

# Soul of Glasgow's

## Obituary: John Taylor Caldwell worked his whole life to keep the flame of anarchism alive

**W**ITH the death of John Taylor Caldwell aged 95 on 12th January 2007 we have lost the last significant link with an anarchist anti-parliamentary form of socialism/communism which flourished in the first few decades of the last century.

Born on 14 July 1911 in Whiteinch, Glasgow, the third child of a family of six, John moved to Belfast at the age of three, but following his mother's death, in 1925 the family moved back to Glasgow, where he and his younger siblings endured semi-starvation and frequent beatings at the hands of their father and stepmother.

Neanderthal Man featured in an instalment of Wells' Outline of History, he went on to read widely in history, literature, poetry, philosophy and political ideas, pursuing knowledge as best he could whilst working in the menial jobs open to a working-class youngster without connections or qualifications in an era of high unemployment.

His first job was that of page-boy in a fashionable Glasgow cinema; then, as bell-boy and subsequently waiter, on the Anchor Line's transAtlantic ships.

When in Glasgow he continued to frequent political meetings, and his first encounter with Guy Aldred at the Glasgow May Day

and direct action rather than in reliance on political parties, whether social democratic or revolutionary.

This kind of anarchism is assumed to have become extinct during the inter-War period, crushed between the pincers of the Parliamentary Labour Party and the Communist Party.

But in a few places, notably Glasgow, it continued to flourish, thanks to individuals like John and his mentor, Guy Aldred, who was the main organiser and theoretician of this movement.

Initially John acted as a steward at meetings, chalked the streets to advertise meetings, and sold pamphlets. His trips to New York whilst working as a waiter were pressed into service as an opportunity to try to make contact with the councilist and anarchist groups there.

Some contact was indeed made with the Vanguard group, and John brought back supplies of their paper, together with copies of Mattick's International Council Correspondence.

The USM took an important part in all the political actions of its time, from support of the Spanish revolutionary cause in 1936-8, through the anti-war struggles of 1939-45 (in which John himself was a conscientious objector), and on to the anti-militarist and peace campaigns of the Fifties and Sixties.

All this was achieved against a background of ever-present poverty, with barely enough money to eat, never mind provide meeting rooms or publish its propaganda.

The most intense period of activity was undoubtedly 1936-38 in support of the Spanish revolutionary cause. Meetings were held every night and funds had to be raised to send two comrades (Ethel MacDonald and Jenny Patrick) to Spain.

But the group was in desperate need of a printing press. Amazingly, Aldred persuaded a "Roneo" salesman to let them have a duplicator on approval, which was immediately pressed into service to produce a broadsheet, *Regeneracion*, giving uncensored news from Spain.

In 1938 John finally left his seafaring employment and began to work full time for the USM. Initially he was Dues secretary, but quickly became Minutes secretary for the meetings.

More important, however, was his work in the Strickland Press in getting out the pamphlets and paper for the movement. One of his first experiences with the press was the feverish activity needed to get out the first issue of *The Word* for the May Day march in 1938.

Having just acquired Tom Anderson's old printing press, the USM quickly put it to use to produce the new paper. Jenny Patrick, who had had experience in a print shop, got



**THE GANG:** In this shot, John Taylor Caldwell is stood to the far right of the picture, and Guy Aldred is sixth from the right.

Beyond a knowledge of the three Rs acquired in a Belfast elementary school, John was completely self-educated.

He had the insatiable thirst for knowledge which until fairly recently was a characteristic feature of working class radical movements.

Stimulated by the striking picture of

demonstration in 1934 left such a deep impression on him that later in the year he joined Aldred's United Socialist Movement (USM), part of a tradition of libertarian socialism going back to the days of William Morris and the Socialist League.

It was a socialism based on working-class self-activity manifest in workers' councils

# proudest tradition

the type ready and had to hand-feed the machine. It was an old treadle machine i.e. powered by footpower, largely John's!

A thousand copies of the 16-page issue were required. Since the machine could only produce two pages at a time, 8000 sheets had to be hand-fed and treadled at the rate of 500 sheets per hour.

The job was still not finished after midnight, and neighbours were complaining about the noise of the machine. So work had to resume next morning. By half-past eleven they had finished, just in time for the May Day procession. It is good to record that their efforts were rewarded when The Word changed hands "as readily as if it had been a free handbill".

By 1939, with the help of the Strickland bequest, the Strickland Press was set up at 104-106 George Street.

At first printing was farmed out to a commercial printer, although typesetting was still done in-house. However, towards the end of the War, when the Scottish print union discovered that women (Jenny and Ethel) were doing the work, they forced the printer to stop accepting jobs from the Strickland Press.

It then had to acquire its own linotype and printing too was done in-house, under Ethel's close supervision. Initially she wouldn't allow John, or anyone else, anywhere near "Big Bertha" (the largest of the Press's machines).

But when Ethel became incapacitated with multiple sclerosis in 1959, John had to do more and more of the printing work. He mastered the linotype, and did more or less everything in the Press for the next dozen or more years.

The Word continued to be published at 104-106 George Street until, in 1962, the Press was forced to remove to Montrose Street.

The George Street premises were the heart of this anarchist oasis in Glasgow, as a meeting-place, bookshop, printing press and social centre for a whole generation of Glaswegians. John managed to capture this in an epitaph for the group's old HQ written after it had been bulldozed for a new University of Strathclyde building:

When the meeting was over the chairs were replaced and the audience meandered upstairs where books were bought and fresh arguments broke out amongst small groups. The old man was tired... but he was loth to hurry them away.

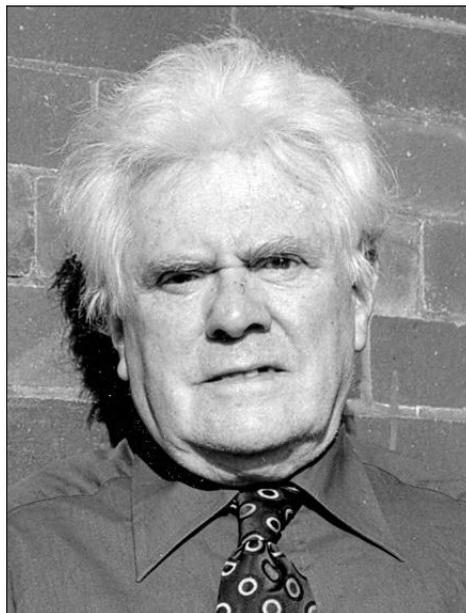
Some, he knew, went home to misery and loneliness. The evening in the old cellar was a rare feast of companionship for them. And for the few young ones it was good too. Not just a case of agreeing with the old master, but a challenge to read and, most importantly, to think for themselves.

Though only a very small group of committed workers, through The Word in particular the USM had much influence in the 1940s, particularly in Scotland.

John remembered, for example, the Burnbank miners selling some 600-900 copies each month. And Aldred's pamphlets sold well, the most popular being his study of John Maclean, which sold 15,000 copies in



**STALWART:** Above, Caldwell In July 1958. Below, in 1986.



repeated printings.

The aim was get their literature out to the widest possible audience, and to help achieve this the price of pamphlets was invariably cut from 6d to 1d at the end of meetings.

In the post-war period Aldred was a candidate in a number of General Elections and by-elections - not in the hope or expectation of being elected, but purely as a propaganda exercise, a cost-effective way "to expose the farcical and false nature of parliamentarism," as John put it.

In all of these, John acted as Aldred's election agent, handling key aspects of the campaigns from organising the nocturnal squads of bill-posters and street-chalkers to booking meeting-halls to printing and delivering 10,000 handbills and election addresses.

John never claimed to be much of a speaker. He spoke at the USM Study Circle

and at Willie McDougall's Workers' Open Forum, but complaints were made that he spoke on "highbrow" topics.

A revealing example of this, John recalled, was his talk on "The Value of Poetry" to the USM Study Circle. Prompted by the perennial Marxist debate on whether poetry has intrinsic value or must always be subordinated to the needs of the class struggle, John argued for the former.

In a closely-argued address, which now seems something of a philosophical tour de force, he made the case for the enduring value of poetry and of all art:

"Our Marxism, our pacifism, our anarchism are symptoms of an imperfect society. We gather to discuss them in a mood of solemn seriousness, as a doctor might diagnose a patient. It is not a pleasant occasion... Our deliberations belong to the bedside of a sick society. We want to cure it..."

"In the new society we will lay aside our armoury of "isms" and our perpetual belligerence. In a state of cooperation we will find freedom to live much more fully than before. Our minds, and what may be termed our souls, will grow to a much greater magnitude, and the whole compass of our lives will expand.

"Then we will discover the beauty that has always been there: the beauty that lies around us, and within us, and which offers the greatest compensation for being alive."

"The talk was profusely illustrated; but before long "my audience was in a deep trance, as still as figurines unearthed by archaeologists. Maybe they were afraid to move in case they woke up..."

It was clear to John that there was little sympathy for such ideas - to most of his companions poetry was irredeemably middle-class and largely irrelevant to the class struggle.

This led John to think of himself as a poor speaker, and also to his contributions to the group being generally undervalued. Yet it is questionable whether, without his unselfish and unflagging effort as the USM's workhorse, the group could have kept up the struggle, even before Ethel's untimely death.

After it, there is no doubt of his indispensability. Having helped to nurse Ethel, and served Guy devotedly to the last, after Guy's death he also found himself looking after an increasingly cantankerous Jenny. She had never warmed to John, and her formidable personality did not soften with her increasing dependence on him. Nevertheless, he cared for her as he might have done for his own mother.

In fact John's importance derives from his incredible tenacity in keeping the movement afloat and alive. At the time of the greatest activity of the antiparliamentary movement in the Thirties and Forties and on into the Fifties, John donated his savings and dole money to keep the movement going.

It was largely his savings, in fact, that enabled Ethel MacDonald and Jenny Patrick to finance their trip to Spain in 1936. Later, he even contributed the money he made as a writer of children's stories, for John was a



writer of no mean talent.

Occasionally he would contribute an article for *The Word*, but he also wrote a series of children's stories for the *Daily Mirror* and *The Comet*.

At one stage he was invited to join the staff of Amalgamated Press but characteristically put his unpaid political work first. It was primarily John who from 1959 onwards kept the Strickland Press going and got out *The Word* following Ethel's tragic illness and death.

In Aldred's lifetime John invariably took a background role. After Aldred's death in October 1963, however, he stepped forward to keep the movement going. Virtually single-handedly he continued to publish *The Word* (later transmuted to *The Word Quarterly*). But the USM fell into decline, and by 1968 John was forced to close its printing press and bookshop.

But perhaps of more long term significance were John's efforts in keeping alive the movement's history and its ideas, of antiparlamentarism and self-activity which were its hallmarks.

I first met John, early in the Eighties, through Willie McDougall, another veteran of Glasgow antiparlamentarism. Willie recommended that, if I wanted to find out about the history of the movement, I should speak to John Caldwell.

For Willie the movement's history was secondary – far more important was his propaganda work, especially the production of his many pamphlets and papers on current issues. John, on the other hand, whilst he of course recognised the value of such activity, realised that if the movement and its ideas were to survive in a period of downturn, recording its history as fully as possible was vital.

To this end, in books, articles, TV programmes, plays and speaking wherever possible, he devoted the last decades of his life.

Possibly it was from Aldred that he first appreciated the importance of this. Aldred devoted pamphlet after pamphlet to rescuing heroes of the movement from oblivion, and in the 1950s embarked on his major autobiographical project, *No Traitor's Gait*, which, although unfinished, remains one of the major sources for the libertarian and freethought movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

To some this might smack of Aldred's egocentricity, placing himself at the centre of the movement's early history. John's approach was completely the opposite, downplaying his own role to insignificance.

Without being conscious of it he was in many ways an oral historian of the movement: having absorbed comrades' memories and stories, he had a remarkable ability to synthesise the information and produce a compelling narrative in his lucid prose style.

He devoted the rest of his long life to "guarding the movement against oblivion", depositing archival material in libraries such as the Mitchell Library and the libraries of Strathclyde and Glasgow Caledonian Universities, and editing a collection of Aldred's works for World Microfilms.

In addition, Luath Press published his biography of Guy Aldred, *Come Dungeons Dark* (1988) albeit in abbreviated form, and subsequently Northern Herald Books published his two important volumes of

## Factfile: John Taylor Caldwell (1911-2007)

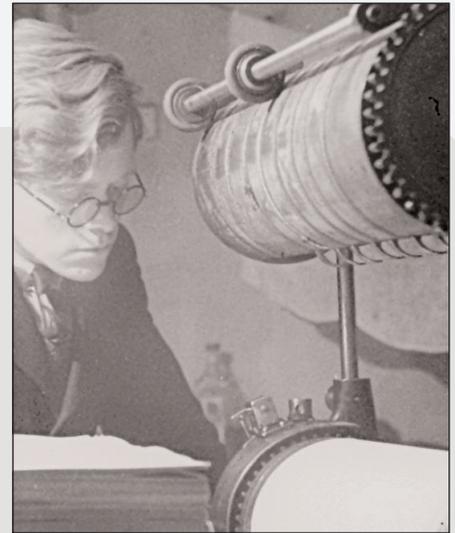
**"In the new society we will lay aside our armoury of "isms" and our perpetual belligerence. In a state of cooperation we will find freedom to live much more fully than before."**

- An agitator since his teenage years, Caldwell found his political home on meeting Guy Aldred in 1934.

- He was both an untiring physical aide to Glasgow's leading organisers, and an important transatlantic link through his work as a seaman

- His work was vital to the founding of the Strickland Press

- Caldwell was a talented writer of children's books, but in his later years, it was the history of the



movement which occupied him

- He continued speaking, helping researchers and supporting anarchist causes well into his 90s.

autobiography, *Severely Dealt With* (1993) and *With Fate Conspire* (1999). The former, a vivid depiction of his harsh upbringing in Belfast and Glasgow, was well received and was a bestseller for three consecutive months at John Smith's historic bookshop in central Glasgow (now also, alas, defunct).

Most recently, about eighteen months before his death, John had made an important contribution to a film about "The Spanish Pimpernel", Ethel MacDonald.

In addition, John was always willing to speak at events in Glasgow, trying to bring alive the history of the movement for a new generation of anarchists and direct actionists.

This he did well into his nineties, for example speaking at Glasgow's John Maclean Centre three or four years ago. He was always ready to assist fellow workers with their research, especially if it promised to "spread the word" to new audiences and to shed new light on the movement to which he had devoted his life.

Similarly, he was an assiduous correspondent, answering queries with thoughtful and detailed accounts drawn from his capacious memory and his notebooks and diaries.

However, emphasis on his lifetime of service to the cause and on his self-effacing character runs the risk of creating a misleading impression of what it was like to be in John's company.

He was a witty and convivial man. A visit to his flat was always an occasion for lively conversation, laughter and (in a modest way) feasting. Until only a few years before his last illness, we would arrive at his flat to find the table neatly set out and his crowning culinary achievement, stewed steak with carrots and onions, filling the air with its savoury aroma.

In extreme old age some people become almost exclusively preoccupied with their

state of health and declining abilities: not so John. He maintained a lively interest in political and social developments, and made determined efforts, ultimately frustrated by his increasing blindness, to master information technology so that he could continue to communicate with the outside world.

Out of his modest income he subscribed to anarchist and freethought publications; and also contributed to a whole gamut of child and animal welfare charities, a commitment rooted in his childhood experience of cruelty and deprivation rather than easy sentimentality.

He took a humorous and completely rational approach to his own mortality, doing his best despite failing sight to put his papers in order so that nothing of historical value would be lost – and pointing them out to us with words such as "When I kick the bucket..."

In accordance with the practices and values his old comrades had always maintained, he willed his body to medical science.

Aldred's 1961 tribute to Ethel MacDonald is equally applicable to John:

"...it seems rather odd that we should have the desire to struggle forward and to change the world and to put it right. Yet for some strange reason a contradiction arises within us. We do struggle, we do change the world. One generation emerges into another.

"The hopes of yesterday's heroes and martyrs become the inspiring slogans of the martyrs and heroes of today, and by them are passed on to the heroes and martyrs that will be tomorrow..."

"I must be bold in mind and spirit so as to play my part in bringing about the new world in which [John Caldwell] believed, and to create which [he] toiled and struggled."