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Nigel Todd (1948-2021) — Passionate to the End

Jan Myers

Passionate to the end is how Greening Wingrove & Arthur's Hill environmental residents' association in Newcastle upon Tyne's West End described Nigel Todd on hearing about his premature death in 2021. Nigel had worked in the North East for over forty years as a local councillor, activist, and campaigner. The tributes from individuals and organisations who knew Nigel and with whom he had worked, underscored his selfless dedication, compassion, commitment, and community leadership. He will be remembered, among other things, as a great friend of the labour and co-operative movements. In accepting a posthumous lifetime achievement award on behalf of Nigel in 2021 (organised by Co-operatives UK), Dr Cilla Ross — then interim director of the Co-operative College, Manchester — described him as “visionary and full of hope”. At a meeting of the Socialist Education Association North Branch (of which Nigel had been founder and chair), Anya Cook (2021) remarked that “Nigel didn't just believe in co-operation and co-operatives — he banked with them, shopped at them, surfed the internet on them, and lived in one”.

His sense of social justice and practical wisdom arose too from the opportunity to study at Ruskin College. In an article written for *North East History* (2016a), he reflected on this period as life changing. It was an opportunity, supported by the Workers' Education Association (WEA) for whom he then worked, that also fuelled his advocacy for lifelong learning and adult education.

In both his written work and in presentations, Nigel had a knack for bringing history to life, particularly the richness of radical socialism and co-operativism in Newcastle and the North-East. His ability and craft as a local historian have also left a legacy of publications, and this review and appreciation highlights a small selection of his work.

His article on the Wallsend Owenites (Todd, 2013) returns, in part, to the exploits and influence of Joseph Cowen. He had previously published (1991) “a cracking biography” of Cowen (*Evening Chronicle*, 2004). Cowen — an associate of both Giuseppe Mazzini and Giuseppe Garibaldi — was central to what Todd refers to as “Tyneside's distinctive ‘militant democracy’ in the early 1870s” (2013, p. 31), of which a co-operative economy was a key part. But there are other gems of local history in this 2013 article: glimpses into the lives of others such as Robert Douglass — manager and secretary of the Wallsend (Industrial Co-operative) Society — keen gardener and lover of “soft dogs” (p. 31); and the “Tyneside detective folk-hero” (p. 26) and former Chartist and friend of Cowan, John Elliott. Elliott had a reputation both as an amateur thief catcher and as an agitator. He met resistance not only when he applied to join the police force, but also on becoming chief constable for Gateshead in 1863, when he set about reforming and modernising the force. Todd further explored Elliott's life and career in an article in 1992. Noting that provincial police forces were a response by the government of the day to Chartism, Todd details the tensions faced by Elliott in having to distance himself from his former activities while also putting into practice Owen's doctrine on education for social change (Owen, 1813). Todd credits Elliott with the introduction of “an early form of social enquiry report” (1992, p. 26) which influenced the prosecution and sentencing of individuals by taking account of the context and circumstances (poverty, illiteracy) that may have contributed to their actions. Additionally, there are examples of the contradictory positions Elliott found himself in, particularly regarding unions' relations and strike action. Todd recounts the help and support given by Elliott to women across the Durham coalfield who, in 1872, called for a food strike and boycott of butchers due to the rising prices of meat (see also Todd, 1996b). Elliott arranged for the women to have access to Gateshead town hall for an open meeting to agree a plan for the boycott (an early attempt having been “prevented from proceeding by numbers of hostile men and boys ...” p. 44).

One of Todd's best-known publications on the North East — and his first book — is *Roses and revolutionaries*. First published in 1986 and a revised edition with new material published in 2015, it tells the story of Clousden Hill Free Communist and Co-operative Colony, set up in 1895 and famously visited by Kropotkin (see Kropotkin, 1895). The account traces the founding of the anarcho-communist inspired community, its growth and development, and final demise in 1898. At its height, the 'back-to-the-land' project sustained livestock, four acres of market garden produce, orchards, roses, and grain fields. The story of internal tensions and eventual disappearance still has lessons for contemporary intentional communities and co-operatives.

One of my personal favourites is a short pen portrait of Ethel Williams (1996a), founder of the first general medical practice in Newcastle upon Tyne and co-founder, in 1917, of the Northern Women's Hospital. Todd also tells us that as well as playing key roles in the suffrage movement and the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, Williams was the first woman to drive (and to repair) a motorcar in the North East. Williams worked alongside Ethel Bentham in campaigning for medical and social reform. Bentham became the first female Labour candidate and entered the House of Commons in 1929 as member of parliament for Islington East. Williams died in 1948, "just after the national Health Service was born" (p. 21).

It would be remiss not to mention several contributions linked to rights to learning and adult education. Todd's pamphlets and articles covered co-operators as pioneers of education (1980); organised and negotiated learning (1990); the history and contribution of the WEA (2010a; 2010b; 2011; 2016b; 2019); and educational and social campaigning (2018). An article in 2019, with co-author Alan Tuckett, reflected on the demise of adult education opportunities while emphasising the significant role of adult education and lifelong learning in the wider sphere of public education. Providing, in part, a manifesto for a national education service, this article outlines a compelling call for equality of opportunity and inclusion, not in the technocratic interpretation of widening participation but in "creating a learning society for old and young alike" (p. 268).

Nigel Todd's writing has breadth as well as depth and highlights his knowledge, passions, and activism. His works are professionally researched and sourced — and he tells a good story. I like too the humour and personal snippets. In 2020, reflecting on the 1983 general election and the ways in which they influence our lives, Todd starts with recounting a visit to Newcastle made by Dennis Healey. In doing so, he draws not on policy soundbites, but on the memories of Jason English who, at that time, was in the city centre having absconded from a local approved school (p. 30). In 2015, when Healey died, Jason made an online post recounting a day he says he would never forget when he and two other boys met and shared a punnet of strawberries with the former chancellor. Todd then shares a little of his own experience as a labour candidate at the time (having beaten Mo Mowlam) in the former Newcastle North constituency (abolished for the 1983 general election, with many wards moving to Newcastle Central, which the Conservatives then held). He recalls he was not a particularly popular choice, seen as part of the "Bennite" left and "a Marxist intellectual type", which he says he "took as an accolade for a bloke from the Co-op" (p. 31). He was, in the words of a celebration of his life, work, and passions organised by the Labour and Society Research Group (<https://blogs.ncl.ac.uk/labourandsociety/past-events-2/>), an "active utopian".

Reviewer

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