

THE COMMONWEAL COLLECTION :

A SHORT HISTORY

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A LIBRARY FOR A NONVIOLENT WORLD

The author, staff and Trustees of the Commonweal Collection would like to thank all those who have contributed towards the production of this work.

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Introduction

The Commonweal Collection is a library specialising in resources for nonviolent social change. It contains a vision of how the world could be, and of how to create that world. The Collection is a resource for those people who want to build this new society; it shows them what is wrong with the present situation, what the alternatives are and how they may be achieved using people-power or nonviolent resistance.

The library grew out of the Collection of David Hoggett, a man with the vision and foresight to see the need for a comprehensive unit of easily accessible material for workers in the peace movement which was flourishing to counteract the dangerous Cold War climate of the 1960's and 1970's.

David Hoggett - Founder

David was born in Bristol in 1929. On leaving school he worked in Cheltenham Public Library, where he learnt general library organisation, classifying and indexing and deepened his appreciation of books. Through ardent reading he gradually became interested in pacifism and nonviolence as a way of life. This was later fostered by three years in India as a worker for the International Voluntary Service for Peace, where he was involved in the Bhoodan 'land-gift' movement based on Gandhian ideals of working for the benefit and welfare of all the community, with skills and proceeds being shared.

On his return to England in 1955 he became apprenticed to a carpenter and became accomplished at his trade. Whilst using this skill during his holidays, building homes for refugees in Austria under the auspices of the United Nations Association, he fell from a roof and was paralysed. This unfortunate accident completely changed his physical life, but ultimately led to the creation of the Commonweal Collection. After extensive treatment in Austria and, later, in Sheffield, he returned home to Cheltenham in 1958. There he was cared for by his mother,

Theo; his brother, Chris; and later by Alfred, another IVSP worker, who became his nurse and friend, and the general factotum for the library.

Although confined to bed, David could use his right elbow to control ingenious devices designed by his brother which were attached to the bed or ceiling. This facilitated David's use of the light, radio, TV and telephone. He later acquired a Patient Operated Selector Mechanism typewriter (his POSSUM) which he could operate by blowing through a tube, and eventually by a small rod attached to the back of his hand. This made him less reliant on friends and family for literary needs, though he welcomed them for playing chess or Scrabble, for singing or music sessions, and conversation. Propped up in bed with pillows, David read avidly, and his knowledge was prodigious. Chris added more floor-to-ceiling shelves in David's room to hold the numerous books and periodicals sent to him by kind friends. These books formed the nucleus of the future Commonweal Library.

David's experiences, his reading and the inspiration from visitors' conversation, led him to plan the establishment of a community house based on Gandhian/Quaker ideas of peace, nonviolence and the development of an inner spirituality to enable a better way of living. In 1959, David, his ripple bed, communication aids and his collection of books moved with Alfred to Merthyr Tydfil in Wales to set up such a community. This project flourished at first, earning a reputation for its caring work with underprivileged people in the area, but after two years it disbanded when many of its members moved on to other things. David then moved into the cottage of some friends in Merthyr, with Alfred living nearby, and there they stayed for three years.

Commonweal - The Early Years

The five years in Wales (1959-1964) were important years for the Collection. As a result of serving a group of pacifists and people whose primary ideals were centered on peace, nonviolence and alternative living, the ethos of the library shifted towards these areas. This set the pattern for the future, pivoting around Gandhian ideals of a better life.

Members of peace and nonviolent direct action groups outside of Wales were eager to learn more, and as a result the idea of a postal library evolved. David began to classify and catalogue the books. Bibliographies and indexes of books and articles were made and sent to enquirers. Loans were free of charge, usually for two months, with the borrower paying return postage. The key subjects were, and still are: writings by and about Gandhi; the lives and writings of influential peace makers; and information about alternative life styles.

Thus, the ethos and the organisation of the library were in place. David appealed to friends and publishers for donations of books or periodicals; a practice which has continued throughout the life of the library to the present day.

In 1963, David decided to put the library into trust, to ensure it would continue when he was no longer able to run it. The four Trustees were himself; his cousin April Carter (who was active in the Committee of 100); and friends Donald Groom and Devi Prasad, who were also active in the Peace Movement. The Trust Deed named the library officially as the Commonweal Collection.

David returned to his family home in Cheltenham in 1964 and concentrated his efforts on the Collection as his contribution towards peace and reconciliation. It became his life and he worked hard at it, using his organising skills to the full to establish and run an efficient postal library, helped by friends, family, and particularly Alfred, who also looked after his medical needs.

Over several years David laboriously designed a unique classification system suited to a specialist library. By 1972, 3,000 books and runs of 60 periodicals ranged round his room and into his mother's music room, all indexed and up to date. There was seldom anything out of place, and David could always tell exactly where everything was to be found, directing users straight to the appropriate shelf. The library included meticulous notes, correspondence, diaries, translations and criticisms written by David. He compiled indexes and cross-references to whole areas of the library, such as Gandhi's collected works, in addition to producing annotated bibliographies on a range of topics. These were invaluable for use at conferences, for local borrowers, students and academics from all over the world, and were

sold by publishers and booksellers. Continuous rolls of typing paper and sticky labels allowed David to execute library business for some time unattended.

Over the years the library became known and more used, although it was always financially precarious, dependent on donations of books and money. Constant increases in postal costs meant that from 1973, users had to pay the costs of borrowing as well as returning books, unless they were on a low income.

Users of the library were grateful for all the help and friendship given by letter or in person by David and his team of helpers, and valued the hard work which was involved in compiling the indexes and bibliographies. Friends and visitors were amazed at his courage and humour, and his commitment to the ideals in which he believed: a peaceful world; nonviolence; and an end to the threat of nuclear weapons.

David achieved a great deal, despite his physical limitations, helped by his family and numerous friends. He appeared to have an inner strength and love of humanity which gave a purpose to his life and kept him a cheerful, uncomplaining individual right up to his death on November 15th 1975, from a virulent urine infection.

He is still remembered with affection by many people who feel their lives enriched for having known him, as well as for the energy and commitment he gave to establish a wonderful legacy, the Commonweal Collection.

Commonweal in Bradford

David's death left the Trustees with the matter of the disposal of this unique collection. They felt it was essential to keep the library intact as a single unit with its specialist ethos preserved. After much discussion, they negotiated to move the library to Bradford University, where the first School of Peace Studies in the United Kingdom had recently been established. The University pledged to house the Collection intact in a separate room in the main University library; to allow it to keep its legal independence and identity; and to do all they could to ensure its safety and well-being by granting it certain services. This arrangement continues today.

Settling Commonweal into an existing and different institution took several months, requiring much patience and meeting time to formulate a viable and good working relationship between the two bodies. A first essential was for the Trustees to inform past users of the new address and ensure that their friendly library was not to be lost to them, and that, although it was unlikely to continue as a postal library, books could be borrowed through the inter-library loans service.

The main problems from the changeover were finding a room to house the Collection, integrating it into the Bradford issuing system and finding somebody to run the library, and the means to pay them. The brunt of solving these problems fell to the chief librarians, Frank Earnshaw and John Horton, and to Trustee Nigel Young, then lecturing in the School of Peace Studies.

These were not insurmountable problems and solutions were found. Nigel persuaded a young friend, Bob Overy, to co-ordinate the library changeover part-time while doing doctoral research on Gandhi in the Peace Studies department. He was assisted by Mark Dunn, one of David's young helpers in Cheltenham, now employed for six months by means of a Quaker Peace Studies Trust grant. (Mark was to stay on for some time after this as a volunteer.)

A small room was allotted in the University library and Bob painstakingly negotiated shelving and other library needs, while he and Mark sorted and labelled the books with distinguishing Commonweal Collection labels, aided by J.B. Priestley library staff. They were helped later by willing volunteers, mostly Peace Studies students whom Bob organised into workgroups responsible for certain sections of the Collection. This is fully in keeping with the original decentralist philosophy of Commonweal, that people should take a hand in decision making and the destiny of the community in which they function.

Each group kept their section in order, recommended improvements in method and made suggestions for purchasing books or periodicals. Other ideas were brought for discussion to the monthly workgroup meeting. This allowed Bob to establish an acquisitions policy and discover publicity needs. These workgroups are still an active facet of the Commonweal structure and the monthly meetings are full of plans for publicity, work to be done, or taking Commonweal to the wider community.

The changeover from Cheltenham to Bradford owes its smoothness to the hard work of Alfred, who packed the books in Cheltenham and chased up any that were overdue; of the staff of the J.B. Priestley Library; of Nigel Young, Trustee; Mark Dunn; and Bob Overy, the first co-ordinator who bravely drew order out of chaos.

A stream of co-ordinators has followed Bob, who officially left in the summer of 1978 (although he helped for a lot longer after this). After Bob, the Trustees were able to offer part-time employment to Peter Todd and Brenda Thomson. This was made financially possible by the donated proceeds of a Joan Baez concert held in December 1977. Brenda and Pete advanced the position of Commonweal and the quality of service a great deal in the two years in which they worked in harness. In the summer of 1979, they were both due to leave, and the future of Commonweal was in the balance again. Nigel Young wrote to 50 trustees for grants to fund a Fellowship, and subsequently accrued sufficient funds to employ Bill Jones as co-ordinator part-time and to do research based on 'The literature of the Collection'.

Once the Fellowship ended, Commonweal had mostly exhausted the goodwill of Trustees, and for five months relied on volunteers, as there were no funds to pay a co-ordinator. It has functioned at a financial low ebb for many years now, and this has resulted in a series of short-term appointments of co-ordinators for a few hours each week. All of these people have added their strengths and ideas to the Collection, but, regardless of this, the library has suffered. It is only in the past five years, when Karen Spencer has been part-time co-ordinator that any feeling of continuity has been present. This continuity has also been helped by the secondment from the University of Pam Crook as a full-time administrative assistant.

Commonweal owes a great deal to its Trustees past and present, as it is they who have to make the difficult decisions and constantly appeal for funds from Trustees. They, and the people they employ, would like to do far more, but reliance on donations of books and funds means that so much has to be left undone. Yet, any alternative could mean loss of independence of the library and loss of its specialism, which is unthinkable.

Commonweal could never have operated on the level it does without the numerous volunteers who give free time to the library, whether they be students or members of the local community. No matter if they can give two hours or two days a week, all are welcome and appreciated. One particular person here is Isabelle Guillou, a former co-ordinator who returned to Commonweal recently to contribute to its outreach and fund-raising in a voluntary capacity. Isabelle is now employed as a part-time development worker.

Commonweal today houses a fine display of current periodicals (numbering about 200) and an inviting array of books (now over 10,000). Prominent is a photograph of its founder, David Hoggett; his United Nations Association Medal awarded for his work for refugees; and a memorial sculpture from his devoted brother which depicts a dove of Peace suspended over two open hands on a plinth emblazoned with the word Peace in many languages. Also on display are the original designs for the CND logo by Gerald Holtom. In addition to this, Commonweal has received a large stock of archives, mostly of collections bequeathed by friends of the library, who were often once prominent in the Peace Movement. These archives are a source of research for local and international scholars, who come from as far away as Japan, as well as from various parts of Great Britain and Europe. Amongst these archival collections are papers from the Direct Action Committee; Hungary EMD; research on the peace camp at Molesworth; and material from Peace News.

The library has broadened its base, changed its clientele and moved from a postal arrangement to a more conventional one, yet still keeps its own ethos and independence. It has moved with the times to address the issues of the 1980's and 1990's, while retaining past wisdom. In 1993 it became associated with the Gandhi Foundation, an organisation which promotes Gandhi's teaching as a solution to the problems and challenges of our time. Commonweal acts as a research resource for the Foundation and has compiled a catalogue of its numerous Gandhi holdings for them and other scholars.

Healthy links are continually being fostered with the Department of Peace Studies, and numerous students, of Peace Studies and many other departments, regularly delve into the literature of the library for help with their studies. An increasing number of people from the local

community come to borrow or merely browse in the tranquil atmosphere of the library. Alfred still keeps in touch and has been a regular visitor since the move to Bradford. The Collection indicates the faith and generosity of friends and publishers in supporting a library built around the teachings of Gandhi, of peace and nonviolence and alternative thought and living; beliefs which are becoming accepted by an increasing number of people tired of the selfish and aggressive trends of the modern world.

At present, hopes for the future are high as Commonweal has recently acquired a substantial grant from the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust, sufficient to fund two part-time workers for three years. Karen and Isabelle will work together to enable the library to grow and develop, and to form a viable strategy to give Commonweal a firmer financial future.

What more fitting tribute to the man who gave so much to it throughout half of its life. He would be pleased to know that it is still cherished and cared for so well, and is still guiding people in their effort to make a better world in which to live.

A more detailed history of the Commonweal Collection will be available in the summer of 1996.

Copies of David Hoggett's Newsletters to Friends 1950-1956, describing his experiences as a volunteer for the International Voluntary Service for Peace in France and India (where he worked with the 'land gift' movement), will be available in May 1996.

Please contact the Commonweal Collection for the prices of these.

Both of these publications will also be available through the inter-library loan service.

BECOME A FRIEND OF COMMONWEAL

The Commonweal Collection has an important part to play in the creation of a more just and nonviolent world. The library is unique, but funds are needed in order to maintain and improve it.

The idea of a "dan" or gift is a key feature of Gandhian economics. We are asking for "sampatidan" - the gift of money; a gift made in spirit of service and fellowship.

If you identify with this work, become a friend of Commonweal and send us a small donation. If you would like to make payment by standing order, please let us know.

We also welcome donations of material; journals or books or archival documents relating to nonviolent actions. Please contact the library if you would like further details.