

The Accidental Making of an Anarchist*

*memoir by Laurens Otter edited by Martin Bashforth, 2016, available online at www.thesparrowsnest.org.uk

I've only just caught up with this online: previous attempts all failed. So thanks to Sparrows Nest for making it available and sorry my reaction is so late.

For me the most positive and important part is Laurens's account of the links between Committee of 100 activists and traditional anarcho-syndicalists in the Syndicalist Workers' Federation. In general the memoir is full of fascinating detail on events & people, some of whom I met & worked with; others I knew by reputation only. Also, Laurens clarifies his attitudes to Gandhian principles and practices, eg of pacifism, non-violence and fasting (he emphasises that he was not a "pacifist" in the strict sense of the word). But I was a bit surprised not to be mentioned in the main text since I worked quite closely with Laurens on several occasions as I mention in my own memoir (details below).

For example, while noting that Will Warren of the Oxford Committee of 100 "had been assured by the Oxford Chief Constable that there would be no arrests" at the planned Brize Norton sitdown in December 1961, Laurens doesn't even mention the pre-emptive strike by the police on the day – we (that is, the marshals, including Will, Laurens and me) were arrested on a village green miles away from the base.

Above all I was shocked by the "postscript" of the memoir since it claims to describe events that I actually took part in – and I'm afraid I don't recognise Laurens's account. It's true I did go to Belfast just after Xmas 1971 with a photographer to cover the leafleting of soldiers by peace campaigners. My two-fold purpose was to get a usable picture feature (it made a double-page spread in *Inside Story*, March 1972) plus something more substantial if there'd been serious trouble.

Much of what Laurens describes certainly didn't happen. Here are a couple of direct quotes: "while I was in the room a reporter from the *Guardian*, one from a Belfast newspaper and Wynford Hicks called to get the CO's comments." Not so.

"He [the soldier] apparently stood like a character in a Wild West film, holding a pistol and ordering them out...from Wynford's account I had apparently met the CO in disguise." Not so: there was no such account.

There's more, including Laurens allegedly being threatened by a corporal with a revolver and looking up through a ripped out ceiling to see armed soldiers in the room above ready to shoot him if necessary, then being "taken into the next room and made to sit with a hood over my head" and experiencing "white noise". In the postscript Laurens says he "didn't know what they were doing" – whereas the leaflet he was giving out actually made this clear, protesting at the brutality of suspects on previous occasions spending "hours at a time with sacks over their heads" subjected to "continuous hissing noises".

If all this had been said at the time, it would have been investigated, certainly by the *Peace News* journalist and me, if not by other people. So I think the best thing to do with the postscript is: forget it.

MINOR QUIBBLES

Without looking for them I spotted one or two spelling inconsistencies, eg “George *Clarke*” for “Clark”, “*Bryan Hart*” for “Brian”, “*Gene Sharpe*” for “Sharp” and some confusion in the discussion about revolutionary rising between Barcelona 1936 and the “May Days” of 1937.

THE INFAMOUS ANARCHIST SPLIT OF 1944

Laurens refers to this several times. Is there a factual historical account of this in existence? If not, shouldn't there be one?

NOTES

Guardian obituary of Laurens by Tim Davies published 18 February 2022. My letter to them, sent soon afterwards, including the quote “his anarchist principles, far from being in conflict with his Christian faith, were based on it”, was finally published on 23 June 2022. “My Summer with Boris's Mother” (referring to being in Oxford prison with Laurens after Brize Norton) published by the *London Review of Books* 10 September 2020. My own memoir, “Insulting Behaviour...and other misdemeanours”, is available online at www.hicksinfrance.net.

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