

# Ronald Creagh (1929-2023)

*John Clark*

Ronald Creagh took great satisfaction from the fact that he was born in Alexandria, Egypt, a historic city that was the centre of ancient learning. He grew up in a multicultural milieu in Port Said, Egypt. He was the offspring of a British-Sicilian father and a Franco-Lebanese mother and was taught Sicilian by his paternal grandmother. He said that Sicilian was his first language.

In 1947, his family migrated to Australia, while Ronald moved to France to become a Roman Catholic priest. He took a degree in sociology at the Sorbonne, a masters' degree at the École Pratique des Hautes Études, and then taught at the Institute of Human Sciences and Techniques and at the School of Management.

During a research trip to the United States, Ronald encountered radical student movements and his ideas and values began to change. He was more deeply transformed and radicalised by the events of May, 1968 in Paris. He left the Church and became an anarchist. He soon began his studies at the University of Paris, where he wrote a 1164-page doctoral dissertation on the history of anarchism in the United States.

Ronald then settled in Montpellier, where he became a professor of American Studies at l'Université Paul Valéry (Montpellier 3), specialising in the history of anarchism and utopian communities. He continued throughout his life to be very active in the anarchist movement. He was a core member of an extraordinary circle of primarily southern European anarchist activist-intellectuals. He was an editorial collective member of the anarchist journals *Divergences* and *Réfractions*, and he collaborated with the CIRA (International Centre for Research on Anarchism) in Lausanne and Marseille, the ACL (Atelier de Création Libertaire) in Lyon, and the Centro Studi Libertari/Archivio Giuseppe Pinelli in Milano.

One of Ronald's greatest achievements was his creation of the remarkable RA (Research on Anarchism) Forum, an online archive with many thousands of links to articles, books and documents in English, French, Spanish, German and Italian, in addition to various other languages. He taught himself the skills necessary to maintain and organise this huge database (which, sadly, became inactive when he

could no longer oversee it). He also created and was the primary moderator of the Research on Anarchism (RA) discussion list for many years.

Ronald wrote extensively on the history of anarchism and utopianism, and authored a number of original works. His books include *L'Anarchisme aux États-Unis, 1826–1886*, *L’Affaire Sacco et Vanzetti*, *Quand le Coq rouge chantera*, *Laboratoires de l’Utopie*, *Nos cousins d’Amérique*, *La Déférence*, *l’insolence anarchiste et la démocratie*, *Terrorisme: entre spectacle et sacré*, *L’Imagination dérobée*, *Utopies américaines*, *Elisée Reclus et Les États-Unis*, *Les Zanars*, and *Les États-Unis d’Elisée Reclus*, in addition to several edited works.

In 2016, a festschrift in his honour, entitled *Rêves et passion d’un chercheur militant: Mélanges offerts à Ronald Creagh*, was published by the ACL. In 2019, a documentary film on his life, ‘Ronald Creagh, une essence de l’utopie’, appeared. An excerpt can be found online at <https://vimeo.com/629195770>.

Ronald was in the midst of a very creative period when he passed away. He had completed work on his autobiography, had recently finished an important 11,000-word essay on Joseph Déjacque (the English version of which I’m editing for publication), and had done extensive work on a new book that was in progress.

On a more personal level, here is a text I wrote for presentation at Ronald’s funeral:

My words cannot begin to convey what Ronald has meant to me, and to my family. He was extremely generous to the family when we came to Montpellier for the 1979-1980 academic year. Since then, over the past forty-four years, I have had no better or more caring friend than Ronald. He has also been my closest collaborator in many areas of my work, especially concerning Elisée Reclus, whom we both admired so much, and, more recently, Joseph Déjacque, who inspired both of us.

But beyond this, Ronald was above all a kind, generous, loving person. He had difficult times in his life, but accepted everything with equanimity, and, indeed, with gratitude. He was a happy person who desired, above all, to make others happy.

Ronald and I talked on Skype for over an hour on July 14, and for almost a half hour on July 31. A few days ago, I thought about calling him again, and planned to do so soon, but, sadly, did not do so in time. In our recent conversations, Ronald talked at length about the book he was working on, and about having finished his autobiography, which he hoped to see translated into English. He was always extremely lucid and full of new ideas, despite the fact that he was enduring ongoing medical problems. He

faced these afflictions with a very good spirit, and always retained his lively, creative mind.

I also recorded two long conversations with Ronald in the last several years in which he discussed many topics that were very important to him. In one of these conversations, he told me about three lessons in life that he had learned, and which he liked to pass on to others. I think these precepts, in his own words, say as much about him as anything I possibly can.

The first lesson, he said, is that it is 'important that we not just live alone, or just enclosed within the family, or only our own band, but that we have magical or good relations with everybody. For instance, when I go to a supermarket and I am at the checkout, the first thing that I say to the person at the checkout is "Take your time to breathe, I am not in a rush"'. He said it was important for him to say this 'for the person to have the possibility to be human in her life'.

The second lesson he told me about was that 'Whenever you find a person who is interesting, from whom you can learn, take from that person everything you can. That's how I have learned in life, much more than by books'.

His third lesson, he said, is 'the idea that whenever something bad happens you must be creative'. He reflected on what he saw as the two worst things that happened to him in his life. 'The first thing was a car accident, and that car accident gave me enough money to start studying at the university when I was 34. And that's how I became a professor'.

The second thing, he said, was a terrible personal tragedy, but it led to his meeting and later marrying his wife, Françoise. He said, 'and now, with Françoise, I have a REALLY WONDERFUL family. So even some of the worst things that happened in my life I have turned into remarkable events'.

He added, 'So now, every day, it's the same thing. If I have something that falls from my hand, of course, like anyone, I say "Shit!" But then I say "It's wonderful! I'm obliged to do some exercise, some gymnastics, and I still remain capable of walking, capable of doing things - because things fall!"'

He concluded, 'So this is the sort of advice I give to people today when I see them, when I meet them'.

I feel very fortunate to have known Ronald, and to have received so many gifts from him, above all his wonderful presence for so many years.

My family and I will always love Ronald. We will never forget his great kindness, and the wisdom he practiced in his life, and has passed on to us.

**John Clark** is an anarchist writer and activist. He has published widely on topics including ecological philosophy, environmental ethics, anarchist and libertarian thought, the social imaginary, cultural critique, Buddhist and Daoist philosophy, and the crisis of humanity and the Earth. His recent book, *Between Earth and Empire*, was published in 2019 with PM Press. He is Director of La Terre Institute for Community and Ecology, an educational and organisational project in New Orleans and on an 87-acre site in the coastal forest of the Gulf of Mexico. He is a member of the Education Workers' Union of the IWW.