

Tish Collins

Marx Memorial Library Today*

It gives me great pleasure to bring warm, friendly greetings from the Marx Memorial Library in London.

At a time when there is an urgent need to understand and change the world in which we live, it is vital that the works of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels are made available and accessible to current and future generations.

Two years ago, Karl Marx was voted man of the millennium in Britain, a few years before, a pocket edition of the *Communist Manifesto* was in the top ten bestsellers list among British book shops and the recent biography of Marx, written by a popular journalist, was the Christmas best seller. At the same time we were experiencing a resurgence of interest and an increase in readers at the Marx Memorial Library. I was interviewed by such unlikely people as Swedish radio, and the BBC World Service, as well as the top BBC news and current affairs programme, to explain these phenomena. I could think of two major contributory factors:

- a) since the events around 1990 some academic institutions have made available the study of Marxism and communism in the belief that it is safe now “communism is dead”.
- b) some people reacting to the self-first years of the 1980's and 90's (characterised by Margaret Thatcher), see that major world problems are not solved by capitalism but rather, are caused by capitalism, and they therefore, seek an alternative solution. As we know, Marxism offers the only comprehensive system to understand the dynamics of human society – what it is and how it changes.

I am not suggesting that there is a mass revolutionary movement in Britain nor even in the devolved countries of Scotland, and Wales. However, there is a groundswell of opposition in all our countries to monopoly and globalisa-

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tion. It started at home with campaigns against the poll tax, then the export of live veal calves, then opposition to trees being pulled down to make way for roads. A number of protesters brought into struggle in these campaigns have become politicised but outside the traditional trade union and labour movement.

Our aim at the Marx Memorial Library is to provide materials to further the study of Marxism, the science of socialism and the history of working class movements. We provide the books and leave it up to the readers to draw their own conclusions. The Library is not party political and is non-sectarian and, since 1974 has been a registered educational charity – a not for profit organisation.

Karl Marx with his family, and Friedrich Engels settled in Britain in the summer of 1849. It is often said that Marx learned his philosophy in Germany, his politics in France and economics in England. Marx also captured the spirit of our capital city wonderfully, calling London “this heart of a heartless world”. Most of his time in London was spent reading, researching, discussing and corresponding with like minded revolutionaries. When he arrived, aged 32, Marx probably thought London would be a brief safe haven as he had moved variously through western Europe for the previous decade. However, that was not to be and he remained in London until his death in 1883.

The Marx Memorial Library

Marx Memorial Library was established in 1933 on the 50th anniversary of the death of Karl Marx. A conference was organised by the London labour movement in March 1933 with delegates from the Communist Party, the Labour Party, the trade unions, trades councils and co-operative movement. A report was given, indicating that in Hitler’s Germany fascists were burning progressive books in the streets. As a reaction to such acts of barbarism and the belief that you cannot kill ideas –it was unanimously agreed that the most appropriate memorial to Marx would be a library of books.

The delegates formed a fund raising committee and purchased premises for the new Library which opened a few months later in October 1933 with 4,000 donated books.

Originally it was known as the Marx Memorial Library and Workers’ School providing a full programme of Marxist education with faculties of Political Economy, Economics and History. During the year 1939, over 4,000 students took classes at the Workers’ School.

About 1950 it was decided to concentrate on developing the library facilities and close the Workers School. However, to this day we still provide public lectures in the spring and autumn and we publish two editions of the *Bulletin* each year.

As an independent subscription library we rely on voluntary contributions from members and friends to finance us. Individual subscription rates are very low so as not to exclude readers on the grounds of cost. The Library currently has over 900 members and about 50 affiliated organisations – such as trade unions – branches and headquarters, universities and other institutions such as the House of Commons and the House of Lords. Last year we had more than 400 reader-visits and over 700 visitors to the Library.

So, why do people come to our Library? We have a substantial collection of early and special editions of the works of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, including the *Communist Manifesto* in most of the major and some of the more obscure world languages and our prize possessions – volumes of *Das Kapital* dedicated to Sam Moore by Friedrich Engels. Most of the contents have been donated as there have rarely been surplus funds with which to purchase books but nevertheless,

Marx Memorial Library



Marx Memorial Library, Clerkenwell Green, London. Founded 1933.

The House on the Green...
*a Radical History of
Clerkenwell*

an impressive range and depth of material has been assembled over the years. We are not a museum but very much a working library.

The Marx Memorial Library covers the whole range of radical, socialist, communist, trade union, labour and co-operative movements. Our book stock is in the region of 150,000 volumes, mainly in English. However, we also collect major Marxist texts and histories of workers parties and movements in their original languages. There are thousands of books written in German, French, Italian, Spanish, Russian and other European languages.

Students, researchers and those making background notes for political meetings use our facilities to read on social issues, social movements or life and conditions in former socialist countries. They can use contemporary publications, movement journals as well as original works. It is particularly pleasing to see members join in order to read what Karl Marx actually wrote rather than how he has been interpreted or misrepresented by others.

There is a broad collection of memoirs and biographies of labour and socialist leaders, many unpublished; there is also a wide variety of trade union histories. We have unique collections (in Britain) of publications of the First, Second and Third Internationals as well as Socialist and left wing journals from the 1840's to the present day. As may be expected, the Library also has strong representation of national liberation struggles, particularly in former British colonies. The general pamphlet collection contains some 50,000 titles; and the periodicals and journals range from Anarchists' *Freedom* to *World Marxist Review*, via the suffragettes and the Fabian Society

In addition to our main subject area we have several specialisations: –

The emphasis of the James Klugmann Collection is on early Radicals and Chartists – material from the English Civil War of the 1640's to the end of the nineteenth century. These rare and valuable printed materials, and political ceramics of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, came to us from the Marxist theoretician James Klugmann.

The Library is very pleased to have the Archive of the International Brigades Association which forms the largest collection in the world on the Spanish Civil War and the Aid Spain Movement. This is the most used section of the Library and attracts researchers from all over the globe.

John Williamson bequeathed us a marvellous collection on the left and progressive movement of the United States. Ranging from the 1920's to the mid-1970's, it includes the early civil rights campaigns.

The Bernal Peace Collection includes both national and international initiatives for peace and disarmament. And, although most of the collection is

centred on the Cold War period, the earliest peace congress documents we have date back to 1908.

The Library is used by undergraduates, postgraduates, academics, journalists, trade unionists and politicians. Some will join for just one year when they are working on a particular project; others from out of London join to support the Library's existence even though they rarely or never come to use it. However, we regularly have members and visitors from all over the world.

In 1997 we received a substantial grant from the national lottery to help with the refurbishment of the building and catalogue the collections. The building work is finished and we are nearly half way through the cataloguing project. We receive funding for 75% of the salaries of four professional cataloguers for three years. Such assistance to our library was exceptional and we do not receive any other form of state or official financial support. So far 18,000 pamphlets have been catalogued and over the next few months will be put on the World Wide Web as an On-line Public Access Catalogue which we hope will be of benefit to researchers everywhere.

How is the Library organised?

As I have said, it is a membership library. Thus for a modest fee, members can use all the facilities, receive the *Bulletin* and participate in the democracy of the organisation. The Annual General Meeting of members elects one third of the 15-strong committee per year – members tend to serve for three years and then are eligible to stand again thus allowing for continuity and change. In turn the Committee appoints trustees and staff – the Librarian, and the Secretary are full-time and there is a part-time library assistant. The Library also relies on volunteers to carry out many of the more routine tasks and elected members keep the library open on one late night and Saturday mornings. The Committee meets monthly and the Librarian is responsible for the overall charge and running of the Library on a day-to-day basis.

The *Bulletin* is published twice per annum, containing the texts of lectures given at the Library, news, items of interest, information and book reviews. Over the years a number of seminal works have been reported in its pages.

Donations of books arrive continuously, sometimes more than we can handle. Therefore, we have Book sales twice a year. These have the three important functions of raising money, creating space and at least as important, re-circulating Marxist texts to new generations of readers. Many of the books are out of print and we are able to offer them to members and the public at very reasonable prices. We are also in the process of sorting our substantial

periodical collections and may send a list of surplus publications to other institutions. For example, we would also be able to help complete sets of journals such as *Labour Monthly*.

The public lectures are advertised in the left press but also the popular weekly magazine *Time Out*, which is mainly read by students. This year, being the centenary of Lenin's first visit to London and to our building, there is an emphasis on Lenin. However, coming up in June we shall have a lecture on "The discussion of the "Women's Question" in the time of Marx and Engels."

This spring we have started some basic Marxist education classes which have attracted about 20 participants for each so far.

Perceiving the need to counter some of the rampant anti-Marxist propaganda we are preparing an education pack on Karl Marx and Marxism aimed at 16-18 year old school students. This will take the form of a resource pack and intends to provide an accessible basic guide and indications for further study. We want to get away from the idea that "Karl Marx may have had some interesting things to say but *Das Kapital* is far too complicated so don't even try to read him."

The last exhibition organised was for the 150th anniversary of the publication of the *Communist Manifesto*. Currently in preparation is an exhibition of Lenin in London.

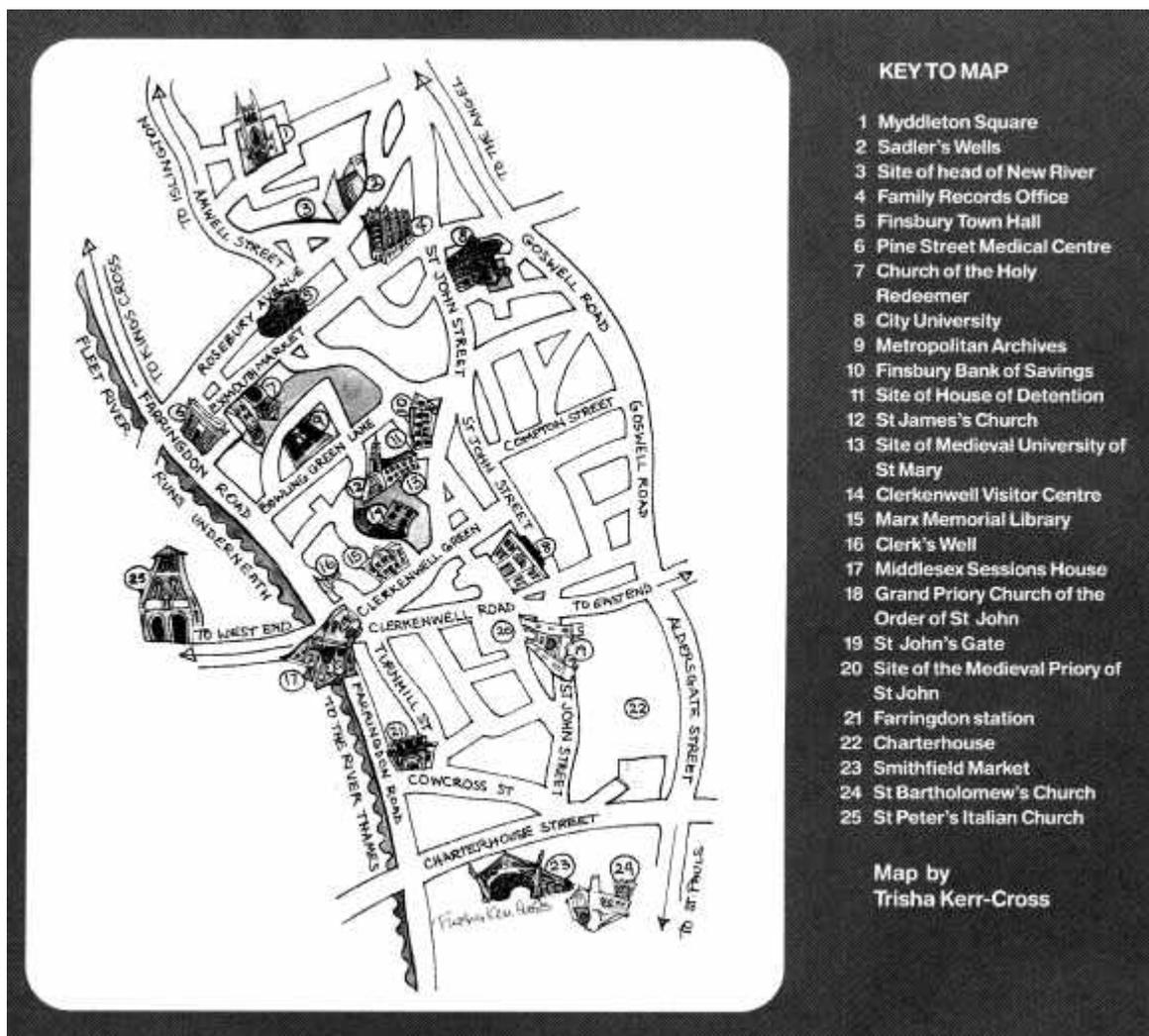
Historic building

One of the delights of the Marx Memorial Library is that it is housed in such a historically significant building. The actual house was built in 1737 as a charity school for the children of poor artisans.

From the mid-nineteenth century, when the area of London called Clerkenwell was a centre of working-class and democratic agitation, the house played a key role in radical and socialist activity.

The London Patriotic Society, a radical pressure group for democratic reform, including votes for women, and in which Eleanor Marx was an active participant, had premises here for twenty years from 1872.

The first socialist press and publishing house, the Twentieth Century Press moved here, with assistance from the English socialist, William Morris, in 1892. The Twentieth Century Press was owned by the Social Democratic Federation which was the first Marxist socialist party in Britain (from 1883). They published their own newspaper *Justice*, some of the first English translations of works by Marx and Engels and provided a facility for the emerging trade union, socialist and co-operative associations.



The Clerkenwell Area, No. 15 Marx Memorial Library

The Russian Social-Democratic Labour Party newspaper, *Iskra*, was printed here during the year 1902-1903 as Lenin was invited to share the office of Harry Quelch, the editor of *Justice* and director of the Twentieth Century Press.

By the way, during the recent refurbishment we discovered the linoleum that lay on the floor in this office whilst Lenin was working there. We have preserved a piece for Library history and are selling small patches of the lino framed for £100 to raise funds and give people a "souvenir", a direct connection with the past. This is one of our more innovative ways of raising money.

The connection with Lenin and the SDF are the reasons that it was suggested that the old house on Clerkenwell Green should be purchased for the Marx Memorial Library back in 1933.

I have attended meetings and lectures and used the Library since I was a mere child in 1969, I was appointed to the staff in 1988. I am still impressed

with the materials we have but would like to see them better used and am striving to make them more accessible. It is to the credit of the labour movement that the Marx Memorial Library has survived some very difficult years. Of course there is plenty of room for improvement but, when so many of the old certainties have gone, I am proud that I am able to say that I represent the Marx Memorial Library of London

Thus, you will understand that our Library exists to be a useful working tool for the study of Marxism. Marxism can be an academic discipline but it is also a creative system to analyse times and events and it provides a guide to response and action. In order to construct their future, people have to understand their past.

To paraphrase Karl Marx: “philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways, the point, however, is to change it.”

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