



# OLIVE IN MANCHES

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In 1975, the year that Olive started her studies at Manchester University, the US withdrew from Saigon, defeated by the Vietnamese, and Portuguese colonial rule was brought to an end by liberation movements in Mozambique and Angola. It is not an exaggeration to say that Olive, too, contributed to a bit of decolonisation. The Victoria University of Manchester (a title not flaunted these days) was established in 1880 in the heyday of the British Empire with generous donations from those who had enriched themselves from trade with China, India and the African colonies. There were few black British students at the University in 1975 and they are still seriously under-represented.

Olive immediately took to Manchester. She came to study social sciences at a time when there was a good deal of political activity among students and some courses were letting in some radical thinking. Olive thumbed through Hobbes' *Leviathan* but also some of the texts of Marx and Lenin. She had left school at the age of sixteen and like most people from secondary modern school was uncertain whether she could cope with academic work. Her first step was to find some kindred spirits. In her sociology class, there was an ex-shop steward from Oldham who had been sacked after an engineering strike two years earlier, a young Irish republican woman involved in the Troops Out Movement, and several left-wing activists. She made contact with the black community in Moss Side and participated in the Abasindi Co-op, a black women's centre. By the second year Olive seemed to know everyone. At lunchtime, she would sit in the café with fellow students planning political activities. She got involved in the anti-apartheid movement, in anti-immigration campaigns and above all, in the main campus issue of that time: the fight against the Labour government's increase of the tuition fee for overseas students. Olive was at the heart of that campaign though the fee increase did not directly affect her. She immersed herself in it because she saw the discriminatory fee as Britain's racist denial of its responsibility to overseas students who had come to this country for their higher education.

Olive was thrilled to be reading and discussing ideas. She took courses that related to her interests, but her interests were open-ended. The subjects I remember her studying were political philosophy, social movements in Asia, South Africa, Marxism and the sociology of knowledge.

It was a hectic time. From lectures Olive would rush off to meetings, go on to the gym and return home to do academic work. At weekends she would often go to London, where there would be meetings, a demo, a squat to defend or friends to visit. Her dynamism was unbounded and her sense of justice meant she did not shy from confrontations.

I remember on one occasion she went to the Social Security office, which happened to be only a few doors away from where she lived. There, Olive got into a row about the way people were being unnecessarily made to wait. On the way out she kicked the door open a bit too vigorously, causing the bottom panel to fall out and shatter. That was Olive, when she was around things happened. She was a life-force shaking the world around her.

Throughout her studies Mike McColgan was an important source of support. I had met Olive through Mike. We had been close friends since 1966. Their relationship was the Marxist dialectics in action. They enriched each other's life but the synthesis was not without explosions along the way. Over issues such as the anti-racist struggle, the importance of anti-imperialism, or the nature of the Soviet Union they were in agreement. It was over the really important things in life that they ended up shouting at each other. For example, on whether salted or unsalted butter is better for making pastry or whether on approaching London from the north it is quicker to come off the M1 at Exit 1 or Exit 2. But the storms were always quickly forgotten.

Olive fought for people who faced oppression and injustice. That is why what she did and thought still speaks to us today.