

Alice's story

Kitty Webster talks to author **Sheila Rowbotham** about the anti-war feminist Alice Wheeldon

At a time when marking the centenary of the First World War has too often become a way to celebrate the British imperial state, Sheila Rowbotham's play *Friends of Alice Wheeldon* gives us a window into the lives of those who opposed the war. The play, written in the 1970s and just republished by Pluto, tells the remarkable story of Alice Wheeldon, an anti-war activist set up by an intelligence agent and falsely accused and convicted - of plotting to kill the prime minister, Lloyd George.

Wheeldon kept a secondhand clothes shop in Derby, and before the war she had campaigned for women's suffrage. When the war broke out she became active in the anti-war networks. In December 1916 an intelligence agent, who called himself 'Alex Gordon' and posed as a conscientious objector, arrived at her house pleading to be put up for the night, after which he claimed to have uncovered a poison plot to kill Lloyd George. Brought to trial amidst the jingoism and panic of the first World War, Wheeldon was found guilty, outcast by many of her neighbours and died just two years later of influenza after being released early from prison.

How did you come across Alice's story and why did it strike such a chord with you that you wanted to write a play?
I came across a brief account of the case when I was ill with the flu in the late 1970s and read a book by Raymond Challinor, *The Origins of British Bolshevism*. I was immediately struck by the personal consequences for Alice Wheeldon and



her family. Their lives were turned over. Two broader issues interested me: the role of the state and the radical networks of her supporters. Both are just as relevant today.

My play was influenced by the politics of the 1970s. Initially in women's liberation, many of us were critical of the state's control, not just through the police or intelligence agencies but through bureaucratic top-down welfare provision, yet organising taught us how women, and especially those in vulnerable and marginalised groups, needed to get access to resources that were controlled by the state.

By the time I wrote the long historical background to the case, which was published alongside the play in 1986, Margaret Thatcher had started to demolish welfare provision. While

I was writing it I had been working at the Greater London Council seeking to transfer resources to people so that they could determine what they wanted and build alternatives for themselves. Democracy, I was convinced, was the key.

The First World War saw the beginnings of state welfare. It also bred a deep distrust of the state among those who opposed the war. I was fascinated by the overlapping personal networks opposing the war - the socialists, syndicalists, liberals, pacifists, feminists and militant trade unions. The intelligence agencies couldn't understand that these networks were based on friendships and solidarity; they were always looking more for intricate conspiracies that just weren't there. Accustomed to hierarchies, they found it incomprehensible, for

example, that the shop steward leaders were not trying to lord it over people.

The networks made sense to me because they were how we created women's liberation as a movement. People in formal political organisations used to ask us 'how did you recruit all these members?' but we never recruited anyone in that sense! We just bumped into one another and linked up, always following everything up and ensuring we didn't lose contact with people. Now, of course, groups are able to organise very successfully through networks and they are taken for granted.

The play looks through the keyhole into Alice Wheeldon's personal life, and by doing that we also learn about the state repression at that time, the intra-rivalries of the intelligence agencies, and the struggles between different groups to define and shape a British socialism...

I think looking through a keyhole is a great image. That's exactly how I work as a historian. You get just a tiny bit of light on an intricate set of stories, and then doing more research you can zoom out and take in all the factors that are impinging on individual people's lives. You start with the particular and the wider picture unfolds.

Something that you paint so vividly in the play is the different intelligence agencies competing with one another - which seemed to be so fatal for Alice Wheeldon - as they tried to uncover elaborate plots in order to justify their funding and continued political support.

It was amazing. Until I wrote the historical background to the play I'd written history from below, whether it was labour history or women's history, but with this story of Alice Wheeldon I found myself thrust into the history of state intelligence.

It is a very strange feeling as a person on the left reading the reports from the people who were sending spies round to check on the shop stewards' movement at the time. But it was also illuminating. I realised how complicated the state is and that nothing is ever completely preordained. There was not a unified plan to pursue this trial, but a convergence of political and personal factors. Individuals were competing to show their allegiance to Lloyd George; there were the internal tensions between rival intelligence agencies, vying for power and resources.

It was convenient to exaggerate the threat in order to justify the work of the intelligence agencies?

Exactly, and the Alice Wheeldon case presented a justification for one particular unit.

The play also touches on the struggle for women's liberation within these radical networks. One character in the book, Jessie, says at one point: 'But the men can always escape to the pub or the meeting. It's the women who have to clean the same square feet over and over again. The women who give birth in these conditions. So it's the women who have the real need to match words with effective action.' How was that

received when the play was performed in the 1980s?

Jessie is a fictional character based on my historical knowledge. She became the socialist-feminist voice in the play, demanding a politics grounded in daily actualities. The incident in which she tells Arthur MacManus he should miss a meeting to look after Alice Wheeldon's daughter Hettie is an invention, though again the power disparities between men and women were real enough. In fact, Hettie's affair with Arthur MacManus occurred later.

I was making a political point really. It caused shock horror at the time. It really divided audiences. After the play some guys were saying 'He shouldn't have missed a meeting!' But in the women's movement we really challenged this 'professional revolutionary' vision among activists who would cut themselves off from all other responsibilities and personal life. That was partly how we came to the slogan 'the personal is political'.

Do you think the surveillance culture that entrapped Alice Wheeldon is as relevant for political movements today? It is a real dilemma - to be open to new people while being wary of police spying. But there is nothing worse as a newcomer that wants to get involved than being viewed with suspicion!

Perhaps Alice Wheeldon should have followed Hettie's

example and suspected the agent, 'Alex

Gordon', though she was not the only one - he had deceived MacManus, who gave him a letter. But I don't think viewing everyone with suspicion is the answer. And of course groups like the Communist Party that were not so open also later got surveilled. If you get too paranoid you get consumed by it and it is damaging for all of us involved in left politics.

Can you tell me a little bit about the ongoing campaign to clear Alice Wheeldon's name?

There has been more interest over the years in the case. She has been mentioned in books and articles and since my play at least two other plays have been written. Alice Wheeldon also has a poem and a poster in her honour. In Derby the local People's History group campaigned and the council and the Civic Society put up a plaque about her. Her descendants, Chloe and Deirdre Mason, have also been collecting a vast amount of evidence to present to the Criminal Cases Review Board.

Are there any plans for the play to be performed again?

Not that I know of. But if this new edition helps more people hear about this miscarriage of justice and demand that the state admits the wrong that was done then I will be happy. I hope too it will be relevant to a new generation of activists thinking about how to organise against austerity and the surveillance of left groups. ■

