

# The training of a radical

Letter to the Past  
by George Woodcock  
Fitzhenry and Whiteside, 1982  
329 pages

## Review by Geoff Martin

George Woodcock is a Canadian writer, critic, broadcaster and historian who in this, his first autobiographical volume, provides an illuminating view about British literary circles from 1930 to the end of the 1940's.

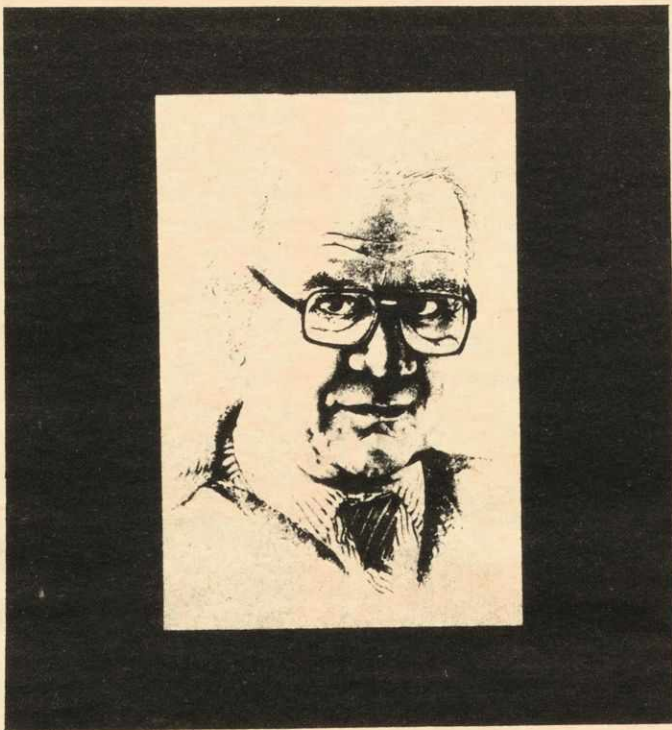
Woodcock, who turned 70 in 1982, writes about his early life in Shropshire and his later life as a member of the London literary community. In reading Woodcock's description of his early life, one immediately thinks about George Orwell's description of rural England in his book *Coming up for Air*. He was largely influenced by friends like George Orwell, whom he met in the Second World War and admired greatly. Orwell's writing described experiences which Woodcock either experienced or understood, and referred to frequently.

Woodcock's upbringing provides a very interesting look at growing up in Britain during the 1920's. Woodcock says the following about restrictions on him on Sundays.

"(On Sunday) I could read the travels of Livingstone because he was a missionary, but not those of Stanley; the autobiography of the Reverend John G. Paton, the Presbyterian apostle to the New Hebrides; but not Cardinal Newman's *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* which was regarded as worse than paganism."

Partly because of his dislike for his grasping and successful grandfather, Woodcock was converted to radical politics before World War Two.

"My conversion to social revolt...came instantaneously one evening when I sat alone in a railway carriage coming home on an evening early in 1930, stewing over my bitterness towards my grandfather and his kind, and reading a volume of William Morris' socialist writings. Suddenly, with a sense of great illumination, I knew I was on the side



of Morris and all who thought with him and against my grandfather and all who acted like him. With this revelation came a sense of great relief; I was replacing my hatred of a person with my hatred of a class and its way of life."

Like many British intellectuals, Woodcock was a conscientious objector during World War Two and served Britain by working in agriculture. By the end of the war Woodcock was an anarchist in the tradition of Prince Peter Kropotkin, the 19th century Russian intellectual and believer in the need for a disintegration of all forms of centralized power in society. His radicalism became pronounced as a result of seeing a number of his literary friends sent to prison for undermining the war effort.

"If we are to take the Holocaust as a benchmark in human degradation, it seems to me its territory must be extended beyond Auschwitz and the other Nazi death camps to include Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and all the hellholes of the Gulag Archipelago, and the roster of victims must be extended to include not only Jews gassed by Germans, but also Japanese fried

alive by Americans, and Russians starved and shot and beaten to death by their fellow Russians. In the demonology of the modern age I have since August 1945, placed Churchill and Truman beside the Nazis and Stalin."

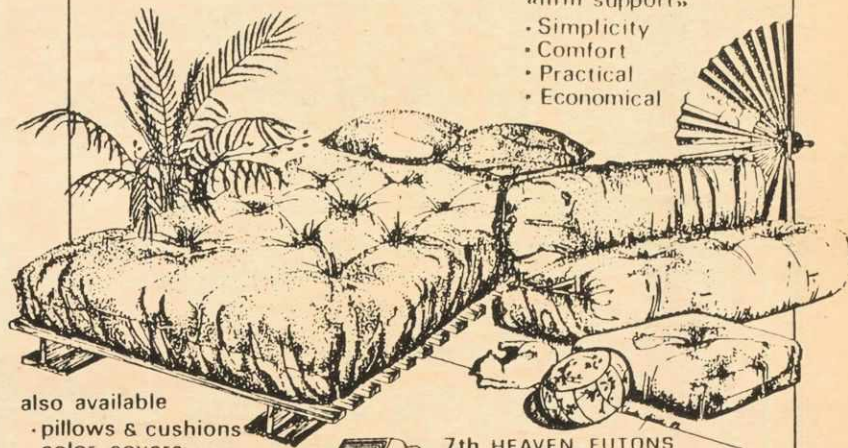
This really sums up Woodcock's very radical position, and his refusal to see the world in simple terms of good and evil. While Woodcock's political views do stand out most of the book is actually concerned with the British bohemian community of the day, rather than any individual's particular view. While it is an autobiography, the literary scene plays a very important part in shaping Woodcock's character and in Woodcock's description of his life in Britain.

Since Woodcock returned to Canada (he was born in Winnipeg) with his wife in 1949 he has written and edited dozens of books and articles on politics, literature and history.

This volume is well-written generally, though it does lapse into repetition and awkwardness occasionally. All in all it is a valuable book for those interested in Woodcock and the literary scene which spawned him and many other talents.

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