
The Working Class Movement Library

Michael Herbert
Chair WCML Trust
Working Class Movement Library,
51 The Crescent, Salford, M5 4WX
Tel: 0161 736 3601
E-mail: enquiries@wcml.org.uk
www.wcml.org.uk

The Working Class Movement Library is a national collection of the history of labour movement in Britain, founded in the mid-1950s by Ruth and Edmund Frow, whose personal and political partnership lasted for over 40 years and led to the creation of this unique and wonderful archive.

HOW THE LIBRARY BEGAN

Eddie Frow was born in Lincolnshire in 1906, the son of tenant farmer. After leaving school he became a toolmaker in the engineering industry. In 1924 he joined the Communist Party of Great Britain and in subsequent years lost many jobs because of his political and trade union activity. During the Depression he was active in the unemployed workers' movement in Salford and served four months in Strangeways prison after being badly beaten up by police after leading a march to Salford Town Hall in October 1931, an event that Walter Greenwood included in his novel *Love on the dole* and which also featured in the film (somewhat differently from the reality) He found work again on his release, became a leading member of the engineering union and was eventually elected as the full-time Secretary for the Manchester District, a position he held for just under ten years, retiring in 1971.

Ruth Frow was born in 1922 and served in the RAF during the war, going into teaching afterwards. She joined the Communist Party of Great Britain in 1945 whilst canvassing amongst Kent miners during the general election. In the 1950s and 1960s she was active in the peace movement as well as the National Union of Teachers. Ruth finished her teaching career in 1980 as deputy head of a large comprehensive school in Manchester.

Ruth and Eddie first met at a Communist Party school in 1953 and soon merged their lives - and their respective book collections. They began collecting material on the history of the trade union, radical and labour movement, travelling the country in their holidays in a 1937 Morris van and later a caravan, which on each trip they filled with books and pamphlets barely leaving room for themselves to get in.

The result of these journeys was that their house in Old Trafford became a treasure trove, with bookshelves in every room as well as banners, emblems, prints and much else all meticulously catalogued by Ruth and Eddie, although they could often locate a volume without bothering to look it up, so well acquainted were they. They also began writing books, pamphlets, and articles and were in great demand as lecturers, as well as being active in the Society for the Study of Labour History. News of their library spread and many researchers made their way to Old Trafford, their studies fuelled by regular cups of coffee and Ruth's home-made buns.



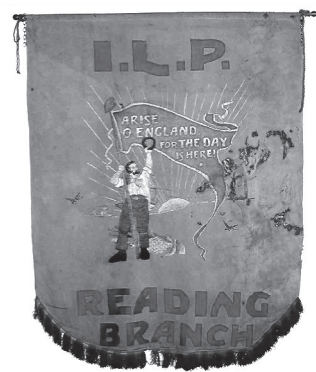
Eddie died in May 1997, just short of his 91st birthday, and he is still much loved and greatly missed. His obituary appeared in the *Morning Star*, *The Guardian*, *The Times*, *The Independent* and even (this would have amused him) the *Daily Telegraph*.

THE COLLECTION

The library collection begins in the 1790s, a fascinating period when, in the wake of the American and French revolutions, ideas of democracy and liberty reverberated across Europe. The library has a whole room devoted to Tom Paine, whose book *The rights of man* is one of the founding documents of the British radical tradition.

The rest of the collection covers the two hundred years since and includes collections on trade unions, chartism, the suffrage movement of the early 1900s and the 'second wave' of feminism in the 1970s, socialist organisations of every hue, the co-operative movement, Ireland and the Irish in Britain, anti-fascism, peace movements (such as the No Conscription Fellowship and CND) as well international issues (such as the Spanish civil war and Vietnam war).

As well as tens of thousands of books and pamphlets - some of them unique to the library - the collection also includes banners, posters, pottery, leaflets, newspapers, journals, prints, photographs, videos, LPs and CDs, furniture, union emblems and many other items which document and illuminate the story of the struggle of working people over many decades for social, economic and political justice.



THE LIBRARY MOVES TO SALFORD

By 1987 the house was full to overflowing. Fortunately at this point Salford City Council offered to provide a new home for the library, together with full-time library staff, and later that year the entire collection moved to Jubilee House (a former nurses home opened in 1901) which is situated on the Crescent opposite Salford University. In the seventeen years since the collection has continued to grow and rarely a week goes by without some new material being donated. Often a donor will arrive unannounced with a bag full of wonderful archive material that may have been in a family for several generations. The ceramics trade union CATU has recently agreed to house some of its important archive at the library.

Whilst there are other labour movement historical collections in Britain, the library is unique both for the broad range of the collection and the scarce nature of some of the holdings, some of which cannot even be found in the British Library. The library is particularly strong in ephemeral



material, such as tens of thousands of radical pamphlets from the 1790s onwards. Jonathan Miller was filmed in the library for instance for his recent BBC 4 series *A brief history of disbelief*, examining rare secularist pamphlets by Thomas Paine, Richard Carlile, George Jacob Holyoake and Charles Bradlaugh.

FRIENDS, VOLUNTEERS AND TRUSTEES

The library has an expanding friends organisation comprising individuals and trade unions who give financial help to support the library's activities. We have been very fortunate in attracting a growing band of volunteers who give up some of their own time to carry out work in the library. There are many tasks still to be done in the collection, which far exceed the time available to the two full-time members of staff. The volunteers are carrying out vital work sorting, listing and cataloguing items and writing material for the website (www.wcml.org.uk), which is a key source of reference information on the collection and includes an online book catalogue.

The library has been a trust since the early 1970s. The trustees comprise both academics and those from a trade union or educational background. The management committee meets regularly to plan and implement the strategic development of the library as a resource. We have started producing a quarterly newsletter *Shelf Life*, which is sent to friends and others, and secured funding to produce a CD-ROM aimed at schools entitled *Children of the industrial revolution* (a free copy was sent to every school in Salford). We also hold regular events such a drama production by Mikron Theatre on the history of Clarion Cycling Club and Open Days for the public.

The library welcomes visitors and researchers. Please phone first to book an appointment as staff time is limited. We also welcome donations of printed material and archive collections.