

# Reviews

## Jeremy

**Alex Nunns, *The Candidate: Jeremy Corbyn's Improbable Path to Power*, OR Books, 2016, 406 pages, ISBN 9781682190647, £15**

There have been only a handful of books that I have felt it necessary to read. There are several I have wanted to read. And then there are books that you are sceptical will tell a truthful account of events you personally recall, or of circumstances in which you had some small part to play, but you feel you need to read them anyway.

I was on the outermost reaches of the unfolding events in *The Candidate: Jeremy Corbyn's Improbable Path to Power*. I was entirely sceptical that there would be an even-handed and impartial recounting of even some of the events that I could recall. In that climate of suspicion, I began to read. I have to say that it was most engaging, purely on the conversational yet detailed and informed style of writing. Unlike my expectation of a slanted and wholly 'broadsheet media' treatment of the subject matter, the author offered a cogent and coherent explanation of the unlikely events. Some of his interviews were quoted, and other aspects of interviews just referenced. Nonetheless, what was most refreshing and disarming was the ability of the interviewer (the author) to represent in a wholly impartial manner the even more refreshingly honest appraisals and answers provided by the interviewees. There was no dressing up or mitigations in the presentation of what was this wholly absorbing read, which I surprisingly started and finished during the afternoon and evening of the day of receipt.

The warts-and-all exposé of the unlikeliest transition of Jeremy Corbyn, from the outer edges of the left of the Labour Party into the reluctantly-accepted position of candidate for leader, proved to be deeply insightful. Whereas with the TV docudrama *Theresa v Boris*, about the election battle for the leadership of the Conservative party, not one of the candidates or participant parties acquitted themselves well, or even came across as remotely approachable (let alone likeable!) or honest. The complete opposite is, for me, true of the main protagonists in *The Candidate*. Whilst they do present themselves as being deeply serious and thoughtful politicians they are nonetheless absolutely realistic about their initial ambitions and their reasoning for their actions. It was fascinating to see how they coped and rationalised each changing position as the horizon of

expectation kept on moving forward rather than stopping, as they expected, and waiting for them to walk into it, stumble and fall away. As a retired trade unionist it reminds me of – and has many parallels to – the succession to power of my own General Secretary, Mark Serwotka (Public and Commercial Services Union), whose own leadership began with an equally dedicated and committed group of trade union socialists determining that a candidate from the left should at least stand in the leadership election. Mark's success was a testament to those dedicated individuals and the campaign they fought. Jeremy Corbyn also took some time to volunteer to be the 'point man', with low expectations for success, and even less ambition to be Labour Party leader.

The Labour Party leadership election campaign is not what I would normally be recommending to people to read about, unless they were deeply political and invested in campaigning. However, this book reads more like a real-life thriller. I could readily identify with many of the actions of other citizens who also felt it was time for change. Fortunately, they had the drive and determination to not let this opportunity pass them by, and to attempt to give their best and communicate the importance of not missing this moment and opportunity for change. Their actions thrilled, excited, and shamed me in equal measure. As a trade unionist, I felt that I should have done much more than merely advocate to members, write emails, and forward mails and twitter links.

Regardless of my guilt, the book makes clear how transformative was the campaign, and innovative in the manner of its application. When being educated about the Industrial Revolution, my teacher provided us with a quote: 'necessity is the mother of invention'. Well, some of the campaigners from the general public were accepted as contributors by the inner circle of the Corbyn team, and those few inner circle people showed how openness and independent thinking can offer a huge benefit; let's hope not just for this campaign, but for future conduct in both politics and wider society. *The Candidate* shows how, from improbable beginnings and with limited expectations, given the right attitudes of those running the campaign, hope can transform even the most limited of expectations into a truly innovative and positive campaigning movement. That is not to say that you can just step up with an idea and it will catch a mood. Corbyn and McDonnell have been ploughing their political ideas in this particular left field for over 30 years, so the actual seeds of this most unexpected of events were sown very deep before even a leaflet was drawn.

This is a highly engaging book whose central figure is, by turns, diffident, humble, and yet determined. Indeed, no different to the public

persona. A very different read about a very different politician. I found it literally unputdownable. Now it's your turn.

*Dave Putson*

## Alice Bacon MP

**Rachel Reeves with Richard Carr, *Alice in Westminster: The Political Life of Alice Bacon*, I.B.Tauris, 2017, 240 pages, hardback ISBN 9781784537685, £20**

'I hope you will enjoy your short stay in Westminster' – ungracious 1945 Tory congratulation. Bacon would remain there until 1970, retiring undefeated. 'All but unknown' – Alex Smallwood, *TLS* 24 February 2017. Reeves herself admits she only heard of Bacon 'about six years ago'. 'A challenge to biographers' (Smallwood). Alice, to her credit, never published self-promoting diaries or autobiography.

Reeves (evidenced in her 5-page bibliography, plus YouTube interview) brought home the Bacon via archival documents, mentions in other politico-diaries (e.g. Castle, Crossman), and conversations with former MPs (especially Gerald Kaufman) and veteran Leeds Labourites who knew her. She might have mentioned that Bacon's 3,584 Commons speeches are available on the Hansard website; also various newspaper obituaries (online).

Appropriate that Bacon is resuscitated in this widely-acclaimed biography by her direct successor as female Leeds Labour MP. One immediate fruit was the 'Alice Bacon Event' hosted (21 April 2017) by Yvette Cooper. Less fitting that co-author Richard Carr's name does not share cover-billing.

Reeves' introduction sets the tone, adumbrating Bacon's lifelong socialism and her legislative/personal priorities. Earliest encouragement came from her miner father. One naturally compares the Grantham grocer's daughter. Bacon detested Thatcher, hence noteworthy that the latter (1966 interview) hailed Bacon as female pioneer on becoming first-ever woman minister of state (Home Office). Not that Bacon was a modern-style feminist, indeed frequently disavowing the label, echoing Barbara Castle's 'I am no feminist. Judge me only as a socialist' in her victory speech: 'we were not elected because we are women, but because we are Labour candidates believing in a socialist cause'.

Bacon inevitably suffered from male condescension, then common in all parties. Reeves quotes some trenchant remarks of Lena Jeger MP - Herbert Morrison told her 'stick to women's problems' – leading Bacon

(supported by Castle) to establish separate Labour female cadres, prefiguring modern quotas.

Bacon also suffered from now unthinkable personal insults about her ‘grating’ (‘unbearable’, Crossman) voice and ‘plump homely figure’ – in several of the 23 illustrations, she is actually quite fetching. Not that Bacon was herself entirely innocent, joking about Bessie Braddock’s rotundity. Nor was her image improved when her knickers once fell down in mid-Commons speech.

Bacon’s lifelong spinsterhood did not help. Close friend Denis Healey dubbed her ‘a Jane Eyre [she did two pre-parliamentary teaching stints – despite supposed opposition to corporal punishment, pupils remembered her as a caner] who never found her Mr Rochester’. Some (e.g. Shirley Williams) speculated she might have found one in her idol, Hugh Gaitskell. Reeves’ disbelief is probably right. She might have mentioned his Lotharian career. As a WEA lecturer in 1920s Nottingham, Gaitskell lived ‘under the brush’ with a local woman, dismissing marriage as ‘bourgeois convention’. Later, he conducted a flagrant liaison with Ian Fleming’s wife, Ann. Impressive record for the man Nye Bevan dismissed as ‘a desiccated calculating machine’.

Healey also christened Bacon ‘Terror of the Trotskyites’ for expelling Cliff and Barbara Slaughter, luminaries of that other Healey’s Socialist Labour League. Her antipathy to the far left went back to the anti-Red campaign (1929) of miners’ leader A. J. Cook against communist infiltration. Her *Times* obituary recalled her ‘smoking out heresy and recommending expulsions’. Trotskyite blood pressures would also have shot up over her unexpected kind words for Stalin, whom (1944) she met in Russia.

Reeves charts Bacon’s course throughout the turbulent 1960s, both deploring and provoking the Left-Right splits and the Party’s losing its working-class roots – very prophetic. After Gaitskell’s sudden death (cp. John Smith’s, later), there rose Harold Wilson, with whom Bacon and some others formed a ‘Yorkshire Mafia’. Reeves largely ignores the Clause IV controversy and the ups-and-downs of nationalisation overall, though quoting Wilson’s quip that revising it would be ‘akin to taking Genesis out of the Bible’. Here also, an otherwise excellent account of Bacon and the Co-operative Party might have mentioned its admirable Sunday paper, *Reynold’s News*, sadly long defunct.

As Minister of State, Bacon was much involved in the great social liberalisings that (inter alia) decriminalised homosexuality and abortion, saw capital punishment abolished, and the 1968 Race Relations Act –

Crossman called her ‘magnificent’ in support. This last inevitably recalls Powell’s ‘rivers of blood’ speech, though one should also remember some Alf Garnett-like dockers marching in ‘Enoch’s’ support, and the Sheffield Labour MP who, post-*Windrush*, immediately called for immigration caps and the right of dance halls to debar ‘coloureds’. Nor can Reeves herself claim any moral high ground, given her 2016 description of Leeds West as ‘like a tinderbox that could explode if immigration was not curbed’. Shades, here, of this couplet from an old Rupert Bear story:

*‘Cries Reggie Rabbit in dismay/Weird foreigners are on the way.’*

For sharp insight into the cultural and emotional impact of black immigration, Colin McInnes’ trilogy of novels (*Absolute Beginners*, *City of Spades*, *Mr Love & Justice*) cannot be bettered.

‘Woy’ Jenkins is automatically identified with these changes, thanks not least to his hyper-egotistical memoir *Roy: A Life at the Centre* (1991). Reeves convincingly discloses the credit due to Bacon and Leo Abse. ‘Woy’ was reputedly lazy, inspiring Nye Bevan to remark:

‘Anyone who worked so hard at his accent could not be described in such terms.’

Likewise, there was Bacon’s role in the drive for comprehensive education and the belittlement of grammar schools. Everyone remembers Anthony Crosland’s infamous promise ‘to destroy every fucking grammar school’. But, Bacon (reshuffled to Education, 1967), for whom this was her ‘ideological rather than practical’ passion (Reeves, p.157) was the battering ram. Chapter 5 is entirely devoted to this, with much gloating over Thatcher’s inability to stem the tide, Reeves calling it Bacon’s ‘greatest personal and political legacy’.

Not for me, a working-class boy who owes everything to his Lincoln School (1948-56) teachers. Reeves’ claim (p.161) that ‘the 11+ exam was skewed towards benefiting middle-class children’ is simply not true. In response to Bacon (herself grammar school), Crosland, and company, I always invoke the passionate defence of grammar schools by Attlee’s Minister of Education, ‘Red’ Ellen Wilkinson. Contrariwise, Neil Kinnock protested to the BBC over a ‘one-sided’ *Archers* episode in which Shula defended the Borchester Grammar School, demanding equal time for the Comprehensive argument – he didn’t get it.

Whilst fighting these battles, Bacon never neglected her constituents, praised for her ‘surgeries’, in contrast to the absentee MPs (mainly Tory) castigated by Thatcherite Ferdinand Mount.

Bacon's odder side comes out in her Leavis-like hostility to 'popular culture', not only denigrating The Beatles and Rolling Stones, but objecting to the television screening of British crime drama *The Blue Lamp* – perhaps the shooting of Dixon of Dock Green was too much for her?

After an envoi remarking Bacon's last triumph (unmasking John Poulson), her uneasy but effective Lords speeches, the long, enigmatic friendship (possibly more?) with journalist Eric Stacpoole (one of very few trusted by Wilson), before rapid health decline, leading to death from broncho-pneumonia, 24 March, 1993, Reeves leaves the last words to long-time colleague Bernard Atha:

'Alice was like a rock for the Labour Party ... there was no messing with Alice.'

Buttressed by terse, referential end-notes, five statistical appendixes, and a just-about-adequate index, this is a timely book for the Labour Party – a sense of déjà vu frequently pervades. Although written in undistinguished (though commendably jargon-free), sometimes plodding, prose, Reeves and Carr have given us a welcome, long-overdue tribute to a woman who was both ordinary and extraordinary.

*Barry Baldwin*

## Vietnam revisited

**Tom Hayden, *Hell No: The Forgotten Power of the Vietnam Peace Movement*, Yale University Press, 2017, 160 pages, hardback ISBN 9780300218671**

**John Marciano, *The American War in Vietnam: Crime or Commemoration?* Monthly Review Press, New York, 2016, 196 pages, paperback ISBN 9781583675854, hardback ISBN 9781583675861**

These are two very different books but they cover much the same ground. The protest movement against the Vietnam War is being slowly airbrushed out of history. It is not always the winners who write the histories; the losers can do a pretty good job, too.

Tom Hayden, who died late last year, is hardly a household name in the UK and indeed one wonders if he is remembered even in the USA today. If he is remembered at all, it is for his marriage to Jane Fonda, another very committed and active resister of the war. But he was a big name in the sixties: he was one of the founders of SDS (Students for a Democratic

Society) and one of the Chicago 8, who were tried for conspiracy. The eight represented the gamut of the Protest-Resistance Movement: from Dave Dellinger, an old hand who had been involved his whole life, Rennie Davis, the more buttoned-up, 'straight' politico, to Bobby Seale, the only Afro-American defendant, bound in chains on the orders of Judge Julius Hoffman – who makes the judge at Jeremy Thorpe's trial the picture of benign partiality – and so on to the Yippies, Jerry Rubin and Abbie Hoffman. (Yippies, not Hippies: they believed in Flower Power well enough but were convinced that drugs, sex and rock 'n' roll could be combined with a dedicated commitment to political action, and proved that it could.)

So, understandably, Tom Hayden's emphasis is on the movement on campus, but he recognises and pays tribute to the Veterans for Peace and the various Afro-American groups.

John Marciano's work has a broader sweep; it's a more general history and very interesting, too, but poorly edited with much repetition. Marciano scoffs at the idea that the Peace Movement started with the Vietnam War. After the Second World War, American troops were mightily pissed off when their troopships, that were supposed to take them back home, were used to take French troops to Vietnam so they could join fully-armed Japanese troops in attempting to crush the Vietnamese independence movement.

Still, there can be no doubt the anti-war movement reached extraordinary proportions during the Vietnam War. From my own experience, there wasn't such a split between campus and veteran groups. I was never a member of any special grouping, but there was always a mixture of students and veterans who weren't students. Indeed, I was glad of the vets' presence; they beefed up our nerdy image and gave us some credibility in the face of some very outraged and hostile audiences. The mothers of 'our boys in Nam' were the most terrifying – I was grateful for the presence of police at times, even though once involved in a massive police riot in Washington.

Whites and blacks didn't mix much, although Martin Luther King had a huge white following. He is, himself, one of the victims of airbrushing both authors are so determined to combat. His 'I Have a Dream' speech is deservedly well known, but little is heard of his Riverside Church speech in which he denounced the war in Vietnam and called the US Government 'the greatest purveyor of violence in the world'. Who has heard *of* it, never mind actually heard it? But then American elites have always been good at airbrushing: slavery was a sad mistake (not a criminal system) and hell! – we have had a black president so everything is all right then. And the



Revolutionary War (The War of Independence) which was, in reality, the First American Civil War, has been so mythologized as to have little or nothing to do with what actually happened. Indigenous Indians, while no longer redskin devils, remain practically invisible and the recent controversy of the oil pipeline nearby the Standing Rock Reservation follows the old dismal pattern: we need your land, we want your gold, we want your oil, so don't mess with our superior, civilised ways.

Of course, not even American elites could deny that the Vietnam War was a catastrophe, but only because the US lost, not because it was wrong or criminal, as both authors claim. It was a sad mistake: poor Uncle Sam was only trying to stand up for what he has always believed: Democracy, Freedom, 'our way of life', 'our values', 'the Free World'. Ask Indonesia, Latin America, the Caribbean, and most Middle East countries, not to speak of Cambodia and Laos, how they feel. And the My Lai Massacre was a one-off 'mistake', not, as John Marciano claims, part of a regular pattern. So, Americans feel very sorry for themselves, and there are plenty of films to justify that: *The Deer Hunter*, *Full Metal Jacket*, *Apocalypse Now*, *Platoon*, and the unspeakable *Green Berets*. Our poor boys in Vietnam went through hell. I am sure they did and you can feel sorry for them just as you can for those poor German boys on the Eastern Front in World War Two. But why were they there in the first place, and what about the 'enemy', which, in both cases, included millions of civilians? In American history you hear very little of this. In the films, you hardly see the Vietnamese at all. When you do, they are usually torturers, real bad guys, or whores offering off-duty grunts 'nice fucky-fucky, good time'. You would never know three countries were devastated and that hundreds of thousands died and that chemical weapons were used with abandon, the long-term effects of which are still with the peoples of South East Asia.

It would seem that the subtitle of Tom Hayden's book, 'The Forgotten Power of the Vietnam Peace Movement', is something of a misnomer. If it had been more powerful, it wouldn't have been forgotten. He quotes Thomas Powers' 1973 study *Vietnam: The War at Home*:

'The anti-war movement in the United States created the necessary conditions for the shift in official policy from escalation to disengagement.'

John Marciano would agree with this verdict, but I am not sure I do. I left the USA in 1970. The war still had another five years to run. The spies, agents provocateurs, underground agents, disinformation that penetrated the Peace Movement had considerable success.

It must be hard for activists like Tom Hayden or writer/activists such as



Noam Chomsky, Howard Zinn, Naomi Klein or David Noble, who have spent lifetimes fighting the good fight, to have had so little success (which is not to say they shouldn't have fought). 'No more Vietnams' was the slogan, and what have we got? Permanent war. And Noam Chomsky saying the Occupy movement could be the dawn to a new world, and urging his many (but not enough) admirers to vote for the dreadful Hillary to keep out the ghastly Donald.

If you are interested in those times, and in American foreign policy of the day, or in any way participated in the events, then these two books might well appeal. But things have moved on, and have probably got worse.

*Nigel Potter*

### **'Bollocks really'**

**Tom Mills, *The BBC: The Myth of Public Service*, Verso, 2016, 272 pages, hardback ISBN 9781784829, £13.59, ebook 9781784850, £8.99**

This book confirms many of the criticisms of the BBC made by the left, and lays bare the close relationship between higher management of that institution and what C. Wright Mills called the 'power elite'. Government, of course, has the ultimate financial sanction through the licence fee, and Mills' text takes us through the history of these control mechanisms and the changes in management priorities and style. Remarkably, it is estimated that 'one in sixteen adults' around the world use BBC News Services. Such a broad sweep of listeners and viewers obviously means a great deal of power and influence, and is therefore always inherently too tempting a vehicle for government to leave undisturbed.

The author is adamant that the BBC 'has never been independent of the state in any meaningful sense'. From its very inception the BBC was there to influence the multitudes to look upon the actions of government positively, particularly at times of national crisis. It also acts in times of crisis as the public mouthpiece of the government. In 1926 during the General Strike, the BBC demonstrated its influence to aid the power of government. With all national newspapers hit by the strike, the BBC was virtually the only source of national news and was quickly enlisted as a propaganda aid to the government. This power to influence was immediately recognised by the first General Manager and later Director-General of the BBC, John Reith, who pursued a struggle for a modicum of independence against those such as Winston Churchill who sought to make

it a 'state broadcaster'. At the time of the General Strike, Churchill was Chancellor of the Exchequer and a vicious opponent of the striking workers, both as editor of the *British Gazette* and in Cabinet, advocating the use of armed force. Mills goes into considerable detail over the arguments within the BBC and government at the time. It is at this point that the veneer of 'political neutrality', 'balance', 'independence' and 'impartiality' was to be outwardly trumpeted, whilst it got on with the business of 'collector and distributor of Government news, censored where necessary but undoctored'. The latter statement came from the pen of the government's public relations head entrusted with liaison between the BBC and Reith.

The establishment of elite control, whilst still licensing operational independence, is coupled with the overall integration of the upper echelons of the BBC into the web of governmental and financial power through its overtly independent status as a Corporation, granted by Royal Charter, and by the commonality of the recruits to that level. Unarguably, the BBC is run by government appointed trustees who carefully choose the personnel for the higher managerial posts – so carefully, in fact, that *The Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission*, chaired by such establishment luminaries as Alan Milburn and Baroness Gillian Shephard, when it investigated the BBC, had no difficulty in characterising its management as members of 'Britain's elite'. Not surprisingly, even if the applicants were all Oxbridge graduates, this was not in itself a passport to a position with the BBC. There existed a secret vetting procedure to weed out those whose politics might be questionable, rather than Soviet agents. Sir Hugh Carlton Greene, one of the most culturally liberal of the Director-Generals, was very keen on the procedure as, for him, it served to make for editorial impartiality or, as some would say, conformity throughout the editorial process.

The second chapter, entitled 'The BBC and the Secret State', constitutes an exhaustive study, tracing the development of the relationship of the BBC with the various intelligence agencies. Formally, it began on 21 December 1933 – the BBC Controller of Programmes, an old Etonian, Colonel Alan Dawnay, (formally of the War Office) was to meet with MI5's Brigadier Oswald 'Jasper' Harker, head of counter subversion and espionage. Over a no doubt highly civilised lunch, these two servants of the state met to set up the rudimentary controls that would ensure that (in Harker's words) no 'subversive propaganda' or 'undesirable persons' besmirched the BBC's good name.

*The BBC: The Myth of Public Service* goes on to describe in some detail the setting up of a system of vetting of potential employees that presumably sought to avoid heavy-footed editorial intervention at a later

stage. The author thinks this was the first official meeting between the BBC and the security services, and this harmonious co-operation resulted in vetting the likes of Hugh Dalton, a former Labour Minister, the economist J.A. Hobson, J.L. Stocks for his association with an anti-fascist relief organisation, and John McMurray for speaking at anti-war gatherings. Poetry readings on air by C.S. Lewis and W.H. Auden caused particular perturbation in the BBC's corridors of power. Mills goes on to describe the expansion of the BBC's relationship with the 'secret state' during World War Two, the Cold War, and now the 'war on terror'.

In the distant past, the BBC was controlled by the Post Office and then by the Foreign Office and, given its major propaganda role in wartime, ended up during World War Two under the remit of the Ministry of Information. Reith himself was made Minister of Information for a few months in 1940, and the importance of the BBC to government when Britain is at war can hardly be exaggerated. BBC reportage of the Falklands/Malvinas conflict, the Suez debacle, and the first Iraq war were crucial in making many British people fall into line. In particular, coverage of the Falklands War was a gift to Thatcher's nationalist 1983 election campaign.

A most tumultuous recent war-reporting imbroglio involving the BBC was that concerning the weapons expert, Dr. David Kelly, the 'Dodgy Dossier' on Iraq, and then BBC reporter Andrew Gilligan. Dr. Kelly was found dead in mysterious circumstances and Gilligan's broadcast concerning the 'sexed up . . . Dossier' led to the resignations of Greg Dyke (Director-General) and Gavin Davies (Chairman). These events were used by some in the media to argue that the BBC had taken a stance of independent interrogation of UK participation in the Iraq invasion. For Tom Mills this is not the case at all: for him the abject apology, the resignation of the two senior directors, and the promise to tighten editorial vetting smacked not of fearless independence but craven acquiescence.

Other important matters touched upon include treatment of trade unions, specifically mentioning bias the BBC showed during the year long miners' strike and the anti-trade union, pro-business manipulation of economic reporting. There is a long piece on the myth of BBC leftist bias, carefully cultivated by a Tory coterie of MPs and hack servants in the press, which coincides with the demise of those newspapers having a semblance of objectivity concerning the travails of the labour movement. The *News Chronicle's* absorption by the *Daily Mail* and the metamorphosis of the *Daily Herald* into Murdoch's *The Sun* represent perhaps the most notable examples of the rise of the 'Red Tops' and the denigration of the BBC as a leftist redoubt. Mills details the history of the so-called BBC leftist

deviation through the fabrications of Mary Whitehouse, Norman Tebbit, Brian Crosier, Enoch Powell, Julian Lewis and Boris Johnson. Perhaps the most pertinent quote is from an ex-BBC presenter, one Robert Peston, describing the idea of left-wing bias at the BBC as ‘bollocks really’.

*The BBC: The Myth of Public Service* also contains the history of how the neo-liberal rot set in when Keith Joseph took up the matter of a documentary by the world-renowned Keynesian economist, J.K. Galbraith. With the monetarists now ascendant in Thatcher’s Cabinet, the Iron Lady herself took a swipe at the BBC for disseminating the wrong doctrine. Thatcher, with the agreement of Tebbit and Rupert Murdoch, appointed Marmaduke Hussey as a BBC executive. The liberal-leaning Alasdair Milne was ‘summarily’ dismissed, to be replaced at the helm by Michael Checkland, but the Board insisted Checkland have a deputy, John Birt. The latter installed a marketised structure, centralised decision-making, and the outsourcing of a lot more actual production to commercial companies.

Throughout its history, the BBC has indulged itself with public presenters penning peons to its own democratic credentials and its efforts to bind the nation together and support parliamentary democracy. However, there were at times, and still are, brief interludes of acceptable openness, but the pressure to keep up with the bread and circuses (or should that be cookery and sport?) of other channels seems at times overwhelming. For Tom Mills, reform of the BBC would entail hiring senior staff, freed from establishment control, and the whole institution subjected to ‘a more democratic system of public accountability’. Alternative social media activity helped mightily to redress the vile avalanche of hostile propaganda from the mainstream media aimed at Corbyn during the 2017 General Election. What would have been the result if BBC broadcasting had been truly representative of civil society, instead of wallowing in its self-defined ‘impartiality’ – a left Labour government?

*John Daniels*

## **Recto and Verso**

**Vladimir Mayakovsky, *‘Vladimir Mayakovsky’ & Other Poems*, translated and edited by James Womack, Fyfield Books/Carcanet Press, 2016, 240 pages, paperback ISBN 9781784102920**

This is a gorgeous book. The reader will find it either a seductive introduction or a thrilling reunion. James Womack’s translations are bristling with appropriate vigour. The epitome of the revolutionary poet, out on the

streets, swift to respond to events, yelling his texts to the crowd, Vladimir Mayakovsky was also a playwright, actor and graphic artist. A dutifully transgressive Futurist, he believed the arts should be liberated from the past – and therefore from the museums, galleries and concert halls – and performed instead in the streets, factories and workers' tenements. As for literature itself, the likes of Pushkin, Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy were fit only for the dustbin. There was a good deal of bluster and bravado in his stance.

Noting that bureaucrats and the bourgeoisie shore up their position by wielding the pen, he issues a clarion call to the writers of the Revolution: 'It is time / to fight back / with the pen. / It is time / to use the pen / to defend'. At stake is the rebuilding of the world along egalitarian lines. When he says that 'millions of future truths will grow / from our present-day sketches' he is speaking, not of abstract philosophical or political truths, but of individuals. The pen will proclaim them: 'long live / the red / worker's pen / our present-day weapon!' This is, of course, a long way from the truths of Seamus Heaney's squat pen, pensively digging for potatoes in the countryside.

Mayakovsky is obviously a prominent exemplar of the agitprop poet with a portfolio of messages to hand out; but he is also, no doubt, one of the great exponents of what we now call 'spoken word' poetry. Although he innovates on the printed page – the placing of the words, the breaking of the lines – we should also imagine his poems as reading scripts or even, better still, as after-the-fact reports of public performance. Taken in that manner, he would be a good model for today's young spoken-word artists who do not want simply to join the queue of colleagues delivering half-cooked, not to say half-baked, rap. For that purpose (and I have been reading some of them aloud), Womack works.

My main previous experience of Mayakovsky came by way of the three-volume *Selected Works* that Raduga Publishers issued in Moscow in 1985; variously translated, but mainly by Dorian Rottenberg. They are workmanlike versions, conveying little of the poet's sense of fun, except in rather starchy pantomime. Here is the last stanza of 'You!', as done by Rottenberg:

To give up my life for the likes of you,  
 lovers of woman-flesh, dinners and cars?  
 I'd rather go and serve pineapple juice  
 to the whores in Moscow's bars.

And here is James Womack's version of the same:

To give a life for you and yours,  
 you lovers of partridge and the pink trombone?  
 I'd rather be barman to a barful of whores,  
 serving them pineapple champagne!

I don't know the original – and there is surely a significant difference between lovers of 'woman-flesh' and those of 'the pink trombone' – but the tone here seems right. It fits with a Mayakovsky who is not only always eager to deliver, on his own terms but in the interests of the wider community, the shock of the new; but also happy to do so with a giggle and a shrug.

One of the shocks of the new was that it didn't have to be solemn – not, at least, until the authorities declared that it did. Womack does catch Mayakovsky's swagger and soul. His Mayakovsky tends to be more the spur-of-the-moment jester than the poster-boy of the Soviet state, as he posthumously became. (It was in 1935 that Stalin declared him the greatest poet of the Soviet era.) As a translator, Womack has great confidence in his control of Mayakovsky's variable tone, and also in the allusive resonance he allows himself, dodgy though it might sound to the purest of purists. For instance, he appears to quote David Bowie:

Oh you pretty things,  
 you people  
 who only worry about looking good when you dance ...

And there is a distant echo of Ernie Wise which may be lost on younger readers.

Please don't  
     ignore this note:  
 before firing off angry epistles  
 read the poem  
     what I wrote.

Neither of these echoes tells us much about Mayakovsky or his times, even if they do deliver an internal chuckle. And here is Womack, taking viable liberties in the middle of the long poem 'Cloud in Trousers':

Wayne and Waynetta paint the town red,  
 pucker neanderthal brows –  
 but in their gob  
 the little corpses of most words lie dead.  
 Only two pull through:

‘wanker’  
and ‘kebab’.

The original speaks of ‘Krupps and Krupplets’ (in Andrey Kneller’s version, available online), a reference to the German family of arms manufacturers; so the choice of ‘Wayne and Waynetta’ is not exactly doing the whole of its job. (Their two animate words are, in Kneller’s version, ‘swine’ and ‘borsch’.) Clearly, Womack is willing to make certain sacrifices of historical context for the sake of the tone of voice.

Wayne and Waynetta Slob were grotesque characters created by Harry Enfield and Kathy Burke, in the early 1990s. ‘Oh! You Pretty Things’ was written by Bowie in 1971 for *Hunky Dory*. And the Ernie Wise line could come from anywhere in the 1960s or 1970s. These are dated resonances. Somewhat more in keeping with our times, the poem previously known as something like ‘An Extraordinary Adventure Which Happened to Me, Vladimir Mayakovksy, in a Summer Cottage’ becomes, in Womack’s hands, a piece of online click-bait: ‘Vladimir Mayakovsky Rented a Dacha One Summer; You Won’t Believe What Happened Next’.

Also included here are a couple of the longer poems, ‘Cloud in Trousers’ and ‘I Love’, the 1913 play *Vladimir Mayakovsky*, and the 1926 film scenario *How’s It Going?* (subtitled ‘A Day in Five Cine-Details’). The shortest item, as fresh as on the day it was written, is the 1928 epigram:

Productivity  
and a living wage  
are recto and verso  
of the same page.

Moments like this remind us that, setting aside my reservations about some of Womack’s out-of-date updates, Mayakovsky can be both of-his-own-time and quite convincingly of ours too. The solutions on offer may have evolved in a century, but the basic injustices come in the same shape.

Womack’s brisk introduction to the book raises an interesting point:

‘Between 1922 and 1928 Mayakovsky was the pre-eminent Soviet poet, moderating his style to meet an encroaching public philistinism. Perhaps he did not manage to become philistine enough. The last year or so of his life was marked by antagonism between him and his public, and in mid-April of 1930 Mayakovsky killed himself’.



It is sometimes hard to think of him as compromising with anyone in his more blustering verse – compromised, perhaps. But there is an inevitability about the process: the wider the audience, the greater the need to discard the egotism of artistic vision. Spoken-words take heed.

*Gregory Woods*

### **Eat Your Pineapple**

Eat your pineapple, chew your grouse:  
your last day dawns, you bourgeois louse.

*Vladimir Mayakovsky [1917]*

### **from The Bureaucratiad**

*A concrete suggestion*

I,  
as you know,  
am no manager or secretary.  
I'm a poet with absolutely no bureaucratic capacity.  
But I think  
that it's necessary—  
would be a mercy—  
to take  
the offices by the chimneys and give them a good shake.  
And then to sit down  
with the workers you'd shaken out,  
and pick up just one of them,  
and say to him:  
'Write!'  
With just one proviso,  
a finishing touch:  
'You go ahead, comrade, and write, *but not much!*'

*[1922]*

### from Bastards!

‘London.  
A banquet.  
Attended by kings and queens.  
As a gesture, the guests’ seats will not be golden.’

Damn you! God damn you all to hell!  
I hope savages come from the colonies you conquered,  
hungry and cannibal,  
hunting your head  
with its crown!  
I hope your cities are burnt to the ground!  
I hope the flame of rebellion burns  
brightly over your kingdom!  
I hope that—in copper cauldrons!—  
your sons and heirs are boiled into jam!

[1922]

### Spring

The snow is melted into drool.  
The town’s taken off its winter clothes.  
Spring is here again, as foolish  
and chatty as a sailor on shore leave.

[1918]

## Danger of Death, Keep Out

**John Le Carré, *A Legacy of Spies*, Viking/Penguin, 2017, 264 pages, hardback ISBN 9780241308547, £20**

Perhaps we’re all considerably wiser, or better informed, than we were when we first encountered the Le Carré universe of shabbiness,

furtiveness, mendacity and callous ruthlessness that, fifty years ago or more, characterised his earliest novels and quintessentially, of course, *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold*.

We're no longer shocked by the scenes of atrocity that, deftly and without any gratuitous lingering, he places at the heart of his vision of the West's moral bankruptcy. When we journey, with Peter Guillam, the protagonist of *A Legacy of Spies*, to MI6's safe house in the New Forest and are introduced to 'the Submarine, a purpose-built isolation cell for instructing trainees in the unlovely arts of resisting and administering harsh interrogation ... windowless padded walls, hand-to-foot manacles and head-splitting sound effects', we may be momentarily startled, but we recognise immediately its kinship with phenomena such as the CIA's black site torture room in Afghanistan, acknowledged by George W. Bush in September 2006 and claimed as essential to the containment of Islamic fundamentalism, with rendition, waterboarding and Guantanamo Bay.

We recognise also – Le Carré has spent decades, from *The Little Drummer Girl* onwards, persuading us to engage imaginatively with systems of exploitation, profiteering and criminality which are global in their reach – that the narrow struggle for ideological supremacy conducted by Smiley, Guillam and the ancient clan of Cold War operatives, now rising once more from the dead, never constituted a world apart, or one that was immune from a much wider culpability.

Robert McCrumb in *The Guardian* (September 2016) is therefore right to detect a deep-seated pessimism in the current novel's immediate precursor, Le Carré's memoir *The Pigeon Tunnel*, when it comes to assessing legacies. On the one hand, there's the recognition that old, discredited regimes survive revolution and war and go on functioning in, or infiltrating, new realities (the Nazis in post-war Germany, Communists in the Soviet Empire and present day Russia, countless examples across the other continents of murderous regimes propped up indefinitely by superpower self-interest), as do intelligence services – 'like the wiring in a house: the new owner moves in, he drops the switch, and it's the same old lights that come on again'. Worse still, perhaps, for Le Carré personally is the British Establishment's propensity to mythologise its own history so cavalierly it constitutes, among spy services, 'a class apart'. Le Carré takes aim, with withering scorn, both at the organisation's atrocious operational record and at its readiness, whenever necessary, to collude with barbarism: 'wasn't my former Service energetically trading intelligence with the Gestapo right up to 1939? Wasn't it on friendly terms with Muammar Gaddafi's chief of secret police right up to the last days of Gaddafi's rule?'

Where McCrumb gets it wrong is in underestimating the vehemence in this passage, and others like it, and characterising the author of *The Pigeon Tunnel* as a ‘slightly chastened figure, all passion spent’. Nor should we miss the many instances of individual heroism Le Carré pays tribute to in the course of his reminiscences: Sakharov, Vadim Bakatin, Oldrich Cerny, Salah Tamari, Yvette Pierpaoli, above all ‘the striving and endurance of so-called ordinary people who weren’t ordinary at all’.

In *A Legacy of Spies*, what astonishes most of all is the redoubled narrative energy with which an octogenarian novelist conducts what may be his ultimate counterattack on behalf of those with the will to resist. As ever, the pigeon tunnel is stocked with victims. As ever, innocence and systemic brutality perform their grisly, voyeuristically compelling dance of death. Fallow deer add to the New Forest hideaway’s ‘air of cultivated charm and tranquillity’ a few steps away from a corpse hanging from a tree by a thread of nylon – one thinks, with revulsion, of the fate of David Kelly. When we’re told a character is ‘neurotic but extremely controlled, and highly vulnerable’ or ‘sweet ... humanity breathes out of him’, we wait for the noose of political expediency to tighten.

In an Orwellian context of maximum surveillance, the barest expressions of human identity – desire, protectiveness, solidarity, *love* (the equivalent of Alec Leamas going back for the already murdered Liz at the Berlin Wall in *The Spy*) – court catastrophe and, predictably, women and children come off worst. Le Carré pulls the whole story forward into a contemporary setting in which the front line perpetrators, in this case including Peter Guillam, themselves face court proceedings in a cosmetic exercise designed to shore up the Service’s lack of genuine accountability. The odds are stacked against them, against truth, against any kind of moral reckoning. The ‘gruesome bastion’ on the Thames at Vauxhall – Le Carré’s contempt is palpable – with its malevolent apparatchiks, its Bunnys and Lauras – has little to fear, it believes, from antiquated spooks on the verge of extinction such as ‘Millie McCraig’s motionless shadow looking down on me from the window’ of Smiley’s defunct operational centre ‘The Stables’, or Jim Prideaux still out to grass in the dilapidated caravan of *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy*.

But Smiley and Guillam in particular, the consummate hangman and the consummate philanderer, have both had their Damascene moments on the road to a reclaimed humanity. It’s given to Guillam to spell out the ethical conundrum any legacy worth handing down must find an answer to: ‘how much of our human feeling can we dispense with in the name of freedom ... before we cease to feel either human or free?’ And it’s Smiley, the

knight with the rueful countenance, who sets off in pursuit of his former employers, armed with the documentary evidence that will unmask them. Perhaps the children Leamas remembers in his last conscious moment ‘waving cheerfully through the window’ of a car on the autobahn, their lives miraculously spared, symbolise a future worth dying for, after all.

*Stephen Winfield*

### **Austerity’s re-working**

**Vickie Cooper and David Whyte (editors), *The Violence of Austerity*, Pluto Press, 2017, 256 pages, paperback ISBN 9780745399485, £16.99**

At the turn of the century, an obscure Home Office poster was discovered in Barter Books, a shop in Alnwick, Northumberland, with the motivational slogan ‘Keep Calm and Carry On’. It had been prepared in 1939 for use in case of a coastal invasion by the Nazis, and was designed to steady the national nerves in the face of such a calamitous event. The poster was never used in these circumstances but became a fashionable, ironic, comedy catchphrase after its unearthing in 2000. The phrase adorns mugs, t-shirts, key-rings, fridge magnets, bags, tea towels, pencil cases and, of course, posters, and has cultivated an industry fuelled by post-war nostalgia. It’s a powerful image of a clichéd yet outmoded expression of ‘traditional’ English stoicism, of British pluck, of stiff upper lip, and it is a gloriously kitsch memento of determined resolve in the face of hardship. This nostalgia for remaining positive in the face of adversity provided an easily identifiable and artistic backdrop to the ‘age of austerity’ that the UK entered following the financial crisis of 2007/8. We were told by the media and successive governments to ‘Keep Calm and Carry On’, to ‘make do and mend’ and that ‘we are all in this together’.

Such a comradely, belt-tightening narrative set the stage for ensuring that the necessity of austerity measures was clear, and provided an historical lens through which we were asked to cope with them. We were told that the deficit accrued from the bailout of the banks was actually a result of public and personal profligacy: we had collectively spent too much. Successive Labour governments had overspent on the public sector, handing out gold-plated pensions to public servants and dishing out welfare to anyone who filled out the necessary forms. In turn, we, the public, had gone overboard by purchasing as many consumer goods as we could possibly acquire on credit. In short, the financial crisis was

represented as stemming from a combination of government recklessness and debt-fuelled consumption. Despite no hard data to support the idea that government overspending caused the deficit, the only way out of the economic mess was to cut back. From this perspective, austerity is viewed as a purely economic procedure that comes down to nothing more than the fiscal need to cut the deficit and slash public spending. This view that was put forth as the rationale for austerity in the UK, which included freezing Child Benefit and public sector wages, reducing housing benefits, implementing the ‘Bedroom Tax’, and introducing Personal Independence Payments, to name but a few measures. However, it was the façade of togetherness that, as *The Violence of Austerity* demonstrates, ‘played a key part in the ideological making of austerity’ by organising consent for the cuts and simultaneously deflected blame from the private sector and banks.

The politics of austerity not only has a scarcely hidden ideological dimension, in that it was framed as the common sense and only way to pay for the massive increase in public debt caused by the financial crisis, it also has a deeply nefarious dimension that is kept from public scrutiny. In *The Violence of Austerity*, editors Vickie Cooper and David Whyte draw together research that collectively presents evidence of the ‘violent consequences of government policy conducted in the name of “austerity”.’ Together, the 24 articles expose austerity as a process of cuts to publicly funded services that has led to policies that target the most vulnerable in society. These cuts are implemented through various bureaucracies and institutions that make each policy a reality and routinise the harmful effects of deciding whether, for example, someone is legally homeless or fit for work. In four sections the contributors examine in detail the impacts that workfare, the asylum system, fuel poverty, homelessness, and work capability assessments (WCA) have on the mental and physical health of hundreds of thousands of people in the United Kingdom.

Benefit sanctions feature in both the workfare scheme and WCA measures, and underpin the rise of food bank usage, food and fuel poverty and homelessness. The impact that such sanctions have on individuals is evidenced by the shocking stories related throughout *The Violence of Austerity*. In his chapter on ‘Welfare Reforms and the Attack on Disabled People’, John Pring charts the series of brutal cuts to disabled people’s support as Personal Independence Payments (PIP) slowly replaced the Disability Living Allowance (DLA) from 2013 onwards. One impact of this cut was that ‘by July 2016 up to 700 disabled people a week who had previously claimed DLA were being forced to hand back their Motability vehicles’. There were more cuts to come, as eligibility for the out-of-work

disability benefit, Employment and Support Allowance (ESA), began to be assessed through the work capability assessments. These assessments, delivered by private companies (Atos from 2008 and Maximus from 2015), determined whether an ESA claimant was fit for work. However, it was discovered that in a number of cases these private assessors had not sought evidence of illness from GPs, psychiatrists or clinical psychologists, resulting in people being forced back into work when they were not well enough. Pring recounts one notable incident, the case of Andrew Davidson, whose coroner's report stated that his 'decision to take his own life had been triggered by being found "fit to work".' As the article goes on to show, Davidson's case is not an outlier, with one study showing that thousands of people have died not long after being found 'fit for work'. More worrying still is the evidence that, even if you are 'lucky' enough to be offered Employment and Support Allowance, there is the constant threat of benefit sanctions that are regularly implemented without the prior knowledge of the recipient. One anonymous welfare rights officer tells us:

'Frequently clients do not know that they've been sanctioned until they don't receive their benefit. They've received no letter and given no information on the right to appeal ... Clients have told me they are shoplifting to eat.'

Such punitive measures has led to the formation of Disabled People Against Cuts (DPAC), set up to 'fight the austerity-driven erosion of disabled people's living conditions and human rights'. Another grassroots organisation that campaigns against the impact of austerity on benefit claimants is Boycott Workfare. This group aims to expose the violence of the workfare scheme and to 'end forced unpaid work for people who receive welfare'. In essence, workfare means people are sent on compulsory work placements *or* have their Job Seekers Allowance taken away. In their contribution, Jon Burnett and David Whyte analyse the testimonies of more than 500 people who logged on to Boycott Workfare's website. The analysis revealed that working environments in some of the organisations that had signed up to the government's scheme were almost Dickensian in practice. Claimants reported being 'expected to complete physical labour at an intense pace,' were afforded no breaks, some mentioned that they had to pay for access to the toilets, and many reported having their illnesses ignored by employers. Not only were people forced to work at an unhealthy rate but, in several cases, they were also working in unsafe and often illegal conditions. Alarming, the employers with the highest number of abuses included charities or social enterprises.

The picture of austerity Britain painted by this important book stands in



stark contrast to the image painted by successive governments since the crash. The financial crisis may have started as an economic problem to be solved, but it was ideologically reworked into the political problem of how to allocate blame and responsibility. This ideological reworking focused on the claimed profligacy of government spending on public services and welfare – a narrative that was assisted by the negative image of welfare that reassured workers that those on benefits were ‘feeling the pinch too’, that ‘we were all in this together’, and that we needed to Keep Calm and Carry On. What *The Violence of Austerity* clearly articulates is that the consequence of this reworking is the de-politicising and normalising of a number of increasingly punitive measures that have a harmful, and in some cases, fatal effect on people and their lives. It exposes and confronts the impact of austerity and highlights the work of a diverse body of activist and campaigning groups who tirelessly challenge the government, its policies and the institutions that implement them, in the courts and on the street.

*Abigail Rhodes*



## Brexit slobber

**Written and illustrated by Madeleina Kay, *Theresa Maybe in Brexitland*, 2017, 56 pages large format, paperback ISBN 9780995707412, £5**

Madeleina Kay won the ‘EU in My Region’ blogging competition and duly made her first visit to Brussels to attend a European Commission journalism course. She dressed as Supergirl, and caught the eye of the world’s press whilst sitting quietly at the front of the room where Michel Barnier and David Davis were about to give a press conference at the end of round five of their dogged negotiations. Madeleina was accredited for her visit to the Commission Press Centre, but made no fuss when she was asked to leave prior to the press conference starting. ‘They thought I might pull a stunt like the guy who gave Theresa May a P45 at the Tory Party Conference,’ she later told the BBC.

A fearless young activist and European citizen, Supergirl held her copy of *Theresa Maybe in Brexitland* for the assembled photographers and television cameras to see. The Superhero’s mission is to save Britain from the emerging horrors of Brexitland. In bright colours and large readable type, her Lewis Carroll inspired political satire ‘parallels the story of British politics following the Brexit vote’. In all this vital work, Supergirl is helped by Alba White Wolf, her elegant Alsatian companion:

‘An enormous white wolf was looking down at her with large eyes, and cautiously stretching out one paw, trying to touch the Brexit. The white wolf sniffed the Brexit as though it were filled with delicious biscuits. It gave Theresa Maybe a big lick covering her head in slobber, but she didn’t seem to mind because the white wolf was such a friendly creature.’ [www.albawhitewolf.com](http://www.albawhitewolf.com)

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