

Sword of Damocles

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Rob Edwards,
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In November 2022, there was a webinar hosted by the Nuclear Information Service to commemorate John Ainslie's work and to launch his archive. This is a partial transcript.

Trish Whitham: I am the coordinator of the Nuclear Information Service and also the project manager for the Ainslie Archive, a work in progress that's available online. The archive project was enabled by donations from a great many individuals as well as some grants, covering the costs of scanning, categorising and uploading John's vast archive. It has also covered the cost of the website work we've had to do, with about a thousand documents available and many, many more to come. There are some interesting stories coming, after which the event will be opened up for discussion and further contributions.

Our first speaker is Janet Fenton. Janet worked closely with John Ainslie for many years. She's currently secretary of the Scottish Parliament Disarmament Cross Party Group, organiser of the Secure Scotland Core Group and Vice Chair of Scottish CND. She's worked with Acronym Institute, Peace and Justice Scotland and the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons. Janet is a co-founder of Secure Scotland and a member of Trident Ploughshares.

Janet Fenton: It was my pleasure and an honour to work with John Ainslie. I've been thinking and thinking and I can't actually remember when I first met him. I think that's partly because he was such a modest and unassuming person. I might well have met him when he was staffing a stall somewhere or envelope stuffing in the office. But certainly on the initial meeting, you would never imagine that you were bumping into somebody who was such a powerhouse in terms of his capacity as a researcher. And you certainly wouldn't

think that you were meeting a minister of the Church of Scotland or an arrested activist, somebody who had jumped in a canoe to buzz Trident submarines coming up the Clyde. John was a man of enormous passion for our work on disarmament. He seemed to be able to slip from one identity to another very readily.

I remember on one occasion having to call at his home to either give him something or collect something. He was in the kitchen, standing at the ironing board with a bunch of t-shirts for teddies, ironing CND symbols onto the front. Obviously on that day this seemed like an important task to John. But you could also meet him running after Brian Coyle, making sure that he got the photographs of nuclear convoy activity.

At one point my daughter, Mary, was resident at the Faslane Peace Camp around the time of the International Court of Justice ruling on nuclear weapons. People were putting their arms in concrete ‘lock-ons’ – a bit of a rarity then, but more familiar now. My daughter was doing that and she somewhat nervously ‘locked-on’ at the South Gate of the base. The police were not really aware of ‘lock-ons’ at the time and started to move her in a slightly dangerous fashion. She remembered that somebody had said to shout for cameras if that happened and she shouted for cameras. Mary looked above her head and there was John Ainslie, up a tree, taking photographs of her.

John’s work as the administrator of Scottish CND was incomparable, really, partly because he was very idiosyncratic in the way that he did the job. When I spoke about him chasing convoys or chasing Brian Coyle chasing convoys, the thing with John was that he was not only the kind of activist who would perform imaginatively and quickly in that situation to take direct action. At the same time, he would also have a really careful note of every single vehicle that was in the convoy, what it meant and and what it was likely to be carrying.

His research on the UK’s nuclear weapons system was a hugely important part of the international disarmament campaign, which he followed very closely. It was very common that you would walk into the office at lunchtime and John would be eating his sandwiches and at the same time he’d be watching either the parliamentary process or what was happening at the United Nations on the internet. He was able to provide hugely effective and useful briefings for people who were travelling to those kinds of meeting and doing their best to take the campaign forward in that particular way. His briefings could be about simple campaigning activity for new volunteers, or they could be at a very high level of technical expertise, or from a very politically astute understanding of the ramifications of what was happening at the UN and around the world.

I remember asking when he decided to stop being a church minister and start being involved with all this anti-nuclear weapons activity. He looked at me rather strangely and said that “once you’re a minister of the Church of Scotland, if you’ve been ordained as a minister of the Church of Scotland, that’s it.” I realised that he felt there was not any confusion between those two roles.

I had the privilege of spending a week with John in a residential learning situation in northern France. We also spent a week doing the Rowntree Peace Leadership Programme and that was another opportunity to really get to know John in a different kind of way and for all of us to understand and learn together.

He was very keen always to express the very particular Scottish input to nuclear disarmament in a global way and really understood the very unique position Scotland is in with regard to that. He was very strongly behind Scotland’s peace initiative and he had his own style of dividing these different areas of work. John always maintained that the research work that he did was quite separate from his role as coordinator of Scottish CND.

I’m looking forward to hearing from Rob Edwards because I really don’t understand how somebody became so expert in getting information from people using Freedom of Information rules, sending questions to America and Canada before that was a possibility in the UK. I also feel that it’s very important to make clear how important the nuclear issue was to John for very, very basic reasons. He was such a strong family man. His love for his family and the attention that he paid to his family, his sharing the joy and pleasure of his adventures and work with his son, Duncan, with those of us who were around him, was very significant. John was devastated by the loss of Duncan, but didn’t change his approach to the work in any way.

In one of his last interviews, John talked about children’s hospitals in Moscow and spoke very movingly about the possible impact of the UK’s nuclear weapons policy on those hospitals. The humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons was always at the heart of John’s view of these things.

Trish Witham: Thanks very much for sharing that with us. What a multi-talented person. So now we’re going to move on to Rob Edwards. Rob has been a freelance environmental journalist and nuclear muckraker for more than 40 years. He’s written for the *New Scientist*, *The Guardian*, *Scotland on Sunday*, *Sunday Herald* and many others. He’s now a journalist with *The Ferret*, an award winning platform for investigative journalism in Scotland. He also worked very closely with John Ainslie over many years.

Rob Edwards: Thank you very much. And thank you, Janet, for your words about John, all of which I would endorse. I knew and worked with John for a long time, many decades. It's an honour, a privilege, to be here to pay tribute to him and his work and to tell a few stories about him, which is essentially what I'm going to do.

I've been a journalist for more than 40 years now and for a lot of that time in all the bowels of freelance writing about nuclear matters. It was a particular interest of mine, as it was of John's.

The first thing I want to say is, as a journalist, without your sources, you're nothing. Without your contacts, without the people you speak to or the people who speak to you, then there's nothing to write. There's nothing to know, there are no stories to be done because without sources, without contacts, you can't do your job.

So the trouble is that the longer you go on, the more valuable sources become ill and die. When John died in 2016, he deprived the movement of one of its most effective operators. When he died, the tributes came from all over the place, from CND and others in the peace movement. But there were also tributes from Nicola Sturgeon, Jeremy Corbyn (leader of the Labour Party at the time), the Scottish Greens and many others. They all said very nice things about John after he died.

His death also left me without the best source of stories I've ever had on nuclear weapons. I tried to figure out this morning how many times I've quoted John in stories, but I didn't have time to count them all. There are hundreds, literally hundreds of stories over the years in which he played a role. I'm just going to refer to a few highlights to give an indication of the kind of things he was doing.

For example, in 2013, there was a story in *The Guardian* that was entirely founded on a report that John had written, which basically argued that Trident submarines could not be shifted from Faslane on the Clyde to Devonport on the south coast of England. John had discovered that Devonport didn't have the correct safety clearances and would be unlikely to get them. So of course that story is very important in the whole debate about the role of Trident post-Scottish independence, which is why he wrote the report.

John was always ahead of the game, immediately realising that it was a possibility that if Scotland voted for independence, Trident would have to be moved. He immediately started assessing the possibility of where it could move to and became really expert on the options and how none of them quite worked out from all sorts of points of view.

Another story from 2011 was done with *The Guardian* and Channel Four News. John had done a Freedom of Information request – which he

was an expert at – to the Ministry of Defence, and this unearthed a very heavily censored report revealing in essence that the reactors that run on nuclear submarines were potentially vulnerable to a fatal nuclear accident and failed to meet modern safety standards. That was a report known at the time as the MacFarlane report, which was written by a senior submarine person in the MoD and really exposed for the first time and in much detail, the kind of dangers that we were risking by running these old, clapped out, not very well designed submarine reactors.

The footnote to that is that after we did the story, John came to me and said he'd realised that his version of this MacFarlane report had been very poorly redacted. Large sections of text that were blacked out, but if you simply cut and pasted them into a Word document or another document, you could reveal all the hidden text. That's a kind of schoolboy information error that's been made several times by the Ministry of Defence and other government departments, where they don't do the redaction properly. This caused something of a palaver at the time. Along with others, John decided to publish the full version of the report, showing in more detail how UK nuclear submarines were unsafe and the sailors who worked in them were more at risk of having an accident and dying at sea. That was a big story at the time and it wouldn't have been possible without John.

Another important story was in *New Scientist* in 2008. John had been doing an awful lot of research in the US archives, where there was more freedom of information on nuclear issues than there ever has been in the UK. Here he discovered that the US was experiencing problems with a mysterious but vital component of the Trident warhead known as Fog Bank. It's never really been nailed down as far as I'm aware. Fog Bank is suspected of being a highly flammable and explosive foam in the warheads. Because of the research he'd done, we were able to reveal that the US and the UK were having a problem with its Fog Bank when they were trying to extend its life in 2006.

Here's a story from *The Sunday Herald*. John got hold of a leaked Ministry of Defence 'wargaming' scenario. So there was to be a big military exercise in Scotland. It was quite funny, in a sort of dark way, because the Ministry of Defence renamed Scotland 'Brown Air' for the purposes of the scenario. At the time they said that was nothing to do with the fact that Gordon Brown was about to become Prime Minister. It was just the colour they chose. The scenario also invented a sinister terrorist group in the Inner Hebrides. I can remember John laughing as he was explaining all this to me on the phone.

Another story from 2010. I was involved in challenging the Ministry of

Defence to release the Annual Nuclear Safety Report. John was one of those who helped me. He did a great deal of work along with others for no money whatsoever, so that we could challenge the decision of the military not to release these Annual Nuclear Safety Reports. Rather unexpectedly, we won at the last minute when they backed down, resulting in the annual safety reports being revealed. This gave us an unprecedented insight into the problems they thought they were facing, mainly to do with staff shortages and skill shortages. But then in 2017, the committee retrenched, made three reports secret, and it all went dark again. The rules for Freedom of Information were taken up by Peter Burt, who has since challenged the Committee on Secrecy, so far unsuccessfully.

Another story that John was involved with, which was very big at the time, was another *Guardian* and Channel Four thing in 2009. He was, along with others and me, involved in doing a co-ordinated Freedom of Information request to various organisations in Scotland to try and find out more about environmental problems at Fastlane. This ended up revealing that according to documents the Scottish Protection Agency released at the time, there had been a series of previously unreported leaks of radioactive coolant from submarine reactors into the Clyde in 2004, 2007, 2008. We have been less successful since then at finding out such things.

This is the last story. It is one of the biggest stories I've ever been involved with and probably one of the most important. It wouldn't have happened without John and it was a front page splash in the *The Sunday Herald* in 2015. The introduction to the story said Trident submarines are plagued by serious safety lapses, beset by multiple blunders, and are a disaster waiting to happen, according to a nuclear weapons engineer turned whistleblower, now hunted by the police. The whistleblower was, of course, William McNeilly, a Royal Navy man on HMS *Victorious*, who was subsequently arrested and then dishonourably discharged by the Navy.

The week before that story broke was probably one of the most memorable in my journalistic career. As I said, none of it would have happened without John. I was remembering why this morning. The reason why is that he read his emails. I mean, he didn't just read his emails. He *really* read his emails, which I suspect not all of us do. John and many others, including me, had been sent emails by William McNeilly, linking to a long report he'd written about his time on HMS *Victorious* and about the problems that he had witnessed and had been part of. But it was John who read it first, grasped its significance and called me and highlighted it and started the ball rolling. I, of course, then had to go to the Ministry of Defence to see whether this was true, whether he existed and what had happened. And for days, the MOD failed to get back to me. I can

remember late on a Friday night not knowing whether we had a story for that Sunday's paper or not. And then at the very last minute, the MOD got back to me, confirmed that McNeilly had been a member of the Royal Navy and had absconded and they were looking for him and, in essence, confirming a story. Then we were able to run the front page splash about it. None of that would have happened if it hadn't been for John's diligence. That's how I remember him. He was diligent in the extreme and he really cared for facts and honesty, which I think admirable traits.

Final thought? A personal note. I mean, aside from his diligence, the thing I most admired about John was his diffidence. Janet mentioned this. A lot of those people who seek out journalists are the opposite of diffident, they want to be quoted. They want to have their names in the papers. They want, in some way or another, to promote themselves. I have dealt with many people who would fall into that category. But that was never the case with John. He was self-effacing, absolutely shy. He never sought the limelight.

Trish Whitham: We now have Tim Street. Tim is a board member at Nuclear Information Service, and he's also Secretary of British Pugwash. He's been working on peace and disarmament issues since 2005 and has been very closely involved in the digitising and publishing of John Ainslie's Research Archive. He has also worked with Campaign Against the Arms Trade, the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons, the British-American Security Information Council, Oxford Research Group, Conscience, the Campaign to Stop Killer Robots and Drone Wars UK.

Tim Street: I was lucky to meet John in 2010 in Scotland when I started working for ICAN. I went up to Scotland to a talk at the Scottish Trades Union Congress. I took away a lot from that meeting. John picked me up from the station and as has been said, he was very diffident, a shy, unassuming, just a very nice, warm person. You quickly realise that you're dealing with someone with hidden depths, shall we say. John was very warm and lovely and kind and thoughtful, but also a great researcher. He asked the right questions. I feel like I've got a bit of a grasp on nuclear issues having worked on it for a few years. But then you go back to John's publications and you think, "Wow", because he had a really different level of understanding of the technical issues, which takes hours and hours of persistent study and dogged determination to develop. John was impressive both as a person and as a researcher.

I'm very honoured to be working on John's archive. For the last year or so, working with the members of the NIS team, we have been digitising

the archive. We are about three quarters of the way through that and have uploaded thousands of his documents to the website. His archive contains documents relating to nuclear weapons that were collected over several decades. The information comes from a wide range of sources, including official US and UK government files, as well as some Russian documents. There's also activist correspondence, civil society reports, photos, graphs, newsletters and media articles. Working on the archive is very interesting for the insights it provides on how John approached the issues, how he found his way in and what his focus was, the way he thought about them, what he found interesting.

His archive covers things like the UK-US special nuclear relationship and the Mutual Defence Agreement, as well as preparations in the UK in the 1980s for civil defence in the event of a nuclear attack. These questions are being raised again today.

The archive includes original documents from the fifties and sixties, so John also had an historical interest in issues in the National Archives, such as the nitty-gritty of how British strategy on nuclear planning came to be. That includes the Moscow criterion and how many nuclear weapons would be needed to obliterate Moscow and its leadership. It also includes the geography and importance of the many nuclear weapons installations in the UK, mapping what nuclear facilities and associated installations and technical facilities are in the UK, which is again a very hidden or often invisible aspect of the US-UK nuclear special relationship. We've taken measures to make the archive website as accessible as possible. We're going to keep on trying to tell the story that John put together in the most accessible way of all.

I wanted to talk really briefly about what the 'Sword of Damocles' means. Then I'll talk about what we can do. John's website was called 'The Sword of Damocles', and it was the home to many of his publications which we are trying to get back online. In the ancient parable, The Sword of Damocles refers to the predicament of the very powerful, surrounded by enemies. Their lives are full of anxiety and paranoia, and they labour under the constant fear of attack and death. At the onset of the nuclear age, the Sword of Damocles came to refer to the existential dangers looming over us all. And there is a particularly strange and cruel twist to the parable, because the people of the world don't have the power of kings or their riches. Yet we are condemned to live with the daily threat of extinction. The very powerful rule the world through nuclear terror, which they like to call 'national security', and the 'global rules based order' that risks destroying everything. This must lead people to ask, 'how can we extricate ourselves from this situation?' This is a question John's work directly

seeks to answer and contributes to answering.

In October 2022, US President Joe Biden commented that the risk of Armageddon is at its highest level since the Cuban Missile Crisis. During that crisis probability of nuclear war might have been as high as 50%. US Defence Secretary, Robert McNamara, recognised that it was only luck that prevented nuclear war. In 1962 the US would not tolerate Soviet missiles in Cuba providing a ‘deterrent’ against invasion. Today, Russia won’t tolerate NATO expanding to its borders and stationing offensive missiles with very short flight times to Moscow. The big picture is that the longer the Ukraine conflict, following Putin’s illegal invasion, drags on the greater the possibility of miscalculation involving Russia. This risks escalation, with a huge deployment of conventional weapons and the risk of nuclear use at a time when national resources should be focused on the climate crisis.

The Ukraine conflict has also led to soaring military spending. Liz Truss committed to an extra £157 billion in defence spending, which, if the UK Government goes ahead with that pledge, would mean an annual defence budget of £100 billion in 2030. In terms of Trident, the estimated total costs of replacing it between 2019 and 2027 are at least £172 billion. Meanwhile, the US is set to spend more than \$1 trillion over the next 30 years on developing a new range of nuclear weapons. So we are clearly in a very dangerous, unstable, militarising situation. We really need to be heading in the opposite direction.

We need many, many people to be dedicated and to have the tools and the courage and curiosity that people like John had. John’s example was to focus on democracy, transparency and accountability. He made nuclear weapons visible and intelligible. He provided clear and coherent proposals in direct, clear language on how to get rid of Trident.

I want to end by thinking how we get rid of Trident? How can we think and what we can do? The way I look at it is to try and think through – to mentally construct – and link how the conflict in Ukraine could end, how that would impact what happens in the UK, how we eventually get a nuclear-weapons-free world, and think what could I do to help contribute even a little bit to making that a little bit more possible. If you get to start thinking about that or find it difficult, then check out John’s work and he’ll provide you with inspiration and ideas on what to do.

Trish Whitham: Thanks a lot, Tim. It’s nice to end on a hopeful note of what we can do. Peter Burt is our next speaker. Peter was the programme director of the Nuclear Information Service for a number of years.

Peter Burt: Thank you so much for arranging this session today. How

lovely it's been to hear all the stories of John and bring back all the memories. I think this is a really special occasion and I'm very grateful to you for your work in arranging this.

I was working quite closely with John about ten years ago when I was with NIS. We spoke maybe two or three times a week on the phone. I was fortunate to meet John for the first time at the Joseph Rowntree Peace Leadership event that Janet mentioned at the beginning of the session. And of course, that was the first time that I met Janet as well. And that set up quite a nice little alliance between us all to go forward and do some quite exciting work together in the weeks and months and years after that.

People have mentioned the Freedom of Information research that John did over the years. I'd like to draw attention to some of the other stuff that John did as well, because, as you may know, John had many other remarkable things he'd done in his life. It all started in the military, and I believe he was in the signals side of things and had some knowledge and some background in intelligence. I think he probably used all his intelligence skills in the research work he did.

So, for example, he was always willing – as well as sitting behind a desk and studying – to get out there and put his boots on the ground, get out there in the field to get real life evidence. If you look on the Scottish CND websites, you can find video footage that he took of HMS Vanguard limping into Faslane after the collision that it had in 2009 with a French submarine in the Bay of Biscay. On many occasions, he went out to spot the nuclear convoys and film them. He also had many, many sources as well. I'd like to remind you of some of the early work that John did, which people haven't perhaps spoken about so much yet.

Back in the early 1990s, the UK submarine fleet was undergoing real problems when cracks developed in the reactors in crucial parts of the pipework. John was able to reveal that and blow the whistle due to his sources, his whistleblowers inside the Faslane base. If you look at the archive, then you'll find a report, *Cracking Under the Pressure*, that tells the story and gives some of the information that the whistleblowers passed on to John.

John put together *The Future of the British Bomb* in 2006 with the WMD Awareness Project. I think that to this day, that is still one of the definitive papers explaining how Britain's bomb works and how the Trident programme works. If you look at the footnotes to that paper, then you'll get an idea of the absolutely meticulous and painstaking way that John went about doing his research. You'll see that he travels through hundreds and hundreds of contacts in the United States to get all the details about flight control software and missile procurement. And he also went

through dozens and dozens of online job adverts of the Atomic Weapons Establishment to get an idea of what the scientists there were working on and what the status of the programme was.

So he really did use all his skills to put together various research notes and research papers. I think another paper which he put together, which hasn't been mentioned so much – but which in my opinion was absolutely the most important piece of work that he ever did – was a paper called *Dismantling Trident*. He put this together to show how the UK Trident missiles could be dismantled in the event of a decision by the government to disarm. He showed that it was really a very simple matter that could take place literally over a period of months, if not less, to disarm the warheads taken off submarines and start decommissioning again at the Atomic Weapons Establishment. That was a hugely valuable piece of work.

I think it's important to recognise the work that John did after Scottish CND decided that it was going to support the Yes Scotland campaign about ten years or so ago. John played an important part in pushing nuclear disarmament and the demand that Trident should leave Scotland to the centre of the Yes Scotland campaign.

I'm sure if John was sitting here listening to us go on, he would be cringing and would be very, very embarrassed about the kind and fulsome tributes that we're paying to him. Because as we've heard, he was very modest and very self-effacing. But I think it's impossible to underestimate the commitment that he gave to nuclear disarmament in this country during his much appreciated life.

Trish Whitham: Thank you, Peter. That was really interesting. I didn't know about the intelligence aspect and that helps to explain the meticulousness of his research. Alan Charlton is our next contributor.

Alan Charlton: I'd like to endorse everything that's been said about John. When I think of John, the memory that comes back to me immediately is of the time when a group of us were out on the little boat that we used to hire to go up the Firth of Clyde to do some protesting. John was in his inflatable beside the boat being followed very closely by three MoD inflatables, navy high powered ones. There were obviously MoD personnel on it. It was quite intimidating, actually, because they're all in these wet suits with balaclavas and they're holding the long range camera lenses over their shoulders. They were chasing John and John manoeuvred in and out of the way. But eventually they managed to corner him, took the inflatable over, and John got dunked in the water. He was arrested and charged, and a few weeks later he was in front of a Sheriff in Dumbarton.

And what the MoD didn't understand was that the Sheriff, I'm not sure if he was a member of CND or was sympathetic, dismissed the charges against John and suggested that the Admiralty should be charged with endangering life. John found that quite amusing. He was just such a humble man and he embodied the virtues that I think are so important: courage with compassion and capability. His sense of humour was wonderful as was his sense of adventure. I believe that one of the last things he said when he was preparing for his own death was that he was just embarking on the next big adventure. And that said it all about John. I'll never forget him. Thank you.

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Webinar
The Sword of
Damocles
Reflections on the life
and work of nuclear
researcher and
activist John Ainslie

With Janet Fenton, Scottish CND;
Tom Unterrainer, Bertrand Russell Peace
Foundation; Rob Edwards, investigative journalist;
and Dr Tim Street, NIS.

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