

THE WORKING CLASS MOVEMENT LIBRARY

Geraldine Knight

Jubilee House, on the Crescent in Salford, has since the summer of 1987 housed one of the country's leading collections of labour history materials, together with the couple who formed it, Edmund and Ruth Frow. For some, however, the Working Class Movement Library will always be associated with the three-bedroomed semi-detached house in Kings Road, Old Trafford, Manchester, which was its home for thirty years.

Edmund and Ruth Frow met at a labour history summer school organised by the Communist Party in 1955. Eddie was at this time working as a toolmaker in Salford, Ruth as a teacher in Liverpool. Both were active in the trade union movement, Edmund in the Amalgamated Engineering Union, Ruth in the National Union of Teachers. Common and complementary interests deepened their friendship and they were married in 1953. They bought the Old Trafford house, merged their separate book collections and decided to start a library concerned with all aspects of the history of the working classes. Behind this decision lay the belief that eventually

ranged from local working class people pursuing a private interest or undertaking union business to schoolchildren, students, and academics in the fields of labour history and librarianship, a number of them from overseas.

The Frows decided at an early stage which subjects would fall within the scope of their collection. As a result it encompasses politics of all shades, economic history, trade unionism, co-operation, social conditions, education, agriculture and the women's movement, also local histories, reports of trials (a valuable source especially for pre-1850 history), biographies and autobiographies, novels on social themes and working class plays, poetry and songs. The emphasis is on British history and given the role played by Manchester, Salford and the surrounding towns in the shaping of industrial society and the creation of the world's first working class there is considerable material directly relating to the Manchester region. Material is in a number of forms; more than twelve thousand books and fifteen thousand pamphlets, manuscript material, journals, prints,



Left to right: Wilf Charles, Ruth Frow, Eddie Frow, Lance Middleton, Sol Garson

there will be a change in our social system; 'that the country will be governed by those who produce the wealth, that there will be a need and a longing to know what preceded these changes'.¹ It was not in the beginning envisaged that this would be a library open to the public but as the collection grew so did the Frows' conviction that they should not be its only users. The late 1960s saw the admission of the first readers, and the establishment of the charitable trust known as 'The Working Class Movement Library, Manchester', its purpose being to 'promote the education of the public in relation to the history of the working class movement by facilitating and promoting research and dissemination of information about all aspects of such history'.² In the years which have followed the Library's visitors have

posters, photographs and ephemera. The earliest items date from the 1760s. Eddie and Ruth acquired many of their books and pamphlets on the second-hand market, either through catalogues or on visits to booksellers all over the country as they holidayed in their caravan. Bibliomaniacs will recognise instantly the pleasurable symptoms of fellow-sufferers described by Ruth and Eddie as they went in search of Gammage's *History of the Chartist Movement*.³ The archive material was mostly donated.

Gradually the Library took over the house in Kings Road, lining the walls of every room except the kitchen and bathroom and overflowing into the garage and wash-house. The Frows recognised that this limited both the number of readers who could be accommodated, and



The Landing at Kings Road.

additions to stock, but they felt keenly that the Library should remain in the house for as long as possible because this setting helped to make it unique and attracted users who might be intimidated by a conventional library or record office. When the time came to look to the future, offers of accommodation from several local libraries and educational institutions were considered before the move to Salford was negotiated. In Jubilee House Salford City Council had a building which Eddie and Ruth could envisage as a home for the Library, and where the welcoming atmosphere of the Old Trafford house could be reproduced. A three-storey former nurses' home built in 1897, the year of Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee, it has a character very much in keeping with the collection. The City Council, as well as donating Jubilee House, made a substantial contribution to the cost of refurbishing it and undertook to pay the Library's running costs. The Manager and the Chairman of the Cultural Services Committee of Salford City Council were appointed as trustees. The Working Class Movement Library in its new premises was officially opened by the former M.P. for Salford East, Frank Allaun, on 6th November 1987.

Eddie and Ruth Frow consider that the Library's strongest asset is its trade union collection. It is also particularly close to their hearts. Eddie was involved in the union movement throughout his working life and for the ten years leading up to his retirement in 1971 was full-time Manchester District Secretary of the Amalgamated Engineering Union. He was one of the first to recognise the need to preserve trade union records and in 1976 he initiated the project at the Manchester Studies Unit of Manchester Polytechnic whereby many local records were rescued and recorded.

The Library has, not surprisingly, a preponderance of engineering union material. At national level there are good runs of the Amalgamated Engineering Union's monthly journal and reports and National Committee reports. Reports and minutes of the Amalgamated Machine, Engine and Iron Grinders and Glaziers Society date from the late nineteenth century and are possibly unique as they came from the union's head office. A.E.U. divisional and district records include attendance registers, correspondence and minutes. Those of the Stockport District relate to the strike at Roberts-Arundel (textile machinery manufacturers) in the 1960s and are accompanied by three volumes of press cuttings compiled by the strike committee. The records of a number of local branches of the Amalgamated Society of Engineers and the Amalgamated Engineering Union are mainly minutes.

The records of unions in other industries include local

divisional and district papers of the Amalgamated Union of Building Trade Workers and minute books and subscription records of both the Warrington District and the Manchester Branch of the Amalgamated Society of Wire drawers and Kindred Workers.

One of the great strengths of the Library is the pamphlet collection and this contains rare early items, among them rules for trade unions published in 1807, 1816 and 1823, plus some modern material which is not easily obtained, for example a booklet published by A.S.L.E.F. to mark its centenary. The Library has a near-complete set of Trade Union Congress reports and more than seven hundred books on trade unionism.

Local unions are well represented in the large collection of rulebooks, the earliest of which is a revised edition, dated 1843, of the rules and regulations of the Manchester-based Journeymen Steam Engine, Machine Maker and Millwrights' Friendly Society.

The papers issued by shop stewards' committees were the subject of a chapter in a book by the Frows on the shop stewards' movement.⁴ They fall into two categories, those produced for the employees of one firm (so-called 'factory papers') and those aimed at a wider audience. *Combine News* (Massey Ferguson) and *The Voice of Ford Workers* are examples of the former; *New Propellor*, later the *Metalworker*, organ of the Aircraft Shop Stewards' National Council, of the latter. There are also papers issued by various unofficial groups, such as *Seamen's News*, produced by the Seamen's Strike Reform Movement of the 1960s.

A special collection related to trade unionism consists of the papers of Walter Lewis, which contain the correspondence and other documents of the Nuneaton Central Strike Committee, which was active during and for some weeks after the 1926 General Strike. Lewis, the Labour agent for Nuneaton, was the Committee's secretary. The letters in particular give an insight into how it was organised and its relations with other committees in the area and with bodies such as the Church. There are copies of the eight bulletins circulated by the Nuneaton committee, together with newsheets and other literature from as far afield as Bristol and London. The minutes of several other strike committees are known to exist but correspondence seems to be rare.

Fortunately in recent years the value of trade union records to the student of economic and social history has come to be widely appreciated and such records are now being preserved in libraries and record offices nationwide. The collection at the Working Class Movement Library is noteworthy because it combines primary and secondary sources and because of the



The Landing at Jubilee House.

knowledge and understanding of the union movement the Frows have brought to bear in building it up. The directories compiled by Manchester Studies still provide a good introduction to the collection⁵ although since the move to Salford significant donations of trade union records have been deposited. These include runs of annual reports and journals and, in some cases, Minutes, of the Boilermakers' Society, Draftsmen's Union, Typographical Society, Foundry Workers' Union, Amalgamated Association of Card and Blowing Room Operatives, Ship Constructors and Shipwrights Association, and Amalgamated Weavers' Association, National Union of General and Municipal Workers and the National Society of Drillers and Hole Cutters.

The Library's Peterloo collection could not hope to rival that of Manchester Public Libraries but it does contain many of the most important sources of information on the event. At its heart is the material accumulated by local antiquarian bookseller Robert Walmsley in the course of research which culminated in *Peterloo: the case reopened*, a book which differs from the majority of accounts in defending the Chairman of the Magistrates, William Hulton. Several items in the collection have associations with Hulton. His notes on the trial of Henry Hunt are bound in a report of the proceedings published in Manchester in 1820 by Joseph Pratt. There is a plan of St Peter's Field made for him, and his copy of the report of the trial *Redford v Birley*.

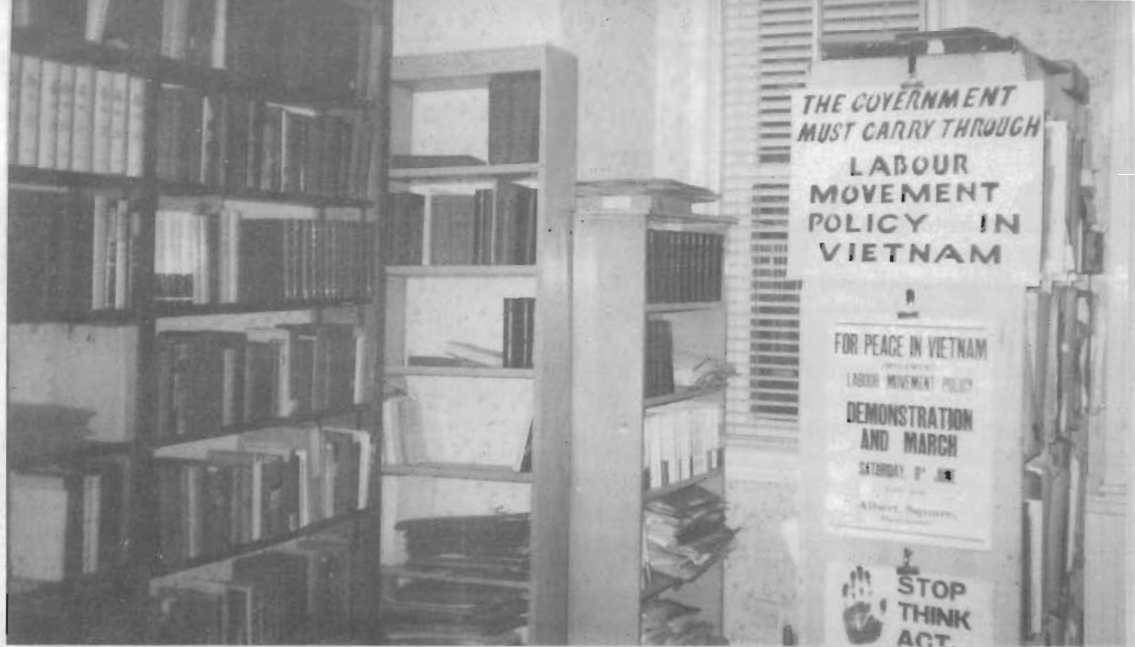
Walmsley's sources included newspapers such as the *Manchester Observer* and *The Cap of Liberty* and contemporary pamphlets. Copies of other books on Peterloo, which he read and annotated, also form part of the collection, which is complemented by other material acquired by Eddie and Ruth over the years. This includes scarce pamphlets published in the North East of England soon after the incident. A calico print depicting the Manchester Yeomanry charging the crowd can be seen in the Exhibition Room. An interesting item is the first

edition of Samuel Bamford's *Passages in the Life of a Radical* in its original parts. There is also a set of the pamphlets *Peterloo Massacre* issued by the printer James Wroe in 1819 in which is published the names of those who were killed and injured. All the published trials connected with the Peterloo episode are included in the collection.

Another collection of papers which contains interesting local material relates to the Spanish Civil War. When the war began in July 1936 thousands of Britons joined the International Brigade to fight for the Republican government against the Nationalists under Franco. At home various organisations were set up to send food, medicine and other supplies to the Republic. The papers of Arthur J. Kirkwood, which were deposited in the Library after his death in the 1960s, relate to this, the Aid for Spain Movement. Arthur Kirkwood was a member of several relief committees in the Bolton area, most notably the Horwich and District Committee of the Manchester Foodship for Spain, later to become the campaign for the Third Lancashire and Cheshire Foodship. As Honorary Secretary he retained the papers which document the Committee's work in detail. Formed on 2nd February 1939, by 22nd March it had forwarded £150 and about four tons of goods for the Foodship. Kirkwood also saved the appeal leaflets and bulletins of a number of other relief organisations and some newscuttings, a few hundred items in all. Eddie Frow does not know of another local archive on this subject, the acquisition of which prompted the Frows to ask among their friends for other Civil War documents. This led to the donation of more than thirty letters sent from Spain by members of the International Brigade and also the diary of Ralph Cantor, a Manchester man killed at Brunete in July 1937. A collection of letters and press cuttings paying tribute to George Brown, Manchester organiser of the Communist Party, who died during the same engagement, was donated to the Library by one of its trustees.



The front room at Kings Road.



A corner in Jubilee House.

The Library stocks only a few books on the War but a large number of pamphlets, some bought by Eddie Frow at the time. It has, too, a complete set of the *Volunteer for Liberty*, the paper produced by the International Brigade for its members. This is in the form of a limited edition American reprint, although some original copies are also held.

The struggle for peace has a long history in the Manchester region and among important holdings are the local archives of the Campaign For Nuclear Disarmament and the Peace Committee from the early 1950s. There is also a collection of material relating to the Medical Aid For Vietnam. Like other archive material in the Library these provide exciting opportunities for students searching for subjects for dissertations. These opportunities continue to expand. An important recent acquisition is the T.A. Jackson Irish Collection, which contains some seven hundred volumes on Irish history, among them notable early works such as Wakefield's *Survey of Ireland*. Jackson's own history, *Ireland her own*, was published in 1946.

The move to Salford has of necessity brought about changes in the way the Library is run. Four staff — a librarian, senior library supervisor, library assistant and caretaker — were appointed by Salford City Council to handle its day-to-day administration. Set opening hours were introduced. The stock is shelved in exactly the same order as before (in broad subject areas) but much of it is now housed out of public view. All material is for reference only but any item can be consulted on completion of a request form, and photocopies can be supplied. The librarians are engaged in completing the job of cataloguing the collection begun in 1978. The catalogue, which can be consulted in the Reading Room, consists of separate name and Dewey classified catalogues, and subject indexes for books, pamphlets and ephemera.

The Reading Room is one of three public rooms on the Ground Floor. In the Exhibition Room some of the Frows' splendid collection of mugs, plates, badges, pictures and other mementoes can be seen. The Seminar Room, where small groups can meet, contains a browsing collection of duplicate books. A fully-equipped annexe is available for larger meetings and conferences. In 1969, when the charitable trust was set up, it was envisaged that the Library would be a venue for film shows, lectures, meetings and conferences. This is now a reality and the Working Class Movement Library should be viewed not simply as a library but as an educational institution. Parties of interested people can be shown around the collection and introduced to the fascinating subject of labour history while the Annexe offers possibilities of extending the educational and cultural aspects of the Library's work. A group of *Friends Of The Library* to which trade union branches, labour movement organisations as well as individuals can belong has been formed to assist in every possible way. Over the years the Library has published a large number of books and pamphlets which illuminate particular episodes and themes in the region's labour history, many of which can be purchased at the Library.

Eddie and Ruth Frow live in a flat in Jubilee House and are busy passing on their knowledge to the library staff. They are happy that the future of the Library has been assured. Inevitably it will be the poorer when they are no longer actively involved in its affairs but it will continue to house a collection not only of local but of national significance which all are welcome to visit and use.

The Library is at 51, The Crescent, Salford, M5 4WX, (061-736 3601). It is open from 10.00 a.m. to 5.00 p.m. on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Fridays, from 10.00 a.m. to 7.00 p.m. on Thursdays and from 2.00 p.m. to 5.00 p.m. on Sundays. Groups are welcome by prior arrangement.

NOTES

1. Edmund and Ruth Frow, 'Travels with a caravan', *History Workshop*, 1976, no.2, 177-82.
2. Trust Deed, first schedule.
3. *History Workshop*, 1976, p.181.
4. *Engineering Struggles: Episodes in the Story of the Shop Stewards' Movement*. (1982).
5. Manchester Studies. *Trade union records of Greater Manchester: a guide to their location*, (1982). Manchester Studies. *Union of Construction Allied Trades & Technicians: a directory of records in Greater Manchester and surrounds*, (1982).