

# Housmans

## *A personal tribute*

Ross Bradshaw

Housmans Bookshop in London and I go back a long way. I would visit it on my occasional trips to London in the 1970s, but also subscribed to ‘Housmans Peace Packets’ — a monthly parcel of leaflets for events I could not get to (I was living in rural Aberdeenshire) and conferences I could only dream about, organised by groups such as the Peace Pledge Union, the Fellowship of Reconciliation, and the attractively named Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom. The packages also included pamphlets from these and all sorts of other peace organisations.

I learned a lot and yearned more. So I joined the PPU and, thanks to a table of literature at Aberdeen People’s Press, a local radical magazine and print set-up, I came across *Peace News* (PN) and the anarchist magazine *Freedom*.

*Peace News*, based in the Housmans building, became my favourite magazine, which I would start contributing to. And Aberdeen developed a *Peace News* support group.

I became a customer at Housmans initially when Harry Mister was in charge. Compared to my scruffy, youthful hippy appearance, Harry was definitely an old man in a suit but, more importantly, he was an activist entrepreneur. In his *Guardian* obituary, the now also late Howard Clark sketched out Harry Mister’s importance to Housmans, *Peace News* and the wider peace movement.\* Harry had the idea that if Housmans stocked large amounts of stationery, local Kings Cross businesses would put their money into the peace movement. People were selling that

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stationery for many years afterwards. Howard Clark's obituary drew attention to the large number of groups which were based at 5 Caledonian Road. Was it really true that a group called Peace Action London met there at the same time as London Action for Peace or was this an urban myth? I hope it was true.

Among the groups who did meet at Caledonian Road was London Greenpeace, no relation to Greenpeace. London Greenpeace was a small direct action group which achieved fame for its campaign against McDonalds, more fame when Helen Steel and Dave Morris won the 'McLibel' case, and even more recent fame when it was revealed that some of the group were police infiltrators, one of whom was involved in writing the McDonalds leaflet.\*\*

Despite, or perhaps because of, Aberdeen's remoteness, there was a plethora of left organisations and alternative businesses. As well as *Aberdeen People's Press*, there was an environmental magazine, *Aether*, whose team also ran a wholefood stall in the market. There was a wholefood shop, a city farm, Jaws wholefood cafe, a youth advice centre, Boomtown Books, with a very active Aberdeen Libertarian Socialist Group (in those days, libertarian was a left-wing word). The ALSG, amongst other things, organised what might well have been the first gay rights demonstration in Scotland, years before partial decriminalisation of gay relationships. An older type of politics was represented by the Aberdeen Peace Council, under the leadership of Ray Newton. Whereas the rebuilt CND and the non-violent revolutionaries had the Young Communist League as members and colleagues, the older communists were closer to the Peace Council. You can work out why.

One odd occasion in our world was the appearance of the Aberdeen Chief Constable — and his wife! — who came to the Aberdeen non-violence study group to talk about conflict reduction in police training. He knew he was talking to people who believed in breaking unjust laws. In passing, he promised us that if police in the UK became generally armed — there was a contemporary discussion about that — he would immediately resign. He never asked for 'Chatham House rules' — we all talked freely, and I respect him for that.

But we knew that other parts of the police *were* interested in what we were doing. This was the age of political trials — the ABC case (Aubrey, Berry, Campbell), the Persons Unknown Trial, and that of the BWINIC 14. The British Withdrawal from Northern Ireland Campaign was a pacifist group, which stood separately from the Troops Out Movement on the left. Among BWINIC's projects was distributing the leaflet 'Some Information

for Discontented Soldiers' with advice on how to avoid the war in Ireland. A trickle of people headed to Sweden seeking political asylum and a few were aided to go underground or find false identities. The trial of the fourteen for Incitement to Disaffection went on for months, but the jury accepted the defence that they — and we in Aberdeen (four of us had also been charged but our case depended on the main trial) — were only aiding discontented soldiers, not inciting disaffection. Naturally, several of the fourteen were associated with Housmans/*Peace News*. \*\*\*\*

Housmans went through some hard times. The area around Kings Cross was pretty grim for a long period. Drug dealing was quite open. It was a red-light area with a lot of derelict buildings and directly opposite Housmans was a strip joint. The irony is that Housmans was one of the few businesses to stand against the developers who were quite happy to winkle people out by leaving them in the middle of a planning blight area. In fact it was *PN* staffer Diana Shelley and her partner Phil Jeffries who were key in ensuring that the area was able to resist the worst of inappropriate development. \*\*\* Housmans refused a shed load of money to move.

Perhaps it was around then that staffing became an issue at Housmans. It sometimes felt that one or two of the people on the counter ... well, let's leave it at that. There were stand out workers like Malcolm Hopkins who was very knowledgeable about writing on London and his London section and London meetings kept the interest going.

It was all a bit male though — all male, in fact, for many years. So much so that I was astonished when a woman joined the team (these days the majority of the staff are either female or non-binary).

Before the advent of the internet, radical bookshops such as Compendium (London), Mushroom Bookshop (Nottingham) and Housmans were among the few places where you could buy American imports or Indian, in Housmans' case. It was through Housmans that I discovered Thomas Merton, Barbara Deming, Gene Sharp, the *Catholic Worker* writer Dorothy Day, and many others. I bought the lovely spiral bound diaries of the American War Resisters League and a shelf of books on or by Gandhi. For a period, Housmans had its own distribution service carrying imports and small peace movement publishers.

Though I personally abandoned anarchism in the mid-1980s, then pacifism towards the end of the decade, the call has never gone away. I still get Housmans Peace Diary every year! Housmans broadened its range of books and, thanks to the *Peace News* Trustees owning the building, it survived the political downturn of the late 1980s and 1990s, which saw off most radical bookshops.

For a period I was a member of the board. This was before I set up Five Leaves Bookshop, and my time there was helpful to me at least as Housmans' finances began to turn round, a new customer base developed, and radical bookselling became an option once again in more towns than London. A good job nobody paid attention to an earlier report of mine on Housmans, which advocated closure, or to my attempts to close down the *Peace Diary*!

Nik Gorecki from Housmans was instrumental in reviving the Alliance of Radical Booksellers (ARB) and starting up the London Radical Bookfair, which returns this year for the first time since COVID (4 November 2023 at Goldsmiths in South London). Nik has been at Housmans for a long time now. He is a friend as well as a colleague. He'd seen the shop pull out of the doldrums and become the much more attractive place it is now. Current staff include the young adult fiction writer Catherine Barter, one of those who took forward the ARB's Bread and Roses Award for Radical Publishing to spin off the Little Rebels Award for Radical Children's Publishing.

Housmans did struggle under and following the worst COVID years, being in central London — due to home working and a collapse in the numbers of people visiting. Nor did COVID overlook the staff who worked there.

Housmans survives. It is certainly the best radical bookshop in central London and a port of call when I am down there.

**housmans.com**

**fiveleavesbookshop.co.uk**

\* [www.theguardian.com/news/2006/feb/06/guardianobituaries.politics](http://www.theguardian.com/news/2006/feb/06/guardianobituaries.politics)

\*\* [www.theguardian.com/uk/2013/jun/21/mclibel-leaflet-police-bob-lambert-mcdonalds](http://www.theguardian.com/uk/2013/jun/21/mclibel-leaflet-police-bob-lambert-mcdonalds)

\*\*\* [kxdf.wordpress.com/2008/12/20/diana-on-phil-a-truely-irreplacable-campaigner-for-our-community/](http://kxdf.wordpress.com/2008/12/20/diana-on-phil-a-truely-irreplacable-campaigner-for-our-community/)

\*\*\*\* [www.historyworkshop.org.uk/war-military/radical-object-peace-newsbwnic-poster/](http://www.historyworkshop.org.uk/war-military/radical-object-peace-newsbwnic-poster/)