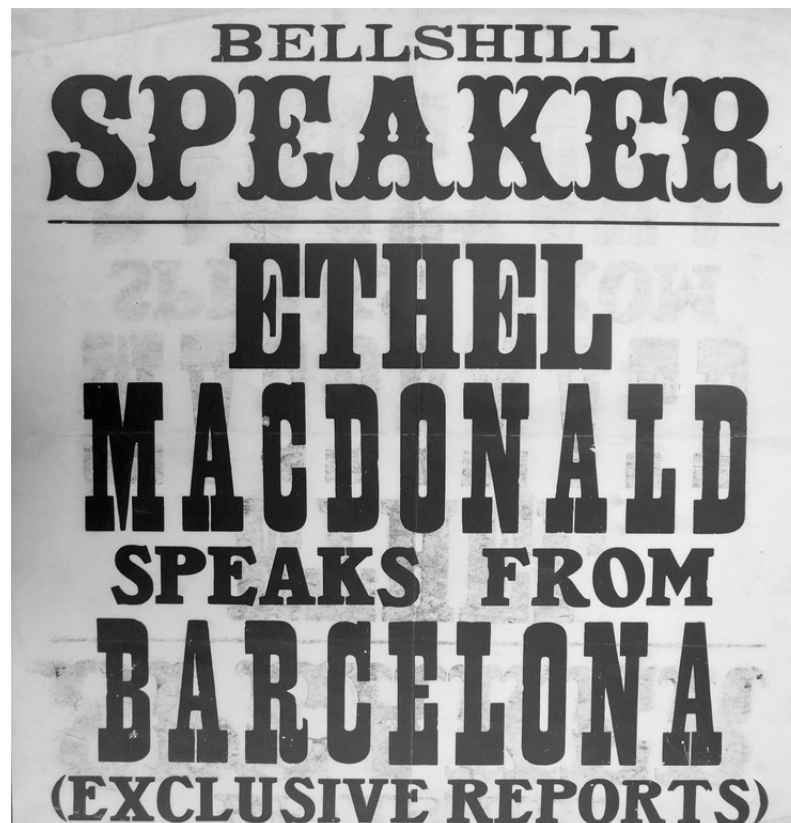
Guy Aldred. Rebel With A Cause.ⁱ

Ruth Kinna, Department of Politics, History and International Relations, Loughborough University, UK.



Guy Aldred is an obscure but important figure in the history of socialist thought. He sometimes crops up in histories of British socialism, syndicalist and labour organisation, but rarely in discussions of socialist theory. His uncompromising commitment to activism perhaps explains this neglect: as Aldred himself argued in a commentary on British anarchism, ideologies are too often shaped by the philosophical reflections of educated elites, leaving the thoughts of working class autodidacts who spend a lifetime standing on street corners, propagandising, ignored. Perhaps, too, his evangelical roots make his work an acquired taste: Aldred writes with moral certainty and conviction that leaves little room for debate. Most biographical accounts suggest that he was not an easy man to get along with and though he did not lack organisational skill, he found co-operation difficult. The pleasure he took in the pun of his name – 'the man they all dread' – was indicative of the problem. Yet Aldred's ideas are compelling and the judgements he made in his early life were consistently revolutionary, libertarian, anarchistic and usually good. Aldred campaigned against marriage and for birth control in support of women's liberation before the First World War; he encouraged conscientious objection in both world conflicts and publicised the vindictive abuse that COs suffered for taking their stance. In all his early writings, he elevated the struggles of common people – from religious non-conformists to convicts. Drawing on the reports of his comrades, Ethel MacDonald (1909-1960) and Jane (Jenny) Patrick (1884-1971), he supported the 1936 anarchist revolution in Spainⁱⁱ and until his later life, he consistently opposed the dogmatism of orthodox Marxism, whether it was expressed in

the theoretical pieties of the European social democratic movement or, after the Russian Revolution, in the cold, physical brutality of the Stalinist regime. The passion with which he advanced these causes captures the spirit of an optimistic, utopian, romantic current of socialism whose hopes and ideals, squeezed by social democracy on one side and state socialism on the other, were ultimately disappointed but which remain inspiring.



Aldred was born in 1886. He grew up in London, strongly influenced by his free-thinking and anti-militarist grandfather but spent the best part of his life in Glasgow, where he died in 1963.ⁱⁱⁱ As a youth he was a boy preacher, enthused by Christian missionary zeal. In 1907 he met Rose Witcop with whom he had a stormy affair. Defying convention they lived together and refused to marry until 1926, long after the collapse of the relationship, in order to prevent Rose's deportation. For both, the experiment in free love reflected a commitment to revolutionary practice and it pointed to an idea of political transformation that not only reserved an important place for individual action but which also prioritised direct action over institutional politics. Neither Aldred nor Witcop supported the suffrage campaign and instead gravitated towards the militant feminism of Dora Marsden, the editor of The Freewoman and New Freewoman. In terms of the revolutionary politics of the time, Aldred's rejection of parliamentary party-politics drew him closer to anarchism than to social democracy but after flirting briefly with both the Social Democratic Federation (the leading British Marxist-socialist party) and the anarchists of the London Freedom group, he refused to align himself with either and from 1907 operated as an independent. As a non-aligned revolutionary socialist, Aldred labelled himself 'communist', following the example of William Morris, one of his heroes. He

continued to do so after the Russian Revolution, when the term was appropriated by the Soviet system, even though he denied any correspondence between his view and the new orthodoxy.

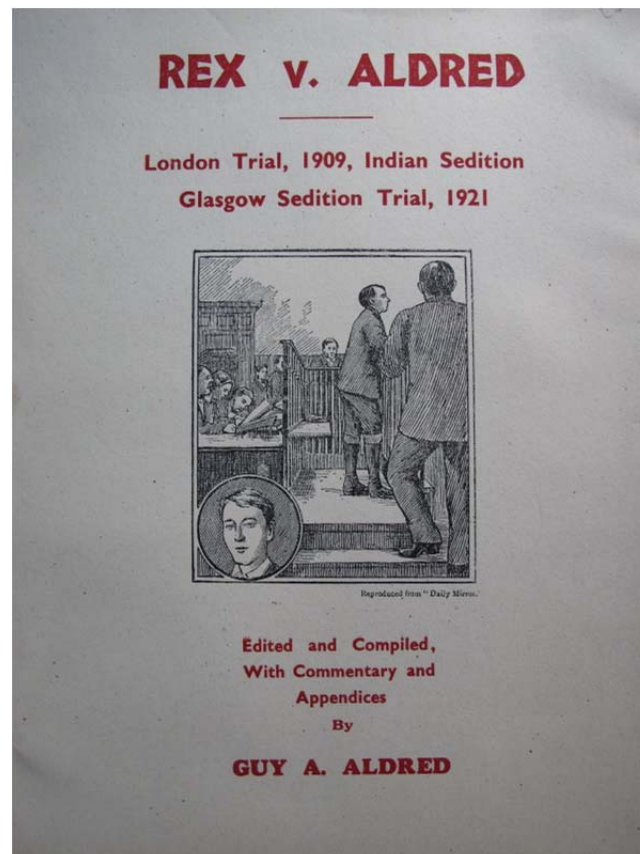
Ideologically, Aldred identified as a follower of Marx and a critic of Marxism. His view was based on a claim that Marx's thought had been distorted by his many followers. The German Social Democrats were largely to blame but the fault was also partly Marx's: his personal authoritarianism and obsession to dominate European socialism had resulted in the corruption of his own doctrine. Indeed, the true inheritors of the Marxist tradition were the anarchists, notably Michael Bakunin and his followers, who understood that Marx's critique of capitalism necessitated a disavowal of the state, rejection of authority and the adoption of a politics of anti-parliamentarism. Genuine Marxists like Bakunin and Aldred himself, also understood that socialist theory was inextricably bound to revolutionary action. Theory was not to be despised, but it was important only insofar as it could provide a diagnosis of the operation of capitalist exploitation and state oppression. Once this had been revealed, further debate was a pointless distraction.

Though Aldred claimed to be a follower of Marx, he in fact drew on a rich mix of sources to develop his socialist theory, cherry-picking ideas from William Morris's utopian socialism, the evolutionary biology of Darwin's 'bulldog' T.H. Huxley, the anarcho-communism of Peter Kropotkin and the critiques of slavery and domination he found in Nietzsche. Like many other activists, Aldred was not interested in wrestling with the philosophical problems that his particular combination of doctrines and principles presented, and anyway saw only coherence in his own thought. He was more concerned to draw out the practical implications of the ideas that most attracted him. As an activist and Bakuninist, the two outstanding themes of his socialism were duty and freedom.

Aldred was hardly the only socialist to grapple with these ideas. The relationship between individual freedom and the necessity for collective revolutionary action animated much of Kropotkin's work, for example, and towards the turn of the century discussion was stimulated by the impact of Tolstoy's work, as well as Nietzsche's, and the re-discovery of Max Stirner, in anarchist and other radical avant garde circles. The issues that these debates threw up were complex. Yet although there were significant theoretical divisions within both camps, opinions tended to polarise along communist and individualist lines – establishing a fracture that is not only still visible in contemporary anarchism but which has become quite pronounced in recent years. One measure of this was the shift in Dora Marsden's politics. In the period leading up to the First World War, Marsden leaned increasingly towards egoism, defining herself as an anti-anarchist and against those she derided as limp humanitarians and clerico-liberals, people who talked up ideas of sacrifice and duty in the name of abstract causes. Having once contributed to The New Freewoman, Aldred had nothing to do with the successor paper, The Egoist.

Unlike Marsden, Aldred refused to trade off the concept of individual freedom against duty and instead insisted on their compatibility. The roots of his understanding might be traced to his early religious commitment and to his celebration of heresy and dissent, on the one hand, and proselytising, crusading service on the other. As a Christian who followed Jesus's teachings (Aldred deemed the question of his historical existence irrelevant), it seemed obvious that the rejection of authority, compassion for the oppressed and the commitment to struggle for justice, even to the point of death, were all aspects of the same, single idea. And as a believer, it seemed equally obvious to Aldred that faith was actually measured by the individual's willingness to practically realise Jesus's

teaching. Jesus was not only a rebel. He was also an agitator. If he could not remain passive once the rebelliousness of his doctrine was made plain, then nor could his disciples. When Aldred's early Christian enthusiasm gave way to socialism, this profound sense of religious duty remained. In Aldred's book revolutionaries were heretics who refused to obey the systems of government that oppressed them and crusaders who worked to destroy the capitalist exploitation that government sustained and supported. In short, they were individuals driven by their sense of moral right to do their duty - to challenge, resist and fight immoral practices and behaviours. Free speech was one of his particular causes, and he went to prison in 1909 for sedition, after breaking an order banning the publication of the journal, The Indian Sociologist.



Aldred argued that it was only for heretics and dissenters to decide questions of morality. As an anti-smoker who campaigned in the Anti-Nicotine League, for example, he drew a line between propaganda and coercion. Moreover, there was an important difference between individual persuasion and government prohibition. One was freedom, the other was tyranny. When it came to socialist action, a similar distinction applied. The idea that individuals might be corralled by political elites to follow particular policies was abhorrent to Aldred. Genuine socialist struggle was driven solely by the decisions that individuals made about the conduct of their own lives and it could only be advanced by campaigns they decided to support in collaboration with others. Plenty of examples could be found in everyday life and in the actions of ordinary people: the Marian martyrs, conscientious objectors and feminists committed to free love all displayed the same crusading spirit.

As a socialist, Aldred's own sense of duty was driven by a particular ideal. He described his vision as one of equality, mutual aid, freedom, justice and social peace or, as he said, 'the kingdom of heaven on earth into which the rich cannot enter'.^{iv} Communism was not just an economic system but one that made possible an idea of community in which individuals lived harmoniously and understood the interrelationship between all natural phenomena. Aldred did not doubt the intuitive, universal appeal of these principles and since he refused to indulge in what he regarded as childish, utopian speculation, he avoided drawing up any blueprints which might constrain the creativity of its practical construction. The questions he asked were about the processes that would impel others to similarly commit to the struggle for its realisation.

Part of the answer came from an idea of evolutionary ethics and his conviction that sociability and the idea of service was linked to a process of social change. In the other part, he relied on education. Through education individuals would not only learn the truth of socialism but gain the practical skills that would undercut the expertise of existing elites, thus making them redundant. The final part of his answer was moral courage. Here, the example of dedicated revolutionaries played a central role.

Aldred celebrated a number of fellow revolutionaries but Bakunin occupied a special place in his thought because he had the unique distinction of being the crusading heretic who embodied the cause of socialism. Others might inspire action, but Bakunin epitomised socialist agitation because he took the core of Marx's ideas and lived by them in continuous rebellion. Agreeing with Bakunin's famous rejection of God as an idea that should be abolished, Aldred saw Bakunin as a modern-day Jesus: a rebel, an agitator and the very soul of socialism, 'the word incarnate'.^v Compared to Marx, Bakunin was not much of a philosopher, but he was a far more important model for revolutionaries. Aldred argued: 'Marx DEFINED the Social Revolution, whilst Bakunin EXPRESSED it. The first stood for the invincible logic of the cause. The second concentrated in his own person its unquenchable spirit. Marx was an impregnable rock of first principles, remorselessly composed of facts ... he was the immovable mountain of the revolution. Bakunin, on the other hand, was the tempest. He symbolised the coming flood'.^{vi}



In comparison to Bakunin, Guy Aldred left a very light impression in the history of socialism. His theoretical assumptions were sometimes unpersuasive and his reasoning shaky, but ultimately he was probably right that his failure to fire a mass movement owed more to the misleading but seductive promises of institutional socialism than to popular concerns about his logic. And not only did he refuse to give up his service for the cause, he injected socialism with principles of freethinking to espouse an attractively libertarian creed. By concentrating in Bakunin principles of freedom and duty, the idea of individual rebellion and the struggle for common goals, he anticipated notions of personal liberation and anti-capitalist action that continue to resonate in contemporary radical politics and which find real strength in their combination.

ⁱ This article is based on research presented in a longer essay, 'Guy Aldred: Bridging the Gap Between Marxism and Anarchism' Journal of Political Ideologies, 16 (1) (2011), 97-114. I am grateful to D. J. Milenburge Associates for providing the illustrative photographs and to the University of Strathclyde Special Collections and the Glasgow Mitchell Library Archives and Special Collections for permission to reproduce images in their collections.

ⁱⁱ See R.M. Hodgart Ethel MacDonald, Glasgow Woman Anarchist (London/Berkeley CA.: Kate Sharpley Press, 2003, 2nd edn.).

ⁱⁱⁱ For an account of Aldred's life, see John Taylor Caldwell, Come Dungeons Dark: The Life and Times of Guy Aldred, Glasgow Anarchist (Barr, Ayrshire: Luath Press Ltd., 1988). Bob Jones's entry 'Aldred, Guy Aldred (1886-1963) in the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) follows the turns of Aldred's politics, and his shift from anti-parliamentarism in the 1930s, to meet the threat of fascism.

^{iv} Guy Aldred Dogmas Discarded part 1 in Essays in Revolt, 2 vols. (Glasgow: Strickland Press, 1940), p. 40.

^v Guy Aldred, Bakunin p. 46.

^{vi} Guy Aldred, Bakunin in Essays in Revolt vol. II, p. 46.

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