

Treasuring the West Coast's anarchic history

Tom Hawthorn

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VICTORIA

Camas Books is a busy place.

By day, there's a children's free school. By night, teens gather for all-ages gigs featuring ska and punk bands.

Every second Friday is Burning Fort Cinema Movie Night.

On Saturdays, a volunteer from the Devil's Club Community Apothecary is on hand to answer questions about the contents of the jars in the wooden cupboard that serves as a shared herbal dispensary.

The Victoria Anarchist Reading Circle gathers on Tuesdays. The reading homework for last night's scheduled meeting was a 16-page essay on the Black Panther Party. Last week they discussed fascism.

Then you have your meetings of the anti-Olympics "No 2010" group, not to mention assorted workshops, benefit concerts, bicycle maintenance demonstrations, and what is billed as a not-so-silent auction.

You wonder how the anarchists ever find the time to smash the state.

The not-for-profit bookstore is operated by a collective. No salaries are paid. Bookkeeping, book ordering and book reshelving is all handled by volunteers. Any revenue from book sales goes back into retaining the space.

The address provided for the store is "Lekwungen territory (colonial jurisdiction of Victoria, B.C.)" The oppressive-reactionary-bourgeois street address is 2590 Quadra St.¹

Camas Books and Infoshop takes its name from a herb popular with indigenous people, who cooked the bulb to a thick liquid like molasses, or dried and ground it into flour for bread. Camas fields disappeared to grazing cattle brought by settlers. By building neighbourhood autonomy and challenging authority, the collective states, they "envision the camas flower one day being able to blossom forth from beneath the pavement that now restrains it, flourishing on this land once again."

Among those who helped launch the bookstore a year ago was Allan Antliff, who holds the Canada Research Chair in art history at the University of Victoria. His graduate seminars includes the topic "New York Dada."

¹ This article was written back when Camas was at 2590. They are now located at 2620 Quadra Street as of 2024.

Mr. Antliff, who gives \$200 monthly to support the bookstore, has made his own contribution to the shelf of anarchist literature by writing three books. He also donated his personal collection to launch an Anarchist Archive at the university.

“As a historian,” he said, “I was acutely aware that people were not saving their history.”

While researching the modern art movement of the early 20th Century, the professor sought documents seized from Emma Goldman’s Mother Earth magazine. These had been taken by American authorities during the Great War, when the publication’s 8,000 subscribers were investigated and harassed.

Turns out the government destroyed what they had taken.

“I don’t want to see the history of anarchism in Canada pulped by the authorities, or thrown into a garbage bin because they’re moving and don’t have a place to keep it anymore.”

One of the better finds for the Victoria archive came from an editor of the Toronto publication Ecomedia, whose files and correspondence had been gathered because of a court case. The cache was being stored in poor condition in an attic before being donated.

What do donors get for handing over their materials?

“They do what they do because they want to change the world,” Mr. Antliff said. “They get the knowledge that what they’ve done — and the ideas — aren’t going to disappear.”

The archive includes flyers and zines, posters and pamphlets. A stack of newspapers leaves the impression anarchists have black ink for blood. The titles tell the story — “Clash,” “Clamour,” “Class War” are unsubtle calls for strife; “Bulldozer” and “Slingshot” match theory with weaponry; “Endless Struggle” is either a call for never-ending confrontation, or a recognition of the task at hand; “Practical Anarchy” and “Anarcho-Syndicalist Review” promise a less-than-thrilling literary experience; “Strike!” and “Storm Warning!” are exclamatory!; “Demolition Derby” expresses the revolutionary and humourous nature of much anarchist expression.

The political philosophy has deep roots on the West Coast, where a respect for nature and a connection to the indigenous peoples are defining elements. George Woodcock, the prolific writer who in 1962 produced an important overview of anarchism, settled at Saseenos, outside Sooke, before moving permanently to Vancouver after the Second World War. A friend of George Orwell, he also maintained a correspondence with the English anarchist poet and art critic Sir Herbert Read, whose papers are also part of the holdings at the McPherson Library at the University of Victoria. Less literary and more Yippie were the pie-throwing Groucho-Marxists.

Four years ago, Arsenal Pulp Press published “Only A Beginning,” an anarchist anthology edited by Mr. Antliff. Some of the livelier writing is to be found in “Open Road,” which published irregularly from 1976 to 1990. The largest print run was 20,000 copies for an issue dedicated to Bikesheviks, who figured we’d all pedal our way to utopia.

One of the Open Road founders was Bob Sarti, who contributed a short overview to the anthology in which he acknowledged the newspaper’s outsized influence even if the results were thin.

“The environment is still going to hell, racism and authority are flourishing, state-sponsored war never seems to end,” he wrote. “And we really didn’t make much of a difference on the specific stuff we targeted either: Leonard Peltier is still in prison, solitary confinement has not been abolished, our friends got convicted for the Direct Action campaign and sent to prison.”

Still, he found much to cheer in the upcoming generation.

He’d doubtless be impressed by Camas. The anarchists are getting downright organized.

The Anarchist Library (Mirror)
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