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John Patten
An anarchist in the archive
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An anarchist in the archive

Remembering Barry Pateman

John Patten

Our comrade Barry Pateman was at the heart of the Kate Sharpley Library for thirty-five years. My earliest memory of Barry is of him on the KSL stall at the anarchist bookfair in London. He was in his element. I clearly remember Barry telling me the pamphlet I'd just bought was 'as rare as rocking horse shit'. I hope this brief account throws a little more light on his life and his ideas.

Barry was born and raised in a mining community near Doncaster. Radical political ideas were common, but so was non-school learning and a love of books. 'When I was growing up I met many self-educated working class men and women. They were everywhere in the community I lived in. […] They always recognized the "literary canon" and had, sometimes, a rather exaggerated respect for it. That said they brought their own frame of reference to the classics. I can remember sitting in a pub listening to two old miners tell me that Sir Walter Scott's "Ivanhoe" was a radical novel because they read it as an exercise in solidarity and anti-racism.'[1] There wasn't an aw-

[1] Barry Pateman '"Nameless in the crowd of nameless ones…" : Some thoughts on The Story of A Proletarian Life, by Bartolomeo Vanzetti, 1923'

ful lot of anarchist literature about though. I remember seeing the large format newsprint 'Freedom Anarchist Pamphlets' series at the KSL and Barry telling me that they were some of the few things available when he was finding his way to the anarchist movement.[2]

In London in the early 1970s, Barry worked with Albert Meltzer, Stuart Christie and Miguel Garcia in the Anarchist Black Cross. He was modest in hindsight about his anonymous writings and other contributions: 'I'd never seen myself particularly important (I'd always put the stamps on the envelopes and book the meeting rooms etc)'.[3] He also took part in the bitter internal disputes of the early 1970s: was anarchism about class and revolution or were such ideas outdated? 'I had been around the edges (and probably too involved) of some rather intense disagreements about anarchism and anarchist practice.'[4] There were other differences: London anarchist Martin said 'I recall Barry Pateman telling me he wasn't sure he was an anarchist when he first got involved, as he liked ska and all the anarchists he met thought jazz was the only music anarchists should listen to.'[5]

As a miner's son, and member of the anarcho-syndicalist Direct Action Movement, Barry was heavily involved in anarchist solidarity during the miners' strike of 1984-85. He lived

KSL Bulletin, no.81 (February 2015) https://www.katesharpleylibrary.net/vhhp2j.

[2] There were eight, published 1970-71 See https://thesparrowsnest.org.uk/search.php?query=Freedom+Anarchist+Pamphlets&logic=and – some were reprinted by Freedom Press in their *Fighting the Revolution* pamphlets (two volumes, both 1971).

[3] Barry Pateman 'Anarchist History: confessions of an awkward pupil' *KSL Bulletin*, no.84 (October 2015) https://www.katesharpleylibrary.net/02v7v0.

[4] Barry Pateman 'The Kate Sharpley Library Then, Now and Next: An Interview with Barry Pateman' *KSL Bulletin* no.63-64 (October 2010) https://www.katesharpleylibrary.net/0vt50w.

[5] Martin H on libcom, 2012.

phlets folded and put in a pocket to read at work, at home, in the pub, or on the bus. […] We need to ask how these readers processed what they had read in the light of their own experiences. They were not empty vessels waiting to be filled by the word.'[18]

Barry and Jessica moved to New Zealand in 2012. Barry continued to work on the Kate Sharpley Library right up until his death in September 2026. The library collective is poorer without him, but we aim to carry on. He has left us with a lot to think about.

[18] Barry Pateman 'Foreword' in Jared Davidson *Sewing Freedom: Philip Josephs, Transnationalism & Early New Zealand Anarchism* (2013).

up a history of freethought, previously owned and annotated by Mat Kavanagh led Barry to ruminate on what it meant to see Kavanagh 'working out what knowledge he can take from this book that will be useful in his discussion on anarchism and anarchy with his work mates.'[15] Many of my conversations with Barry have stayed with me. I remember filing copies of *Red Action* (Marxist but not Leninist) in the library and Barry saying he would write something about them one day. Since Barry, as a DAM member, worked with them in Anti-Fascist Action, it might have expanded on his later remark about their anti-fascist work being 'the best thing they ever did.' We talked a lot about his research into exactly what happened to split the Anarchist Federation in 1945. That was the long-delayed harvest of his early researches into British anarchism.[16]

For Barry anarchism was all about getting to anarchy, and anarchy was all about everybody being able to realise their full potential. He warned about what we lose if 'we raid the anarchist past to justify the anarchist present'.[17] It's been fascinating to re-read his introductions, re-watch interviews and see Barry worrying away at questions of anarchist history. In his foreword to Jared Davidson's biography of Philip Josephs, an immigrant worker in New Zealand (and importer of anarchist literature) Barry asked: 'What tactics should we use, and how malleable and flexible can they be, yet still remain anarchist? […] Above all, what is it that makes people anarchists and not syndicalists, or libertarian communists, or individualists, or whatever? Make no mistake – they saw a difference and the very least we can do is to explore it. […] All those pam-

[15] Barry Pateman 'Mat Kavanagh and the History of Anarchism' *KSL Bulletin*, no.63-64 (October 2010) https://www.katesharpleylibrary.net/vdnf0f.

[16] You can read it at http://katesharpleylibrary.pbworks.com/w/page/139511268/The%201945%20split%20in%20British%20anarchism.

[17] Barry Pateman 'Free Commune and Billy MacQueen' *KSL Bulletin* no.70-71 (July 2012). https://www.katesharpleylibrary.net/ngf357.

through a time of 'Mutual aid, not in a fucking book, but in everyday existence'; and of not only defeat but the pain of finding that the anarchist movement couldn't make room for radical apprentices who weren't yet 'full anarchists'.[6]

His experiences as an activist and those disputes about what the anarchist movement should do or could be led him to research British anarchist history. He earned a PhD studying the Spanish anarchist exiles who came to Britain in 1939. He also researched the bigger picture of British anarchism from the 1880s to the 1940s. That laid the groundwork for his involvement in the Kate Sharpley Library. When Albert persuaded Barry to house the KSL, it shifted from a collection of books on all topics of interest to anarchists to a more focussed one. Barry said 'there was so much material by and about anarchists that I felt KSL should concentrate on that.'[7]

We should recognise that Barry's first partner, Jennie Sidney, was important in making the Kate Sharpley Library a welcoming place – even if initially she was not too happy when Barry 'arrived with a minibus full of boxes (twice!!)'.[8] With Albert working on the publications and Barry unpacking, organising and expanding the collection the KSL grew in size and influence. Barry was also an enthusiastic stallholder at anarchist bookfairs, as much for the chance to share materials as for the essential money they brought in. Matt Hart recalled how Barry helped his research into the Anarchist Black Cross: 'When I used to go to the Anarchist Bookfair up in San Francisco, Barry Pateman, every single time he saw me, he would

[6] Barry Pateman 'Tensions in Anarchism' (a talk at the Bay Area Anarchist Bookfair in San Francisco). https://www.katesharpleylibrary.net/h44m7w.

[7] 'Then, Now and Next: An Interview'.

[8] 'Then, Now and Next: An Interview'.

all of a sudden bring up a large stack of old *Black Flag*s that he had collected and literally put aside for me.'[9]

Barry was guided by the example of Paul Avrich, the great American historian of anarchism. When Avrich died, Barry paid tribute to his 'consistent and rigorous insistence on accuracy', suggesting that we 'learn from Avrich's refusal to condescend to the people that made up his histories. He did not have a clever theory and try to prove it, a methodology that treats its subjects like chess pieces rather than people.'[10]

Albert Meltzer died in 1996, leaving Barry and the rest of the Kate Sharpley Library collective to carry on. A much greater shock came when Jennie Sidney died in 1998. Both Barry and Jennie had been teachers in East London and later in Peterborough. The next year Barry moved with their son, Paul, to a new life in California. Barry worked at the Emma Goldman Papers Project bringing his knowledge but also a curiosity about the people (anarchist or not) that Goldman worked with: 'We are rescuing men and women from, as E.P. Thompson writes, "the enormous condescension of posterity." On our desk, ill-lit by lamp-light, they come alive again.'[11] Sometimes people look for the Emma Goldman that they want to see, but Barry brought a vital focus on recording facts: 'Rule 1 of researching: never trust anyone until you've read the original yourself'.[12]

Barry's life improved further when he met his new partner, Jessica Moran, at the Emma Goldman Papers. Jessica also joined the Kate Sharpley Library collective. The holdings of the

[9] 'A History of Anarchist Prisoner Support (with Matt Hart)' Final Straw Radio June 11, 2025 https://archive.org/details/tfsr-20250608-MattHartOnAnarchistPrisonerSupport

[10] KSL Collective 'Paul Avrich 1931-2006: a historian who listened to anarchist voices' *KSL Bulletin*, no.46-47 (July 2006) https://www.katesharpleylibrary.net/2z358c.

[11] Barry Pateman 'Barry Pateman is On The Edge' *Open Road: the newsletter of the Emma Goldman Papers* (Winter 2000). https://www.katesharpleylibrary.net/3r23ht.

[12] 'Barry Pateman is On The Edge'.

KSL grew once Barry started buying rare anarchist materials from American booksellers. Sometimes in part exchange, sometimes with donations from friends of the library but more often out of his own pocket. I especially remember visits to Bibliomania and Bolerium (both in the Bay Area), though Barry would never knowingly pass by any second-hand bookshop.

Barry encouraged people to think about anarchy, anarchism and history. Barry was a generous student of anarchism, who would take time to support other people's research, whether by reading their manuscripts, pointing them to sources or simply talking enthusiastically about anarchist history. He shared a lot of information but also represented a personal connection to the history of the movement (in the same way as Albert Meltzer had for him). Barry was one of the moving spirits of San Francisco's Alexander Berkman Social Club (formed in 2008). He was willing to be a speaker at meetings and conferences even if he self-deprecatingly claimed 'in retrospect I had fuck all worth saying'.[13] Barry wrote many encouraging introductions and book reviews, and followed the example of Paul Avrich, 'preferring to remain silent than chastise.'[14]

Barry worked closely with AK Press, who have co-published several works of anarchist history with KSL. He also read manuscripts for them, and shared others that came to the KSL from Cienfuegos Press via Albert Meltzer. One project with AK Press that took Barry and Jessica years was the annotated edition of Alexander Berkman's *Prison Memoirs of an Anarchist*. As well as providing context on people and events for the modern reader, it transcribed the diary Berkman kept while writing *Prison Memoirs*.

It was fascinating to work with Barry in the KSL as he was so interested in what the material there could tell us. Picking

[13] 'Anarchist History: confessions of an awkward pupil'.

[14] 'Paul Avrich 1931-2006'.