

**Robert Barltrop** (1922-2009) was an English socialist activist, essayist, and biographer.

Barltrop grew up in the East End of London, descended from a long line of blacksmiths, although his father was a horse fodder dealer; he was educated as a scholarship boy at the Sir George Monoux Grammar School in Walthamstow, now Sir George Monoux College. During World War II, he served with the Royal Air Force, but was invalided out with tuberculosis before seeing active service.

He was for many years a member of the Socialist Party of Great Britain. He had various careers and at different times was a professional boxer, a labourer, a strip cartoonist, a schoolteacher and a sign-painter. Barltrop also published widely and his books include: *The Monument: Story of the Socialist Party of Great Britain* (1975), *Jack London: The Man, the Writer, the Rebel* (1977), *Muvver Tongue* with Jim Wolveridge (1980), *A Funny Age (Growing up in North East London between the Wars)* (1985) and *Yes Mush: A Cockney Dictionary: The Cockney Language and Its World* (intended to be published in 2004, but in fact unfinished at the end of his life).

He was a regular contributor to the Newham Recorder newspaper, producing some 1200 illustrated weekly articles for them during a 24-year period up to his death, and contributing also to other Recorder titles.

***OBITUARY OF ROBERT BARLTROP by his son Chris, published in the Newham Recorder 13th May 2009***

HE was a sportsman, a socialist, a working man, a teacher, artist and writer.

The life of my father, Robert Barltrop, is the story of a working-class boy who worked hard to develop his talents, and who committed himself deeply to every activity he took on.

Bob, to his family, was born in Walthamstow, where his father followed the family trade as a green-meat carter, supplying horse-fodder to small traders throughout the East End.

The boy had an obvious talent for drawing, and a love of books - while his father was dealing with customers, he would spend his own coppers rummaging on book-stalls at markets such as Chrisp St, Poplar. Observing the East End and its characters gave him an understanding of people, as well as a stock of stories, an interest in Cockney speech, and a realisation that for many people, life was very hard indeed.

His maternal grandfather, Arthur Lancaster, died when Robert was an infant, but Arthur had been a Socialist, and this fascinated the growing boy. At about 14, when offered a tip for helping a customer, he refused it on the grounds that tipping undermined fair pay. The foundations of his own ideology had been laid.

He won a scholarship to the Sir George Monoux Grammar School, then a fee-paying school. The teachers, some of them eminent academics, demanded high standards; Bob's natural inclination to always do his best gained him good results, and the school fed his thirst for knowledge and love of literature. Bob realised that learning is life-long, and also that he was following a tradition of self-education developed by social reformers to help members of the 'labouring classes' better themselves. All his life, he read voraciously on all subjects.

He was also a good footballer, and when there was a school boxing class, he was the pupil who rose to the teacher's challenge; " 'Come on, boy, hit me', he said, dancing around, 'so I did!'"

There was no University back then for working-class boys; families couldn't afford to be without a potential wage-earner. A strong chap, Robert worked as porter at Sainsbury's, carrying cheeses and sides of bacon from the stores to the shop. They later trained him as a butcher, though his family only saw that skill when he carved the Sunday joint.

He also took up boxing professionally. He fought at light-heavyweight, had 35 fights, and won them all. If the War had not stopped him, his career could well have led to greater fame. He did a variety of jobs at this time; later in the War he enlisted in the RAF and trained as a pilot, but then contracted TB and spent many months in a sanatorium.

In 1946, he joined the Socialist Party of Great Britain, which followed a pure and idealistic left-wing ideology. He became editor of their magazine, and one of their leading thinkers. He often spoke in public to put forward the Party's ideals; though this sort of public speaking is now almost extinct, I saw him address and enthral huge crowds at Hyde Park Corner, Lincoln's Inn Fields, and in Manchester and Glasgow. He much regretted what he saw as the distortion of Socialism by the parties and politicians of latter years.

He met my mother on VE Day, and discovered a devoted love which sustained him until the end. He trained as a teacher, and as in all his activities gave more than was demanded, passing guidance and insight to his pupils so that several have kept in touch over the years as friends. Robert gave up teaching to become a full-time commercial artist, and he also began to write, first about the Socialist Party, and later about the author Jack London (his remains the only British biography). He wrote about the language of East London, and began to compose a Cockney Dictionary, which remains at present unpublished.

Other books told the story of his own upbringing, recording as they did so the life of East London between the Wars.

From about 1956, he was one of the first among 'ordinary people' to research his family's history, and our extended family tree now links us with cousins throughout the world, and has led to many warm friendships with more distant relatives who had become cut off from their own roots. At his death, he was President of the Waltham Forest Family History society.

For many years, he visited local groups throughout Essex and the Home Counties, giving talks about family history, Cockney speech, life between the Wars, and circus life. And, of course, for 24 years and in over 1200 weekly columns in the Recorder, he recalled and commented and reminisced and illustrated, his work becoming one of the paper's favourite features. He could talk to anyone, no matter their background.

He was interested in people, using his skills to do things for others, providing drawings, words, lettering in beautiful hand-writing, and guidance.

It's impossible to sum up Robert Barltrop in these few words. His thinking and attitudes were ahead of his time; he was highly individual. In working with my mother to bring up their three sons, he did far more than just encourage our own interests and careers, he involved himself and committed himself to our ambitions. He was our teacher and our guide, and will always be our exemplar, encouraging us towards his own standards.

He didn't call himself a 'commercial artist', but an 'illustrator'. My mother made the joke that he was 'illustrious'; that's a good word to sum up an irreplaceable figure.