



Obituary: Nicholas Albery

We were sad to hear of the sudden death of Nicholas Albery, a member of the Self & Society editorial board for many years. We send our thoughts to his family at this time.

The founder in 1985 and chairman of the Institute for Social Inventions, Nicholas Albery was an innovative generalist widely respected not only for having learned how to brainstorm himself and others to solve problems and produce new ideas, but also for testing these ideas and trying them out.

The breadth of his thinking and the scope of his output was extraordinary. From the institute's Global Ideas Bank (as he put it on the institute's website, "it has extended this collecting of ideas to the Internet, with millions accessing the site every year") to the Natural Death Centre ("advising those wishing to organise green, inexpensive family-based funerals"); from the International Poetry Challenge Day ("individuals and schools take up the challenge to learn poems by heart to raise money for charity") to the Apprentice-Master Alliance ("a free service that links graduates and school-leavers wishing to learn a trade with small or one person businesses for long-term apprenticeships"), Nicholas Albery has left his mark on society in a way that, in Buddhist terminology, represents "the creation of merit for the benefit of all beings".

Albery was the collaborator, or catalyst, par excellence. He rarely claimed innovations as his own. Having realised early on in life that information could be free and not withheld or possessed for some people to gain advantage over others, he then set out carrying this principle with an almost manic energy. His publications include *The Book of Visions: an encyclopaedia of social innovations* (1993); *Poem for the Day* (1994); the *Time Out Book of Country Walks* (1997); and *Seize the Day*, which is due to be published later this year.

Born in 1948, he was one of four siblings in the theatre-land dynasty headed by his father, Sir Donald Albery. Public-school educated (at Stowe) and an Open University dropout, he was equally a child of the optimistic Sixties who never lost his early vision of the role that information could play in a society where computers are widespread. But rather than being a techno-nerd, he was interested in the social uses of information. In this sense he was a generation ahead of most of his peers in envisaging, in the late Sixties, the socially beneficial uses of what has now become the Internet.

At the age of 19 Albery lived on Complan for a year because he wanted to test its claim to be a complete food. At 29 he was a leading light of the Free Republic of Frestonia, an area of Notting Hill that declared itself independent of the UK in order to resist evictions and subsequent commercial development (the republic won). At 30 he stood as Ecology Party candidate in Kensington and Chelsea and got 800 votes, including a ballot paper marked with a heart instead on a cross which, after lengthy debate, was accepted as valid as it clearly expressed the voter's intent.

In the late Sixties he ran BIT, the London-based alternative information service. In between finding crash pads and temporary work for allcomers he produced the first overland guide to India, compiled from travellers' tales. A cover of *Bitman* magazine in the 1970s shows him and Nicholas Saunders (the Neil's Yard/Covent Garden entrepreneur) walking naked down Piccadilly, accompanied by a goat and a chicken, captioned "rehearsal for the year 2000", which became the title of Albery's 1976 autobiography.

The collaboration of the two Nicholases, Saunders and Albery, became the pivot for a series of social innovations for the next quarter-century; Albery the socially involved ideas man who stayed up all hours with the computer, as well as running a highly varied open-plan social life, Saunders the entrepreneur risk-taker with the Midas touch. Sadly each of them died in a freak car crash where the other passengers were unscathed, Saunders in 1998, Albery last weekend.

To his friends Nicholas Albery was supportive and showed great generosity and loving-kindness. For friends and strangers alike, he brought a sense of excitement to every occasion, challenging, always asking questions that got to the heart of the situation, and spilling over with ideas.

Perhaps his greatest contributions as a rolemodel for how to behave in our information-dense, technologically based society; trying to be inclusive, not exclusive; always curious, but not accepting the given as fixed or immutable; putting people before machines. The website www.globalideasbank.org is exemplary. When

asked what one needs to become a social inventor Albery replied, "a mentor who believes in you; to have run an enterprise when quite young; to be an artist with a creative mind".

His interest in country walks, which he managed to indulge once a week for many years, dated from his being diagnosed with the potentially crippling ankylosing spondylitis which tends to weld one's vertebrae together. Characteristically his response was to take a large amount of exercise to combat the problem head-on and, although he was no athlete, he retained a glow of youth that eludes most of us in middle age. Unusually, he looked no younger in death than when alive.

John Hopkins.

Nicholas Bronson Albery, social inventor and writer: born St Albans Hertfordshire 28 July 1948; married 1991 Josefine Speyer (one son); died Princes Risborough, Buckinghamshire 3 June 2001.

Reprinted by permission from The Independent, Obituaries, 8 June 2001

From John Rowan

I don't know nearly enough about Nick to give him a proper obituary, but I liked him a lot. I don't remember when exactly we first met, but I already knew him when he became one of my students at the Institute of Psychotherapy and Social Studies in the 1980s. He was a strange-looking guy, because he was very tall and slightly bent, due to a form of spondylitis which affected his back. In spite of this, and the pain it sometimes caused him, he led the most adventurous life, and sampled the most extraordinary range of therapies, some of which is related in his wonderful book *How to Save the Body*, which he published himself in 1983.

Instead of becoming an ordinary therapist when he completed the course, he threw himself into a multitude of activities. He organised great poetry readings (and brought out several books of collected poems), he started up the Institute for Social Inventions (which has published several collections of ideas), he opened a Natural Death Centre for people who didn't want the conventional coffins and churchyards, and most recently he was taking part in a Politics and Spirit group based on the ideas of Ken Wilber.

Everything he did, he did with enthusiasm. He was one of the most alive people I ever met.