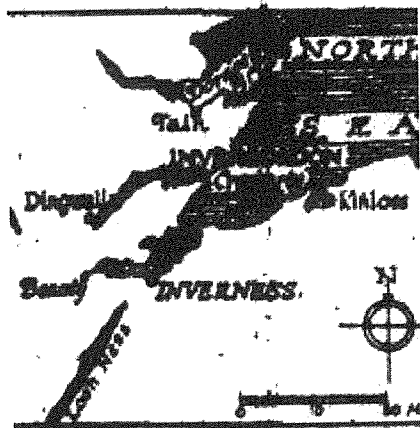


Invergordon 1931

Shipshape and Mutiny Fashion: How they Fought the Pay Cuts

by Liz Willis



Financial crisis, national (coalition) government imposing a programme of drastic cuts in wages, supposedly forced on them by the state of the world economy, and insisting on the need for public-sector workers to accept a lowering of living standards, extending even to the armed forces, in the national interest... The year was 1931, and one of the first and most effective shows of resistance came in an unexpected quarter.

All in the Same Boat – Not

Unsurprisingly, when the schedule of pay cuts emerged from the National Government's deliberations in late summer 1931, it turned out that the most devastating effects would be felt by those at the bottom of the social pile, the lowest paid and the unemployed. Nowhere was the inequality more blatant than in the Royal Navy, whose 'lower deck' (non-officers) had already been subject to a reduction in rates for new entrants since 1925. Men serving before that date had been assured they would stay on the higher 1919 rates (won after agitation), but this guarantee was now written off. Seamen and stokers were faced, at three week' notice, with having to adjust to a daily rate of 3 shillings instead of 4 shillings. (Incredible as it may seem, this translates to 15 and 20 decimal pence, although the *equivalent* in present-day terms would of course be rather more. An agricultural labourer around this time might earn 5 shillings per day). Officers' pay was to be reduced too, but by a much smaller amount, proportionately, 10 or 11% rather than 25%. There was a schedule of scales; exact rates given in different sources vary but the general idea was the higher the rank, the smaller percentage cut. For many ordinary sailors, especially those with families and commitments such as hire purchase payments, this would entail a plunge into actual poverty.

This prospect did not deter the Board of Admiralty from acquiescing in the proposed cuts although it did cross some of their minds that there might be some adverse reaction or 'discontent' from the Navy's lower deck. Whether through normal incompetence or a cunning plan to delay breaking the news until the Atlantic Fleet had reached Invergordon, hundreds of miles from the ships' home ports – Chatham, Devonport, Portsmouth – for scheduled exercises, they botched the announcement, and a letter to the acting Commander-in-Chief went temporarily astray. A Fleet Order posted on ships' notice boards on the morning of Sunday 13 September thus hit the sailors with the full realisation of what the cuts due to take effect on 1 October would mean, as they did the maths themselves without benefit of 'spin' from Senior Officers. Nor was it lost on them that the guff about urgent measures in an immediate crisis did not square with the inclusion of their pensions – a long-term saving at best – in the cuts programme.

Leaders, who needs them?

Not being daft, they knew cuts were in the offing. There had been speculation in the newspapers and a 'buzz' about how bad they might be. On some ships there was an opportunity to hear more details on the wireless, in advance of the Admiralty notice. It would have been surprising if the threat to their pay had not been a hot topic for sailors both on the way up north and among those with shore leave on Saturday 12th. While later allegations about illegal meetings, left-wing agitprop, and a subversive plot being developed in advance seem to be largely invented, a feeling in the air to the effect that something should be done about it if their fears were borne out is more than likely. Even

though they had been through training based on discipline and obedience, many were recruited from industrial areas with experience of labour activism, and some had already been in the Navy at a time of previous agitation over pay. They knew too that they were not the only people in the country wanting to resist the cuts.

Whether or not the idea of a mass meeting had already been canvassed the day before, a plan to hold one on shore as soon as possible was the immediate collective response to the bad news and the blatant unfairness of it. 'On that Sunday morning the whole Atlantic Fleet was ready for action, without instigation from any quarter.' (Wincott p.90) Renowned as 'the' Invergordon mutineer, Len Wincott claimed credit for a few key interventions, including being the 'someone' who gave the 'first push'. It may be questionable whether his push was either the first or the only one, although it sounds like a neat bit of opportunistic improvisation all the same. Given that a certain number of men, some from every ship, would be at a single Catholic service, these would be asked to spread the word about a later mass (no pun) meeting ashore, such being not as easy to convene among men scattered and confined on a dozen warships as in an industrial setting. Only a certain number could go ashore at any given time, of course.

Exactly what happened and when is not always easy to disentangle from the various accounts, most if not all from sources with their own viewpoint to assert or corner to defend. The first comprehensive (and still longest) history of the mutiny was to concoct a tale of dedicated revolutionaries establishing a Sailors' Soviet that very day (if only?). Later less lurid versions still spoke of firm, detailed plans, volunteers representing each ship on a Strike Committee, and a system of signalling to communicate decisions and carry them out, while others play this down. Even the memoirs of prominent participants can be confusing and contradictory, for example Fred Copeman describes things occurring on the Saturday which most writers locate on Sunday.

Anyway there was a big meeting (estimated 600 ratings) in the canteen, with a succession of speakers. The more far-out ideas, such as marching to London, did not find favour; instead the plan emerged for a concerted industrial-style strike. That this would amount to mutiny, and so might entail dire consequences, must have been self-evident, but for many there seemed to be no other option, given the lack of any effective means of permitted protest. The outcome was a determination to take action, spread the word on board, and have another meeting next day with as many as possible attending. The fleet was due to begin its exercises at sea on Tuesday 15th.

On Monday the canteen overflowed so that the meeting migrated to a sports ground where speeches could be made from the top of a shed. By now the point at issue, Fred Copeman recalled, was not whether but exactly when to strike. The decision was to ignore the first call to 'turn to' the next day, and then for each ship's company to gather on the forecastle (fo'c's'le). All sections of the lower deck were to be involved, including

the contingents of Royal Marines who were there to keep order. Each man's participation was to be voluntary, with no intimidation.

Shore leave had not been curtailed but there was an attempted intervention by an officer with the shore patrol who was, in some versions, ejected from the meeting, or else walked out when his efforts proved ineffective. He sustained no injury – despite being 'pelted with beer glasses' in the words of one much later, self-confessedly unreliable oral snippet. (RNM website). Apparently one (legendary) glass was in fact thrown. The meeting broke up in a mood of collective determination and solidarity, reportedly expressed in singing of the Red Flag, 'a socialist song' as the Royal Naval Museum website helpfully informs us. No wonder if there was singing at such a time, and if that song suggested itself. How well they knew the words is not recorded.

Back on HMS *Norfolk*, the ship on which both WIncott and Copeman were serving, men assembled on the common ground of the recreation deck to be hear the plan of action. By this time a realisation that something was going on beyond the expected low-key grumbling had percolated to the (acting) Commander-in-Chief on the spot. He initially reported to the Admiralty that a 'slight disturbance' which 'might 'be reported in an exaggerated form by the press' was still being investigated.

'None of this was done in response to orders'

In an impressive display of dispersed solidarity the sailors on almost all the ships proceeded to strike, as cheering from one to another passed on the message that things were going to plan, such as it was. Only on the *Devonshire* did a popular captain succeed in persuading the intending strikers to change their minds – and oddly enough this is the only recollection of the mutiny which makes it to a book of oral history about the Navy. (Le Breton in Arthur, ed.)

Being on strike didn't mean sitting around idly, although it did free the ratings from their usual routine and above all from having to jump to obey orders. In some respects it was more of a work-in, after all they had little option but to remain in the work-place. Essential tasks were carried out to keep daily life running smoothly and safely: watch was still kept, but in such a way that no individual took the whole of his normal turn. Cooks were considered better able to support the strikers by continuing to feed the men than otherwise. They might even feed the Skipper (on Copeman's ship) but felt the rest of the officers could 'peel their own spuds'. Kenneth Edwards described wonderingly how all necessary work – boats, steam, routine cleaning – was being continued by the men of their own free will: 'None of this was done in response to orders.' (p.264)

The fact that events took a similar course on so many different ships, later taken to confirm the Red Plot theory, was due to the same conditions producing the same result. In one possibly slightly exaggerated estimate 'Similar incidents were taking place on all

fifteen capital ships, until 12,000 seamen and marines had refused duty.' (Woodman, p.251) George Hill, who typed the mutineers' manifesto, confirmed that there was no 'lead ship' as such, no overall leader – and that any such was ruled out on practical grounds in the context of the fleet. (Quoted in Carew, p.161). There was no central handing-down of the line to follow or instructions on tactics to adopt. Copeman saw it as 'A simple affair, worked out in the simple way that comes natural to sailors' using common sense. 'If the masses are with you,' he added, 'no-one can do was to anything about it.' (ibid. p.163)

SAILORS HOLD MASS MEETING ON SHORE

CREWS STATE THEIR GRIEVANCES AGAINST PAY CUTS

Officers, Admirals, Sea Lords and government were soon to realise how little they could do. Royal Marines, although 'sworn men' unlike the ratings, either joined in or allowed things to happen round them; petty officers carried out their own duties without trying to chivy the men back to theirs. Officers, sometimes sympathetic, were trying to fulfil their thankless allotted task of 'explaining' the case for the cuts. The Commander-in-Chief, Rear Admiral Tomkinson, reacted with an intelligent understanding of what was and was not on the cards, for which he was initially commended, but later castigated and scapegoated by his superiors. In successive telegrams he urged the need for a quick decision, advising that the only way to resolve the situation was to announce some concession over the cuts and in the end frankly arguing the justice of the men's case. Obviously neither a mere postponement of the cuts' implementation nor the token undertaking to investigate cases of particular hardship was going to be enough, when so many were going to be so severely affected,

Any attempt to end the strike by force, even if any force could have been relied on, appeared incongruous in view of the determinedly peaceable way it was carried on, as noted by even the least sympathetic commentators, especially considering the policy of treating officers with politeness and respect, strictly no violence. Even when ranted at and abused by one Admiral apparently understudying Captain Bligh of the *Bounty* as portrayed in the movies, the response was merely to ignore such provocation, or laugh and walk away. Edwards (Lt-Comdr RN, Retired) considered the refusal of the men to muster properly to be addressed by officers 'one of the most embarrassing features' of the mutiny; the ordinary seamen, shock-horror; had to met on their own ground and addressed on equal terms.

With the worst will in the world, it was hard afterwards to find heinous deeds with which to tax the sailors. According to Edwards, some young men and boys joined the mutineers 'in a spirit of sheer hooliganism' on two ships in particular and indulged in such bloodthirsty acts as attempting to loot the bookstall. The spectre of the 'chaos of

gang warfare' thus evoked was supposedly exorcised by urgent precautions, i.e. putting revolvers and ammunition out of their way. (No-one suggests the mutineers made any attempt to arm themselves. Rifles and bayonets were left locked up. the only weapons allegedly employed – and those disputably or absurdly – being the famous beer-mug or glass, and in one incident potatoes, directed at a barge). Nevertheless he concludes this was, 'as a whole, one of the most orderly mutinies in history', due entirely to the men's restraint, under their own discipline. (p.264)

The King's Most Loyal Mutineers

The tone of reasonableness was maintained in the 'Manifesto' produced on HMS Norfolk, reportedly drafted by Len Wincott and typed by his friend George Hill (who, far from being intimidated into this action as alleged by some, had such regard for Len that he was present at the scattering of the latter's ashes more than fifty years later). (ODNB) This statement was sent round the fleet by boat, and round the world through press reports, becoming 'infamous' in the view of the order-givers but as conceded even by Edwards, a 'remarkable' document which accurately described the feeling of most of the Navy. Not the most revolutionary of proclamations: radicals may be more inclined to deplore its profession of 'loyalty' (while understanding the motives behind that) than its assertion of determination.

Manifesto

(reprinted in several histories; also on file ADM 178/110)

"We, the loyal subjects of His Majesty the King, do hereby present to My Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty our representations to implore them to amend the drastic cuts in pay that have been inflicted upon the lowest paid man of the lower deck.

It is evident to all concerned that this cut is the forerunner of tragedy, misery and immorality amongst the families of the lower deck, and unless we can be guaranteed a written agreement from the Admiralty, confirmed by Parliament, stating that our pay will be revised, we are still to remain as one unit, refusing to serve under the new rate of pay.

Men are quite willing to accept a cut, which they, the men, consider in reason."

(The allusion to 'immorality' implies that women with no other means of protecting themselves and their children from impoverishment would turn to prostitution.)

They had to hold out for two days until after much fretting and fuming in Whitehall and the Cabinet Office the Admiralty issued a statement agreeing to a review of the new pay scales and promising no victimisation. Characteristically they wound up with a threat of

punitive action if the strike continued, but this could not disguise the fact that the mutineers had gained their stated objective. The king, at Balmoral, was kept informed too, by telegram. His aide reported back on the 17th that 'The King feels, as everyone else does, that there is nothing wrong with the men but that they were taken by surprise before full explanations could be made to them' adding that there was 'no question of a 25% cut'. (The idea of marching on Balmoral – hardly a practical one admittedly although nearer than London as the crow flies – doesn't seem to have occurred to the supposed revolutionaries).

Exercises were cancelled, and the order was for ships of the Fleet to proceed to their home ports. The Daily Herald reported next day that the men had their suspicions about the good faith of this procedure, in case there was a plan to despatch them to a distant station once at sea, and that it took a lot of persuasion, with up to two hours' debate, before they decided to resume normal working. They also had misgivings, well-founded as it turned out, about the supposed guarantee of no reprisals against them or their 'leaders'. In the end, however, all the ships did leave the Firth on Thursday 17th September

The Hunt for Red September

or 'This is In-tell-i-gence speaking...' (*Anyone remember The Navy Lark?)

The refusal to obey orders, not the partial stopping of work in itself, constituted mutiny, and it was the flouting of their authority that maddened the rulers of the King's Navy, irrespective of the justice of the strikers' case or how they behaved under the direction of themselves alone. It was for this that some at least were going to have to pay, one way or another. Revenge was not the only motive for the Sea Lords seeking out the ring-leaders they assumed had to exist, and trying to put a stop to their influence and if possible their Navy careers. Naval Intelligence got busy before the home ports were reached, reporting an intercepted signal from *Norway* to *Nelson* on Saturday: 'Keep your end up, do not forget next Tuesday [22nd] 8 a.m.' This (whether fantasy, wind-up or wishful thinking) was taken to imply 'similar action as at Invergordon'.

The perceived danger of a general mutiny, with the added strength and support of the home ports, prompted the final Cabinet decision and announcement that no pay cut of over 10% would apply to the Services, teachers or police. Within a week of the mutiny starting, its stated objective had been gained. Marvellous to relate, crisis or not, money could be found to keep the sailors' pay at an acceptable level, even if only just; other economies would be made instead. Also, on Monday 21st September Britain came off the gold standard, a measure attributed to the effects on financial markets worldwide of the shock-waves from Invergordon. After all the Navy was there to guarantee the impregnability and permanence of the British Empire...

To find out how such a thing as mutiny could have happened and prevent its renewal in a very aggravated form, His Majesty was informed, 'The War Office organisation known as MI5 has been instructed to investigate'. Special Branch men infested the home ports; constables noted conversations in pubs and dogged footsteps; ratings were interrogated and officers asked to report on exactly what had happened and who was responsible. Both Wincott and the man who regarded him as the arch-villain of the piece, Kenneth Edwards, bring out the absurdity of these goings-on and suggest the men being questioned or having drinks bought for them by dodgy strangers were having a laugh when they played up to the obsessive search for sinister seditious tendencies.

There were serious consequences when Reds were eventually found under the bed, after the 'bed' had been made by the security forces and two leading Reds, prominent Communist Party members George Allison and W G Shepherd, been lured to it in a crude entrapment plot using an informer, as detailed in security files. These two were charged under the Incitement to Mutiny Act and sentenced to 18 months and 3 years penal servitude respectively in November 1931 for trying to spread communism among sailors. Naturally enough the CP had tried to get in on the act when news of the mutiny got around, and were to make much of it in their propaganda for years to come. Everyone in a position to know, from within or outside the party, rejects the idea that the CP – or any other party or political organisation – actually had anything to do with the Invergordon events (e.g. Jacobs, 1978). It was not only the CP which found them a source of inspiration and example in retrospect, however.

We can't hang them from the yardarm, but...

It turned out to be no easy task to identify instigators or subversive elements among the sailors themselves; each captain seemed to think the worst trouble-makers must have been on someone else's ship. Eventually lists were drawn up, and large numbers of men were transferred and dispersed; Three dozen were kept on a punitive 'training course' until the end of the Secret Service investigation, which could have brought a court martial for some if the desired results had been obtained. Failing that, 24 were dismissed the service. the traditional formula being 'Discharge to Shore: Services No Longer Required'. Because no-one was supposed to be disciplined for the two 'days' strike, the pretext was their 'conduct since the Invergordon incident'. On that basis any protests, arguments or appeals were rejected out of hand, as decisions were 'not based on what happened at Invergordon'.

In Fred Copeman and Len Wincott the country lost two sailors and international communism gained two recruits. For each of them, with their chosen career path closed, the CP was a source of support and comradeship. Copeman's chances of alternative employment were scuppered by the Admiralty's responding to enquiries from the National Association for Employment of Regular Soldiers, Sailors and Airmen and

from the Economic League (Lancs. & Cheshire) by describing him as discharged 'for continuing conduct subversive of discipline after the Fleet left Invergordon' and as 'understood to have been acting in the interests of the CP. (File ADM 178/113) He became better known for his part in the Spanish Civil War than for the mutiny.

Wincott was inescapably identified with the latter. In the next two and a half years he was followed everywhere, his movements and activities logged, addresses and contacts noted, mail intercepted, private letters copied and commented on for the files, speeches transcribed. He worked for the International Labour Defence, a CP front organisation which published his pamphlet 'Spirit of Invergordon', spoke at meetings all over the country, and was a party activist in Stepney despite allegedly having reservations about the CP and being regarded in turn as a bit of a maverick. After making a visit to the USSR he moved there permanently in spring 1934, reportedly spending some time in Spain in 1937 assisting volunteers to the International Brigades, and certainly spending a long time in a labour camp after the Second World War as a 'British spy', only returning to his native country in 1974 to promote his autobiography. By then Admiralty files had been released under the 30-year rule so that he was able to refute their version of events, but his personal security files were closed for much longer.

DI Hutchings, Plymouth, to Chief Constable [for MI5]:3-3-32: 'I beg to report that Wincott went to a picture house in this city yesterday afternoon and I understand he was heard to say, "I hope they don't play the bloody King."
— National Archives file ref. KV 2/508

As well as the close observation of the spooks, Wincott's contribution to the mutiny earned him the posthumous distinction of an entry in the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography as probably the only 'naval agitator and expatriate' in that mighty reference work. The author appears sympathetic but faintly disparaging and notably reluctant to give Len credit for writing anything by himself. His autobiography is casually termed 'a ghosted work'; in fact it rings true, inconsistencies, faults and all, as Len's authentic voice and was accepted as such by people who knew him well. (Jacobs 1974) His way with words is well attested, and plenty of photostats of letters on security files (series KV 2) confirm this was not confined to speaking – not to mention the articles he wrote as a CP activist, and later success in earning his living as a translator. The condescension of so many historians, unable to believe in the organising abilities of ordinary people, alone and without a leader, extends to the capacities of individuals among them.

Remembering that September

The Admiralty devoted quantities of words and paper to their own investigations and recriminations, while trying to clamp down on discussion of the Invergordon events, especially within the Navy but also in the press and among the public at large. Thus

they were not best pleased when Edwards' book appeared in 1937 and was widely reviewed. A file was opened to record their criticisms and consider a response (ADM 178/171). The book's 'inaccuracies' were itemised; the author was blamed for these in spite of having requested official information and being refused, and was further blamed for the 'despicable' action of raising the matter at all, and for his 'damaging, hostile and 'misleading', 'unfair and unEnglish' comments on the Admiralty. Nevertheless it was thought best not to write to the papers, but rather 'leave it to settle' as criticising would make more people read the book. Already it was being widely advertised and read, by men of the lower deck; extracts had appeared in nine issues of the *Sunday Express*.

Edwards was far from endorsing the mutineers' strike action and especially the fantasy red-plot scenario he discerned behind it but evidently developed a certain respect for them in the course of his research, as he conspicuously did not do for the Sea Lords. He knew the Navy and his account remains the most detailed, while requiring a health warning about the number of pinches of salt needed to swallow much of it. It was not until 1970 that more histories of the episode began to appear, with benefit of access to official records and with some appreciation of what the mutiny was about although seldom if ever in perfect accord with the recollections of participants, notably those of Wincott and Copeman. Caution is needed in assessing first-hand accounts too, of course, and those two were writing with hindsight after having led lives packed with incident in the meantime and having developed different political perspectives.

Libertarian Content

Despite the widely divergent political views of different commentators, and their disagreements on anecdotal detail, there is remarkable consensus on some key points:

- rightness of the case against the cuts, and absence of any other means of resisting them
- spontaneous nature of the strike, uninfluenced by political parties and with no leaders or instigators other than those whose temperaments and talents brought them to the fore.
- solidity of 'lower deck' support for the action throughout the Fleet.
- collective organisation and decision-making maintaining essential services and doing work considered useful with no reference to orders from on high.
- lack of violence or even serious animosity towards officers, who simply became irrelevant in their order-giving capacity, and refusal to react to threats and bluster from those higher up.

Although, at a guess, there can be little sign of the collective libertarian spirit of Invergordon in the present-day Navy, there may still be hope for something of it to survive, or be revived, in other arenas of struggle.

A shorter version of this article appears in Black Flag No.234, late 2011, pp.17-19 (with some nice pictures).

Sources.

Participants' Accounts

Fred Copeman, Reason in Revolt. London, Blandford Press, 1948. Ch.3 'Mutiny at Invergordon'.

AB 'Ginger' Le Breton in Max Arthur, ed. Lost Voices of the Royal Navy. Hodder 2005: pp.172-4.

Len Wincott, Invergordon Mutineer. Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1974. 183pp.

Oral testimony linked at <http://www.seayourhistory.org.uk/content/view/147/234/1/0/>

History and Comment

Alex Aspden, A short account of a strike... <http://libcom.org/history/1931-invergordon-mutiny>.

Anthony Carew, The Lower Deck of the RN, 1900-1939: the Invergordon Mutiny in perspective, Manchester U P, 1981.

Alan Coles. Invergordon Scapegoat: The Betrayal of Admiral Tomkinson. Alan Sutton, Stroud, 1993. Ch.16, 'Mutiny or Disaffection?' pp.113-131.

David Divine, Mutiny at Invergordon. London, Macdonald, 1970

Kenneth Edwards, Lieutenant Commander, RN (Retired) The Mutiny at Invergordon. London, Putnam, 1937. 425pp.

Alan Ereira, The Invergordon Mutiny: A narrative history of the last great mutiny in the Royal Navy and how it forced Britain off the Gold Standard in 1931. Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981.

John Horsfield, 'Wincott, Leonard (1907–1983), naval agitator and expatriate.' Oxford Dictionary of National Biography (ODNB) 2004..

Review of Wincott (above) by J. J. in *Solidarity: for Workers' Power*, vol. 7, no. 12, November 1974, pp.19-20. See also dispersed comments in Joe Jacobs, *Out of the Ghetto*, London, 1978.

Royal Naval Museum. <http://www.seayourhistory.org.uk/content/view/147/234/1/0/> and 12 following pages [accessed 30-8-11]. Includes brief transcripts from oral accounts.

Dave Sherry, 'Red Letter Days: 15 September 1931. The Invergordon Mutiny'. Issue 244 of Socialist Review September 2000. <http://pubs.socialistreviewindex.org.uk/sr244/sherry.htm>

Richard Woodman, A Brief History of Mutiny. London, Robinson, 2005: pp.244-57. (Relies mostly on Divine 1970, see above, for details).

National Archives

Admiralty files in series ADM 1 and ADM 178 (about a dozen on aspects of the aftermath).

Security files in series KV 2 on Wincott, Copeman, Allison..

Newspaper

Daily Herald, 16 and 17 September 1931, p.1. (Map on front is from No. 4863, 16-9-31).

Back-list of A5 booklets (retrospectively added to this imprint):

As 'Safety' Saw It: Around Stornoway in the 1950s. Articles by Calum Smith.(2009). 56pp. £3

Women in the Spanish Revolution by Liz Willis (2010 edition)16pp. £1.00

What is Libertarian History? by Liz Willis (2011) 12pp. £0.60p

Forthcoming:

Himalayan Encounters: Ladakh 1944. (Notes on a 'Trip' from Srinagar to Khalatse) by Kenneth Behrens.(2011). 20pp. £1.50.

50 copies printed November 2011

Address for correspondence:

SmothPubs (E A Willis),

165 Greenford Ave.,

London W7 1HA, UK

e.a.willis@tinyworld.co.uk

<http://SmothPubs.blogspot.com>

a SmothPubs limited edition