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[Episode 37: Freedom News](#)

Host: David Turner – **DT**

Guest: Ella Harrison – **EH**

Transcript edited by David Turner – 26/1/17

Conversation:

DT: Hello, my name is David Turner and this is another Lunar Poetry Short, today I'm in Bethnal Green in east London. I have again travelled all the way from south London. I am joined by the editor of Freedom News, Ella Harrison. Hello Ella.

EH: Hello.

DT: How are you?

EH: I'm well thank you.

DT: Good. I think we should probably start, if we could, with you telling us a bit about the history of the Freedom Press but more specifically Freedom Newspaper.

EH: Well, Freedom Newspaper was founded in 1886 by Peter Kropotkin and Charlotte Wilson. It was founded as a journal of anarchist socialism and has been carrying on in various different forms ever since then. It's had several incarnations, for example, during the Spanish Civil War it transformed into a pro-republican paper, Spain and the World. And during the Second World War it was an anti-war publication.

One of the more interesting aspects in the newspaper's history is the expelling of Peter Kropotkin as the editor during the First World War. Peter Kropotkin is probably one of our most famous writers and proponents of anarchism but he was a supporter of the First World War. A supporter of the allied forces, which were seen as incompatible with freedom and anarchist philosophy in general and he was expelled.

So last year was the centenary of the start of the First World War and for us at freedom it was also the centenary of chucking out our most famous most famous editor. So yes it's existed in various forms throughout its history. It's stayed in publication as a newspaper for, you know, maybe the last nearly one-hundred and forty years. It was closed down last year as a monthly printed paper that was running close to about thirty pages an issue.

There were various reasons for closing it down that were explained in depth in our final publication which was released in time for the Anarchist's Book Fair last year. Which was my first fully edited newspaper which I did with my co-editor Adam Barr and that was also the first time Freedom has properly featured poetry.

DT: And where is Freedom based?

EH: Freedom is based in Freedom Bookshop in Whitechapel which has been in its location since the 1960s but it's also, a bit like the paper, existed in various forms for a long time. The building is owned by Friends of Freedom Press which is what has given it its ability to stay despite the kind of rapidly changing market forces and gentrification forces in the area. So it's a bit of a relic but a good relic of anarchism.

DT: Why was it important to re-introduce a physical version of the newspaper, with the quarterly free-sheet?

EH: When we closed down the regular print paper, there wasn't so much of an outcry which I think was symptomatic of why it had to be down. Because it was very expensive and it just wasn't getting its message across. But the most regular form of feedback we got from people and their disappointment at it being closed down was not being able to have

something physical to read and to transfer and to share. And Freedom and anarchism in general often targets people who might be, say slightly, on the fringes of society or who don't have access regular access to the Internet.

And when we closed down, I became editor very soon after the paper was shut down, my primary concern was how do we get this information for example to prisoners who... We would regularly send every issue of Freedom to prisoners who had requested it and it was fairly popular there and it had a very good message.

Freedom does a lot of work with legal support for example, Freedom Bookshop acts as a kind of a stopgap often for people between their lawyers and after arrests on protests and things like that. There were lots of subscribers to the paper who had been, you know, involved in anarchism and had appreciate Freedom for a long time but who didn't really use computers who would...

We still get letters, for example, people write us handwritten letters about the newspaper or requesting books and that was my primary concern for getting maybe something physical because I was aware that we were potentially alienating and excluding some of our most valuable readers. And the people who really relied on Freedom or, you know, it had been a part of their kind of political awareness for a very long time.

And I would meet people and say, "Oh, I edit Freedom" and they'd be very interested in it. You know it's a very old, long-running anarchist newspaper and they would say, "Oh do you have a copy?" And I'd have to say, "Oh no! But I could show you our website?", "Oh, is it only online."

was always disappointed saying that and people would always be disappointed that I couldn't give them a physical copy of the paper. And I felt that Freedom was so important and had such a strong historical basis that for it not to exist physically was was a real shame. And that I felt as editor I owed it to the institution that I was fortunate enough to become a part of, to try and ensure its legacy somehow and I think having the physical print copies definitely does that.

DT: It's just a technical question I suppose but who prints Freedom, the free-sheets?

EH: The free-sheet and Freedom has always been printed since the 1980s, very very generously by [Aldgate Press](#) who are linked with Freedom, they were founded partly with the help of Freedom Bookshop so they have always printed Freedom for free. Part of our decision to close down the paper last year came from the fact that, it was an incredibly large subsidy [that] Aldgate Press were giving us and we felt that it wasn't worth taking that from Aldgate. And they are now printing our free-sheet which is only a single sheet and of a slightly smaller run.

They're printing that for free as well which is absolutely brilliant. And it's definitely taken a burden off Aldgate Press, although they never made it feel like a burden but I think a lot of us on the Freedom Collective felt a responsibility towards making the most of that subsidy.

DT: I suppose if the newspaper wasn't reaching as many people as you would wish it's not really worth the time for the press. If Aldgate Press can support you in a different way, it makes it a much better deal all round.

EH: Absolutely and now with the free-sheet, how it is now being printed and its distribution capabilities is an absolutely much better deal for Aldgate.

DT: Yes, it must now be much cheaper for you to spread it out and send it to people.

EH: Exactly.

DT: And as always with these conversations poetry is never far away. So why was the decision taken to reintroduce poetry to the free-sheet? And to give it some context, when was the last time that poetry was printed in Freedom Newspaper?

EH: Well I don't know the last time poetry was printed in the newspaper but I was aware when I became editor that previous editorial and lay-out decisions had been taken by people who were very against having poetry in the newspaper. And when I was put in charge of putting together the October edition, along with my co-editor, we decided that to make our mark on the paper we would re-introduce poetry because it had been such a deliberate decision to exclude it previously.

And I've always appreciate poetry very much and I think poetry is a fantastic way of expressing very nuanced and very individual political views. And I've been fortunate enough to be around many poets who write and perform extensively political pieces and who put on events in support of political organisations or causes. And I felt that I wanted Freedom to be a part of that and to, kind of, give support both to these poets who are active within our political movements.

And also to provide I suppose a break up in the stories that we were providing in the newspaper and to show lots of different ways in which anarchism or broader left-wing views can be expressed, you don't just have to write an article explaining all the long technicalities of anarchism. You can also write a poem that expresses your own fears about what the State can do or class solidarity. And yeah, I was fortunate enough to get some excellent poems in that paper that were the most popular aspect of our October issue.

DT: Actually, I was just about to ask how the poetry was received by your readers and did you have much feedback?

EH: Yeah I was absolutely delighted with the feedback I got about the poetry. I think the single most popular thing in there was the Hoxton Market Forces poem by [Tim Wells](#) or 'oxton, as he would rather pronounce it.

DT: Yeah, as he always says, he remembers Hoxton before the aitch went back on.

EH: Yeah better without the aitch. Which is a fantastic poem about gentrification and about the ways in which changing class demographics alienate people. Done very wittily,

done in a hugely relatable way and I also had a poem by [Grim Chip](#) in there which was a poem about class and that was used next to the article about the 'poor doors' protest by Class War. Which were a long running event in the second half of last year.

I finished the free-sheet with a poem by Felix Henson, which was just a really great poem about the weekend and that I really read and kind of related to and thought, yeah, this is a bit like... You know, you're working class you're going out on the weekend you're going out to have fun. I just really really liked it and that was also really popular because it wasn't explicitly political but it was still relatable.

DT: I mentioned to a few people that I'd be speaking to you and talking about the free-sheet and every person so far has asked if you only print, broadly, left-leaning poetry. I suppose that isn't what the Freedom Newspaper is about. I think the point that's often lost is that the people reading your paper, you've already one them round. You're not providing poetry to change their political beliefs. You're really looking to print poetry that they can relate to, aren't you?

EH: Absolutely and to illustrate that, the first edition of the free-sheet features another Tim Wells poem called *The Winger*, which is quite a nostalgic poem remembering a lad he played football with at school. And that's a part of lots and lots of people's growing up experiences is playing football. You know, everyone has these kind of memories of people you knew, you wonder what happened to them.

You know, even though you still kind of live in the same areas or the same estates you might have grown up on, the same you know schools you went to you. You wonder what happened to these people. I read it and I thought about my experiences watching my friends play football. I never played football, nothing like that! But I am a football fan, I like watching it and I put it in the free-sheet because I thought it's a really brilliant poem and it's really relatable.

Not everyone might like football but everyone remembers being at school and there's a... I believe that if you take football out of the kind of horrendous corporate Premier League-state it's in now it's a working-class sport. There's a lot of working class solidarity. In football, there's, in London at the moment [Clapton FC](#) are quite popular you know and they are I think trying to reclaim a bit of their class basis of football. So I felt that that poem was really relevant and I was really the delight to have it.

DT: I should also mention, for regular listener Mishi, [Dulwich Hamlet Football Club](#). They're doing a lot of work like that as well. It's really community based, it's not just about the game on a Saturday afternoon, it's all the stuff around it [like] supporting local younger teams and supporting teams that are down on their luck and trying to raise money. I think that... Yeah the way football, or all sport is represented on TV, it's sort of losing touch with what it was supposed originally. Which was a more slightly more open air church feeling, you know and bringing people together.

EH: Absolutely, yeah.

DT: I was wondering actually. It just popped into my mind actually. With the political climate the way it is, it's becoming a bit all-consuming, especially if you're concerned... Which, thankfully, a lot more people are becoming concerned. Do you think there is going to be more need for an escape? Like there was in the early '80s or rather whole of the bloody '80s.... But you know a lot of music and art scenes grew out of the fact... This whole thing of living for the weekend, because it was pretty tough grinding through the week. Do you feel like you in the newspaper or in the free-sheet you're going to have to represent that a bit more as well?

EH: I think so yeah. I completely agree that there is definitely going to be a need for escape but I think anything that encourages the fight back rather than escape. Right? [**DT:** Yeah.] People will want to escape from the very grim reality we already live in and the even grimmer reality that it will be under five years of a majority Tory government. But I think that the political poetry I hear and the political poetry that I read you know, if you call it political poetry, but poetry with a political slant is really inspiring.

And I think that creativity is an absolutely essential and incredibly powerful tool. And I like to think as well maybe going back to the '80s this idea of living for the weekend. But also this idea of working class people getting together, creating their own culture, creating their own subcultures, defining their own music. I hope that happens because I think it'll be a real antidote to some of their more recent... Especially musical...

I can't necessarily speak for the poetry world but definitely, kind of, musically there's been explosions of very middle class very twee kind of music. And I'd like to see more, I'd like to see a return to a lot of what was being done in the 80s because it's powerful and it encourages class solidarity and it encourages you know people to get together and say, "Even if the government's trying to screw us over. We can't let them." You know as long as you're always fighting, even if at times it might feel a bit hopeless it's not hopeless as long as you keep fighting.

DT: Yeah I think in terms of poetry I think we'll probably see the return of a more critical voice and a move away from this, sort of, slam-influenced love-in where everyone just goes and reads for four minutes and everybody pretends to love it.

EH: And claps really politely.

DT: Because we're all 'in the same space', whatever that means. I'd like to see a little bit more 'grit'. [**EH:** Absolutely!] That's my... Actually I better not get into that. How can poets submit their work to Freedom?

EH: Well they can submit them directly to our editors' e-mail address but they can also send them to me personally. They can get in touch via our Facebook page as well. And it's all very digital but they can also send them in to Freedom Bookshop. Yeah. If they wanted to send them handwritten.

DT: Is it open-ended submissions? You don't have themes or? You're just at the moment taking submissions from what people send?

EH: Yeah, what people send and what we like what we feel is relevant and it doesn't have to be overtly political or overtly left-wing, that's always great, but I'd like Freedom to represent a much broader spectrum than just hard core ultra-left-wing anarchism. Because anarchism is much broader than that and Freedom is very fortunate in its unique position where I think...

It has a lot of sway I think and it's a big name in the anarchist movement. Freedom as a bookshop and as a space I think has often been treated as a kind of a meeting place for anarchists and I'd like to think that the newspaper itself can be a meeting place. But for ideas and for people's creativity in a way that fits in with a non-hierarchical anarchist message but doesn't have to be, you know, based entirely on anarchist theory or a set-criteria. Of, this is what being left wing is about or this is what being anarchist because that's not how it works and that's not how I want Freedom to operate.

DT: And how can people get hold of the free-sheet?

EH: Well they can pick it up from Freedom Bookshop and it can also be requested via the same means of submission to be sent out. It will be sent out around the country to various bookshops for stocking. It's currently available from [Hydra](#) in Bristol at the moment. So it will be available to pick up from other bookshops but one of the easiest ways if you really want to get hold of one is just to get in touch and then we can send them out.

We're happy to do that, especially if people want them in bulk as well to give out on. I'm sure there'll be lots and lots of demos and protests and part of why it was brought back is free-sheet is because we don't have to charge... The newspaper was charged before, it cost £2. This way it can be given out and taken and, you know, people don't have to worry about it, it can just be left anywhere or you know... Even if people take it and end up not even looking and throwing it away at least it's still getting out there.

DT: Yeah. What is the website for Freedom?

EH: The website is <http://www.freedomnews.org.uk/> and that is the, specifically news website. There's also the www.freedompress.org.uk which is the bookshop's website and people can purchase the bookshop's books from there. But for the news website, it's Freedom's News.

DT: I'll put both of those in the description for all this thing, what you are listening to now. I think that's it. Thank you Ella.

EH: Thank you very much.

DT: Yeah everyone should check out Freedom it's great. And everyone request some free-sheets and leave them dotted about everywhere. Spread the word.

EH: Please do, please do.

DT: Thank you Ella.

EH: Thank you very much.

End of transcript.