

## Reviews 55

An Anarchist's Story: The Life of Ethel MacDonald by Chris Dolan reviewed by Declan McCormick

An Anarchist's Story: The Life of Ethel MacDonald Chris Dolan, Birlinn 2009, 224 pages, £9.99, ISBN-13: 978-1841586854 When the BBC Film An Anarchist's Story: The Life of Ethel Macdonald was released in 2006 it came as a bolt from the blue, bringing to light two events, both greatly hidden from history. The first was the experience of the Spanish Revolution of 1936, the second the involvement of a hitherto obscure political activist in that revolution. In a reversal of the usual pattern, journalist Chris Dolan's book has now appeared based upon the research he and others undertook for the screenplay. Like the film, the book aims to revisit the Spanish Civil War from a different, dissident angle, that of the anarchists and others who hoped that the events in Spain were not merely the latest episode in the struggle for democracy against fascism but the opening shots in a world revolution. This bigger story is told through the biography of Ethel Macdonald, the Motherwell born anarchist who, briefly, achieved worldwide recognition as the English language voice of the Spanish Revolution. At the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War Ethel Macdonald was a member of the United Socialist Movement (USM) in Glasgow, which like most organisations featuring 'united' in the title, was the product of a schism. The USM had emerged in the early 1930s following the defection of Guy Alfred Aldred from the Anti-Parliamentary Communist Federation (APCF). Aldred, one of inter-war Glasgow socialism's most colourful and controversial figures had briefly joined the Townhead branch of the Independent Labour Party (ILP) before establishing the USM, bringing with him the entire Townhead ILP. A former ILP youth organiser, Dolan claims "[Ethel] called herself a Marxist throughout her life" p.27 and this may indeed be true, though given the political milieu in which she worked it is more likely that she self-described as anarcho-marxian. Whilst the famous International Brigades were mobilised by the Communist Parties of each country and benefited from their size and resources, the non-International Brigade activists who made their way to Spain found the trip even more difficult. As Dolan puts it "The USM barely had the price of a single ticket to Carlisle" but when, following an invitation from the CNT, Spain's anarcho-syndicalist union, Ethel and fellow USM militant Jenny Patrick volunteered to represent the Scottish anarchist movement they didn't let the little detail of being broke stop them. Neither did the fact that neither could speak a word of Spanish! Dolan manages to capture the heady atmosphere of revolutionary Barcelona which greeted Ethel in October 1936, a city whose industrial working class had deep-rooted anarchist traditions and which was seen as the urban stronghold of the two million member CNT and the libertarian movement. It was from Barcelona that Ethel sent her reports on the Spanish political situation to not only the revolutionary press but the Bellshill Speaker and the Evening Times. And it was from a Barcelona studio that she spoke to the world via short wave Barcelona Radio, station of the CNT. Dolan refers to Ethel's international audience, which stretched to the United States, and offers extracts from her speeches. Her frustration with the lack of action on the part of the international working class in solidarity with their Spanish brothers and sisters comes across strongly. The high profile which her broadcasts attracted brought Ethel not only to the attention of the listening world but political enemies in Spain itself. The May events in 1937 brought the tension between those who wanted to defend and extend workers power and those who wanted to call a halt to such developments in favour of prosecuting the war against the Nationalists. When the anarchist controlled Telephone Exchange in Barcelona was occupied by Republican government forces, a civil war within the civil war erupted. Although this ended in a military stalemate it signalled an era of repression for the anti-Stalinist Partido Obrero Unificado Marxista (POUM) and, rapidly, the anarchists. Dolan's chapters 'The May Days' and 'The Scots Scarlet Pimpernel' covers this period in some depth, a period in which Ethel would be imprisoned and instead of being a commentator on revolution she would be "...actively engaged in its defence." P153. For the reader not particularly versed in left history or the finer points of political theory An Anarchist's Story serves not only as an excellent introduction to the Spanish Civil War and Revolution but also exhibits a remarkably astute understanding of anarchism. Certainly someone new to anarchist thought will, in part thanks to the quotes from Noam Chomsky and Mike Gonzalez, come away with the realisation that the mainstream of anarchist thought and action has been based upon class analysis and class struggle organisation rather than abstract notions of individuality or acts of random violence. That said, some of Dolan's assertions do need challenging. Describing Ethel's politics as "somewhere between anarchism and Trotskyism" p.89 (a somewhat uncomfortable place to be!) is plain wrong. More accurate would be somewhere between anarchism and the Marxist council communist tradition of Anton Pannekoek and Herman Gorter. Likewise, whilst lazily describing the POUM as Trotskyist has become almost universal, Dolan's assertion that the USM were "not classical Trotskyists" p.51 is even less accurate. Also, using a capital 'C' when referring to Communist Party politics would have helped to put Ethel's 'anti-communism' (i.e. anti-Stalinism) in the right perspective. That and a few other minor historical errors are, however, as nothing when compared to the overall quality of the writing which keeps the reader engaged as Dolan's obvious enthusiasm for this previously unjustly ignored anarchist's story comes across in every page. Anyone interested in Scottish socialist history, the Spanish Revolution, Glasgow politics in the inter-war years and particularly the interface between individuals and world-historical events will gain from this fascinating book. Declan McCormick