

Rewi Alley, 1897 – 1987

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A prolific poet and writer of non-fiction, an educator and a social reformer, a peace activist and a passionate proletarian, New Zealander Rewi Alley devoted almost all his long life to the people of China.

Alley, the third of Frederick and Clara Alley's seven children, was born in the Canterbury township of Springfield, sixty kilometres west of Christchurch. The honour of naming the child fell to Frederick Alley's unmarried sister Amy who called the boy Rewi in honour of the Ngati Maniapoto leader Rewi Maniapoto, whose acts of bravery during the New Zealand wars of the 1860s had become legendary.

Rewi's parents were idealists. Frederick James Alley, a schoolteacher, was born in New Zealand to Protestant Irish parents; Clara Maria Buckingham had emigrated from England with her parents. They married in 1892, made their first home in Springfield, and in their separate ways worked towards realising their aspirations for a better world. Frederick, a strict disciplinarian, instilled in his children a respect for hard work and education. He was a democrat, a religious non-conformist, a social visionary and a pamphleteer, producing essays on the reform of education, and on land tenure and farming in which he proposed state-owned, mechanised industrial farm units, each with its own community of labourers, mechanics and tradespeople. Alley remembers him as a great believer in social progress, 'a socialist before his time' (*Rewi Alley: An Autobiography* 9). Clara, a governess prior to her marriage, worked for women's suffrage and in the Women's Christian Temperance Union, and represented the Malvern Women's Institute at the first National Council of Women in 1896.

The Alley family moved to Amberley in North Canterbury early in 1898 and in 1902 Rewi started school under an infant mistress who believed in applying spelling and mathematics with the strap. Although home life too was disciplined – from a young age the Alley children were assigned chores, and every day Frederick would select a poem, a biblical text, or a passage from one of his beloved Unitarian philosophers for his children to memorise – Alley remembers Amberley as a wonderful place. Reading to his father while he milked the cow was rewarded with warm milk; summer Sundays were spent at a swimming hole in the Kowhai River where there were trout to be caught, and weka to snare.

In 1907 the family moved into Christchurch. Frederick Alley, now headmaster of Wharenui School in Riccarton, bought a farm in Southland so that his sons did not lose contact with the land. Every holiday, one or two would be sent down to assist the manager on the windswept, rabbit-infested holding. It was here that Rewi learned to shear, to shoot and to ride: '[L]earning to plow, / Endure the cold, and eat a little bitterness at times; to read all that / Could be read; doing many foolish things, and rarely repenting.' ('Autobiography', *Gung Ho: Poems* 12)

Back at Christchurch Boys' High School, he applied himself to sport – especially rugby, rowing and shooting – and to history, geography and English. His favourite reading was adventure stories, and later the novels of Walter Scott, Jules Verne, O. Henry, Dickens and Thackeray. He also enjoyed 'poems of action' and Shakespeare's sonnets. (*Autobiography* 259) Although he discovered the active life of the farm suited him rather better than formal education, he also found that he did not enjoy the farm's profound isolation: 'My kind of person needs comradeship as well.' (*Autobiography* 19)

At high school, Alley had been a member of the school military cadet corps. His older brother Eric had joined the Southland Regiment twelve days after war was declared in 1914; Rewi falsified his age and attempted to enlist in 1915. He left school at the end of that year, and, advancing his age by seven months, enlisted early in 1916. His company, the 12th Nelson Company of the First Canterbury Battalion, first saw action at Ypres in 1918, where Alley suffered a shrapnel wound to the shoulder. In August of that year the Canterbury Battalion was part of the Allied advance along the Western Front. During an attack on the town of Bapaume, Alley and another soldier made a successful assault on a German machine gun position. For this action, and others around Bapaume, Alley was awarded the Military Medal for bravery. In a later assault at Bapaume, he was shot through the hips. He underwent surgery in France and completed his convalescence in England.

Alley arrived back in New Zealand early in 1919. Soon after his return, he and school friend Jack Stevens decided to take up their wartime gratuities, and together purchased 800 hectares of bush and rough steep sheep country at Moeawatea, inland Taranaki. For six years they struggled to make a living in the face of an overwhelming mortgage and plunging wool prices. Although the admission of failure was the cause of some bitterness, it became clear that the farm could not provide a living for two. Jack's plans for marriage gave Alley the opportunity he needed to move on. Leaving his share of the farm to

his friend, he walked off the land just before Christmas 1926. He had been reading about China's nationalist revolution in the *Auckland Weekly News*, and had already decided to make China his next destination. What was to have been a short trip begun in a spirit of adventure and curiosity lasted a lifetime. Although Alley would return to New Zealand for brief visits, he would never again live in the country of his birth.

Alley arrived in Shanghai on 21 April 1927, knowing nothing of the political upheaval which had taken place just nine days before. Afraid of the rapidly growing Communist influence amongst workers and peasants, nationalist leader Jiang Jieshi (Chiang Kai Shek) had decided to break the alliance between his Guomindang Government and the Communist Party. (The alliance had been formed in 1924 in an effort to unify China and oust foreign control.) Government forces were rounding up and executing communists and trade-union activists.

Alley took lodgings in the International Settlement – a wealthy area of Shanghai administered by the foreigners who lived there – and applied for a job in the Fire Department of the Shanghai Municipal Council. For ten months he drove fire engines at night and visited factories during the day. Shanghai industry was then mostly in foreign hands, and the Fire Department was staffed by foreigners and funded largely by foreign insurance companies. Alley quickly learned that the Shanghai of the Settlement was worlds removed from the world of the factories he inspected as a fire officer, and the filthy slums where the vast majority of Chinese people lived, 'where every tiny room held a family, and where rows of night pots lined the streets' (*Autobiography* 46).

The plight of child factory workers concerned him most. Inspecting silk filature factories, he found children as young as eight standing over boiling vats, picking out the bobbing cocoons with their bare hands. Elsewhere, small boys worked over chromium vats without exhausts for the toxic fumes, their hands and feet pitted with ulcers. By now chief factory inspector, Alley could not remain an observer. Forming a team with some other concerned foreigners living in the Settlement, Alley began by asking all the hospitals in Shanghai to fill in a form for every industrial accident they treated. Factory safety inspections followed. Over the next few years, what became the Industrial Division of the Shanghai Municipal Council instituted some significant changes: a central boiling system replaced the open vats in the silk factories; elsewhere, machinery guards and ventilation fans were fitted and

fire exits were installed. Some premises where improvements were impossible were closed down.

After witnessing the execution of five young men accused of trying to organise a trade union among the silk filature workers, Alley visited his friend Henry Baring, a progressive English schoolteacher. 'I told him what I had seen and that things had become intolerable. What should and could a man like me do?' (*China: The Quality of Life* 55) Baring introduced him to the writing of Karl Marx. Alley formed a friendship with the American Marxist and feminist Agnes Smedly; together they set up a Marxist study circle with a few other friends. Alley studied Mandarin and the Shanghai dialect, and, at the urging of American missionary Dr. Joseph Bailie, whose writing about the need for technical training in the countryside Alley admired, travelled into the hinterland of Shanghai and as far afield as Inner Mongolia and Shaanxi, in order to find out more about the plight of the Chinese people. His travel notes and observations, especially about rural life and industry, appeared in the *China Journal of Science and Arts*. Through Bailie, Alley learned of a devastating famine in the north-west province of Suiyuan and devoted his summer leave of 1929 to famine relief work. It was here, working alongside 40,000 Chinese relief workers on the construction of the Dongkou irrigation canal, that Alley first became aware of the real strength of China: its people. Back in Shanghai he addressed members of the YWCA: 'Nothing will do but a revolution.' (Chapple 1980, 49)

On his return to Shanghai Alley adopted Alan (Duan Simou), a twelve-year-old boy orphaned by the famine. Two years later, Alley adopted another Chinese boy, the eleven-year-old Li Xue, ('Mike'), orphaned by flooding at Wuhan where Alley had been the League of Nations representative in control of dyke repair.

During the 1930s, Alley's work for the Communists was mostly underground. His Marxist study circle kept contact with Chinese revolutionaries, and Alley found himself housing the radio station used to send messages to the Red Army, providing a safe-house for important fugitives and, in 1936, he secretly exchanged a large quantity of provincial currency captured by the Red Army into the Central Government funds it urgently needed. He also contributed pseudonymous articles to the radical English-language newspaper *The Voice of China*.

China of the 1930s also saw increasing imperialist aggression from Japan. Manchuria had been occupied in 1931 and Shanghai had been attacked in

1932. When Japan invaded China again in 1937 Alley was overseas, visiting New Zealand and touring factories in Britain, Europe and North America. On his return he found Shanghai – the industrial capital of China – on its knees. Major factory areas were in ruins. Japan had immobilized 70% of the city's industry and was threatening to occupy other major ports. Refugees poured into the foreign settlements or streamed away from the city and into the interior. The problem was grave: how could China maintain its industrial production in the face of the Japanese blockade?

Alley and his friend Edgar Snow discussed solutions. In 1936 Snow had been the first foreign journalist to interview Mao Zedong. *Red Star Over China*, Snow's book on the visit, awaited publication. Both understood the vulnerability of city and port-based industry and both knew the strength of the Chinese hinterland. The task was to mobilize and organise this strength. The result was the Gung Ho ('Work Together') movement, better known in its time as the Chinese Industrial Co-Operatives or Indusco. Supported in the first instance by the British ambassador to China, who understood the military importance of keeping China economically viable in the face of advancing fascism, and later by influential figures in Chinese politics, and eventually by Jiang Jieshi himself, who needed supplies for his troops, Gung Ho was born in April 1938.

Within two years, Alley was managing an industrial complex of over 3000 small, rural co-operative factories in 16 of China's 24 provinces, scattered over 2000 miles and employing upwards of 300,000 workers. In the process of organizing the co-operatives, he covered 18,000 miles, many of them by bicycle, on foot or on horseback. The Gung Ho factories – funded mostly by overseas aid – represented more than 50 types of industry, producing consumer goods from textiles, glass and sugar to coal and electrical machinery, and supplying Jiang Jieshi's army with blankets, tents, stretchers and uniforms as well as military hardware. By the end of World War 2, Alley's slogan 'Gung Ho' had become part of the English language.

Gung Ho peaked in 1941. The movement's decline began after the Japanese invasion of Hong Kong in December 1941, and the dispersal of the Hong Kong-based International Committee of fundraisers. Alley, however, blames Gung Ho's ultimate demise on the right-wing Guomindang Government, which feared Indusco's size and power. Although Alley was dismissed from his position as Gung Ho's Chief Technical Executive Advisor in September 1942, his commitment to the co-operative movement was undiminished. He had already seen that Gung Ho needed the support of

technical and leadership training facilities and various models had been tried; in 1940, the first of several Bailie Schools had been established at Ganxima in Jiangxi in China's south-east.

These industrial schools, named in honour of Dr. Joseph Bailie and funded through Gung Ho, were set up to train peasant boys and refugees in the technical and engineering skills they would need to further the principles of Gung Ho after the inevitable revolution. Older children taught the younger; half of each day was spent in academic studies and half working in a co-operative factory. The Bailie School at Shuangshipu in China's central north became Alley's pet project. Under the direction of young Englishman George Hogg the school flourished and from 1942 Alley made it his base, helping with the teaching whenever he could. But Guomindang pressure on the school mounted after Alley's dismissal from Gung Ho, and in December 1943 Hogg and Alley began relocating the school 1100 kilometres to Shandan in Gansu province in China's remote north-west – a region where the rule of the Guomindang government had always been weak.

When Hogg died of tetanus in July 1945, Alley took over as headmaster. The school continued to flourish on its motto of 'create and analyse' and a routine of study and shared work, designed to instil self-discipline, teamwork and co-operation. Students produced textiles, glass, pottery, bricks, paper and leather; the industrial workshops were supported by machine shops, a smithy, an electrical department, a laboratory and the school's own coal mine. A farm produced grain and potatoes, flour, bean curd, vegetables and sugar beet. Sheep and goats were kept and in 1947 a shipment of 1000 sheep arrived from New Zealand, funded jointly by the UNRRA (United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration) and Corso (Council of Organisations for Relief Service Overseas).

Alley's international reputation as a humanitarian was vital to the fund-raising needed to maintain the school: as well as Corso and the UNRRA, the American Committee for Aid to the Chinese Industrial Co-operatives and the China Defense League (headed by Madame Sun Zhong Shan, the widow of China's first president) were loyal supporters. Relief organisations in Britain and Canada also contributed. Word of the school's success spread, and foreigners arrived, adding their expertise in accountancy, chemistry, engineering, geology and health care to the skills of local craftsmen, foundry workers and farmers. At its height, teaching staff numbered 36. Alley's memories of Gung Ho and the Shandan years, which he regarded as the richest and happiest of his life, are recounted in *Yo Banfa!* ('We have a

way', 1952), *The People Have Strength* (1954) and *Sandan: An Adventure in Creative Education* (1959). These books amount to an educational and political manifesto. *Leaves from a Sandan Notebook* (1950) collates poetry and prose from the same period.

The school's position became dangerous in the civil war which followed the defeat of Japan in 1945: Gansu Province was remote from any Red Army divisions, and Guomindang harassment of the school escalated until a decisive People's Liberation Army victory at Lanzhou, the capital of Gansu. The retreating nationalist militia had been ordered to kill Alley and destroy the school. But further Red Army advances in the autumn of 1949 meant the school's defenses – five ancient carbine rifles – were not put to the test. Following the proclamation of the People's Republic of China in October 1949, Alley found himself caught up in a backlash against foreigners. By 1951 the Bailie school at Sandan was under the control of the All-China Federation of Artisans' Cooperatives and in 1954 it was relocated to Lanzhou and taken over by the oil industry.

Although he had twice been refused membership of the Communist Party and had been turned down for Chinese citizenship, Alley decided to remain after the revolution. Some commentators have suggested that in order to stay in China, where his presumed homosexuality was not a matter for comment, he struck a Faustian bargain: he would stay, but the price would be open support of the communist regime. To the discomfiture of many of his friends in the USA and New Zealand he defended the Chinese annexation of Tibet and denounced American policy during the Korean war. Mao Zedung's Great Leap Forward (1958-1959), a devastating attempt at large-scale collectivization and industrialization, found a largely enthusiastic champion in Alley. (*China's Hinterland - in the Leap Forward* (1961); *Land and Folk in Kiangxi - A Chinese Province in 1961* (1962); *Among the Hills and Streams of Hunan - in the Fall of 1962* (1963)). Even during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1969), when his title as honorary headmaster of the Lanzhou School was revoked and his sons Mike and Alan were persecuted because of their relationship with a foreigner, his commitment to China remained unshaken.

Alley devoted the rest of his long life to peace and to fostering relations between China and New Zealand. In 1952 he represented New Zealand at the Peace Conference of the Asian and Pacific regions and in 1953 settled in Beijing, where he became secretary of the Peace Liaison Committee of the Asia and Pacific Region. In that capacity he visited Bandung, Cairo, Delhi, Hanoi, Havana, Helsinki, Jakarta, Pyongyang and Stockholm, speaking at

peace conferences. From 1961 to 1965 he attended the annual World Conference against Atomic and Hydrogen Bombs in Tokyo. Following the New Zealand government's recognition of the People's Republic of China in 1971, Alley became New Zealand's unofficial ambassador to China, and in 1972 Victoria University of Wellington awarded him an honorary doctorate of literature, citing his writing 'in plain English for the common man' which strove to explain a changing China to the world, and his translations, particularly of T'ang dynasty poetry (*Rewi Alley Seventy Five* 14-15). In 1982, Beijing granted him honorary citizenship and in 1985 he received a Queen's Service Order for community service.

Poetry for Alley began in China, as a marginal and deprecated activity:

Through the years of the wars of resistance and liberation, I travelled over the country, mainly by truck, up and down hinterland roads. As the trucks often had to halt for repairs, I would sit by the roadside and scribble poems, which I would stuff into my pocket when resuming the journey. Some poems were written during periods of enemy air raids, perhaps, on the back of old envelopes. They were completely marginal, scribbled just because I had nothing to read; I did not care to keep them. (*Autobiography* 257-258)

Later, at Shandan, Alley began collecting and publishing his poems as a way of raising funds for the school. His poetry, which he saw as a kind of 'release mechanism' (*Autobiography* 259), grows out of his social and political vision, often records his experiences as a traveller in China and inevitably displays a concern for the lives of ordinary people: 'unless it deals with life and the people, poetry for me has little meaning.' (*Autobiography* 259). Alley's preferred forms are free: line lengths and stanzas vary. His imagery is conveyed in direct, unrhymed language: rhyme, he felt, distorts or conceals meaning, and his intention was to produce sharp, easily-understood images, and to condense ideas into a form that could be assimilated in a hurry. The output, extending to some fifteen volumes, has not attracted much critical attention.

Rewi Alley died in Beijing. In accordance with his wishes, his ashes were scattered over Shandan. 'To China, Alley's most significant legacy was his faith in the co-operative capacities of the ordinary Chinese. To compatriots, he epitomised a practical and self-reliant humanitarianism which had its root in New Zealand.' (Roderic Alley 'Rewi Alley', *DNZB* 4, 11). His life has been the subject of a play (Stuart Hoar, *Yo Banfa*, 1993); *Alley*, an opera by New

Zealand composer Jack Body with Alley's biographer Geoff Chapple as co-librettist, premiered in Wellington in 1998. Alley's commitments to education and to forging closer ties between New Zealand and China have been honoured after his death: the Asia 2000 organisation offers an annual Rewi Alley Fellowship for an educationalist from Gansu to study in New Zealand, and the University of Waikato offers an annual grant for studies related to Rewi Alley or his interests.

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[Dictionary of New Zealand Biography](#)

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