

Edward Carpenter: A life of liberty and love

by Sheila Rowbotham, Verso Books, 2008, 565 pp.

Peter Tatchell

This is one of the best political biographies for many years. As well as being a book about a sadly forgotten icon of past progressive history, it is bursting with ideas that are still relevant to the future of humanity – relevant for all people, LGBT and straight.

Author Shelia Rowbotham, the much-loved socialist feminist historian, has written an incredibly moving, inspiring account of the personal and political life of the prophetic gay English author, poet, philosopher and humanitarian, Edward Carpenter, 1844-1929.

Arguably the true pioneer of the LGBT rights movement in England, he lived openly and defiantly with his life-long partner George Merrill.

In the nineteenth century, he wrote some the earliest essays and pamphlets advocating homosexual law reform and spoke out enthusiastically for women's rights.

Unlike many others, he understood the connection between sexism and heterosexism: that the struggle for women's rights and gay rights are closely tied together (a view that was resurrected by the Gay Liberation Front in the early 1970s and by OutRage! in the 1990s).

Decades ahead of his time on many social issues, Carpenter advocated green socialism, women's suffrage, contraception, curbs on pollution, sex education in schools, pacifism, animal rights, recycling, prison reform, worker's control, self-sufficiency, vegetarianism, homosexual equality, naturism and free love.

His socialism was libertarian, decentralised, self-governing, cooperative and environmentalist, with a strong streak of anarchism, individualism and (non-religious) spiritualism. He argued that socialism was as much about the way we live our personal lives as about changing the economic, political, social and cultural systems.

We need to transform our hearts and minds before we can overturn the iniquities

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of capitalism, he observed. Otherwise, we might end up replacing one tyranny and ugliness with another.

Echoing the left-wing arts and crafts movement, which was often derided by the Marxists of the Social Democratic Federation, Carpenter's vision of socialism included a cultural renaissance to promote access to the arts for everyone, not just the rich. He saw things of beauty as a way to uplift the human spirit.

Carpenter himself was not without fault; occasionally expressing anti-Semitic sentiments, which were standard and rife (but not therefore excusable) in the late 1800s. For someone who distanced himself from the mainstream and the mob on most issues, these lapses are particularly surprising and lamentable.

Initially a member of the Social Democratic Federation (a forerunner of the Communist Party), he had disagreements with the SDF's advocacy of revolutionary violence and its dismissal of ethical socialism. This prompted Carpenter to leave the SDF in 1884 and help found the Socialist League, where he worked closely with Eleanor Marx, William Morris and Edward Aveling.

In 1893, he joined with Kier Hardie, George Bernard Shaw and Ben Tillett to form the Independent Labour Party (ILP). He stuck with the left, despite the homophobic asides of some left-wingers, including Frederick Engels and later George Orwell.

I recall meeting Fenner Brockway, the legendary ILP leader (1888-1988), in 1983, when he was 93 years old. He knew Carpenter and enthused about his trail-blazing ideas; praising him as one of the greatest thinkers of the last 100 years. Probably he was.

This book is a fascinating, engaging insight into the life of a truly remarkable man. Read it.

Peter Tatchell is a human rights campaigner and left-wing member of the Green Party. For more info about his human rights campaigns, visit www.petertatchell.net. His essay 'Their Multiculturalism and Ours' appeared in *Democratija* 8, Spring 2007, and his report from the 2007 Gay Pride conference in Moscow in *Democratija* 9, Summer 2007.