

The Miracle Of Fleet Street

by George Lansbury (Spokesman Books, £15)

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by Nathaniel Mehr



"In 1870, our fathers secured elementary education. We all learnt to read; the landlords, capitalists and their hirelings have ever since been engaged in an endeavour to monopolise the source of supply of reading matter, so as to ensure control over our minds; hence the millionaire Press."

First published in 1925, *The Miracle of Fleet Street* is George Lansbury's account of the tumultuous first decade in the life of the extraordinary labour daily *The Herald* - a newspaper which positioned itself at the forefront of the labour left struggle in the 1910s and 1920s.

Its mission was simple enough - to provide a socialist-inspired alternative to the lies of the "millionaire press" at a critical time in British history.

"From the very day of its birth," as Lansbury explains, "the paper continually urged the gospel of discontent ... with mankind's social conditions."

The first issue of the paper attacked the management of the White Star Line company for having sent the Titanic out to sea "critically under equipped with means of life-saving."

The paper also denounced the great European statesmen who drew up the Versailles Treaty for having inflicted "the cruellest outrage on the peoples of the world who had trusted them."

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In August and September 1920, with the British government attempting to engineer a new war against Bolshevik Russia, the *Herald* was vocal in its support for the formation of workers' councils throughout Britain - an anti-imperialist mobilisation which ultimately averted the proposed war.

Lansbury remembers a difficult and often frustrating struggle against financial problems and various types of harassment from a hostile Establishment against the gloomy backdrop of unemployment and strife.

"Wages were falling, prices were rising, women were being tortured and imprisoned, there was a ghastly unreality about Parliament," he writes.

Nevertheless, a contagious optimism pervades Lansbury's compelling narrative, tempered only by a remarkably prescient warning about the potential hijacking of the labour movement.

He warns that the movement "could be just as easily killed were it to allow itself to become controlled by a caucus maintained in power by the money of trade unions and a handful of well-to-do converts."