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Book Review

Roses and Revolutionists: The Story of the Clousden Hill Free Communist and Co-operative Colony 1894-1902

By Nigel Todd

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I first discovered the original 1986 version of this book when I moved to Newcastle, into a shared house which had a strong history of both co-operative endeavour and anarchist politics. This, it will become clear, was fitting. My readings on anarchism up to that point had not predicted that this sort of story should exist. This book taught me that there are some lessons — some episodes of human endeavour — that can only be discovered by research into local, human-scale history. It also taught me that our great grandparents had higher aims and more grit in pursuing a transformed future than perhaps my own generation was capable of. I went on to work on some collaborative projects of local radical history, and discussed this book with local historians — one of whom had tried to follow up some of the footnote threads but without success. I also went to visit the site of the colony to see how the buildings stood now (the most recent picture in the book is from 1979, and was chosen by the author for showing more of the original buildings before modernisation and demolition).

The revised edition is greatly improved from the original, both affordable and conveniently sized, with clear print and an instructive new preface. This identifies new contexts for the history, both with other contemporary colonies (Tolstoyans at Purleigh and an Owenite colony at Wallsend), and also with a continued lineage of local co-operation and community gardening on Tyneside. The author gratefully acknowledges help and suggestions from many — “Piecing together this tantalising story required a good deal of help” (p. 11). As a long-serving local councillor, the author stands on the Co-operative platform each election, showing a continued personal relevance to the topic. At the same time, the ambitions and the depth of idealism involved in the original colonists' milieu stands out miles ahead from our 21st century echoes.

The bare bones of the story are these: anarchist-communists met and worked with visionaries of the North East co-operative movement to take on the lease of buildings and land at Clousden Hill, on the rural fringes of Newcastle. They were to run it exactly as their anarchist-communist beliefs required, and the manifesto reproduced is in itself a document of history worthy of wide appreciation and circulation. The colonists recruited included both local unemployed, and international visionaries on the run from the police (about which I would have loved to learn more). With the help of some well-crafted publicity the industrious colonists garnered international fame, attracted hundreds of visitors, and contributed to the wider historical movements of the time as a meeting-place, a breathing-space and as a test-case for uncountable and mostly unrecorded individuals.

The most fully sketched figure is Frank Kapir: “vigorous, intellectual and likeable” (p. 17), who anglicised his name to Frank Kapper. An anarchist-communist exile from the Hapsburg Empire, on his travels he picked up fluency in 5 languages and then came locally to share his skills with workingmen, teaching French via translation from the anarchist-communist texts of Kropotkin. This was on top of his regular job as tailor, a job which he kept on into the first few months of the colony. Kapper had moved from belief in violent revolution to one of peaceful transformation, and the undertaking of a practical communal endeavour — this agricultural back-to-the-land

colony, was the way in which he and others sought to liberate the working classes and bring about social transformation.

The date-bounded element of the title imposes that sense which comes from bracketing any tale within fixed long-gone dates. As a reader, already part of you is thinking “I know it will fail. Inevitably it will”, and inescapably the final pages detail deaths and endings. I would ask you to suspend this natural sense of doom, however, and allow the courage and ambition of the lived local history to illuminate your imagination as it illuminated mine. Todd provides sufficient insights and episodes to achieve this, drawing on substantial reportage by local and national papers of the time (some of which is reproduced in facsimile). This allows us to see glimpses of the colonists in action, and even to hear their own words.

Themes which Todd draws out include the lot of women in the commune; the links to wider local and national working-class endeavours of the period; tensions between ideologically different models of working; and the range of characters brought to Tyneside by the colony’s fame. Questions to which his work provides a simple answer include: What would have happened without exiles? What would have happened without a recognition of kinship with others, or without openness to new ideas? Probably nothing. Clousden Hill was a local concern with a full embrace of the wider world. It used the unique mix of conditions present on Tyneside (cheap coal; an emerging co-operative movement rooted in a capable, conscious working class; also a comparatively sympathetic press and neighbours). The colony got off the ground through collaboration, and a willingness both by the colonists and their wider community to experiment on new ground. It included — in a practical common enterprise — people of different distinctions of belief (socialism/anarchism/cooperative enterprise) who did not use these distinctions to hinder their common experiment.

If we were to identify a famous figure behind the enterprise we would choose Peter Kropotkin, whose writings married anarchist-communism to the new possibilities that an application of science might bring to agriculture and collective endeavour. Kropotkin proposed in 1892 “applying artificial heating systems, greenhouses (or ‘glass culture’) and new fertilisers to land cultivation” (p. 19), and it was with this practical aim that Clousden Hill was formed.

Kropotkin had strong links to Tyneside, but if his advice had been followed to the letter then Clousden Hill would never have happened. He was offered the position of treasurer (which he politely but firmly turned down), but in his wider works he consistently argued against any fragmented experiments such as this. Likewise if those involved in the colony — first initiating, and then inhabiting and working with it — had focused on pursuing their differences in ideology or belief, then nothing like this could ever emerge. This inspiring story is, therefore, certainly one of ideological inspiration, but more importantly it is one of how local men and women saw through a practical undertaking — a focus on what can be done.

To a reader who makes herself fully open to the worldview and ambition of the colonists, there then appears a gulf between their high ambitions, and the more compromising, compromised nature of the contemporary parallels highlighted by Todd in the preface. Current community ventures are typically mediated by NGOs and bounded by the limited reach of available funding pots. Few would now argue a community garden might significantly change the structural relations of society, and explicit anarchist-communism is hard to locate amongst local initiatives. Perhaps this makes it even more important to read and remember that once people did pursue things in that way, and might even do so again? In any case, if today we can only look with awe at the possibilities and purity believable in our great grandparents’ time, then at least let us do so with some curious local detail.

Todd details the specific conditions on Tyneside that enabled productive interchange between the likes of Frank Kapper and such networks as the Independent Labour Party, Labour Church, and various co-operative networks. The Clousden Hill colony casts a fascinating light on these. Co-operatives were growing, with annual sales of over £2 million, while active anarchist groups were meeting regularly on Tyneside, Wearside and the surrounding pit villages. The

Independent Labour Party was sympathetic to land colonies, and other moves for self-sufficient communities had emerged out of Owenite, Chartist and other movements. The Durham and Northumberland miners, for example, adopted for their manifesto “the great ideal of living in perfect harmony in co-operative communities, each seeking the good of all and all seeking the good of each, broadly based upon the land” (p. 26).

While local kids at first shouted ignorant, anti-Jewish slogans at the unfamiliar colonists, “Over time, barriers between the villagers ... and the anarchists dissolved” (p. 75). Early support from such allies as the Sunderland co-operative society was crucial: “in the true spirit of co-operation” they agreed to buy all their vegetables and even voluntarily raised the payment for tomatoes, from 6d a pound to 7d a pound (p. 46). Imagine any supermarket chain doing that today, with UK food producers’ independence so dwindled, and remote subsidy schemes and mass cartels skewing the terrain such that earning an independent living off the land is no longer seen as a viable option for many even medium-sized producers. The technological improvements part-pioneered by the Clousden Hill colony may have transformed the countryside, but their human-centred vision has long since been filleted away. It takes just such a work of local history to remind us of how connected they once could have been.

Kropotkin had always understood that social change would happen on a mass scale or not at all. He stated in correspondence with Kapper that he “had little confidence in schemes of communistic communities started under present conditions” (p. 39), but despite this he offered warm words and supportive advice, particularly in regard to female equality within the colony. Accordingly, the colonists’ prospectus explicitly stated it was “to be regulated by a Joint Committee of all the adult male and female members”: this at a time many co-operatives disallowed female membership. Kropotkin had argued “for reducing household work to the lowest minimum” and castigated “those who want to emancipate mankind” for a failure of vision, seeing “emancipation of the house slave, the women” to be “beneath their superior masculine dignity” (p. 41). At Clousden Hill, things were to be different. The application of science could bring emancipation from all forms of toil. Tapping into abundant cheap local coal, and providing heated greenhouses could transform agriculture. The colonists’ vision implied that household chores too, might be transformed by an application of improved science.

Of course the lived reality of the colonists’ experience was no utopian dream. Supreme energies were put in, and we hear Kapper lamenting in the early days how “The oats we mowed by hand, and found it very stiff work” (p. 45). By collective effort they built greenhouses for cucumbers, tomatoes and flowers to sell. Visits from like-minded thinkers and exiles began early on. In 1896, Kropotkin himself visited and declared himself “much gratified with the manner in which the farm is being worked” (p. 49).

A unique interest of this book lies in its snapshots of forgotten luminaries and curious thinkers. I wish I could have learnt more about the interactions of lazy Tolstoyan individualists with ILP propagandists, and also historically notable figures such as Tom Mann, Jim Connell (author of the Red Flag) and Harry Snell (later a Junior minister in government and advocate for the London Gardens Society).

This history is not just of a commercial venture: while surplus was to be sold at a reasonable rate, internally the colony was run on “strictly anarchist-communist lines”. This did not mean either licentiousness nor that all must believe alike (as Kapper put it, “in all personal affairs ... the members have full liberty” (p. 79). Rather, this was applied practically, meaning that all members would be willing to operate, to work together, on the basis of anarchist-communism. It is when colonists began to differ on how to work together that the tensions grew. The open-door policy for new colonists brought in both ‘ultra-individualists’ and those with a more conventional, less full-going view of cooperative endeavour.

It is ironic that some ex-colonists’ efforts to set up a similar, but more narrowly conceived “co-partnership” model of a co-operative farm failed to take root, because the wider co-operative movement failed to move from vague statements of goodwill to practical support. A process of

conservatism was taking place amongst co-operatives, with more “conventional management structures” and a growing preference for expanding existing institutions with branch shops, instead of setting up anew: “the days of pioneering new, independent co-operatives were largely over” (p. 70). From this process of institutionalisation, Clousden Hill seemed at first immune, and it remained in favour with the same co-operative movement that was proving too timid to launch rival endeavours.

Problems that beset the farm included everything from a lack of money for investment (p. 65); serious storm damage; and livestock issues: “The fowls would not lay, bees refused to swarm, rabbits ran away and the ducks died” (p. 81). Such disasters might be encountered by any of us attempting a new agricultural enterprise: it is no accident that so few of us manage to live off the land. Another problem, predicted by Kropotkin, was the colony’s fame leading to “too much outside interest”: “Would-be Communists came tumbling in from all quarters of Europe” (p. 82), and both new colonists and the crowds visiting in summer holiday mode could cause a burden on the more committed colonists.

Although the wage system was avoided, much kept in common and only a frugal allowance claimed by the members, specialisation did develop and this included a gendered division of labour. This was made worse by the unequal ratios — at one time “as few as two women to fifteen men and four children” (p. 76) — leading to a situation where a few women would share the “cooking, cleaning, washing, mending, and knitting for all members of the colony” (p. 77). Those women quoted by journalists nonetheless saw advantages over their previous lives and worked “in perfect harmony” together, but they clearly had a higher domestic burden than the initial ideals predicted (p. 78).

When Frank Kapper left (he resigned after his publicity for the colony was deemed inaccurate by other members, and indeed too attractive), the colony went into “a period of rapid change, and crisis” (p. 85). One cannot but lament the departure of his charismatic, energetic character. Membership was reduced just as applications for membership soared, leading to a situation where the fame of the colony was most broadcast at the exact moment its remaining members were withdrawing. This means that disputes between the members and contradictory accounts were broadcast in papers both sympathetic and hostile.

The spirit of anarchist-communism seems to have abandoned the colony before its agricultural and economic model could truly be said to have been tested. Even in its end-days, it proved a source of inspiration to the co-operative movement, hosting group visits and demonstrating the advantages of the original idea of coal-heated glasshouse agriculture. Some colonists moved out to attempt new versions of the ideal, including the “Whaggs Commune” (p. 98) over the river, while the original site became a co-operative nursery. This was crippled, unfortunately, by the debts of the former entity, which it inherited. At the same time, rival market gardeners and nurserymen were entering the market pioneered by the colony, and bankruptcy and dispersion mark the final moments in this history. The beauty and insights we can gain from the Clousden Hill Free Communist and Co-operative Colony, however, come from its lived moments, and this handy-sized, well-produced little book will add something of these to your life.

The Reviewer

Michael Duckett works supporting voluntary projects on Tyneside, and volunteers supporting DIY Culture and community action more widely.