Paul Avrich 1931-2006: a historian who listened to anarchist voices

The death of Paul Avrich has taken from anarchism its finest historian.

More than that the study of history has also lost one of its finest proponents because Avrich was also a great historian. If his work brought to life those who shared "the beautiful ideal" it was because he used his considerable talents to treat his subjects with respect, thus avoiding the glib condescension that characterized much of what constituted "anarchist history" in the academy. Avrich's work reflected his skills as a linguist, the absolute importance he placed on primary sources and his perseverance in finding them, an ability to sustain long, and sometimes fruitless periods of research and a writing style that enabled him to encapsulate his findings in a readable and engaging manner. Central to all of this was a consistent and rigorous insistence on accuracy. He went further, looked deeper and reflected more pertinently than others. He allowed anarchist voices, missing from history, to speak for themselves, with a minimal of authorial judgement or intervention, and much of what we know about the history of anarchism in America is due to the work of this one man.

His work on anarchism in Russia formed the first half of Avrich's published career. His first book, "The Russian Anarchists" (1967) was a model of what we would come to expect. Succinct, readable and yet packed with information reflecting Avrich's use of primary sources, it brought to English speaking minds a lost history. It also reflected, as much of his work would do, one of the primary tensions in anarchism, between those who search for organizational structure to support their anarchist ideas and those who are far more wary of any organizational apparatus. He treated the relationship of anarchism and violence with scrupulous fairness and rigor, an approach that ran throughout all of his writing, and reflected confidently the nuances and complexities of anarchism in Russia. He clearly stressed the constructive qualities of anarchism in 1917 and onwards, developing his earlier dissertation on " The Russian Revolution and the Factory Committees". His work "Kronstadt 1921" (1970) destroyed the Bolshevik myth of Kronstadt being a counter-revolutionary center whose vibrant revolutionary movement had long been dissipated. On the contrary, to Avrich, it was in effect a last ditch stand against the centralizing, counter revolutionary excesses of Bolshevism. Again scrupulously documented, the work brought what had long been known in anarchist circles to a much wider audience.

His "Russian Rebels 1600-1800" (1972) continued his interest in the revolutionary heritage in Russia and, again, was unflinching in its examination of its subjects. His groundbreaking "Anarchists in the Russian Revolution" (1973) completed what we may call the first phase of his work. A collection of primary documents interspersed with appropriate editorial commentary it allowed the reader to see and read, often for the first time, the words of the Russian anarchists themselves. From the swirling and tremulous words of the Anarcho-Futurists to the Petropavlovsk Resolution of Kronstadt we see the reach and range of Russian anarchism.

In the preface to his "An American Anarchist: The Life of Voltairine De Cleyre" (1978) a work in memory of Max Nettlau, himself a great historian of anarchism, Avrich writes of abandoning his project of producing a comprehensive history of American anarchism writing that "a fuller examination of the materials at my disposal, together with the discovery of new sources, aroused a growing sense of the complexity of the movement, of the richness and diversity of its history." The rest of his life would be spent exploring that complexity, richness and diversity. He also found his methodology. He would explore the lives of those who played a role in the movement because "From most existing accounts …one gets little understanding of the anarchists as human beings, still less of what impelled them to embark on their unpopular and seemingly futile course. Anarchism, as a result, has seemed a movement apart, unreal and quixotic, divorced from American history and irrelevant to American life." His work on De Cleyre was a brilliant introduction to this complex and anguished woman. We quickly become aware of the fierce quicksilver mind she possesses and realize, through Avrich's deftness, that we are in the presence of some kind of greatness. Written nearly thirty years ago it remains unsurpassed as a narrative of her life and an appreciation of the multi- faceted nature of her ideas. Through the interactions that constitute her life a history of anarchism also begins to emerge.

His two greatest works now lay ahead of him. "The Modern School", dedicated to anarchist librarian Agnes Inglis, (1980) is a jewel of a book. It describes a moment in American anarchist history where culture and militancy meet. Nearly every line drips with original research; the narrative is clear and precise, linking complex and apparently contradictory themes and helping the reader decipher them. If the work on De Cleyre has not convinced us, his work here makes it crystal clear that American anarchism was much more than Benjamin Tucker, Emma Goldman, and Alexander Berkman. "The Modern School" rightfully re-establishes many lives previously lost to the historian as critical players in the attempt to create anarchy in America. Avrich is re-defining our knowledge, our expectations and our appreciations. It is a book to read and re-read and like all great works each re-reading teaches

us something new. So too with his next major work "The Haymarket Tragedy" (1984), dedicated to Joseph Labadie, which continued the standard he had set himself. Using original sources he creates an unforgettable picture of anarchist practice and culture. The heroism and tragedy of the whole affair are presented to us in a highly readable narrative. People are presented to us as fully rounded with their flaws as equally obvious as their strengths. A seminal event in American radical history is presented to us clearly yet passionately. It is the book on Haymarket, the book on late nineteenth century class struggle anarchism and culture and a volume to treasure.

"Anarchist Portraits" (1988) dedicated to Arne Thorne (a profound influence on Avrich) was a collection of essays on a wide range of subjects. All reflect Avrich's customary elegance. He is at ease writing about the Australian anarchist "Chummy" Fleming as he is discussing Kropotkin's Ethical Anarchism. His essay on Jewish anarchism in the United States is essential reading while his sketch of Alexander Berkman's life remains a most valuable template. His essay on "Sacco and Vanzetti: The Italian Anarchist background" was the forerunner of his "Sacco and Vanzetti: The Anarchist Background" (1991). Here again he looks at a critical event in the history of the left in America and through his biographical style brings individuals and their ideas to life. The remarkable human qualities of many of the anarchists are clearly drawn as well as their inconsistencies and flaws. The violence that runs through this period of history is portrayed straightforwardly without any attempt to judge or moralise. As a result Sacco and Vanzetti, and all the others who were in their affinity groups, are presented in their richness and complexity. A richness and complexity no one else had been able to reflect. A by-product of his biographical approach is that we are guided through the history of anti-organizational and insurrectionary Italian class struggle anarchism of the period, in a manner that brings life and meaning to its theory and actions.

Finally "Anarchist Voices: An Oral History of Anarchism In America" (1996). Many of Avrich's interviews with anarchist activists from the early twentieth century onwards are recorded here. It is essential reading. Of course memories will play tricks and Avrich's footnotes gently corrects errors. Yet this volume reminds us that anarchism is not just what we read in anarchist papers or in the pamphlets and books regularly circulated. Anarchism is also those, who, by their actions, make up the movement. They sat and listened to Goldman speak. They went to the Modern School. They helped sell papers, financed comrades on the run, lived in the colonies, became jaundiced or never gave up. They put the stamps on the papers when they were mailed out. They gave life to words. How refreshing to hear these voices at last and how exciting to see our understanding of anarchism so broadened and enriched.

Much remains to be done to complete the work started by Paul Avrich (It is to be hoped that his long worked on life of Alexander Berkman will see the light of day) and we should finish by making some final comments on his legacy. Firstly he implicity realized that we were still at the discovery stage. There is still much to learn and tease out about the history of anarchism. Much spade work and slog still need to be done to discover anarchist history. We can, though, 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. Instead he preferred to let the facts and events guide him to any conclusions he might make. He did not judge and he did not try to explain actions that took place a hundred years ago with the reasonings of today. For him the discovery and telling of the story was the most important thing and how well we and his subjects benefitted from that approach.

In person he was lovely and enormously helpful to all who came to him with questions. Students and activists and fellow scholars all benefitted from his knowledge. He must have known he was the gold standard ("what does Avrich say?") yet there was no arrogance, just a desire to share and help. He was spare with his criticism preferring to remain silent than chastise. If he offered praise and encouragement it meant the world to the recipient. One could ask for no finer praise from any source. When he began his studies Avrich was chastised by his tutor for studying those who had "lost." It is an interesting thought that his honest and thorough approach grounded in primary sources may well have given anarchists, should they choose to read him, some of the tools to succeed.

KSL Collective