

Lifelong Comrade

John Daniels

It is a cause of much personal regret that I was not able to participate (to the extent I would have liked) in the many political campaigns and initiatives associated with Ken Coates. Apart from the usual commitments of family life, most of my waking and working hours were spent helping with others to develop one of Ken's many instinctive ambitions – the Russell Press. Over the years from its presses has flowed, hopefully, a profusion of eclectic radical texts that have made a difference.

I must have known Ken Coates from the age of about 11, which would place our meeting firmly in that tumultuous year for the Communist movement, 1956. This was the year of Khrushchev's Secret Speech, the Hungarian uprising, and also the year of Suez, and of what the history books tell us was a surprisingly spirited opposition by the Labour Party to one of the last overt splutterings of formal Empire. Nevertheless, it was the turmoil in the Communist world that pervaded the Daniels' household, so much so that the next-door neighbour was to inquire of the young schoolboy, 'What do you think of your Russian friends now?' Ken was one of the many frequent visitors who came to our home to discuss the turmoil within the Party. In particular, I remember one weekly sequence of visits which coincided with a series on BBC radio dramatising the debates in the infant Soviet republic. It must have been based on the Isaac Deutscher Trotsky trilogy, which was beginning to appear around this time. Unfortunately, I can find no record of such a series in the BBC Third Programme archive, but I well remember being intrigued by all these 'grown-ups' huddled

*John Daniels established
the Russell Press.*

round the radio in our smoke-filled dining room, to be followed by hours of animated conversation which kept the puzzled child from his slumbers. Of course, Ken's voice was often heard in the spirited debates that followed the broadcasts.

Ken continued to be a regular visitor, partly because of our privileged ownership of that not yet universal possession, the television set. Ken was a life-long film devotee and his attendance at the first TV airing of *Citizen Kane* initiated an interesting discussion on the morals of capitalists, 'yellow journalism', and US excuses for armed conflict – Tonkin Gulf and Iraqi WMD were yet to come. Ken did, during this period, make his own brief appearance on the small screen in a rather unexpected role, namely as disrupter of the equanimity of Hugh Gaitskell. The latter was engaged in a series of public meetings around the country 'saving the party he loved' from the arms of those misguided unilateralist disarmers, and one such gathering was nearby in Derby. Sitting watching ITV News one evening, my mother and I were treated to the sight of a bald head and a voluminous overcoat being carried out of the meeting by stewards and a young man remonstrating as he was physically pushed out of the venue. The interlocutor at the door was Ken who, along with my father, had attempted to make a verbal intervention in Gaitskell's oration, in defence of Labour Party policy, and for their pains they were both summarily ejected from the meeting.

Ken had left the pit after securing a scholarship to Nottingham University where he displayed such intellectual prowess that, on finishing his degree, he secured a lectureship at the University's Extra-mural Department. During his student days he became the secretary of the National Association of Labour Students and editor of their magazine, *Clarion*, but with the conclusion of his studies he was to immerse himself in the struggles of the local Nottingham Labour Party, becoming (much to the annoyance of the local civic leaders) President of the City Party. Much of the story of his expulsion from the Party and the devious role of the 'city fathers' is narrated by Ken himself in *The Crisis of British Socialism (1972)*, a book of essays on the first years of the Wilson Government. The Labour aldermen and some of the councillors were keen to rid the Party of those who would disturb their cosy do-nothing politics and moribund municipal flummery. Their inertia on comprehensive education and housing, often even at odds with official national policy, was exposed in a carefully tolerant, democratic manner by the actions of Ken as President of the City Party. This inevitably brought him into conflict with the Labour Group, described by Bertrand Russell at the time as reeking of the 'petty

ambitions of tired and conservative local hacks'. Ken had also earned the disapproval of the national party hierarchy by his trenchant criticism of the Labour Government's direction in both national and international affairs, and particularly their abject public support of America's bloody intervention in Indo-China. It was, in fact, Ken's outspoken condemnation of the Labour Party's policy on Vietnam that brought him into contact with Bertrand Russell and his long association with the Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation. These two factions, the local councillors and the national party apparatchiks, had sufficient control of the party apparatus to suppress the legitimate right to dissent which should have been Ken's, and sustain his expulsion for some four years.

It was during this period that a discovery was made which was to transform the social life of the radical Left in Nottingham, for better – and for worse. Ken was now living in a first floor flat on Park Road, Lenton, courtesy of his live-in landlord Peter Price. Peter was a stalwart of CND and, at one point, a Nottingham Labour councillor and a companion with Ken in the struggles within the Labour Party. The house on Park Road was therefore a veritable magnet for all kinds of people whether local, national or international visitors. A visit to Park Road, to Ken or Peter, was a sure guide to what was preoccupying the Left. Naturally enough many of these lively discussions would be continued at a nearby local hostelry. One Sunday evening, the weather not inclement, it was decided that we would stroll to the nearest pub. Until then the 'nearest pub' had, in fact, been obscured from public view, being ensconced within a nest of terraced houses. All the housing had now been demolished, leaving one building standing on the rubble-strewn hillside – a humble watering hole by the name of the now politically incorrect *Black's Head*, subsequently to be known by all and sundry as the 'Ghost Pub'. That evening we discovered that the licensing hours, which were fairly onerous in the 1960s, did not seem to operate in this demolition wasteland. For about two years or more the 'Ghost Pub' (as its libertarian policies with regard to licensing hours became common knowledge) became a sort of social club for the Nottingham Labour Left. It must have been the only time that Ken spent so much time in a pub, as he was no drinker, but visiting celebrities were often treated to an outing with varying degrees of inebriation. Ernest Mandel was a strict orange juice imbiber, but Hugh MacDiarmid attempted to drink the pub dry – he failed. The many visitors to the pub provided Ken with much anecdotal scope for his impish wit. He was always a humorous man, ready to make fun of the human predicament with all its weaknesses, but he loved people and always engaged openly with them.

During this period he was working hard on a number of projects, amongst them editing and writing for the *The Week* and the *International Socialist Journal*, whilst also contributing to many other publications. Then there was all his university and WEA lecturing, plus instigating and directing with Bill Silburn that milestone amongst the studies of poverty in Britain – the *St. Ann's Report*. Perhaps Ken's most onerous labour was his participation in the exhausting and often pointless meandering arguments, common in 'groupuscule' politics, through his membership of that loose band of disparate Marxists cohering around the International Marxist Group (IMG), referred to laughingly by some as the 'Not Trots'.

Having helped to found the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign and by now a Director of the BRPF, Ken became involved in the debate within the IMG concerning the general political direction to be adopted. The primary national concern for Ken was the struggle for workers' control and its adoption by the labour movement as a policy for advance, as a way of switching the emphasis from the usual defensive posture of the labour movement (necessary as many defensive struggles often were). This brought him into a conflict of emphasis with those who saw the future only in terms of student revolt and the campaign around Vietnam. Inevitably, the differences led to substantive organisational questions within the IMG and there was a parting of the ways, with Ken forsaking forever that kind of politics.

Ken had always entertained the hope that *The Week* would one day dispense with the ink-smearing stencil duplicator for the equally inky but more visually appealing printing process. *The Week* metamorphosed into *The International* magazine, now the official organ of the IMG, which bore little or no resemblance to the spirit or content of *The Week*, whilst he moved with others to launch the Institute for Workers' Control. With the latter's pamphlets and *Bulletin*, together with the desire of the Foundation to launch a more regular and ambitious journal than their *London Bulletin* (which was to become *The Spokesman*), there seemed to be sufficient basis for the establishment of a printing press. As a result the Foundation took the decision to provide the small amount of capital necessary for its establishment.

The first premises were in cramped offices in central Nottingham, not far from Ken's place of employment at Nottingham University's Extra-Mural Department. The Press had to survive commercially, and its struggle to keep its head above water was a burden for us all. In the early days, Ken was a constant visitor, taking a very active role in advising and directing our efforts. The Press, however, did provide immediately a support and

responsiveness to the campaigning activities of Ken and, later, the publishing endeavours of Spokesman Books. The Press was able to react to events swiftly, to underpin such initiatives as workers' factory occupations, the formation of producer co-ops, and the vicissitudes of the peace movement with timely pamphlets. Ken also had a genuine interest in the printing process, which manifested itself in his attention to cover design and his midnight searches through his bookshelves for illustrations and his editing of page layouts for maximum effect. This was on top of his normal workload of writing, researching and editing. Of course, as a keen bibliophile, he was aware of the life and work of that quintessential socialist, designer, artist and printer, William Morris, and was often to mention that dictum of Morris' 'no man is good enough to be another man's master'.

Others will have contributed memoirs of different times and areas of engagement, and I have necessarily restricted my contribution to Ken's presence in, and influence on, my formative years. His kindness and support, at times of personal travail, will be with me always, and I was by no means the only recipient of his innate good-heartedness. His prodigious political energy, together with an active interest in all manner of cultural, historical and scientific concerns, was only curtailed, sadly, in his later years by ill health. His enormous collection of books stands witness to the breadth of his knowledge and interests. He was always interesting, provoking and informative in conversation, but no armchair revolutionary. His legacy of campaigning commitment, erudition and insightfulness should galvanise us all into continuing the struggle to 'act locally and think globally', as he did. He always tried to examine new ideas sympathetically, but was scathing about mystifiers and betrayers who blunted the efforts of the Left. He never abandoned the central thrust of his ultimate commitment to arouse the idea of change within the bosom of ordinary working people. This was the aim: the means would vary tactically depending on both the times and the venue he found himself in. Many will recognise the merits of Ken's work over the years from his written, spoken and organisational endeavours, but only those who had the privilege to work with him over the years witnessed his tireless commitment, energy and humanity.