

# ABCA: a world turned upside down?

*We print here an article version of a talk given by Colin Waugh at a meeting of the Independent Working-Class Education Network (IWCEN) on 29th June 2017 at the Unite HQ, Moreland Street, London.*

**T**he Army Bureau of Current Affairs (ABCA) was an arrangement that existed in the British army during World War 2, according to which every private soldier was required to take part during one hour every week in group discussion of an issue that was in the news. It was widely thought to have contributed to the Labour landslide in the 1945 general election. What, then, was the ancestry of ABCA?

There was in the UK a tradition going back at least to the 1830s of the from-below, collective self-education of working-class activists. In the early 1900s this tradition took a Marxist form. There was also a tradition, going back at least to 1848, of the attempted use by ruling-class intellectuals, especially Christian Socialists, of the liberal education of working-class adults to defuse class struggle. In the early 1900s, this tradition took the form of WEA tutorial classes. In 1908-09 these two traditions confronted one another in a struggle over the control of Ruskin College in Oxford. Seen from the perspective of leftwing activists at that time, the broader project of those on the WEA/Christian Socialist side in this struggle was to use tutorial classes to create a compliant layer within the working class. Such classes were organised in three-year courses (for example in economic history) comprising weekly a one-hour lecture followed by an hour of discussion. On the working-class side, the result of the Ruskin College confrontation was the setting up of the Plebs League, the Central Labour College (CLC) and eventually, in 1920, the National Council of Labour Colleges (NCLC).

In the 1917-1919 period, there was a rising tide of working-class struggle, including mutinies by British soldiers in France. Under these circumstances, and as an antidote to this rising tide, a few senior army officers began to develop forms of discussion-based citizenship education for soldiers. At the same time, the Army Education Corps (AEC) was set up. The YMCA (more than the WEA) was also involved in this initiative. However, once this - arguably pre-revolutionary - situation had passed, the powers-that-be in the Army laid these ideas about citizenship discussions and the AEC itself in abeyance.

If we turn now to adult education in general in the inter-war period, we see that during the 1920s the government protected WEA provision from public service cuts. In contrast, between 1926 and the late 1930s, the loss of union funding, in particular from the miners' union, led in 1929 to the closure of the CLC, and, across the whole period, to a gradual bureaucratisation of the NCLC. As a consequence, the state-funded WEA became an increasingly dominant provider of adult education. In the late 1930s, many leading figures in the WEA remained reluctant to depart from tutorial classes as the primary form of adult education.

Although the WEA and YMCA/YWCA were potentially rivals for control over the expanded provision of adult education within the armed services that both expected to develop in wartime circumstances, on 25th January 1940 they jointly set up the Central Advisory Council for Education in H. M. Forces (CAC). The CAC also involved representatives of the university extension

movement and of universities' extra-mural set-ups, as well as of other religious providers, and of the TUC. We shall see that this attempt by the CAC to assert control over army education during the war was less than fully successful. Meanwhile, the army itself revived the AEC. With these developments in mind, let us look now at the overall situation at the start of WW2.

Obviously there existed at this time amongst broad sections of working-class people a memory of the slaughter that took place during WW1, especially in Flanders, and the ruling class was widely blamed for this. At the same time, there was a memory of betrayals committed by those nominally leading the working-class movement, for example the betrayal of the miners by Transport Union leaders on 'Black Friday' in 1921, of the General Strike by the TUC in 1926, and of the working-class as a whole by the MacDonald government in 1931. On top of this, there was in working-class heartlands the remembered experience of starvation and of the means test in the late 1920s and much of the 1930s. Finally, many working-class people saw the appeasement of Hitler in the late 1930s as evidence of ruling-class sympathy with fascism.

These factors meant that there was greater working-class support for WW2 than there had been (after an initial phase) for WW1, because it was seen as at least partly a struggle against fascism, analogous to the struggle in Spain between 1936 and 1939. In this period also some white-collar workers and some sections of the middle class, for example some professionals, were drawn towards leftwing ideas and activity, as for example through the Socialist League led by Sir Stafford Cripps, the Left Book Club (founded by the publisher Victor Gollancz in 1936), the Spanish solidarity movement, the Independent Labour Party (ILP), the left of the Labour Party itself, the Communist Party, and, during the war, the Common Wealth Party.

As in WW1, conscription was introduced, and hence the army now contained a large mass of conscripts, including both working-class people and some radicalised professionals. At the same time, levels of industrial employment were rising with rearmament, and in consequence, as during World War 1, levels also of industrial militancy, especially in engineering.

The effect of the retreat from Dunkirk between 26th May and 4th June 1940 was that large numbers of soldiers were in barracks in the UK while German armies were sweeping across Europe. Dunkirk was widely seen as a failure by the army high command and the ruling class more generally. There was a high level of demoralisation and a lack of enthusiasm for the conduct of the war, and hence

those in charge of the army perceived an urgent need to motivate the soldiers.

This need was addressed in particular by Sir Ronald Adam. As we saw, there was in the army a tradition going back to 1918 of some high-ranking officers being in favour of discussion-centred education. Adam was such an officer. After Dunkirk, when he became the general officer commanding (GOC) of Northern Command, Adam himself introduced current affairs sessions amongst the soldiers. In this situation he also had a civilian advisor, William Emrys Williams.

Born in 1896, Williams was from 1925 Secretary of the British Institute of Adult Education (BIAE), an offshoot of the WEA. In 1930 he became editor of the WEA's monthly magazine *The Highway*. He remained in this position till 1941, raising its circulation from 8,000 in 1930 to 20,000 in 1939. In 1936, Allen Lane set up Penguin Books, and in the same year he appointed Williams as an advisor. Williams soon became an editor-in-chief of Penguin, and in 1937 introduced the Pelican series of non-fiction titles. He was also close to Victor Gollancz.

Williams, then, was centrally connected to the WEA. However, he was also a dissident from its mainstream as represented by the General Secretary, Ernest Green. In particular, he was critical of the dominant WEA focus on tutorial classes, as appealing to a narrow and highly motivated, self-selecting layer of working-class people, and when the wartime expansion of education for service personnel came on the agenda he saw the tutorial approach as insufficiently popular to engage the mass of army conscripts.

In 1941 Adam was appointed adjutant general - that is, he became the highest official in the army itself - and as such from 1943-45 he was directly answerable to the Secretary of State for War. In 1941 he sent Williams on a fact-finding trip round army camps to investigate soldiers' morale. On the basis of his observations, Williams proposed the setting-up of ABCA, and in August 1941 Adam appointed him as ABCA's director, a post in which he was directly answerable to Adam himself. ABCA itself was formally set up by the Army Council in September 1941. Williams remained its director throughout the war.

ABCA (and Williams) was based in the War Office. Williams arranged for the weekly issue to all army units of bulletins giving background information about the item to be discussed and tips for how to get discussion going. There were two series of such bulletins, issued in alternate weeks: one on general news issues (called *Current Affairs*) and one on military details of the progress of the war (called *War*). *War* was written by army officers, whereas *Current Affairs* was commissioned by ABCA from

civilian experts, edited by journalists, and vetted by civil servants in the relevant ministry according to subject - for example, housing, tax, health, empire, industry, transport, how the electoral process worked etc. In short, it offered a form of radical civics. These bulletins were used in weekly one-hour discussion sessions with every soldier, and these sessions were classed as 'parades', meaning that they were compulsory. However, they also replaced one of the hours that soldiers had hitherto been required to spend in military training. There was an emphasis on informality and freedom of speech regardless of rank. Further, the discussions were not presented as education - in fact, they were kept separate from the education provided within the army by the AEC and by CAC-sponsored civilian lecturers. Each unit designated a junior - usually young - officer to conduct ABCA sessions. These officers were provided with training in how to conduct discussions. ABCA also supplied maps, visual displays and the like. Use was made of film and drama, and eventually there was the widespread development of wall newspapers and 'information rooms'. In practice, then, what was the relation between the WEA and ABCA?

The dominant elements in the WEA (including Ernest Green) were not keen on ABCA. It was claimed, for example, that young officers would not be able to conduct politically neutral discussions, viewed as an essential feature of tutorial classes. However, the WEA reluctantly adapted to ABCA, and the CAC, jointly with the AEC, provided discussion method training for junior officers, for example through week-end residential courses at Coleg Harlech. 2,400 such officers were trained via these week-end courses in the first three months of the scheme. As well as this, travelling 'circuses' (that is, outreach training in discussion method) involved 5000 subalterns over the same period. (We can assume that the WEA could not stop them talking to one another informally when brought together for this training.)

In the course of the war, ABCA developed strongly. Williams's approach was implemented across the majority of the potential three million 'students'

Some unit commanders resisted this activity but a majority supported it as a morale booster. Women in the Auxiliary Territorial Service - ATS were involved. There is clear evidence of active participation both by working-class private soldiers and by a radicalised section of the intelligentsia who were for the moment in the army. (This would have included both some of the junior officers who were running the sessions and professionals conscripted as private soldiers.) In particular, there is much evidence of

soldiers participating strongly in ABCA sessions, especially during the North African campaign, the invasion of Italy, in the far East, and in the course of the fighting in France and Germany after D-Day on 6th June 1944.

It's important to bear in mind that the junior officers who ran the ABCA sessions were regularly in combat alongside the private soldiers in their units. Beyond a certain point, it was not possible for the powers-that-be to tell frontline soldiers how to act, and there is evidence that the traditional army ethos of unquestioning obedience was starting to break down. (Such evidence includes the Cairo and other 'forces parliaments'.)

Some sections of the army and War Office establishment were opposed to the whole ABCA experiment. Even General Montgomery, for example, reportedly saw it as a waste of time, and Churchill as prime minister tried to stop it, although his attempt to do so was thwarted by civil servants in the War Office. Nevertheless, opposition continued, and there were certainly Tory MPs who saw ABCA as a leftwing plot. The most high-profile example was a bulletin issued by ABCA in December 1942 which consisted of a plain language write-up by Sir William Beveridge of his Social Security White Paper (itself made public in the November). This bulletin was recalled by order of the Secretary of State for War (Sir James Grigg) but again there is clear evidence that this didn't stop discussion of the welfare state question in ABCA sessions.

So how much truth, then, is there in the claim that ABCA produced the 1945 Labour landslide? The Army vote on its own was not enough to do this. However, ideas exchanged in ABCA sessions, along with the habit of discussion itself, did spread. More generally, ABCA may be best understood as reflecting an overall upsurge of discussion across broad layers of the population in this period. As such, it is probably true that ABCA escaped from ruling class - including WEA - control, and arguably formed the embryo of a from-below ideological movement akin to the really useful knowledge movement in the 1830s-1840s and the Plebs League in 1908-1926.

One piece of evidence for this is a book, *Adult Education. The Record of the British Army*, written in 1946 by Major T. H. Hawkins and a civilian (L. Brimble, editor of the science journal *Nature*). To read this book now is to see at once that these authors were not particularly leftwing people. But for that reason what the book conveys is all the more telling. It reveals a world turned upside down, where everything seemed - and much arguably was - possible.