



An Interview With Oriole Tucker



By Paul Avrich

Admirable though it was, the life of Benjamin Tucker lacked dramatic quality. For excitement, color, or suspense, it cannot be compared with the life of Bakunin, Kropotkin, or Malatesta, still less of Durruti, Makhno, or Bonnot. Events there were, to be sure: Tucker's early conversion to anarchism, his seduction by Victoria Woodhull, his controversy with Johann Most, to mention just a few. Yet these were merely ripples in an otherwise unbroken current. Tucker was a man of intellect rather than of action. His months and years were taken up mostly with the working out of his ideas and with the publication of his books and journals, *Liberty* above all else. Because of this, historians have dwelt on Tucker's role as a publicist, to the neglect of his personal life. Little has been told about Tucker the man.

By examining the available sources, however, we can learn a great deal about the human side of Tucker, much of it of considerable interest. In physical appearance, he was a handsome man, 5'9" tall and weighing about 165 pounds, with piercing dark eyes, dark brown hair, and a neatly trimmed beard and mustache. (He shed his beard in his later years but kept the mustache until the end.) Always impeccably dressed, he was seldom to be seen in his shirtsleeves or otherwise informally attired.

To match his well-groomed appearance, Tucker exhibited a

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meticulousness of mind and manner throughout his long life. There was in him to the end something aloof and shut in. He was without snobbery or racial and class bias, but he showed always the aristocratic stance of a member of the New England gentry. Though he had a large circle of acquaintances, he did not make friends easily, and few came to know him on intimate terms. George Schumm, William Bailie, and other close associates on **Liberty** always addressed him as "Mr. Tucker" in their letters.

These qualities were amply reflected in Tucker's writing. He possessed the virtues of discipline, stability, and high standards. He worked with great concentration, thoroughness, and attention to detail. His keenness of intellect, lucidity of style, and adherence to principle were proverbial. Not only did he have a sharp analytical mind and a true gift of literary craftsmanship, but he was in deadly earnest about what he thought and how he expressed it. And he was consistent to a fault. It is remarkable how little his ideas and his prose changed over the course of his lifetime, which stretched from antebellum Massachusetts to the Riviera on the eve of World War II. What he had to say he said straight out and confidently and well. But his candor was seldom tempered by tact. He was a bristlingly aggressive polemicist, sensitive to criticism and sure of his own high worth. Sure, also, of the **Tightness** of his views, he seldom yielded an inch to his opponents. He was forever correcting them, straightening them out, and pointing out errors in their logic. With trembling fingers, friends and foes alike must have opened each fresh issue of **Liberty**, fearing "that keen, clear-cut style," as C.L. Swartz described it, "that was the delight of his adherents and the despair of his opponents."¹

Yet, for all his acidity in print, Tucker was invariably cordial in private company. This surprised regular readers of **Liberty** when they met him for the first time. "Face to face," said J. William Lloyd, "this tiger was a dove." Albert Chavannes found him "the mildest mannered pirate that ever cut a throat or sank a ship," while to C.L. Swartz he was "the most affable and polished of gentlemen and the warmest friend."²

What then accounts for the impression of coldness or aloofness that he left with so many others? According to his sister-in-law, Dr. Bertha F. Johnson, this was due merely to shyness on Tucker's part.³ And shyness, too, may help to explain Tucker's inadequacy as a public speaker, as well as his frequent, "slightly nervous"

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laugh.⁴ Tucker himself, in a letter to Jo Labadie, admitted that "I am as shy in getting acquainted with children as with grown people, which is equivalent to saying that I am very shy indeed."⁵ Along with his shyness, moreover, went a lack of physical courage that dated from his early childhood. "Probably I do not need to remind you of the baby that I was in our boyhood days," he wrote to a cousin towards the end of his life, "averse to doing stunts, timid to the extreme in all muscular sports, and boo-hooing on the slightest provocation. I am the same coward still, and am ashamed of it now as I was ashamed of it then."⁶

Reserved as he was, however, there was a lighter side to Tucker's personality. He was far from being an ascetic, as Victor S. Yarros describes him.⁷ He enjoyed plays and concerts. He knew and loved good food. "I was always an epicure," he wrote in 1936, "and even a gourmand, to the extent that I could afford, and sometimes to an extent that I could not afford."⁸ For all his timidity, moreover, Tucker had several love affairs — with Victoria Woodhull and Sarah E. Holmes, for example — before he found the beautiful young woman with a "classic face" who became his much adored companion.⁹

It was his old associate George Schumm who recommended Pearl Johnson to work at Tucker's Unique Book Shop in New York City during the last two years of its existence (1906 to 1908). She was twenty-five years Tucker's junior, and he had known her mother's family during his boyhood in Massachusetts. Two years before his death, Tucker thanked Schumm for bringing them together. "That was without doubt the, greatest stroke of luck that I have ever had in my life," Tucker wrote. "I realize it more and more as time goes on. How little we know of the future, and the surprises! A word drops, and a child is born. With all my heart I thank you!"¹⁰

The "child" was Oriole Tucker, who arrived in November 1908, nine months after the fire which wiped out her father's warehouse and ended his publishing venture of thirty years' duration. Six weeks after her birth, the family sailed for Europe. Tucker never returned to the United States. Oriole was raised in France and in Monaco, where she lived until her father's death in 1939. She was Tucker's only child, and he was deeply devoted to her. Bright and pretty, she spoke flawless French and English and became an accomplished pianist. Until the age of fifteen, she did not attend

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school. Her mother instructed her at home with textbooks furnished by the Calvert School in Baltimore. When she finally entered school, she made an outstanding record. At home, she was brought up in accordance with her parents' libertarian principles. She had a room of her own, said Tucker, "which is almost her castle, and which her father rarely enters, except under stress of necessity. There are four lines of Emerson which I am fond of quoting: 'When the Church is social worth,/ When the State-house is the hearth,/ Then the perfect state has come,~/The republican at home.' It has been my endeavor in my later years to realize The Anarchist at Home, and it seems to me that my effort in this line has not been entirely in vain."¹¹

On January 21, 1973, I visited Oriole Tucker at her home in Ossining, New York, with the object of interviewing her about her father, and especially about the personal side of his life. Married to Jean Riche\ a French chef, she taught French at the Dobbs Ferry Middle School a few miles away. Her house stood on the site of the former Stillwater colony, a short-lived School of Living community founded by Ralph Borsodi in 1939. Across the road lived Beatrice Schumm Fetz, the daughter of Tucker's long-time associates George and Emma Schumm, while at the bottom of the hill stood the house of Margaret Noyes Goldsmith, a granddaughter of John Humphrey Noyes, the celebrated founder of the Oneida community. Oriole was a fine-looking woman with remarkable eyes, a youthful appearance, and a vivid memory, particularly where her parents were concerned. I had looked forward to coming back at a more advanced stage of my research, in order to talk to her again about her father. But she died suddenly in June 1974, at the age of sixty-five. Thus our conversation was never completed. What she told me, however, is of great interest. Her words were as follows.

I was born in New York City on November 9, 1908, delivered by Dr. E.B. Foote, father's friend and fellow libertarian. I was named after J. William Lloyd's daughter, Oriole Lloyd. My parents had been hoping I would arrive on November 11 th, the anniversary of the Haymarket executions. After the disastrous fire in January 1908, father had decided to move to France. He didn't want to start all over again. Besides, he loved France and always said he wanted to die in France. He and mother went to Paris in the summer of 1908 and rented a house in the suburb of Le Vesinet,

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near Saint Germain. They came back to the U.S. to have me born here (mother was expecting a difficult birth and wanted the family on hand). But by Christmas I was in France, aged five weeks old. And there I stayed. When I was 3H, mother and I did come to the States for a few months to see her family. After the war, though, we never came back as a family. In 1936, I came by myself for three months. America had been as far away to me as the moon. It was a fairyland to me: mother kept talking about it, tried to keep it alive, but to me all the names I heard seemed like people stepping out of mythology.

Mother — Pearl Johnson — was the daughter of a New England couple, Horace Johnson and Florence Hull, one of four daughters of Moses Hull, a minister of advanced views who became a well-known spiritualist. Pearl went to the Sunrise Club in New York, and knew Bea Schumm. It was George Schumm who suggested her to father to work in his bookshop a few years before I was born. One of mother's sisters was Dr. Bertha Johnson. Fred Schulder, who worked as a salesman for *Liberty*, was Aunt Bertha's boyfriend. His son with Adeline Champney, Horace Champney, was the Quaker who sailed a boat to Vietnam a few years ago to protest against the war.

When father's mother died, she left him a nice sum of money. He put it in an annuity and had a comfortable income thereafter of \$1,650 a year. In New York he lived pleasantly, though not lavishly, in a two-room hotel suite. Another reason he decided to go to France was that he and the family could live rather well there on his income. My parents, incidentally, were never legally married. Yet they were the most monogamistic couple I ever saw, absolutely devoted to each other until the end. Oddly enough, they believed in having separate rooms and, if one had the means, even separate houses, coming together when you wanted to. They couldn't afford that though! I always liked the idea of my husband coming home at night and not having to plan and make a date to see him!

We lived in Le Vesinet the first six years, traveling a good deal. The winter following the outbreak of the war we stayed with Henry Bool in England, and when we returned to France we moved to an apartment in Nice. We stayed there eleven years. But taxes were rising sharply in France, so we moved to Monaco, where we rented a nice house for thirteen years, and where father died in 1939.

During the war, father was anti-German from the start. The

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German government, German militarism, German regimentation — he hated them with a passion. And he loved France. France was the only thing that counted — French food, French wine, French newspapers and books. He wanted to be buried there. He never came back to the United States, and never wished to. He didn't speak French very well, but read it easily. He had a great admiration for Clemenceau, to whom he bore a close physical resemblance.

After the war, father was afraid of trouble. He was afraid, as a foreigner, of being disturbed. He wanted to be left alone. There was no contact with Emma Goldman or Alexander Berkman, who were then living in southern France. Father disliked both of them. Mother had been friends with Emma Goldman in New York, and once she saw them on the street in Nice but decided not to approach them. John Henry Mackay used to come down, and George Bernard Shaw came once for afternoon tea. When I was eighteen I gave French lessons to Henry Cohen's sister. Pryn's Hopkins, who was living in Nice, came over to visit, and some nephew of Tolstoy's, but otherwise not many of father's old friends.

In France the whole family lived an anarchistic life. When I asked a question — like how in the world would we get along without police — father would say look it up on page so and so of *Instead of a Book*. Mother, by contrast, would explain carefully. She was a born teacher and psychologist. But father was a born non-teacher. He couldn't speak to a young person. Mother always gave me sensible answers. He had it all worked out — it was very discouraging to talk with him — he always had irrefutable arguments, he always seemed right. And that turned me off. He made no allowance for human feelings and frailties. Just hew to the line and let the chips fall where they may. Mother, too, said he had no psychological understanding of people. He had great affection and respect for me, but we couldn't discuss anything.

Father, incidentally, believed in contracts. We had written contractual arrangements around the house. When I was eighteen, he wrote a whole contract about my paying a share of what I made from giving piano lessons. That might seem cold and calculating, yet it made everything clear and simple. He never would have entered my room without knocking, even when I was a little girl. He was old fashioned in many ways. He rode in a car two or three times in Paris. But he was scared stiff of them. He thought they were dangerous. As a result, I disliked them too and didn't go in

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them for a long time.

Sometime during the 1920s Victor Yarros wrote an article on anarchism, virtually repudiating his whole connection with it, his whole past. This made father furious. He wrote to him, and there was a bitter controversy. Around that same time, the Sacco-Vanzetti affair took place. That was the first blow to my good feeling about America. Father wrote a letter to an American paper blasting the travesty of justice that had taken place. The Spanish Civil War came during the last years of his life. He was certainly against Franco, but he didn't seem to get excited about it. He worried a great deal about the approaching world war, though. He thought we should escape to Denmark, where it was safe! We were scared stiff by Munich. Things got worse and worse. We didn't know what to do — to uproot him and come to America and go to live at Aunt Bertha's? It was really a blessing that he died when he did, you know. The very next day we packed up his books and papers. We came to New York on October 5, 1939. Mother went to Aunt Bertha's farm, and I stayed with George Macdonald, a miserable isolationist to the nth degree! In 1940 we took an apartment on Amsterdam Avenue. Mother died there in 1948. I had married meanwhile. Mother died when my first daughter was six or eight months old. We came up here in 1948. My older daughter Marianne has a brain like her father, yet with such sympathy and understanding for everyone. Now she is twenty-five and getting an M.A. in Social Work in Baltimore. Her sister, twenty-three, is studying dance in Toronto.

Father's attitude towards communism never changed one whit, nor about religion. He was very consistent all his life. In his last months he called in the French housekeeper. "I want her," he said, "to be a witness that on my death bed I'm not recanting. I do *not* believe in God!" I was interested, even sympathetic, in his ideas. But I was never really an anarchist. I don't think it would ever work. Neither did father at the end. He was very pessimistic about the world and in his political outlook. But he was always optimistic about himself, always cheerful, happy; he never sat and brooded but was content to look out at the view and at his books. He sang hymns from Sunday School — the *Rock of Ages* and that sort of thing — and couldn't keep a tune. He had a reputation as a cold person. But how he loved mother! And he cried easily at anything noble.

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Footnotes

1. Foreword to *Individual Liberty: Selections from the Writings of Benjamin R. Tucker*, C.L. Swartz (ed.) (New York: Vanguard Press, 1926), p. v.
2. *Free Vistas: An Anthology of Life and Letters*, Joseph Ishill (ed.), 2 vols. (Berkeley Heismts, N.J., Oriole Press, 1933-1937), II, 280-81.
3. Bertha F. Johnson to Agnes Inglis, February 12, 1936, Labadie Collection, University of Michigan.
4. J. William Lloyd. *Free Vistas*, II, 280.
5. Benjamin R. Tucker to Joseph A. Labadie, August 12, 1888, Labadie Collection.
6. Tucker to Charles Almy, March 15, 1925, Tucker Papers, New York Public Library.
7. Victor S. Yarros, "Philosophical Anarchism: Its Rise, Decline, and Eclipse," *The American Journal of Sociology* 41(1936):471.
8. Tucker to editor of *The American Journal of Sociology*, April 11, 1936, Tucker Papers.
9. The description is that of J. William Lloyd. *Free Vistas*, II, 282-83.
10. Tucker to George Schumm, June 28, 1937, Tucker Papers.
11. Tucker to Almy, March 15, 1925, Tucker Papers.