

Friends of Alice Wheeldon

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The Anti-War Activist Accused
of Plotting to Kill Lloyd George

Second Edition

Sheila Rowbotham



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Introduction

The state entered many peoples' homes in Britain during the First World War, delivering call up papers, reporting on injuries and death, issuing instructions to 'Eat Less and Masticate More'. Some aspects of this state intervention, such as maternity and infant welfare, provided real practical help. However the state's entry into the everyday could also be coercive. In 1917, the intrusion of the wartime state would devastate the lives of a lower middle class family of socialists and feminists, the Wheeldons and the Masons, active in the anti-war movement who were accused of conspiring to assassinate the Prime Minister, David Lloyd George.

The case of Alice Wheeldon and her family aroused strong emotions in 1917, and is still capable of stirring recognition, indignation and sorrow after all these years. They were rank-and-file rebels, the kind of people who usually leave only a few scattered references, and about whom nothing much is remembered except through scraps of local and kinship memories. Alice Wheeldon was without heroic accoutrements. There she was, living in the Midlands railway town of Derby, an independent minded fifty-one-year-old mother of three grown up daughters and a son, with a husband whose work meant he was frequently away from home. She ran a second hand clothes shop and was known to her friends as a kind woman, looking after her business, holding her radical views with passion, selling papers, speaking in the market place and going to meetings.

Before the war, Alice Wheeldon had campaigned for women's suffrage in the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU). However, she and her daughter Hettie, a school teacher in nearby Ilkeston, disagreed with Christabel and Emmeline Pankhurst's support for the First World War. After conscription was imposed in 1916, Hettie became active in the Derby No Conscription Fellowship, advising men who sought exemption from the Military Service Tribunals. Alice Wheeldon's son, William, was also against the war. Like many others, he had been turned down by the Tribunal, served time in prison and was in hiding.

The Wheeldons were connected to the Derby socialist movement and friendly with William (or Willie) Paul, a member of the Socialist Labour

Party (SLP), a small Marxist group linked to the American socialist Daniel De Leon. Willie Paul lived in nearby Littleover, and Alice had helped him to start a clothes stall in Derby market.

In December 1916, a man who called himself 'Alex Gordon' visited Alice. He introduced her to 'Comrade Bert' who claimed to have links with the Industrial Workers of the World in London, a left-wing anarcho-syndicalist group. In fact Gordon's real name was William Rickard, and 'Comrade Bert' was Herbert Booth, employed by an intelligence unit, PMS2, connected with the Ministry of Munitions. Booth was paying Gordon to collect information. Alice Wheeldon's fatal encounter with Gordon and Booth would result in the charge of conspiring to kill Lloyd George. But she insisted that she was innocent and that Gordon had promised to help her son and two other men evading arrest because they refused to fight, if she provided poison to kill dogs that he told her were guarding men in a detention camp.

She did obtain some poison, curare and strychnine, from her son-in-law, Alf Mason, a chemist and lecturer at Hartley College in Southampton, thus drawing him and her daughter Winnie into the 'plot'. The prosecution case rested on the poison intercepted in the post, on letters Alice, Hettie and Winnie had written expressing hostility to the war and to Lloyd George, but most crucially on the evidence of Alex Gordon and Herbert Booth – though Gordon never testified in court.

When the Wheeldons and the Masons were brought to trial early in 1917, the political climate meant that the word of Booth and the absent agent provocateur, Gordon, with his many pseudonyms, proved more credible than the testimony of left-wing opponents of the war. Alice, her daughter Winnie, and her son-in-law Alf received sentences of ten, five and seven years respectively. There was nothing to implicate Hettie, who was found not guilty and the eldest daughter, Nellie, was never charged. Alice Wheeldon's health suffered from hunger striking while in prison and Lloyd George ordered her temporary release on licence in December 1917. She would catch influenza in the epidemic and die in her early fifties in 1919.¹

The War Office widely publicized the arrest of the Wheeldons and the Masons, and their trials were reported not just in the national press, but internationally, contributing to the wartime propaganda machine. The harsh spotlight of public affairs trapped the family tragically and remorselessly and Alice Wheeldon was cast in the role of conspirator, plotting assassination, morally deranged, and outside the pale of reasonable political motivation.

She and her family were thus projected beyond the ordinary, distanced from everyday concerns, and framed as part of the sensational.² So, through the intercepted letters, official documents and predominantly hostile newspaper articles, a lower-middle-class family, along with a radical provincial culture in which socialism, feminism and pacifism combined, were to be arraigned and illuminated for the curiosity of posterity.

I first came across an account of the case in the late 1970s while reading Raymond Challinor's *The Origins of British Bolshevism* (1977). The drama of a woman wrenched away from a familiar world and accused of a conspiracy she denied to the last, caught my imagination. Thanks to Ron Rose, the DAC Theatre Company and the Arts Council, I wrote the play *Friends of Alice Wheeldon*. It was performed in Rotherham, Sheffield, Liverpool and London over the course of 1980.

It was evident that Alice Wheeldon's trial and death also involved a story of the powerful national political forces that converged upon her and her family, fracturing their lives. After writing the play I continued to puzzle over the mystery as to why the British state should go to so much trouble to target and imprison three individuals who were not central figures in either the anti-war movement or the industrial unrest.

I was already aware of the existence of similar clusters of rebellious women active in the suffrage movement and the left in many provincial towns and villages. So, I was fascinated by Raymond Challinor's account of the fluid networks of opponents to the First World War, socialists, syndicalists, liberals, pacifists, feminists and militant trade unionists.³ It was evident that the war years saw an extraordinary shake up of ideas and political loyalties and the emergence of new connections among those who opposed the war. These caused considerable alarm to the authorities. Yet over time these grass roots linkages had well nigh vanished from the historical record and some people who saw my play, *Friends of Alice Wheeldon*, imagined I had invented them!

The play grew out of the hopeful ethos of the 1970s socialist feminism with which I was familiar. We had combined our feminism with activity in trade unions and community politics. During the seventies women workers were taking part in strikes for equality and union recognition, shop stewards were devising new kinds of rank and file combines, tenants mobilised and countless local groups were campaigning for more democratic local services. The women's liberation movement had developed strong local

networks and alliances with this grassroots activism and some of us sought to explore and extend this process of interaction. In *Beyond the Fragments* (1979, 2013) Lynne Segal, Hilary Wainwright and myself argued that the experiences of the women's liberation movement carried wider implications for the making of socialism.

The reflections in 'Rebel Networks in the First World War', were, however, informed by the very different political circumstances of the early 1980s. When I was struggling to finalize these sections on the historical background for the Pluto book in 1985, the political scenario had changed markedly. I was working at the Greater London Council, which, after defying Margaret Thatcher's right-wing policies and devising radically creative alternatives, was in the process of being closed down by central government. I wrote 'Rebel Networks in the First World War', amidst the right-wing onslaught on state ownership and provision.

Both the libertarian left politics and the women's liberation movement of the 1970s in which I had been involved, had been deeply suspicious of the coercive and patronising aspects of welfare policies as well as of the overtly oppressive side of the state. Moreover, there was an awareness among those defending civil liberties that charges of conspiracy were historically likely to appear when the authorities came under pressure. Nonetheless, I could not accept that the state was simply dispensable; my day-to-day activism in the women's liberation movement combined with the effect of cuts in social welfare from the late 1970s had made me acutely aware of the need to defend state protection and provision.

The inspiring, challenging years I spent in the GLC's Industry and Employment Unit enabled me to learn a great deal. We wanted to enable working-class people and other subordinated groups to gain access to resources that had, after all, largely derived from them, in order to develop democratic social and economic alternatives to crisis and unemployment. In 1985, as I laboured over the historical background material for the play, I was pondering on the implications of our efforts at the GLC not simply to counter the government's cuts, but to create an alternative to the top down welfare state. I was searching for an approach which eschewed the Labour Party's uncritical acceptance of the neutrality of the power concentrated in the state, on one side, and the absolute rejection of all aspects of the state associated with the anarchist, syndicalist and revolutionary libertarian left on the other. In an inchoate way, amidst those frantic last months before

Thatcher's Conservative government abolished the GLC, ideas about democratising the *relation* between society and the state were beginning to emerge.

Such hopes proved stillborn, in Britain at least. Nevertheless living through the dilemma of needing, yet distrusting the state, alerted me to the tensions so evident in the First World War. In 1985, this led me to explore in more depth not simply the manner in which networks cross formal organizational boundaries, but also the enigma of the state, which, since the nineteenth century, has caused such schisms on the left.

• • •

The history of Alice Wheeldon and her network of friends and supporters is ongoing. Since this book appeared nearly thirty years ago, interest has grown in the case, helped greatly by the Derby Peoples' History Group's focus on local radical commitment and activism in the past. Also a considerable amount of new secondary material has been published and additional primary sources come to light. New archival sources have been released to the National Archives and Metropolitan Police files relevant to the Wheeldon–Mason case have been cleared but cannot be made available until conservation work is done. While it is impossible to incorporate new material extensively into the existing text, in clarifying or correcting the original I have added some references to work that became available after 1985. In order to prevent confusion I have indicated these with an asterisk in the notes.

Exciting material is also emerging from members of the family. In 2007 Fiona Campbell wrote to me enclosing information on Alice Wheeldon from her study of family history. It revealed that Alice Marshall, born in 1866, who worked as a domestic servant, married William Augustus Wheeldon in Bootle in 1886. She was nineteen and he was thirty-two. He had been a medical botanist, but the couple ran a post office and he also worked as a commercial traveller. They returned to Derby from Bootle and, by 1911, Alice Wheeldon was running her shop at 12 Pear Tree Road. Fiona Campbell also found that in 1913 Alice Wheeldon made a will leaving everything to her four children and speculates as to whether this indicates that she and William Augustus Marshall were by then estranged.⁴

Chloe and Deirdre Mason, the great grand daughters of Alice Wheeldon, and grand daughters of Winnie and Alf Mason, are currently seeking to correct the miscarriage of justice. They have assembled a considerable body of material in preparing an application to the Criminal Cases Review Board and lawyers have been briefed. The absence at the trial of the undercover government agent the defendants knew only as 'Alex Gordon' and the subsequent official silence surrounding him will be the main thrust. The Commission could then review this case to determine whether they received a fair trial and refer it to the Court of Appeal, which is able to decide whether the original convictions were, in legal terms, 'safe'.⁵

So while my account is certainly not the end of the story, I hope it will stimulate others to investigate. The story of the case and its political context is as relevant as it ever was, for this second edition in 2015 occurs at a time of social austerity as a consequence of financial speculation, when yet more privatization is being foisted upon us. The real danger of violence from specific groups has encouraged the extension of a far wider surveillance of the general public. We seem to have been placed on a permanent war footing in which this comes to be accepted. Again, the use of undercover agents, who not only spy on non-violent radical groupings, but actually provoke actions, has been exposed. To top it all, since 2014, we have been subjected to a historical glorification of the militarism of the First World War which has played upon the supposed unity of the nation – a long standing conservative ploy – amidst blatant inequality.

Time indeed to remember Alice Wheeldon and her friends. The story, its setting and the concerns of its characters, still speak at many levels, to the present.

Sheila Rowbotham

2015

REBEL NETWORKS IN THE FIRST WORLD WAR

Abbreviations

ASE	Amalgamated Society of Engineers
BSP	British Socialist Party
CO	Conscientious Objector
CWC	Clyde Workers' Committee
ILP	Independent Labour Party
IWGB	Industrial Workers of Great Britain
IWW	Industrial Workers of the World
NCF	No Conscription Fellowship
PMS2	Parliamentary Military Secretary Department, No. 2 Section
SLP	Socialist Labour Party
UDC	Union of Democratic Control
WSPU	Women's Social and Political Union

1

Radical Politics in Derby

Alice Wheeldon left no political statement, no autobiographical notes. She made no individual testimony to history. The lives and opinions of Alice Wheeldon and her family before the trial can only be pieced together from diverse snippets and fragments of information. Sylvia Pankhurst states that Alice had been a member of the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) before the war.¹ The former Labour MP for Rusholme, Manchester, Lester Hutchinson, recounts being told how, when speaking on women's suffrage in Derby market-place, Alice once tapped one of her hecklers on the head with an umbrella in a burst of indignation.² The woman Sylvia Pankhurst describes as a 'hard-working', kind-hearted, generous, woman,³ clearly did not suffer fools gladly. As a rank and file WSPU activist, Alice Wheeldon diligently tried to sell *The Suffragette* and other feminist literature. Perhaps takers were not always as numerous as she hoped, for copies of the paper were still there when the police raided her house at 12 Pear Tree Road in 1917.⁴ Sylvia Pankhurst praised her as the 'kind of zealous, energetic voluntary worker who is the backbone of any movement', but she says Alice Wheeldon did not take part in any 'serious militancy'.⁵

It is not clear how Alice, Hettie and Alice's other daughters, Nellie Wheeldon and Winnie Mason, who lived in Southampton, felt about the arguments and divisions within the suffrage groups over issues such as the degree of internal democracy or the tactics of the movement. Though the great body of suffrage supporters believed in using constitutional methods, and some sought an alliance with Labour, the Women's Social and Political Union adopted militant direct action. By 1914, this had escalated into outbreaks of decentralized attacks on property that left the militant hard core an isolated grouping, operating as a kind of underground.⁶ In June 1914, a church at Breadsall, near Derby, was burned down, apparently by suffragettes, though this was never proven. It evoked much consternation in the local press, and panics erupted when women were observed near

churches. Then a false bomb scare at Aston-on-Trent caused panic. Further outcry arose over suffrage supporters indoctrinating young girls at school.⁷ A letter to the *Derby Daily Express* on 8 June 1914 illustrates the depth and ferocity of the hostility aroused by the direct action campaign for the vote. 'I would commence by shearing off the tresses and shaving the heads of every militant suffragette justly convicted of any and every offence against law and order; if that failed to subdue them I would give such cats – the cat o' nine tails.'⁸ Echoing the suspicion directed at teachers, another writer was worried that:

So many single women with extreme notions of female emancipation have been in charge of our daughters at school during the past twenty years, and the atmosphere has not always fostered the best attitude towards men, home, marriage and motherhood. Probably at the root of the matter, the suffragette frenzy is largely a sex question and springs from the fact that unmarried and childless women must have some outlet for their free energies.⁹

Opponents of feminism did not distinguish between the political views and tactics of the various suffrage bodies. So whatever Alice Wheeldon's opinions, as a known suffragette she would have encountered hostility, while the outcry against feminist indoctrination in schools would have put pressure on Hettie. Thus, even before the war, both women would have known what it felt like to be in a disliked minority. Though there is no evidence that they ever took part in suffrage militancy directly, they were part of a movement in which it was used. This meant they were up against direct state coercion as an everyday event. Such experiences bred a spirit of intransigence, which was also developing in the Irish agitation and in the waves of industrial unrest, which erupted before the First World War.

However, over 1913–14, the militant wing of the suffrage movement was faced with a fundamental clash of political views among the Pankhursts, which resulted in the expulsion of Sylvia's East London Federation of the Suffragettes from the WSPU. The immediate issues were Sylvia's links with socialism and the labour movement.¹⁰ When the Dublin workers were locked out, their leader, Jim Larkin – described by Sylvia as 'a tall, red-haired young man who had learned in America the methods and phraseology of the Industrial Workers of the World'¹¹ – was

imprisoned. Sylvia Pankhurst came to his defence. On 1 November 1913, to Christabel Pankhurst's fury, Sylvia spoke to a meeting of ten thousand with the socialists James Connolly and George Lansbury to demand Larkin's release. Christabel believed that the suffrage agitation must be kept apart from socialism and syndicalism. Sylvia was equally resolved 'to keep our working women's movement in touch with the main body of the working class movement'.¹²

There is no record to show what Alice and Hettie, as rank-and-file activists in the WSPU, had thought of these conflicts. But because they were also involved in the Independent Labour Party in Derby and part of the left-wing current which was growing more and more rebellious just before the war, it is likely they inclined towards Sylvia's position.

The Labour Party still lacked a local organizational base in these early days. (Until 1918 there were no individual members, merely affiliated organizations.) But there were Socialist Societies affiliated through the Independent Labour Party, and one of these existed in Derby.¹³ A member of the Derby Socialist Society, Reuben Farrow, preserved his memories of the group in a series of manuscript letters, which provide valuable glimpses of both their everyday activities and the political divisions within the local socialist movement. Reuben Farrow was a railway clerk and a Christian Socialist, involved in the Adult Schools as well as in the Pleasant Sunday Afternoons aimed at workers and organized through the churches.

He and his wife Florence knew several of those in the labour movement who were becoming national figures, including Ramsay Macdonald, Phillip Snowden, Margaret Bondfield and J.H. Thomas. Indeed baby sitters were needed, because by 1912 Reuben and Florence were intensively involved in establishing the local Independent Labour Party branch, which invited J.H. Thomas to be its parliamentary candidate. Derby was moving from Liberal to Labour. Reuben Farrow, as one of the first three socialist town councillors, was at the centre of this historical shift. He represented Pear Tree Ward, where the Wheeldons lived.

But, the development from local Socialist Society into a section of a national party seeking office was not a smooth affair. Reuben Farrow was aware of losses as well as gains. Though a political colleague of Jim Thomas, his approach to socialist politics was fundamentally different. Farrow disapproved of what he saw as Jim Thomas' 'opportunism', and Jim Thomas was impatient with Farrow's ethical pacifism. Farrow wrote: