David Goodway, *Anarchist Seeds beneath the Snow: Left-Libertarian Thought and British Writers from William Morris to Colin Ward.* Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2006, 401 pp. £50.00 hbk, £18.50 pbk; ISBN 1846310253 (hbk), 1846310261 (pbk).

Few people are willing to declare themselves publicly as anarchists, either because of the misunderstanding, fear or ridicule which this would cause, or because they regard their opinions as not entirely anarchistic. Of the eleven writers here considered in detail, only three – Herbert Read, Alex Comfort and Colin Ward – are indubitably anarchists. Edward Carpenter, Oscar Wilde, John Cowper Powys, Aldous Huxley and Christopher Pallis are, allowing for some points of difference, claimed for the cause on the evidence of their views. The other three writers, 'who were definitely not anarchists', are George Orwell, E.P. Thompson and 'the great William Morris'. They feature prominently in this book because they were 'libertarian communists or socialists' who contributed in important ways to the

development of left-libertarian thinking in Britain. (p. 10) David Goodway's argument is that, taken together, these writers 'constitute a submerged but creative and increasingly relevant current of social and political theory and practice, an alternative, left-libertarian tradition'. (p. 11)

The title alludes to Ignazio Silone's novel *The Seed Beneath the Snow* which, then newly translated into English, was read by Colin Ward in 1943. Though he was already an anarchist, this novel helped Ward to realise that the essential characteristics of a truly free society, such as self-determination and mutual aid, are vigorously functioning all around us. There is, he later contended, 'a mode of human organisation, rooted in the experience of everyday life, which operates side by side with, and in spite of, the dominant authoritarian trends in our society' (quoted, p. 316). Ward's revelation was anticipated by Morris, who championed 'that true society of loved and lover, parent and child, friend and friend ... which exists by its own inherent right and reason, in spite of what is usually thought to be the cement of society, arbitrary authority' ('True and False Society', 1888). In E.P Thompson's appraisal, communicated in a lecture to the William Morris Society in 1959, 'It was the greatest achievement of Morris, in his full maturity, to bring this concept of community to the point of expression: to place it in the sharpest antagonism to his own society: and to embody it in imaginative terms and in the "exalted brotherhood and hope" of the socialist propaganda'.[1]

Readers of this Journal will be most interested in the second chapter, where, beginning in 1880, Goodway examines Morris's ideas and opinions on politics and society as they developed in relation to anarchist and libertarian-socialist thought and activity, then traces these strands in radical politics up to 1920. According to Goodway, 'There can be no doubt ... that *News from Nowhere* depicts an anarchist society' (p. 22), a view shared with Bob Holton, who credits 'the anti-state traditions of William Morris and the Socialist League' (p. 24) as being the principal indigenous influence on British anarcho-syndicalism as it emerged in the first decade of the twentieth century. Although, in principle, as well as practical contingency, Morris had to part company with the anarchists who gained ascendancy within the Socialist League, his thinking on work, property, education, social relations and the environment was and remains a potent source of inspiration for many left-libertarians. Drawing upon Ruth Kinna's analysis,[2] Goodway suggests that 'the root cause of Morris's opposition to anarchism' is revealed by comparing his assessment of medieval society with that of Peter Kropotkin, who attributed the loss of freedom and co-operation (features of 'natural' society) to the development of the state, whereas Morris held that some kind of government is necessary for the smooth running of human affairs. If, as he advocated (in common with Kropotkin), the state should be dispensed with, the alternative society, a communist one, has 'to be painstakingly constructed' in its stead; it cannot be expected to come about by default, as Kropotkin

trusted it would. (p. 23)

In this chapter, I noticed just one trivial error of fact, when Goodway states that *News from Nowhere* is set in the twenty-second century (p. 21), instead of the twenty-first, not very long after 2003. I would also gently question the accuracy of his comment that, in this novel, Morris was giving his fellow socialists 'a glimpse of *the* socialist future' (p. 21; my italics), rather than *a* desirable – maybe possible – socialist future; and it is a fictional projection of Morris's personal ideals and hopes, not a blueprint for what should nor a prediction of what will transpire. When Goodway asserts that anarcho-syndicalism in Britain 'was terminated by the outbreak of war in 1914' (p. 24), he might helpfully have added that it has re-emerged here in recent years, mainly under the auspices of the Solidarity Federation.

Chapter 3 is devoted to one of Morris's most enthusiastic disciples, Edward Carpenter. Whilst he was 'truly undoctrinaire and ... supported all sections of the labour movement and all trends within it', Carpenter 'was strongly inclined to anarchism itself' (p. 51), an interpretation Goodway shares with Peter Marshall, who stated, in his authoritative book *Demanding the Impossible: A History of Anarchism* (1992), that 'Although . . . Edward Carpenter did not call himself an anarchist, his highly personal form of libertarian socialism comes very close to it'. (p. 54) As Jan Marsh has already shown,[3] Goodway reminds us here, 'Of the three men who inspired English agrarianism in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, it was Carpenter alone, and not Ruskin or Morris, who provided the practical example'. (p. 46) Perhaps of equal significance, Carpenter was also a prophet of sexual liberation, especially for gay men. Surely Goodway's complaint is justified: 'Whereas both Morris and Ruskin have been reassessed during the last thirty to forty years and restored to their full Victorian grandeur, Carpenter, not of their stature but an interesting, original and important writer and practical thinker, whose name it is not foolish to mention alongside theirs, has returned to the periphery and neglect'. (p. 36)

At one point, Goodway remarks that 'Carpenter had only read *Walden* as late as 1883' (p. 47), thus suggesting that he was tardy in doing so; but as this work was first published in Britain in 1886, Carpenter must have read a US edition, so he was keenly ahead of most radicals in this country. I would also challenge the description of Thoreau's way of life by Walden Pond as 'reclusive individualism' (p. 48): it was not a recluse who, although he did live alone, often entertained visitors in his home, and who, every day or two, walked into Concord to hear news and gossip, even sometimes to attend lectures there.

Next comes a chapter on Oscar Wilde, where it is established that he was indeed an anarchist, announced it publicly on several occasions, and to some extent imbued his literary work with hints of this position; but it seems excessive to count Wilde as a 'major British socialist' of his time. (p. 69) The final section

of this chapter (pp. 86–92), where Goodway analyses a lengthy unpublished interview by Thomas H. Bell, of Wilde in the final year of his life, concentrating on his politics, certainly warrants the attention of all Wilde scholars.

Uniquely within *Anarchist Seeds beneath the Snow*, two chapters are devoted to John Cowper Powys, because of 'the originality and importance of his life-philosophy and its contribution to anarchist thought', the 'reformulation' of his outlook in response to the Spanish Civil War, and 'the still insufficient appreciation of his literary achievement'. (p. 93) Unfortunately, Goodway's strenuous attempt to promote Powys's stature as an author along with his reputation as a thinker has actually served to remind me how his worthwhile and often brilliantly expressed observations on landscape, culture, society and individual psychology are hopelessly mixed up with a lot of quasi-mystical nonsense and lamentable misconceptions about the ancient history of Britain. (see pp. 164–74) I remain ambivalent about this problematic writer. According to Goodway, 'Powys's essential sociopolitical position is one of individualist anarchism'. (p. 97)

Between those chapters on Powys is one on the Spanish Revolution and Civil War which carefully explains how it affected left-libertarian thought in Britain, most notably that of George Orwell. Goodway argues convincingly that, although Orwell was not absolutely an anarchist, he was very sympathetically disposed towards that position, especially in his distrust of any kind of state power and his belief in the decency of ordinary people. Orwell's maxim, 'You can't have a revolution unless you make it for yourself' (p. 148), encapsulates his attitude perfectly.

As the best-known self-professed anarchist in twentieth-century Britain, Herbert Read can be found where he belongs, just about at the middle of the book. When aged eighteen or nineteen, Read was converted to anarchism through reading Carpenter's pamphlet on *Non-Governmental Society* (1911). Goodway reckons him 'a marvellous writer' (p. 201), but he is reluctant to grant much significance to Read in the left-libertarian tradition: 'the broad outlines of Read's anarchism are unexceptional' (p. 189) and, in Goodway's estimate, his main contributions were solely of the moment, as an educationalist, art critic and propagandist. Being already acquainted with Goodway's other writings on Read,[4] I was disappointed to find that large chunks from those have been reused almost *verbatim* here (yet it seems ironically apt on this occasion, for this was a common practice of Read himself in his later career).

'War and Pacifism' and 'Nuclear Disarmament and the New Left' would be essential topics in a history of left-libertarianism in twentieth-century Britain. In *Anarchist Seeds beneath the Snow*, they each receive a chapter, as probably the best means to explain the ethical dynamics which led some people to desert or simply by-pass party-political socialism. Morrisians are likely to find most interesting the analysis of E.P. Thompson's political, scholarly and literary develop-

ment, which is embedded into the latter chapter. Here Goodway suggests that, as influences upon Thompson's total career, 'Blake was more significant overall than Morris, and of equal importance to – probably of more importance than – Marx'. (p. 281)

The chapter on Aldous Huxley reveals an enigmatic personality whose inconsistent politics defy adequate classification: 'Yet what there is of Huxley's libertarian thinking is impressive enough, since it is an anticipation of the new kind of anarchism which has developed so strongly and influentially, particularly in Britain and the USA, since the 1960s'. (p. 232) This 'new kind of anarchism' is well exemplified by Colin Ward and Murray Bookchin, who are much more interested in 'biology, ecology, anthropology [and] alternative technology' (*ibid.*) than in economics and class struggle. Similarly, in Chapter 11, Goodway shows that Alex Comfort was much else besides a sexologist; he was 'a pioneering scientist and acclaimed creative writer' (p. 238), whose substantial and accomplished work not only reflected his anarchism but promoted left-libertarian attitudes to a wide public. Even *The Joy of Sex* (1972) had a political aim.

Anarchist Seeds beneath the Snow amply fulfils its author's stated purpose of providing 'a serious, scholarly contribution to the cultural history of Britain', specifically by demonstrating 'that there has been a significant indigenous anarchist tradition, predominantly literary, and that it is at its most impressive when at its broadest as a left-libertarian current'. (p. 337) In this book, Morris is the figure most often mentioned, maybe because of Goodway's special admiration and knowledge of him, or alternatively that he really has been the most pervasive influence upon left-libertarian writers in Britain. Ward appears to think so: 'As the decades roll by, it becomes more and more evident that the truly creative socialist thinker of the nineteenth century was not Karl Marx, but William Morris'. (quoted, p. 321)

Anarchists are idealists, certainly, but it is a mistake to see them as utopians. The do-it-yourself ethic of anarchism grounds it in practicality more surely than those political creeds which trust rulers to manage our welfare. Morris's Nowhere is emphatically located in England, with a topographical precision that invites readers to trace Guest's journey themselves, and, like him, to observe and assess every detail of human life and its physical surroundings. How far that vision – or another vision – is to become reality is a matter for each and all of us to decide.

Anarchist Seeds beneath the Snow is an impressive achievement for its rigorous scholarship across a wide range of sources, for collating this diverse material in a cogent and systematic narrative-*cum*-argument, and for elucidating it with clarity and flair. This book will be very valuable to scholars and other serious readers concerned with political ideas, British cultural history and the individual writers who are here discussed in depth. It is a book that needed to be written and now deserves to be read.

NOTES

1. Edward Thompson, *The Communism of William Morris*. London: The William Morris Society, 1965, p. 16, and E.P. Thompson, *Persons and Polemics: Historical Essays* London: Merlin Press, 1994, p. 74.
2. Ruth Kinna, 'Morris, Anti-Statism and Anarchy', in Peter Faulkner & Peter Preston, eds, *William Morris: Centenary Essays*. Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1999, pp. 215–28.
3. Jan Marsh, *Back to the Land: The Pastoral Impulse in England, from 1880 to 1914*. London: Quartet Books, 1982, 260 pp.
4. I refer especially to his 'Introduction' and 'The Politics of Herbert Read' in . David Goodway, ed, *Herbert Read Reassessed*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1998, pp. 1–12 & 177–95, and his 'Introduction to Herbert Read', in David Goodway, ed, *A One-Man Manifesto and Other Writings for Freedom Press*. London: Freedom Press, 1994, pp. 1–26.

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