

# Anarchist youth

## Chapter 4: Committee of 100

---

My stone-throwing incident had a long-term effect on the way I saw politics in general and demonstrations in particular. There were a lot of demos in those days. In my first term there was a huge CND march from the Brize Norton RAF base which, as it swept into the city of Oxford, was about 1,000 strong – say, one in eight of the university's undergraduates. There was an impressive Oxford contingent on the Aldermaston marches of 1961-3, including various people who would probably be embarrassed to be reminded that they were there. And then there was the Committee of 100 which had been launched in October 1960 with Bertrand Russell as its figurehead. After a big sitdown in Trafalgar Square in September 1961 it spawned regional committees including an Oxford one which I joined.

The secretary of the Oxford Committee was Will Warren, a Quaker veteran of the Direct Action Committee Against Nuclear War (DAC), which had pioneered militant anti-nuclear activity and organised the first Aldermaston march in 1958; Laurens Otter, then working at Oxfam, was another activist with a long list of battle honours. The members and supporters of the committee included trade unionist students from Ruskin College, as well as ordinary undergraduates. Although AJP Taylor was a leading light in CND, few Oxford dons supported the committee; Taylor certainly didn't. An exception was the philosopher Michael Hinton who once wrote me a friendly note after we were both arrested at a London demo and held overnight. After his death I found out from an obituary that he had met his wife, the novelist Jennifer Dawson, on the 1963 Aldermaston march.

Two phrases characterised the Committee of 100 – civil disobedience and non-violent direct action. The sitdown – in the road blocking access to a nuclear base or outside a symbolic building like the Ministry of Defence – illustrated the first; actually invading a nuclear base by climbing over the perimeter fence illustrated the second. In both cases the commitment to act non-violently – never physically resisting arrest, for example – was an essential part of the action. These ideas led me to anarchism, as I shall explain, but I adopted them in the first place because they seemed urgently necessary in the struggle against nuclear weapons.

To put this into perspective it's worth reciting a few of the facts of the time. In May 1960 an American spy plane was shot down deep into Russian territory and the Soviets stormed out of a summit meeting in Paris. In August 1961 the East German regime built the Berlin wall, essentially to stop their people deserting "socialism" for the capitalist west. In October 1962 the world came as close as it's ever been to nuclear war during the Cuban missile crisis. There was real panic in the air then: one of the best-known anti-nuclear activists, Pat Arrowsmith, ran away to Ireland with her companion, Wendy Butlin, while in the Oxford Union bar Roderick Floud, later a distinguished academic and university administrator, kept nervously looking at the clock during our game of bar billiards as the crucial deadline approached.

A limited test-ban treaty signed in August 1963 reduced tension and encouraged cock-eyed optimists to stop worrying. However, President Kennedy was assassinated later that year which increased tension again. A test screening of Stanley Kubrick's brilliant satire *Dr Strangelove or: How I*

*learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* had to be postponed because it had been scheduled for 22 November 1963, the day Kennedy was shot. More prosaically, Jonathan Aitken as Oxford Union treasurer in charge of entertainment, decided to mark the occasion by cancelling my debut as a stand-up comedian in a planned double act with Heathcote Williams. Heathcote went on to wow the world with his evocative poetry and various happenings while I was relieved to have been prevented from making a fool of myself.

I had arrived at Oxford in 1960 just after the Labour Party's historic decision to ban the bomb (reversed a year later after Hugh Gaitskell's campaign to "fight, fight and fight again" against it) and I immediately joined both the university Labour club and the party. I also joined the humanist group which had been founded two years earlier and became in my time probably the biggest and most influential of Oxford's political/religious/current affairs clubs, except for the Oxford Union itself. The site [ouhg.org.uk](http://ouhg.org.uk) gives access to an archive including a miscellany of ephemera and some fascinating detail, for example a reminder that the union passed the motion "This house does not believe in God" by 295 votes to 259 in the 1962 Trinity (summer) term.

The Oxford Labour club was divided between the pro-CND majority, most of whom supported the new left and its journal (still going strong), the *New Left Review*, and the Gaitskellite minority; in the two years 1960-2 the left's domination was never seriously challenged: if you were the approved left-wing candidate for a particular post, you were virtually certain to be elected. In my second year two of us were potential left-wing candidates for the post of Labour club chairman, in those unwoke days the term in use: Lydia Howard and me. Lydia, the daughter of the writer and broadcaster Marghanita Laski, was the girlfriend of "Ralph"\* Samuel – and boasted many more lefty brownie points than I did with my Catholic public-school and Conservative background – so there was no question of me going first: Lydia was duly elected in the spring and I followed in the summer, defeating the Gaitskellite Bob Skidelsky and also Connaire Kensit, who was a kind of maverick Maoist.

\*"Ralph" was what the socialist historian Raphael Samuel was then known as.

Lydia was only the third woman to chair the Oxford Labour club (the first was Betty Morrison in 1934; then came Shirley Williams in 1950) and around this time women were finally admitted to the Oxford Union – in two bites. What happened was this. The motion to admit women had already been passed several times in the debating chamber but on each occasion opponents had demanded a poll of life members to overturn the decision, enabling any geriatric don or other backwoodsman capable of forward movement to totter down to the union office to vote against reform.

In the autumn of 1961 two militant women undergraduates from St Anne's dressed up as men and managed to attend a union debate, watched by a third from the public gallery. The three were Rose Dugdale, an ex-debutante\* and heiress who became a socialist activist and IRA bomber, Jenny Grove and Sarah Cockburn (daughter of Jean "Sally Bowles" Ross and Claud Cockburn) who became a barrister and wrote crime fiction as Sarah Caudwell. The event was well organised and publicised but it didn't solve the problem.

\*one of the very last debs: presented at court in 1958 she had her dance in 1959 and went to Oxford that autumn. For upper-class young people the end of the "season" mirrored the end of national service: the world was changing.

According to the union's constitution, having recently lost a proposal to change the rules, we couldn't raise the matter again for a year. So early in 1962 somebody on the union standing committee – it might have been the president of the time, Hugh Stephenson, or possibly Harold Lind, an astute campaigner on the issue; it could even have been me – had the bright idea of proposing a different, more limited, reform: debating membership for women instead of full membership. I got the gig, explaining in my speech that of course we were in favour of full membership, which was finally passed a year later, but in this case much more than half a loaf was certainly better than none. The motion, opposed by Christ Church's own Christopher Lennox-Boyd (who else?), was passed by a huge majority\* – I don't think there was a poll, or if there was, it failed – and finally women could debate in the union on equal terms with men, whereas previously they could only speak as invited guests.

\*This is no exaggeration: the vote, as recorded by the press (including Dennis Potter, then a reporter on the *Daily Herald*), was 404 to 122.

The first woman undergraduate to speak in a debate as of right was Lydia Howard and a year later the first to speak as a full member was Karen McLeod, who had also been elected the first woman editor of *Isis*. She spoke in favour of a motion highly critical of the British press, citing the bad behaviour of four tabloid hacks who'd descended on Oxford in pursuit of an unmarried pregnant student – she'd written to *Isis* criticising marriage from the humanist point of view. Randolph Churchill (son of Sir Winston) also spoke for the motion; Donald Maclachlan, editor of the *Sunday Telegraph*, and – guess who? – Jonathan Aitken spoke against; the motion was carried (158-132)\*.

\*see ouhg.org.uk

Although I'd been her strongest supporter for the editorship of *Isis* Karen and I used to argue a lot. I wanted to write a weekly column but Karen said no: she wasn't keen on letting me promote anarchist attitudes. We disagreed about various key points of left-wing doctrine, policy and iconography including Simone de Beauvoir. Here's Karen in a letter to me (dated Christmas Eve 1962): "I shall definitely have to run a campaign against *The Second Sex*. As every woman to whom I have spoken who has read it – from the respectable to the ultra non-respectable – has sadly remarked: 'Of course all the men one meets lap it up. They take it for gospel truth.'" Whereas she certainly didn't: for Karen, who was a Christian socialist, de Beauvoir was a brilliant bluestocking but lacked the experience, and the wisdom, of the child-bearing married woman that she herself was keen to become. People's attitudes were less predictable and less tribal in those days.

A woman student who did rate de Beauvoir highly was the feminist anthropologist-to-be Judith Okely (she also campaigned for the admission of women to the union). In her book on de Beauvoir\* she writes: "My article entitled *The Spectre of Feminism* was turned down by the male editor of *Isis* in 1962 as 'insufficiently anecdotal'." She adds self-critically: "It should really have been criticised for its clumsy paraphrasing of de Beauvoir." But having been rejected by *Isis*, the article was accepted by the new left magazine *Messenger* and finally published in April 1963 (see the last page of this chapter).

\**Simone de Beauvoir*, Virago, 1986

Sex at Oxford in the sense of the different opportunities for men and women was a key issue in the early 1960s. But so was actual sex and whether we were allowed to indulge in it. The various college authorities were unequivocally against it for unmarried undergraduates: if you were discovered *in flagrante* the sanction could be permanent exclusion. In a notorious case a woman undergraduate was sent down by her college (St Hilda's) while her boyfriend was rusticated for two weeks by his college (St Catherine's). There was a campaign\* against this appalling decision by St Hilda's although a Cambridge English don, David Holbrook – clearly a man with time on his hands – backed up the authorities in an *Isis* article saying that sex should be solely for reproduction, never for recreation.

\*A campaign – petitions and so on – but nothing more threatening to the authorities. In the early 1960s radical students organised protests including marches and sit-downs but only on external political issues like war and peace and colonialism. In the late 1960s control of students' lives and the content of their courses became a key issue: one of the grievances of the French revolting students in 1968 was the ban on males visiting female dormitories.

Some of the subsequent comments got the background to the story wrong. It wasn't true that all the men's colleges were more lenient than all the women's colleges, as is shown by another, less well-publicised case. In the spring of 1963 a Christ Church undergraduate, Jim Higgins, who was, incidentally (or perhaps not), secretary of both the college JCR and the anti-nuclear Oxford Committee of 100\*, was sent down after being found with a woman in his rooms at the wrong time of day. (Unlike the Christ Church posh boys, Jim, who'd come from grammar school, "didn't have the wit or the money to tip the scout who discovered them", according to one insider.)

\*Jim was replaced as Committee of 100 secretary by another Christ Church undergraduate, Charles Cameron.

And, on the other side of the coin, at Somerville women undergraduates who wanted to stay out late could apply for a key to enter college after hours rather than risk laddering their stockings or tearing their tights climbing in. Somerville always used to pride itself on being more emancipated than the other women's colleges. The tone was set by the distinguished scientist (and socialist) Janet Vaughan, college principal for over 20 years, who once, when I was in prison after a demonstration, sent me via one of her students an expression of her "great sympathy".

Of all the women's colleges St Hilda's was the one that most closely resembled a girls' boarding school. That was certainly the view of my half-sister Audrey who had been there in the 1920s after boarding at Malvern Girls' College\*. She told me that at St Hilda's in her day dangerous occasions of sin like going to the cinema with a male escort were strictly forbidden (the theatre, however, was allowed). As my contemporary Sheila Rowbotham put it in her memoir\*\*: "The first few days at St Hilda's felt like a tape rewinding. At Oxford the fifties had been preserved and in a women's college I was enclosed once again in an institution which returned me to the claustrophobia of Hunmanby\*\*\*." And even in the age of comparative enlightenment St Hilda's was the last of Oxford women's colleges to vote to abandon its single-sex status and admit male undergraduates.

\*founded in 1893, alma mater of romantic novelist Barbara Cartland and Caroline Lucas, the Green MP; now Malvern St James

\*\**Promise of a Dream*, Verso, 2001

\*\*\*Hunmanby Hall, 1928-91, a Methodist boarding school for girls

But how much sexual activity was there at Oxford in the early 1960s? The journalist Lynn Barber claimed in her memoir\* to have had the pleasure of 50 men in the space of two eight-week terms, whereas two of Oxford's best-known science graduates, Richard Dawkins and the even-more celebrated Stephen Hawking, both reported in their autobiographies\*\* that they managed to emerge after three undergraduate years quite unscathed, as virginal as on the day they matriculated.

\**An Education*, Lynn Barber, Penguin, 2009

\*\**My Brief History*, Stephen Hawking, Bantam, 2013; *An Appetite for Wonder*, Richard Dawkins, Bantam, 2013

Faced by this kind of discrepancy my own account is not intended to be a rebuttal of anything or in any way representative. The one general point I would make is that serious science students, who spent their working day in the labs actually working, obviously had less free time (for sport, drinking, debating, acting, poker, politics, recreational sex) than feckless arts students who might wander into a library from time to time and whose most pressing engagement was a weekly tutorial or two.

In the science subjects, attending lectures might be essential because the work being covered was as yet unpublished, whereas in the arts there was often the dismissive attitude that lectures were primarily intended for lazy students who couldn't be bothered to do the reading and in any case needed to be told what to think. Once, listening to a lecture by the philosopher (and Spurs fan) AJ Ayer, I suddenly became aware that the argument he was using came from one of his books – and not an obscure one: it was *Language, Truth and Logic* then in paperback.

Anyway, towards the end of my own still-virginal first term I was, to my great delight, seduced by a Somerville student. It happened like this. One morning my college pigeonhole (before email, letters from other students were delivered via the university's internal post along with all the other bumf like unsolicited sales letters trying to sell you insurance) revealed the following brief but clear note from A--: "You don't know me but I have seen you speaking in the union and would like to get to know you. Please come to tea this week on either Wednesday or Thursday."

An invitation difficult to refuse, you might say, and I certainly didn't refuse it. I turned up at Somerville on the Wednesday, found A--'s room and within an hour or so we were in her narrow single bed. She was in her third year, had spent most of the two previous ones in a relationship which had now ended, so she'd been looking around. Next day she came to my rooms in Christ Church for a successful return engagement but that turned out to be that. We parted amicably.

And then in the Christmas vacation I met Charlotte – Fawcett, that is. It's difficult to avoid identifying her for two reasons. First, as the late mother of Boris Johnson, she was a person of some political/historical interest. At the 2019 Tory Party conference he called her the "ace up his sleeve" on Brexit (she voted out apparently). And, second, because in a possibly unguarded moment\* she was once quoted by a journalist as saying: "I was engaged to somebody called Wynford Hicks who was extraordinarily beautiful to look at but actually quite boring." As anybody familiar with the internet knows, a quote like that has a timeless quality: it will never go away – and it hasn't. So I will answer it as best I can.

\*Interview by the *Gogglebox* star and *Spectator* columnist Mary Killen in *Tatler*, March 2015

For the record, Charlotte and I were never “engaged” – no promise, no ring, no announcement, no engagement party, certainly no proposed wedding date. “Engaged” is pure euphemism. The fact is that she and I spent more than a year together in what is nowadays called a “relationship” without the question of marriage coming up. Next, who would want to argue with “extraordinarily beautiful”? So I won’t.

But obviously I’m not happy with “actually quite boring”. It sounds like *Tatler* toff-speak to me, a drawling dialect that Charlotte didn’t use much when we were together but seems to have adopted afterwards, as she sought to reclaim her conventional top-drawer status. Unlike those who become radicalised at university Charlotte seemed to go the other way and became de-radicalised: what was previously challenging and exciting was now “boring”. Her teenage revolt was over.

We first met in the Café des Artistes in Redcliffe Gardens, a bohemian basement dive in Fulham, and soon found we had all sorts of superficial things in common. Charlotte’s younger brother Edmund was at Ampleforth, the Catholic public school where I might have gone if I hadn’t gone to Stonyhurst; Charlotte herself had been expelled from Mayfield, the convent where my younger sister Monica was at school (Charlotte’s elder sister Sarah was a nun there and we once made a pilgrimage to visit her). We were both 18, on the left and a bit on the wild side, both committed to the campaigns against nuclear weapons and apartheid in South Africa. Above all, we had both recently left the Catholic Church, or “lapsed”, in Catholic jargon.

Charlotte obviously returned to the faith at some point, which explains why she had her son Boris baptised as a Catholic with her best friend, (Lady) Rachel Billington, née Pakenham, as godmother. An early sign of Boris’s political ambition was his decision at Eton to abandon Rome and become an Anglican, before reverting to Catholicism when that became the better option; he was once described as having the relaxed attitude to religion of an 18<sup>th</sup>-century Whig.

After failing to get on with the nuns at Mayfield, Charlotte was being tutored in London for entrance to Oxford where her father, the distinguished barrister Sir James Fawcett, was the bursar of All Souls College. But when she came to see me in Oxford during the Hilary (spring) term, independently of her parents, we had a problem: where was she going to stay? Certainly not in college with me – I wasn’t planning to get sent down. So I approached the only married student I knew then who was Max Mosley.

And that is how Charlotte came to be the house guest of Max and Jean Mosley at their Oxford flat. This episode is not mentioned in Max’s autobiography\* though, among other things, he does record that he was invited to join “the supposedly secret ‘P’ dining club” at Christ Church and that Paul Foot of all people was one of his regular supper guests for egg and chips.

\**Formula One and Beyond*, Max Mosley, Simon & Schuster 2015

At Easter 1961 Charlotte and I went on the Aldermaston march, CND’s annual pilgrimage from the Atomic Weapons Research Centre to Trafalgar Square in London. It was a fun time if a bit uncomfortable – we marchers had to sleep on hard wooden floors in school classrooms. But some of the slogans were imaginative: “Hiroshima, Nagasaki, Slough – THINK NOW!” in the town that John Betjeman had referenced so unfortunately in his 1937 environmental protest poem “Come, friendly

bombs...” ... “The bomb will put the dampers on the champers” as we proceeded through affluent Eaton Square on the edge of Chelsea. And later, when the radical wing of the movement was at odds with conservative CND chairman Canon Collins, “Ban the Bomb and fire the Canon”.

I wasn't particularly keen on the trad jazz bands and protest folk singers that provided the main soundtrack for CND marches. But some of the songs from the campaign against the Polaris nuclear submarine base in the Holy Loch near Glasgow hit the spot. My favourite was “We dinna want Polaris”, which included brilliant lines like “The mayor o’ the toon, he wants his hauf o’croon” and “It’s suicide tae hae them on the Clyde”. Later, when the Spies for Peace published their subversive material in time for the 1963 march, we sang: “I’ve got a secret, a nice official secret, and I’ve published it for all the world to see...”

That summer in London Charlotte was working as a volunteer for the Africa Bureau\*, selling tickets for a benefit concert which included the cast of *Beyond the Fringe*. At the gig we got to listen to Peter Cook’s marvellous Macmillan routine (from four-minute warnings of nuclear attack to a celebration of Roger Bannister’s four-minute mile). In August I joined the Fawcett family at their rented villa in Tuscany where Leonard Ingrams, the future banker and opera impresario, and his wife-to-be, Rosalind Moore, were fellow guests. The four of us spent a night sleeping out on the town walls of Lucca, smoking black tobacco to ward off the mosquitoes. Then Charlotte and I hitched back to England. This involved getting lifts in trucks and two-seater sports cars (no seatbelts in those days), rejecting offers of hotel rooms from sleazy would-be voyeurs and sleeping out on beaches such as the very stony one at Dieppe.

\*an anti-colonial think tank and part of the early anti-apartheid movement

And then came the Trafalgar Square sitdown of 17 September 1961. This was, without any doubt, the biggest challenge to the government launched by the anti-nuclear movement. What happened was that the Tory government reacted to the Committee of 100’s plan to sit down in Parliament Square by banning the – otherwise legal – rally in Trafalgar Square that was intended to precede it. Not only that: they jailed a third of the Committee of 100, including literary figures like Robert Bolt, Arnold Wesker and Christopher Logue, not to mention Bertrand and Lady Russell.

This was a massive PR blunder and ensured that Trafalgar Square on the day would be occupied by more people than the police could possibly contain or arrest; both the *Times* and *Peace News* put the number of demonstrators at 12,000. But the police did their best: they arrested a total of 1,314 people – by far the greatest number arrested on any one day in the history of protest in Britain\* – with more than 650 of us spending a night in the cells. Meanwhile at the parallel demo at the Holy Loch bad weather reduced the numbers though a further 289 people were arrested.

\*By comparison the demonstrations organised in London by the anti-climate change campaign Extinction Rebellion over 11 days from 15 April 2019 led to a total of 1,130 arrests while the ones that followed during October had reached 1,642 by the 16<sup>th</sup> of the month and were finally estimated at 1,850.

Charlotte and I both took part in the Trafalgar Square demo. I was arrested; she wasn't. It happened like this. From 5 o'clock in the afternoon to midnight there were skirmishes, by which I mean that demonstrators tried to evade the police so they could advance towards Parliament Square; they

were blocked; then many of them were arrested. This went on until midnight when most of the demonstrators who remained decided to call it a day. This left a hard core of activists – a few hundred of us, as I remember it. About 20 minutes after midnight the arrests began – some of them were on the robust side, and the violence continued afterwards in police stations.

My Oxford contemporary Adam Roberts (later Sir Adam and a professor of international relations) wrote a graphic account for the *New Statesman* about what happened to him during his arrest and afterwards, "The police at midnight", 22 September 1961. In the House of Lords Lord Kilbracken later summarised Adam's treatment as follows: "He was very seriously beaten up, kicked, and has a doctor's certificate which says that he was bleeding internally three days after the event."

I was quite roughly handled on my way to the police coach though, like most of us, I didn't need medical treatment. In fact the police behaviour was arbitrary and (nowadays you'd say) sexist. When I was arrested the policeman in charge said to Charlotte, blonde and beautiful and sitting down next to me, something like "Why don't you run along home?" And she did. Other women who weren't so lucky were dragged over the paving stones and thrown into fountains.

When the Oxford term started a week or so later Charlotte and I signed up for the newly established Oxford Committee of 100 and she joined me in the university humanist group – in fact she became a college rep at Lady Margaret Hall, for her first two terms\*. Fast forward now to the next big demo – or rather, series of demos at Ruislip and Wethersfield outside London and various other places including Brize Norton near Oxford scheduled for 9 December 1961, just as the university term was ending.

\*see the [ouhg.org.uk](http://ouhg.org.uk) website for humanist group membership cards

Charlotte and I were drifting apart and I think she was getting cold feet about the Committee of 100. She didn't turn up for the briefing before the demonstration and she wasn't there on the day. Then, afterwards, while I was in prison I gathered from a fellow inmate, the secretary, Will Warren, that she had resigned from the committee. Charlotte and I did have something of a reconciliation a few weeks later but that could only be temporary: we were obviously going in different directions.

The Brize Norton demo plan was to convene at a village green a few miles away, march to the base (legally), then sit down in the road to blockade it (illegally). Just before we moved off the senior police officer proposed a meeting with the marshals to discuss traffic arrangements. All was smooth and good-humoured until we noticed that, standing quite legally on the village green and causing no nuisance or obstruction to anyone, we had been surrounded by police officers.

"So do you intend to carry on with your plan to blockade the base?" asked the senior officer – and in answer we sat down on the grass and were carried away to police vehicles.\* Meanwhile the march moved off towards Brize Norton – including several marshals who had avoided the meeting with the police by staying in the pub. A few days later somebody wrote to the *Guardian* to say that the police behaviour that day reminded them of the Russians' tactics outside Budapest in 1956: invite the rebel leaders to a parley; then take them prisoner.

\* In his memoir, *The Accidental Making of an Anarchist*, 2016, available at [www.thesparrowsnest.org.uk](http://www.thesparrowsnest.org.uk), Laurens Otter says that Will Warren had previously been assured by the police that "there would be no arrests" at this point. Looking back it seems likely that the local



police tactics changed in response to a diktat from the government to go for a pre-emptive strike to try to disrupt the Brize Norton demonstration. This certainly happened in London where six leading members of the Committee of 100 had been arrested and charged under the Official Secrets Act on 8 December, the day before Ruislip and Wethersfield.

Since we had been stopped from actually committing an offence we could not be charged with anything – but never underestimate the ingenuity of a prosecution lawyer or the versatility of the English law: under the medieval Justices of the Peace Act (1361) we could be jailed for refusing to be “bound over to keep the peace”, that is, for refusing to agree to accept a heavier penalty if we subsequently committed an offence. The four of us who could spare the time declined to be bound over – and went to prison for the next 20 days.

We were sent to Oxford prison, which has since been transformed into a luxury hotel, the Malmaison. At the time it was far from luxurious but there is (or certainly was then) substance in Evelyn Waugh’s remark in the novel *Decline and Fall* that “anyone who has been to an English public school will always feel comparatively at home in prison”. Porridge is an excellent example – that was what every public schoolboy and prison inmate (and Scotsman) used to have for breakfast in the 1950s and 60s. So no cause for complaint there obviously. Actually there’s even a positive point here: in prison in December 1961 I learnt to drink tea without sugar for the first time; this was because our miserly sugar ration couldn’t be stretched to cover both porridge and tea. Not being Scottish I couldn’t stomach unsweetened porridge whereas unsweetened tea, I found, was drinkable.

I probably put on a few pounds in prison: the meals were regular and substantial if not always appetising. But Laurens Otter noticeably lost weight because he fasted, protesting in Gandhian style, for the full 20 days. For 24 hours, though, we all fasted in protest at the execution of Robert McGladdery, the last man to be hanged in Northern Ireland.

Laurens and I used to meet in the exercise yard and just as in every traditional prison painting we trudged round in a circle; actually we went two by two, like children in a school crocodile or animals approaching Noah’s ark. But at least we were allowed to talk and I was treated to a running tutorial on radical politics in general and anarchism in particular. Laurens, who had an encyclopaedic knowledge of groupuscule politics, turned the traditional arguments for and against anarchism on their head. Instead of asserting (after Rousseau) that fundamentally people were benign, well-intentioned, essentially good, so they had no need of the authoritarian state, Laurens, an Anglo-Catholic, argued, quoting the doctrine of the fall of man, that people were fundamentally flawed. Thus there was no coherent moral case for government because no man was good enough to be another man’s master: anarchism was the only logical solution. As an ex-Catholic I was impressed though not yet convinced by this argument. Over the next few months it stayed with me.

Inside, we ban-the-bombers were segregated from the other prisoners. But the occasional comments – from a con serving meals, say – were positive. Even more encouraging was the screw who came into the cell I shared with two others, expressed sympathy and told us his own story. He’d been a national serviceman in the RAF based in Cyprus at the time of Suez and had been a refusenik on principle.

In prison we wore our own clothes because we were “civil prisoners” – we hadn’t been convicted of anything – and we worked in a small group on one of the landings. We didn’t sew mailbags but we waxed the thread with which mailbags were sewn. This meant we could buy things like chocolate in the prison shop. Christmas day was memorable: we had roast pork followed by a kind of stodge pudding in a custardy sauce – but no booze alas – and we were treated to a carol concert put on by the Salvation Army.

We were allowed letters but not visits and we were issued with a green exercise book (*General Note Book* – “Name 6385 HICKS”) which I still have; it was censored and marked “OK for discharge”. Inside are the restrictions on its use including: “You must not write, draw or paint in it anything indecent or against the good order, security and discipline of the prison or wilfully disfigure or damage it or remove any pages, or make notes in shorthand or cipher.”

When we were released, we were treated to breakfast by the Quakers at their meeting house and interviewed by the *Oxford Mail*. I learnt that Will Warren, one of the two veterans from the Direct Action Committee, had just spent his third Christmas in four years in prison. The other one, Laurens Otter, was eating his first meal for 20 days.

In so many ways the brief experience of being in prison encouraged you think in an anti-authoritarian way. Increasingly, Committee of 100 activists were drawn to anarchism because it provided a theory that made sense of extra-parliamentary – that is to say direct – action. And as we encountered the various agencies of the state – police, courts, prison – and saw from experience how they worked, the anarchist critique became increasingly convincing.

For example, there was the case of Richard Wallace, a bearded carpenter and Committee of 100 activist who was an enthusiast for alternative lifestyles, a pioneer hippy if you like. He was arrested in February 1963 and fined for selling *Peace News* at Carfax in the middle of Oxford on Saturday morning. Technically he was guilty of “obstruction” because he hadn’t moved on – ie he hadn’t stopped selling papers – when asked to do so by a police officer. But Richard was no more causing an actual obstruction than the regular sellers of papers like the *Oxford Mail* and the *Evening Standard* who used the same site. It was pure political spite on the part of the police. And just like the government’s overreaction at Trafalgar Square in 1961, the police tactics here were plain stupid: I knew that this was a battle which for once we were certain to win.

The following Saturday four of us joined Richard at Carfax and one by one we were arrested for the same offence. By the time we appeared in court, the publicity was beginning to embarrass the Oxford establishment – but that didn’t stop the magistrates from fining us in spite of evidence (from Conservative club president Jonathan Aitken, among others) that nobody had actually been obstructed. Inevitably, a deal was then negotiated between the editor of *Peace News* and the police allowing the paper to be sold in public without interference.

Many years later I came across a piece by George Orwell\* protesting at an uncannily similar incident just after the second world war. Five people had been arrested for selling left-wing papers including *Peace News* and the anarchist paper *Freedom* outside Hyde Park; they were bound over (so effectively banned from street-selling papers) for six months or in one case fined and then jailed for a month for refusing to pay the fine. As Orwell observed, the enforcement of the law depends on

the discretion of the police and also on what public opinion is prepared to put up with; above all, by itself “The law is no protection.”

\*Freedom of the Park, *Tribune*, 7 December 1945, accessible online

The case of Donald Room, Detective-Sergeant Challenor and a planted brick was rather more serious. During a series of demos against the state visit of King Paul and Queen Frederica of Greece in July 1963, Challenor arrested Room, an anarchist cartoonist, charged him with carrying an offensive weapon, then added a brick to the property taken from him in order to “prove” his guilt. When he was released from police custody Room had the presence of mind to send his jacket for analysis so he could show in court that he hadn’t in fact been carrying the brick. Result: Room was acquitted and Challenor’s destructive career as a bent copper was over.

Room’s advantage in this case was that he was appearing before a “stipendiary” – that is professional – magistrate in London rather than the often petty, class-conscious and vindictive amateur magistrates outside London. That also applied to me in the one case when, charged with “insulting behaviour”, I was found not guilty...

In court the police officer had a quick look at his notebook and said: “The defendant charged into the crowd using his banner pole as a battering ram. So I arrested him.”

As the defendant I was delighted to hear this but showed no sign. Then when my turn came to cross-examine I said to the officer: “If, as you say, I was using the banner pole as a battering ram would you agree that the person holding the other pole would have been aware of what was happening?”

The officer paused as if considering this outlandish possibility for the first time. “No, not necessarily,” he said. There were one or two suppressed titters from my Oxford student friends in the public gallery – and I was even more delighted.

“Thank you,” said the magistrate to the officer. “You may step down.” Without pausing he continued, now addressing the court: “There seem to be some elements of doubt in this case” – and then to me: “You are free to go.”

So I rejoined my friends (including the person who’d been holding the other banner pole and had come to give evidence). We went to the pub to celebrate this rare event in prosecutions after demos, an acquittal.

I’d been charged with insulting behaviour under section five of the Public Order Act 1936 two weeks earlier on the last day of the 1963 Aldermaston march, which also featured the Spies for Peace revelations. Several thousands of us had broken away from the main march and spread out across Regent Street on the way to the rally in Hyde Park. We were defying the police who wanted us to march in a calm and orderly manner on one side of the road only. But there was no riot, no fighting and certainly no possibility of “charging into the crowd” since any bystanders were of course on the pavement not in the road. I was an obvious target for an officious police officer being over six feet tall with longish red hair and carrying one pole of a red-and-black banner which read “Oxford Anarchists”.

The Spies for Peace story, which I refer to later in this book (see Chapter 11), was probably the highlight of the radical anti-nuclear campaign of the early 1960s. Other notable events for the Oxford committee were a march through the city centre at the key moment of the 1962 Cuba crisis and a “fast for world peace” outside an Oxford church over Christmas 1962; then we took part in two further attempts to immobilise/invoke nuclear bases, the first at Greenham Common in Berkshire, later the scene of the women’s peace camp, the second at Marham in Norfolk; and we supported the protest at Porton Down “Germ Warfare Centre” in June 1963. Nich Bennett and I also made a tape for a local pirate radio station which generated precisely one response, though that did include a pensioner’s postal order for £1.

The fast for peace was organised by Gene Sharp, the high priest and top theorist of non-violent action, then at St Catherine’s. There were half a dozen of us including Hugh Brody, the future anthropologist. Every morning for four days we assembled in front of the University Church of St Mary the Virgin; every evening we were driven to Gene’s flat to spend the night in sleeping bags. We drank water with lemon juice and ate nothing. I lost a stone over the four days but put it back on again in about two days afterwards – it was Christmas, after all. As Dorothy Parker once said of writing, I hated fasting but I enjoyed having done it.

At Greenham Common in June 1962 the plan was to blockade the base for 24 hours over a weekend. Adam Roberts, then working for *Peace News*, reported: “By Sunday morning 323 demonstrators had been arrested, but the sit-down carried on and the entrance to the base was blocked for at least 23 hours of the 24-hour demonstration.” For once I managed to avoid being arrested whereas two anarchist friends of mine, Diana Shelley and Charles Radcliffe, who were to spend several years together, first met in a police van at Greenham.

Diana was included in a study by oral historian Sam Carroll of the links between the Committee of 100 and the women of the Greenham Common peace camp many years later in the 1980s.\* Diana, then working for CND and a feminist herself, described the frustrations of dealing with these newcomers to direct action who didn’t seem interested in the radical past unless it could be called feminist: “One had to pretend that one had only just found out about nuclear weapons and peace issues and indeed quite possibly even feminism. I was basically saying ‘this thing that is happening now is part of a continuing tradition’ and what I encountered was a fixed gimlet stare and ‘I don’t want to know’.” But in spite of some sectarian conflict, the Greenham Common peace camp was an impressive affair; it lasted for 19 years from 1981 and included thousands of women.

*\*“I was arrested at Greenham in 1962”: Investigating the oral narratives of women in the Committee of 100, Sam Carroll, Oral History, spring 2004, volume 32, accessible online. The other five women interviewed were: Jay Ginn, Ruth Walter, Marion Prince, Jo Foster and Barbara Smoker.*

At Marham on 11 May 1963 we were more ambitious than we had been at Greenham: our objective was to invade the base and immobilise its nuclear bombers by sitting in front of them. For hours we stood around the perimeter fence, the athletes among us making sporadic attempts to penetrate it by climbing up the wire and jumping down on the other side; whenever this happened the RAF personnel lined up inside would throw the intruders back over the fence. After an afternoon of stalemate the word went round that we would pack up and go home at six o’clock but first there would be one final attempt to invade.

All went as expected until we realised that 12 of the invaders had not been thrown back this time but arrested. They were taken to a specially convened magistrates' court and the rest of us followed, gathering outside to find out what they'd been charged with. When the answer came, it was a bombshell – they'd been charged under section one of the Official Secrets Act, maximum sentence 14 years.

This was the section under which the Russian spy George Blake had been found guilty in May 1961 and sentenced to 42 years (three counts of 14 years). Even more to the point, after the Wethersfield demonstration in December 1961 six leading members of the Committee of 100 had been selectively prosecuted under the act and sentenced to 18 months.\* Then the committee had not reacted to this intimidation, for example by returning to Wethersfield. This time we had to react.

\*Two of the Wethersfield six, Michael Randle and Pat Pottle, met George Blake in prison and, shocked by the savagery of his sentence, later helped him escape and arranged safe houses for him in London. Then Randle drove him, hidden in a camper van, over the border to East Germany. Pottle and Randle were charged with helping Blake escape but acquitted by the jury in spite of a clear direction by the judge to convict.

The debate that followed the Marham charges was exceptional in the committee's history partly because it was dominated by the activists who had turned up and certainly not by the organisers. In fact Peter Cadogan\*, the local committee secretary, inexplicably argued that we shouldn't change our plans at all. He was ignored. It was clear that we had to respond – or abandon any pretence that we were committed to the principle of solidarity with those arrested. The majority supported the argument that we should return to Marham in a week's time having prepared ourselves for prison or whatever else might happen. But the minority (including me) insisted that those of us who could, should go back immediately. So we did, more than 50 of us. And the following Saturday several hundred others came back as promised.

\*Peter's reputation preceded him. He was one of a number of Trotskyists and ex-Trots lampooned in a song that in his case went: "Peter Cadogan he was there, talking to the *Mail*; if you don't tell the bourgeois press, the revolution'll fail." And it's true that Peter did like the sound of his own voice and the company of journalists. He had served in RAF air-sea rescue during the war, then joined the Communist party, from which he was suspended in 1956, the Labour party, which expelled him in 1959, and two Trotskyist groups, which also expelled him. He once claimed to be "England's most expelled socialist". Later, he was chairman of the South Place Ethical Society based at Conway Hall in Holborn, central London.

Returning to Marham that night, which by then it was, with the certainty of arrest and the virtual certainty of being charged under the Official Secrets Act felt, if sport's your thing, a bit like facing a demon fast bowler in failing light without a helmet. We scaled the perimeter fence and advanced in the gloom towards the planes. We were all arrested and charged, as we expected, under section one of the act and then, unless we accepted conditional bail, we were transferred to Norwich prison – or in the case of women to Holloway in London.

While I was inside I had various supportive letters including one from a young St Clare's student, Jo Firbank, one of five women arrested who initially refused bail. In spite of the weight of the charge against us her mood was buoyant: "The welfare committee have swamped Holloway with fruit,

chocolate and cigarettes – as only two of us smoke, I'm alright Jack...Apparently, I haven't been sent down from St Clare's and my principal (horror) is coming to see me tomorrow so I suppose I'd better stop writing and wash my hair, 'cos I've got to look respectable...My mother's in an awful state about this and keeps sending solicitors and people to see me..." The pressure told: Jo gave in and accepted bail.

I think there were nine days between our arrest and our appearance in court. I spent many hours writing an elaborate political/philosophical reply to the charge of acting in a way that was "prejudicial to the safety or interests of the state" with copious references to Nazi Germany, the Soviet Union and South Africa. But it turned out that I was wasting my time. When we got to Downham Market magistrates' court we found that the charge under section one had been reduced to a much milder one under section three which didn't mention "the state"; we were all (including the original 12) fined £25 and that was that. Of course we never knew what would have happened to the 12 if we hadn't joined them. But at least, for once, we had responded successfully to intimidation by the state.

As I said earlier, the anarchist critique made increasing sense to Committee of 100 activists and an informal anarchist group had started meeting in Christ Church during the 1962 Michaelmas (autumn) term. Over the next few months I agreed with Nick Falk, editor of the Oxford new left's *Messenger* magazine, that I would write an introduction to anarchism. I wrote it and sent it in; it was typeset. Then came disaster; well, a snag. Partly because of defections to the anarchists and the various Trotskyist groups, particularly the International Socialists, the Oxford new left was running out of steam and the *Messenger* was no longer sustainable. It was about to disappear and with it my article.

So what I proposed to Nick was a joint issue between them and us with production costs shared. Our half was called *Anarchist Student*; as well as my piece it discussed anarchism and non-violence, and reported on the *Peace News* at Carfax saga; the *Messenger* half reviewed Jean-Luc Godard's *Vivre sa vie* and included Judith Okely's "The Spectre of Feminism". So, completely by chance, the same publication included manifestos for both anarchism and feminism.

We managed to sell some copies of *Anarchist Student/Messenger* on the 1963 Aldermaston march though the Spies for Peace with their pamphlet *Danger! Official Secret* certainly stole our thunder. Nobody who was on that march will forget the point when a thousand or so of us turned left away from the main body to visit RSG Warren Row, advertised by the Spies as one of the underground shelters from which we would be ruled after a nuclear war. As with the Trafalgar Square sitdown of 17 September 1961 you felt part of what was going to be history (and hoped you would be around to help write it, or at least read it).

After Marham in May I managed, not through my own fault this time, one more interruption before I took my final exams in June 1963. I was a passenger in a car crash which led to a brief hospital visit. Four of us were on our way back from a party in the very early morning when the driver of our Mini-van, who'd spent much of the previous day at the wheel, dozed off and hit a wall at 50-60 mph. In the ambulance I remember saying to him as his face bled profusely: "You look like Henry Cooper", the British boxer who'd recently been badly cut by the mighty Muhammad Ali. Three of us had comparatively minor injuries while the driver's girlfriend, seat-belted in the front, had a broken leg – the Mini-van had hit the wall on her side.

In my case an x-ray revealed a cracked rib for which, I learnt, there was no treatment. But there certainly was pain: coughing was agony; sleep was difficult; physical exercise including sex virtually impossible. (So drive carefully, people, and try to stay awake.)

After my psychology practical and the written exams came a viva (voce), an oral exam for borderline candidates. I was pretty confident that my fourth was safe: I was being viva'd for a possible third. So I wasn't too disheartened when I failed to answer most of the questions. And I got my fourth.