

OBITUARY



April Carter (1937 – 2022)

by **Andrew Rigby**, *Emeritus Professor of Peace Studies, Coventry University*

Photo: A. Rigby

Introduction

April Carter, a prominent peace activist and academic, passed away on 16th August 2022 at her home in Letchworth Garden City, UK. In preparing to write this appreciation of April's life and work I contacted my old friend and a contemporary of April's, Michael Randle. Michael's first words were: 'It is difficult to do justice to the importance and the diversity of April's work as an activist and as an academic'.

Reviewing the corpus of April's writings from the 1950s through to the first decades of the 21st century, it became apparent that April's publications were a vehicle for examining in a disciplined manner the issues she first encountered as a nonviolent activist. Within this framework it is possible to identify a number of core themes or subject areas through which April pursued her life-time project.

1) Democracy and nonviolent direct action

April Carter was born 22 November 1937. Her father was an engineer with the British Colonial Service and April spent the first ten years of her life in East Africa. Returning to the UK in 1947, April was enrolled at a public school in Gloucestershire, not far from the family home in Cheltenham. The staff at the school recognised April's outstanding intellectual abilities and fast-streamed her through the English secondary school examination system—resulting in her being offered a place at Oxford University. Deciding that she was too young to take up a scholarship to Oxford, she chose to sit the civil service exams, and took up a position in the Foreign Office in the mid-1950s.

It was during this period that public concern was growing about the threat to human existence posed by atomic weapons, and the newly developed hydrogen bomb in particular. In May 1957 Harold Steele, a retired poultry farmer from the west of England, set off to join a 'peace fleet' that was due to sail from Japan towards Christmas Island in the Pacific where Britain planned to explode its first H-bomb. A group of peace activists committed to nonviolence came together to support him in this endeavour, which came to be known as the Direct Action Committee Against Nuclear War (DAC).

Steele failed in his attempt but the Committee decided to continue its work. The original group, drawn from pacifists associated with the publication *Peace News*, was joined in 1958 by a younger generation of activists, including Michael Randle, Pat Arrowsmith and April Carter, who became secretary. They decided to focus their energies on organising a march from central London to Aldermaston, the location where the UK's atomic weaponry was being developed. April played a core role in the organisation of the march, which took place over the Easter period of 1958. According to Michael Randle, April was keen for there to be some kind of dress-code, so that people would take the message of the march seriously. She was also concerned that the march should not be seen as some kind of communist party project.¹ The march attracted considerable publicity and was followed by a 9-week picket at Aldermaston during the summer of 1958, culminating in a sit-down protest on 22 September 1958.

¹ See Lawrence Wittner, *Resisting the bomb: A history of the world disarmament movement 1954-1970*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997, p. 332.

In its mission statement the DAC affirmed that its role was 'to assist the conducting of non-violent direct action to obtain the total renunciation of nuclear war and its weapons by Britain and all other countries as a first step in disarmament'. In late 1958, the DAC began a prolonged campaign against the construction of Thor rocket bases in Britain. The most significant of these protests took place near Swaffham in Norfolk, on 6 and 20 December 1958, when activists tried to enter the construction site. It was April's participation in the protest at Swaffham that led to her first experience of imprisonment.²

What needs to be emphasised here is the significance of this relatively small group of activists in influencing the style and the culture of the first wave of British anti-nuclear protest. The methods and the principles of the nonviolent direct action (NVDA) that they pursued in the 1950s and 1960s had a lasting impact upon British popular movements for change in the second half of the 20th century and beyond. It was due to the activities of the DAC and the larger Committee of 100, which superseded it, that NVDA and civil disobedience became an integral and accepted dimension of popular protest for subsequent generations of activists in the UK and beyond. At the heart of this seminal initiative was April Carter—a young woman whose quiet demeanour and unassuming manner belied an iron will and a fierce determination to act upon her principles.

In March 1962, *Peace News* published a pamphlet entitled 'Direct Action' written by April, who had been appointed an assistant editor at the paper. In October 1962, she engaged in debate with a former editor of *Peace News*, Allen Skinner, on the topic of civil disobedience and democracy. For some time, Skinner had been concerned about what he considered the anti-democratic tendencies displayed by nonviolent activists who were prepared to break the law in pursuit of goals which were contrary to the expressed will of the majority of the citizens—such as the rejection of nuclear weapons. In her refutation of Skinner's thesis, April displayed all the qualities that were to characterise her subsequent publications. Her writing always displayed a kind of calmness—there was no resort to hyperbole, but there was an incisive quality and a clarity that came from her absolute mastery of the topic. Here are some extracts from that piece that display these qualities, in addition to evidencing her deep commitment to the principles and practice of NVDA:

² See A. Yates & L. Chester, *The troublemaker: Michael Scott and his lonely struggle against injustice*, London: Aurum Press, 2006, p. 200.

Allen Skinner [...] argues that majorities and minorities must respect each others views and that tolerance means 'a readiness to accept the advocacy of policies of which one strongly disapproves'. He thus bypasses the real problem which is whether one can tolerate the *practice* of policies which seriously infringe the rights and liberties of others [...]

There comes a point when the individual has to say that regardless of what the majority is doing, or whether the government is democratically elected, that he will resist [...] In view of the nature of nuclear war, since it is too late to do anything when war has started, it surely must be justifiable. Faced with imminent annihilation the only way people can exercise some kind of restraint over their government is by non-violent resistance. In this way people can to some extent counteract the tremendous power of military, industrial and other pressure groups [...]

A very good case can be made to show that far from being antidemocratic non-violent action is essentially democratic. It provides people with a natural means of opposing unjust policies and of curbing the excesses of government power; it also provides means which are peaceful and do not cause injury to anyone - except perhaps the resisters. Because any suffering and danger involved falls upon those resisting, non-violent action is the only way of opposing the practice of injustice while remaining 'tolerant' to those enforcing segregation, manning bases, etc.³

In this focus on the relationship between the citizen and the state, and the manner in which excessive state power might be challenged by legitimate nonviolent—if sometimes illegal—means, April was exploring issues that presaged the concerns that remained at the heart of her subsequent career as an academic and author.

2) Means and ends in pursuit of revolutionary transformation

In 1973, April published *Direct action and liberal democracy*, in which she developed some of the themes addressed in the columns of *Peace News* in

³ A. Carter, 'Response to reality', *Peace News*, 15 June 1962, p. 7.

1962.⁴ This book followed her 1971 publication of *The political theory of anarchism*. In both works, one gets the strong sense of an author using her academic discipline to examine the challenges she faced in her own political activities. But as with all her works, the arguments are based on logic and evidence rather than emotional advocacy. Thus, exploring the dilemmas facing anarchists in liberal democracies, she wrote that there were two alternatives:

One is to build up independent communities and organizations within the existing State, and so create a new society in embryo, and an alternative power base. The other is to erode the power of those at the top — a power in reality springing from the co-operative action of the social group as a whole — by withdrawing co-operation and refusing to obey orders. If non-co-operation were adopted on a mass scale the ‘power’ of the men at the top would cease to exist. Both these approaches are wholly consistent with anarchist principles, and both are potentially effective. The snag is that both must be linked to some form of popular movement if they are to have immediate impact; and to achieve ultimate success they must be part of a strategy which can force changes in policy at a national level, and eventually overthrow the powers-that-be. Hence both approaches may still require political compromises.⁵

In *Authority and democracy* (1979), she continued her exploration of the problematics of means and ends in the quest for radical change, concluding with a warning to all those seeking to bring about socio-economic and cultural transformation by means of state-power: ‘No revolutionary party has yet successfully resolved the problem of maintaining progress towards its ideal goals and maintaining genuine popular support and genuine authority while doing so’.⁶

⁴ A Carter, *Direct action and liberal democracy*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973.

⁵ Accessed at <https://tinyurl.com/mw7vbbd2> (28.11. 2022).

⁶ A. Carter, *Authority and democracy*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979, p. 91. Accessible at <https://tinyurl.com/due858ac> (29.11.2022). In 1982 a revised version of her doctoral thesis was published in which she explored the possibilities and the limits of democratisation processes within a communist party state. See *Democratic reform in Yugoslavia: The changing role of the party*,

In 2005, over thirty years after the publication of *Direct action and liberal democracy*, she returned to the same topic in *Direct action and democracy today*. In the introduction she explained that although much had changed over the years:

My earlier claim that nonviolent direct action is often justified in liberal countries, largely because actual liberal democracies are very imperfectly either liberal or democratic, has not fundamentally altered. The role of the state in the international system, particularly its commitment to security, has always tended to undermine both liberalism and democracy and to prompt direct action campaigns.⁷

3) Cosmopolitan citizenship

The DAC developed strong links internationally, particularly with the Committee for Nonviolent Action (CNVA) in the USA. Activists from both groups came together to oppose French nuclear testing in the Sahara in early 1960. Members of the DAC, including April, determined to oppose the action and engaged in six-months of negotiation and preparation, liaising with embassies, debating the politics of the action, the route to be followed and the personnel to be involved, in addition to seeking out funding. The aim of the action was for a team of internationals and Africans to set off from Accra in Ghana and travel over 2000 miles to the proposed test site near Reggane, in what is now central Algeria, in the French Saharan desert. The French colonial authorities prevented the activists from traversing what is now Burkina Faso, but despite the failure to achieve their primary goal the team did succeed in attracting a lot of attention in Ghana and served as a focus for opposition to atomic testing in other parts of Africa. Indeed, Bayard Rustin claimed it was the most significant pacifist project he had been associated with.⁸

The DAC also became involved in a project initiated by Brad Lyttle of the CNVA—the San Francisco to Moscow Peace Walk. In collaboration

Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1982. Accessible at <https://tinyurl.com/y5xum58n> (29.11.2022)

⁷ A., Carter, *Direct action and democracy today*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005, p. xi.

⁸ A. Carter, 'The Sahara protest team', in A. P. Hare & H. Blumberg, eds., *Liberation without violence: A third-party approach*, Totawa, NJ.: Rowman & Littlefield, 1977, pp. 126-156.

with Bayard Rustin, April acted as European Organiser for the march, from its arrival in the UK in June 1961 through to its conclusion in Moscow in October of that year.⁹

In the wake of the Soviet-led invasion of Czechoslovakia in August 1968, which aimed to put a stop to the 'Prague Spring' liberalisation reforms being introduced by Alexander Dubček's government, April was at the fore in organising an international response. When she heard the news April phoned Michael Randle urging that War Resisters International (WRI) should organise an international protest against the invasion. There then followed a frantic period of phone-calls and consultations. The resulting 'Support Czechoslovakia' protest took the form of teams from different WRI sections launching simultaneous demonstrations in Moscow, Warsaw, Budapest and Sofia on 24 September 1968, handing out leaflets and displaying banners. April joined the group protesting in Budapest, and was amongst those detained for a few days in prison before being put on a flight back to London.¹⁰

In her active engagement with nonviolent protest beyond the borders of the United Kingdom, April was giving expression to a long tradition in pacifist and anti-war thinking—the recognition that our responsibility for the human security of others does not stop at frontiers, we need to act as cosmopolitan citizens of the world. She pursued this theme in her 2002 publication *The political theory of global citizenship*. Recognising the threats to our shared home posed by the hegemony of neo-liberalism, the manner in which globalization has resulted in the increasing domination of Western imperialism in different guises, she placed her hope for the future in the growth of transnational political action:

The concept of global citizenship is far from meaningless. It captures the trend in international law and politics to move beyond exclusive focus on sovereign states to the rights and responsibilities of individuals. It also indicates the increasing role of individuals acting through a range

⁹ See G. Wernicke & L. Wittner, 'Lifting the Iron Curtain: The peace march to Moscow of 1960-1961', *The International History Review*, Dec., 1999, v. 21, n. 4, December 1999, pp. 900-917.

¹⁰ This draws on Michael Randle's account. See M. Levy, *Ban the Bomb: Michael Randle and direct action against nuclear war*, Stuttgart: Ibidem, 2021, pp. 194-6.

of organizations within global civil society and the increasing political significance of this transnational phenomenon.¹¹

April's interest in transnational social movements and cross-border political activism was also evidenced when she played a central role as editorial advisor in the publication of Howard Clark's edited work *People power: Unarmed resistance and global solidarity* (2009). As Howard acknowledged:

Without April Carter, I don't know when this book would have seen the light of day. She has been a marvellous source of advice and encouragement, commenting on every contribution, editing several, firing off reminders when they were needed, and in general keeping this project on track.¹²

4) Disarmament and alternative defence

In 1980, April, with support from Adam Roberts, initiated the setting up of the Alternative Defence Commission (ADC), with its base at the Peace Studies Department, Bradford University. It had been April's idea, informed by the desire to move on from a position of protest to the constructive development of a defence policy for the UK that did not rely on nuclear weaponry. Paul Rogers took up the role of chairing the commission—and his reflections on that period and the central role played by April can be found in his companion piece in this volume.

One of the significant outcomes of the various reports and publications that came out of the ADC was that the 'defence establishment' in the UK could no longer easily dismiss the strategic analyses and policy proposals

¹¹ A. Carter, *The political theory of global citizenship*, London: Routledge, 2001, p. 235.

¹² H. Clark, ed., *People power: Unarmed resistance and global solidarity*, London: Pluto Press, 2009. I was the other member of the 'editorial team'. I recall meeting with Howard and April at the British Library in London. This was the only time I had worked with April, and what stays with me is the incisiveness of her comments, the clarity of her editorial recommendations—all expressed in a quiet 'English blue-stocking' tone and manner. It was clear we were in the presence of someone in a different intellectual league from Howard and I.

coming from ‘suspect sources’ associated with the peace movement.¹³ April played her part in this process, not only through the ADC, but also through her own scholarly analysis of the factors affecting the outcome of arms negotiations based on research carried out when she was a fellow of the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute during 1986-7.¹⁴

5) The Commonweal Collection and bibliographies

In 1956, April’s cousin, David Hoggett, travelled to Austria to help prepare reception camps for the thousands of Hungarians fleeing their own country, in the wake of the Soviet armed suppression of the popular uprising that had erupted in October 1956 in an effort to displace the state-socialist regime. Unfortunately, David fell from the roof of one of the houses which he was helping to build and was paralyzed from the chest down. Back home in Cheltenham, with his mobility restricted, he read avidly and began amassing a large collection of books and pamphlets and a diverse range of journals on aspects of nonviolent social change, peace and reconciliation. As the peace movement of the 1960s grew, David began to lend out his books to activists, students and scholars. With the help of April and other family and friends, he established a postal library service, the Commonweal Collection, and this became his life’s work.

After David’s death in 1975, April played a key role in facilitating the transfer of the collection to a new home in the library of the University of Bradford, where the first School of Peace Studies had recently been established. At the time of the transfer the Collection comprised over 3,000 titles, all meticulously classified and catalogued.¹⁵

In 1966, David Hoggett, April and Adam Roberts had compiled an annotated bibliography of works relating to the theory and practice of nonviolent action, with an expanded version published four years later

¹³ Three books came out of the ADC. *Defence without the bomb*, London: Taylor & Francis, 1983; *Without the bomb: Non-nuclear defence policies for Britain*, London: Paladin, 1985; and *The politics of alternative defence: a role for a non-nuclear Britain*, London: Paladin, 1987.

¹⁴ A. Carter, *Success and failure in arms negotiations*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989.

¹⁵ See <https://tinyurl.com/mrxhcjeh> (02.12.2022)

in 1970.¹⁶ April continued with this bibliographical work, producing a bibliography of Marshall Tito in 1989 followed by one of Gandhi in 1995.¹⁷ This was followed in 2006 by the first of three co-edited volumes on people power and nonviolent protest.¹⁸

6) Returning to civil resistance

During her academic career, April held posts at the universities of Lancaster and Oxford in the UK, and at Queensland in Australia. After her return to the UK from Australia she was for a while without an 'academic address'. Accordingly, it was my honour as director of the Centre for Peace and Reconciliation Studies at Coventry University to offer her the post of Honorary Research Fellow. She did us proud, with the Centre accruing status with every mention in her subsequent publications.

In 2009 she wrote what I consider to be the most archetypal of her publications, a review of the civil resistance literature in historical context published in a volume edited by her old comrade Adam Roberts and his colleague Timothy Garton Ash.¹⁹ For me this piece is a classic, it is so succinct and incisive—I would urge anyone not familiar with April's work or with the field of civil resistance studies to read it.

April continued to follow political developments throughout the world, and in 2011 published another significant work on the theme of civil resistance and 'people power'—*People Power and Political Change: Key Issues and Concepts*. Let me close this tribute to April's life-long work with

¹⁶ A Carter, D. Hoggett, & A. Roberts, *Non-violent action, theory and practice: a selected bibliography*, London: Housmans, 1966; A. Carter, D. Hoggett & A. Roberts, *Non-violent action: A selected bibliography*, London: Housmans, 1970.

¹⁷ A. Carter, *Marshall Tito: A bibliography*, Westport, CT.: Greenwood, 1989; A. Carter, *Gandhi – selected bibliography*, Westport, CT.: Greenwood, 1995.

¹⁸ A. Carter, H. Clark & M. Randle, *People power and protest since 1945: A bibliography of nonviolent action*, London: Housmans, 2006; *A guide to civil resistance: A bibliography of people power and nonviolent protest*, London: Green Print, 2013; *A guide to civil resistance 2: A bibliography of social movements and nonviolent action*, London: Merlin Press, 2015.

¹⁹ A Carter, 'People power and protest: The literature on civil resistance in historical context', in A. Roberts & T. Garton Ash, eds. *Civil resistance and power politics: The experience of non-violent action from Gandhi to the present*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009, pp. 25-42.

the final paragraph from the book. The tone is undemonstrative, reasoned, quiet almost—but the strength with which she held the underlying values shows through:

The central emphasis of this book is on the political importance of people power as a phenomenon: the remarkable fact that ordinary men and women armed with nothing but courage, determination, ingenuity and ability to cooperate can undermine and overthrow regimes defended by ruthless security services and armed with the latest weaponry. The importance of protest is worth asserting because academic analysts, suspicious of immediate impressions, are often reluctant to accept that people power is really significant. There is a strong tendency—especially in retrospect—to minimize the role of the popular protests and emphasize instead the significance of long-term trends, the underlying economic, military or political weaknesses of the regime, the role of international pressures or the importance of elite negotiations. All these factors may indeed influence both the context of resistance and the final outcome—and this book seeks to take them into account. There is, moreover, always room for competing interpretations. But progress towards democracy requires popular commitment to achieve it.²⁰

April Carter

by **Paul Rogers**, *Emeritus Professor of Peace Studies, Department of Peace Studies and International Relations, Bradford University*

As the Cold War intensified in the early 1980s, the UK government under Margaret Thatcher took a full part in the re-arming of Western Europe. US nuclear forces in Britain would be strengthened by the deployment of 160 nuclear-armed cruise missiles and the Thatcher government began to plan the replacement of the UK's submarine-based Polaris missiles with the more

²⁰ A. Carter, *People Power and Political Change: Key Issues and Concepts*, London: Routledge, 2011, p. 177. For an informative review of this book by Michael Randle, see *Peace News*, 31 March 2012. Accessible at <https://tinyurl.com/s3k6c6r3> (03.12.2022)

powerful Trident system. This whole process threw new light on the UK's nuclear strategy and also stimulated a vigorous anti-nuclear movement.

It was in this context that an Alternative Defence Commission was set up at Bradford University's Department of Peace Studies in 1980 to propose a non-nuclear defence strategy for the country. This turned into a multi-year project supported by Quaker trusts, an initiative that was hugely supported by April, both as a key member of the Commission as well as a thinker and writer. In her quiet and unobtrusive way, she worked closely on the Commission with the research fellow, Michael Randle, and showed her vast knowledge of nonviolence and its role in security, providing an essential intellectual foundation to the Commission's work.

Over seven years the Commission produced two major studies, the original *Defence Without the Bomb* (1983) and a further political analysis *The Politics of Alternative Defence* (1987), and was seen at the time as presenting a robust intellectual alternative to the many writings on nuclear policy stemming frequently from an assertive realist perspective. It was my good luck to chair the second phase of the Commission's work (1984-7), which brought me into regular contact with April and her work.

It is no exaggeration to say that the Commission, its two books, and various supplementary outputs, relied heavily on April's intellectual drive and knowledge. This combined with Michael's extraordinary knowledge—stemming from what was already four decades of nonviolent action and thought, and which continues into a seventh decade—to underpin the whole work of the commission.

In all her contributions to the Commission, April combined a deep commitment to nonviolence with a determination to be low-profile, to an extent that only those closely familiar with her work knew the extent of its influence and impact. This came back to me when I had a much more recent illustration of her qualities.

Twenty years after the Alternative Commission, April teamed up again with Michael, joined this time by Howard Clark, to write a bibliography of nonviolent protest, *People Power and Protest since 1945* (2006), part of a decade-long project that ended up with the two further volumes of *A Guide to Civil Resistance: A Bibliography of People Power and Nonviolent Protest* (2013 and 2015), which remain the best guides to many decades of nonviolent action right across the world.

Bibliography is not the correct word, whatever the titles say, because every part of each volume provides a succinct and knowledgeable guide to the topic. A chapter in Volume One, for example, on “Resisting Authoritarianism in Post-Communist and Post-Soviet Regimes”, provides the full context for relevant actions and movements in every state covered. These, combined with annotated bibliographies, give the reader a wealth of knowledge and understanding, while opening the door to even more.

Moreover, the project continues to this day, with regular updating, via the website <https://civilresistance.info>.

April's work in this updating gave me another opportunity to witness once more her determination and commitment. In the last few years of her life, and despite failing health, she continued to contribute essential updates to the website, sending them to Michael and me for checking and encouraging us and others to ensure that funding could be found to continue.

Her perceptive analyses of nonviolent attempts to rein in the junta in Myanmar were joined by regular assessments of the more successful protests of Indian farmers to counter the policies of the Modi government. Every few weeks more texts would come through which were not so much for ‘checking’, whatever she said, but for learning from a true scholar. April Carter, in short, was a remarkable person.

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