

# **George Barrett: A Biographical Sketch**

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This is the introduction to the collection *Our Masters are Helpless: The Essays of George Barrett* which I created and edited whilst on strike a few years back. George Barrett was a British anarchist active during the 1910s (including in Glasgow) and whose writings I had always found to be excellent.

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## George Barrett: A Biographical Sketch

“One of the first, and best, anarchist pamphlets I ever read was George Barret’s *Objections to Anarchism* [...] Barrett was a propagandist who took his anarchism seriously, not just rhetorically, and discussed real issues realistically.”

– Colin Ward<sup>1</sup>

George Barrett was born George Powell Ballard in Ledbury, Herefordshire, on 6 December 1888.<sup>2</sup> Initially joining the Bristol Socialist Society, his opposition to parliamentarianism soon saw him become an anarchist. It was also in Bristol that he met and married Edith Oxley, the daughter of a leading local socialist.

Barrett is first mentioned – under his real name, G. Ballard – in the February 1908 issue of *Freedom* in an article entitled “Anarchism in Bristol.” Readers were informed that “Anarchism has been the cause of some trouble in the Bristol Socialist Society of late” with Ballard bearing “the heavy responsibility of having disturbed [its] otherwise peaceful routine” by giving a lecture on “Anarchy and Socialism.”

He soon left for London, where *Freedom* reported on his open-air meetings in November and December 1909, the December issue mentioning Barrett as having given a “stirring” address at four outdoor meetings held by the Walthamstow Anarchist Communist Group in November.<sup>3</sup> By early the following year, he had moved to Glasgow to take a job as an engineering draughtsman. A notice in the “Propaganda Notes” section of the April 1910 *Freedom* read “Comrades who are willing to help in outdoor propaganda in this district [Glasgow] are requested to write to G. Barrett.” November that year saw his first writings appear in *Freedom* – an article entitled “Some Quotations” and a report of the activities of the Glasgow Anarchist Group.

John Paton, an ex-member of the Independent Labour Party (I.L.P.) who helped found the group gives an insight into Barrett’s appeal in his autobiography:

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<sup>1</sup> “George Barrett’s answers,” *The Raven: Anarchist Quarterly* 12 (Oct-Dec 1990), 333, 335.

<sup>2</sup> This biographical sketch is based on Sid Parker’s short “Biographical Note” in *The First Person* (London: Freedom Press, 1963) and John Quail short account in his excellent book *The Slow Burning Fuse: The Lost History of the British Anarchists* (London: Granada Publishing Ltd., 1978), 274–8.

<sup>3</sup> It must be noted that “communist” does not refer to the Soviet Union (which did not exist then) but rather the aim of creating a society based on the maxim “from each according to their abilities, to each according to their needs.” This would be a decentralised, federal system based on workers’ management of production rather than the centralised state-capitalism of the USSR. As can be seen from Barrett’s writings, anarchists had long predicted that Marxism would produce a new class system rather than (genuine, libertarian) communism.

“I saw an unfamiliar figure mounted on a box at one of the speaking pitches. I made one of the half-dozen people listening to him. He was engaged in a familiar denunciation of capitalism and a glance at the pamphlets spread on the street told me he was an anarchist.

“I studied him with a new interest. There had been no anarchist propaganda in Glasgow for many years, although at one time there had been an active group. The speaker was a tall, good-looking Englishman, extremely eloquent and able, whose speech betrayed his middle-class origin. The passionate conviction with which he spoke was extraordinarily impressive; the crowd about him swelled in numbers. As the speech developed my interest quickened with excitement: he progressed from the usual attack on capitalism to a scathing indictment of politicians and particularly the leaders of the Labour Party: here was, at last, being shouted at the street corner, all the criticisms which had become common in the ‘left-wing’ of the I.L.P., but which we’d keep discreetly for party discussion. My heart rejoiced. But it was more than a mere attack on personalities; it was a powerful analysis of the causes that produced them [...]

“It was an outstanding performance in its power and persuasiveness [...] He spoke for over two hours and ended completely exhausted. Much of what he said must have been over the heads of many who listened, but his deep sincerity and attractive personality held them and his audience had grown to several hundreds before the end.”<sup>4</sup>

He became a mainstay of the Glasgow Anarchist Group and by May 1911 it had over fifty members.<sup>5</sup> However, as a result of the Sidney Street Affair in 1911 and the resulting red scare against anarchists, Barrett lost his job after detectives paid a visit to where he worked. He was blacklisted and from then on earned a scant living by free-lance technical journalism.<sup>6</sup>

As well as contributing regularly to *Freedom*, he helped organise the launch of a weekly newspaper, *The Anarchist*. To drum up support for the proposed weekly, he made a tour of Britain in the winter of 1911–12, starting in Woolwich (*Freedom*, January 1912) with short accounts by Barrett of meetings in Bristol, Cardiff, Reading, and Huddersfield appeared in March 1912 *Freedom*.<sup>7</sup> The response was encouraging and *Freedom* April 1912 had an article entitled “Prepare for ‘The Anarchist’.” Edited by Barrett, *The Anarchist* appeared on May Day 1912 and lasted 34 issues, ending in early 1913. Peter Kropotkin – the world’s most famous anarchist writer – was impressed:

“Let me tell you, dear comrade, that you are bringing out a splendid paper. You are a journalist, and that is rare. I mean, of course, a ‘journalist’ in the good sense of

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<sup>4</sup> John Paton, *Never Say Die: An Autobiography* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1936), 230–1. This was published in Britain under the title *Proletarian Pilgrimage*. Paton later left Glasgow, re-joined the I.L.P. and eventually became a Labour M.P. for as he noted: “I was, by every instinct, a politician. Anarchist-communism was for me an ultimate conception: for George it was an immediate reality.” (250)

<sup>5</sup> Including one William Gallacher, later a leading shop steward during the First World War, then chairman of the Clyde Workers Committee during Red Clydeside and, after a chat with Lenin, founder of the Communist Party before eventually becoming in 1935 the elected Communist M.P. for West Fife and advocate of Stalin.

<sup>6</sup> One such article was included in *The First Person*: “Originality and Machine Design,” *Engineering Review*, 15 August 1911.

<sup>7</sup> These reports, amounting to a few sentences on each location, are the only writings by Barrett from *Freedom* not included in this book.

the word, and what I always tried to be: that is, to have your own fundamental conception of the thing to be achieved.”<sup>8</sup>

With the ending of *The Anarchist*, Barrett continued to speak and write for the movement. He contributed an important series of articles for *Freedom* entitled “A General View of Anarchism” between November 1913 and April 1914. It was issued as *The Anarchist Revolution* in May 1915 as a Freedom Pamphlet. In addition, he also worked to relaunch a weekly anarchist paper, encouraged by the resurgence of working class direct action of the 1910s (often called “the syndicalist revolt”). This was achieved in 1914, with *The Voice of Labour*. A newspaper of the same name had first been launched in 1907 but ended after seven months.<sup>9</sup> The relaunch commenced in May 1914 and “represented a significant unification of anarcho-syndicalist effort in the immediate pre-war period.” It “continued to thrive right up to the outbreak of the war” and, unlike many other syndicalist papers, it survived the start of the war but finally went under in 1916.<sup>10</sup> By the end of the war only *Freedom* in London and Guy Aldred’s *The Spur* in Glasgow remained.<sup>11</sup>

Like most of the anarchist movement both in Britain and worldwide, Barrett remained an internationalist and argued in his pamphlet *The Last War* that the class war was the only war workers should wage. *Freedom* later wrote that it was a “magnificent pamphlet” which was “well known for its clearness of thought and simplicity of language,” showed that “the workers are fighting to settle their masters quarrels, and the real war is fought to take over the mines, railways, factories and fields. This pamphlet was condemned by the Government – but not before 10,000 copies had been sold.”<sup>12</sup> He signed the “International Anarchist Manifesto on the War” (*Freedom*, March 1915) along with the likes of Errico Malatesta and Emma Goldman.

Yet Barrett never saw the end of the imperialist slaughter. For he had caught a chill at an open-air meeting in May 1913 and this eventually became acute tuberculosis, of which he died on 7 January 1917. He was a mere twenty-nine years of age.

His “Objections to Anarchism” was serialised in *Freedom* at the beginning of 1921 before being issued as a Freedom pamphlet in September of that year. As the *Freedom* noted, this classic work was “written a few months before his death” and is “a worthy monument to a brilliant propagandist and a well loved comrade” who “was one of the clearest thinkers and one of the most brilliant speakers of his day. He had every asset a speaker needs: tall, good of appearance, a ready wit and an exceptionally good flow of cultured English. Either as a speaker or a writer he went straight to the root of things, pushing all superfluous matters to one side.”<sup>13</sup> The then editor of *Freedom*, Thomas H. Keell, later recounted how he considered Barrett as “the best speaker & writer the English movement ever had in my time. Clear, logical & concise.”<sup>14</sup>

It is impossible to disagree – his writings are amongst the best of revolutionary, class struggle anarchism, whether communist-anarchist or anarcho-syndicalist (not that there is much differ-

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<sup>8</sup> Quoted by Parker, *The First Person*, x.

<sup>9</sup> Kropotkin had written his support for the 1907 incarnation, see “Letter to *The Voice of Labour*,” *Direct Struggle Against Capital: A Peter Kropotkin Anthology* (Edinburgh/Oakland/Baltimore: AK Press, 2014), 387–8.

<sup>10</sup> Bob Holton, *British Syndicalism, 1900–1914: Myths and Realities* (London: Pluto Press, 1976), 142–3, 200.

<sup>11</sup> Also, *The Workers’ Dreadnaught* should be mentioned as this came to advocate an anti-parliamentarian communism close to anarchist-communism (Mark A. S Shipway, *Antiparliamentary Communism: The Movement for Workers’ Councils in Britain, 1917–45* [Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1988]).

<sup>12</sup> *Freedom*, January 1921.

<sup>13</sup> *Freedom*, January 1921.

<sup>14</sup> Quoted by Heiner Becker, “Notes on *Freedom* and the Freedom Press 1886–1986,” *The Raven: Anarchist Quarterly* 1 (May 1987), 19.

ence between the two). *Freedom* in May 1947 stated that the “collected essays of George Barrett would make a fitting memorial to his brilliant abilities.” This selection, although incomplete, is a step towards such a memorial and a reminder of how well he argued for the cause for which he died.

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## Bibliographical Notes

Most of the writings included in this book appear here for the first time, namely the articles, reports and letters Barrett wrote for *Freedom*. However, his pamphlets have been reprinted time and time again. Most recently, “The Anarchist Revolution,” “Objections to Anarchism,” and “The Last War” were all reprinted in *The Last War* (Sheffield: Pirate Press, 1990). “Objections to Anarchism,” along with an introduction by Colin Ward and biographical note by Sid Parker, appeared in *The Raven: Anarchist Quarterly* 12 (Oct-Dec 1990). Finally, a selection of articles appeared in *The First Person* (London: Freedom Press, 1963), edited by S.E.P. (Sid Parker) and dedicated to Barrett’s wife, Edith.<sup>15</sup>

The texts are as originally published, with a few slight grammatical changes. Some of the language is, as would be expected, dated. Most obviously and most importantly, as was usual at the time, Barrett uses “Man” to describe the whole human race (something Emma Goldman also did). Another example is when Barrett uses the word “Scotch,” a dated word for Scottish and is not used today (unless offensive is intended). Footnotes have been added where appropriate to explain terms, events or people and indicated as such by “(Editor)” being at the end. Any editorial additions are enclosed by square brackets.

## Glossary of Marxist and Labour Parties

As would be expected, Barrett mentions other tendencies of the left active at the time. Rather than footnote every reference, here we provide a short summary of the various parties he mentions in passing in his writings. They are all State socialist, usually social democrat or Marxist (or “scientific socialist,” a self-description Barrett obviously likes to mock).

The S.D.F. (*Social Democratic Federation*) had its roots in the Democratic Federation, organised by Henry Mayers Hyndman (1842–1921) in 1881. This was renamed the *Social Democratic Federation* in 1884 when it adopted an explicitly Marxist programme. Its journal was named *Justice*. It changed its name to the *Social Democratic Party* (S.D.P.) in 1908.

The I.L.P. (*Independent Labour Party*) was established in 1893 with the aim of electing working class representatives to Parliament. It played a central role in the formation of the Labour Representation Committee in 1900, and when the Labour Party was formed in 1906, the I.L.P. immediately affiliated to it.

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<sup>15</sup> As well as a short “Biographical Note” by Parker and “Appreciations” by some of those who knew Barrett, this book included: “The First Person,” “Substance and Shadow,” “Originality and Machine Design,” “The Education of the Rebel,” “[Introduction to] *Objections to Anarchism*,” “From *Law and Liberty*” and “Some Last Thoughts.” Only “The Education of the Rebel” and the introduction to “Objections to Anarchism” are included here.

The S.L.P. (*Socialist Labour Party*) began as a faction of the S.D.F. when a group of Scottish members attacked the party leadership as reformist. The party split in 1903, when the *Socialist Labour Party* was formally established at a meeting in Edinburgh. As with its American namesake, it advocated the formation of new Industrial Unions along with political action.

The B.S.P. (*British Socialist Party*) was founded in 1911 when the S.D.P., the left-wing of the I.L.P. and various other Socialist groups meet at a Socialist Unity Conference. As with the S.D.F, it followed an orthodox Marxist position of political action. It split during the war, when the pro-war Hyndman left to form the unfortunately named *National Socialist Party* in 1916 while the remainder of the B.S.P. formed the basis for the *Communist Party of Great Britain* when it was established at the end of 1920.

Finally, Barrett – like many anarchists at the time – tends refer to the members of these parties as “Socialists” and contrasts these to “Anarchists.” However, as is clear from his writings, Anarchists are also opposed to capitalism and, as such, were part of the wider socialist and labour movement. Given this, Anarchists often referred to themselves as libertarian socialists in contrast to authoritarian socialists – who, Anarchists argued, would actually build state-capitalism rather than genuine socialism.

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