

# Reviews

## Women's Co-operative Guild

**Ruth Cohen, *Margaret Llewelyn Davies: With Women for a New World*, Merlin Press, 2020, 256 pages, paperback ISBN 978058367591, £17.99**

The Women's Co-operative Guild which, sadly, came to an end in 2016, played a key role from the 1880s onwards in awakening working class women to the task of fighting for their just rights and for gender equality. Although many outstanding women were involved in its achievements, none did more to inspire the struggle than Margaret Llewelyn Davies, its General Secretary from 1889 to 1921.

This book is a biography of Margaret which is not only a detailed record of her administrative and public work but also an account of her family background and personal life, touching on the lives of many of her distinguished relatives, friends and acquaintances.

Perhaps unexpectedly, Margaret came from an upper middle class family. She was the only daughter among the seven children of the Rev. John Llewelyn Davies, the incumbent of Christchurch Marylebone, in West London, a theological scholar who had translated Plato's *Republic*. Her brothers were educated at public schools and universities and she herself was well educated, finally at Girton College Cambridge, of which her aunt, Emily Davies, was one of the founders.

Margaret's father was a Christian Socialist influenced by the theologian, F. D. Maurice, and her mother, Mary Davies, was well educated and came from a Unitarian family. Other relatives were linked to progressive causes and were highly knowledgeable.

However, Margaret's mother insisted that she should return home before completing her course at Girton, probably for health reasons, and she took over some of her mother's responsibilities. Influenced by the family tradition of public service, Margaret helped to run two youth clubs.

In 1886 she read *On Labour* by William Thornton, which led her to join the local co-operative society and, in December 1886, she attended a meeting of the local branch of the Women's League for the Spread of Co-operation. This organisation had been founded in 1883 by Alice Acland, a vicar's daughter, and Mary Lawrenson, a teacher. Margaret was deeply impressed and accepted the position of branch secretary. So successful was she in recruiting members and arranging attractive topics for discussion that she was soon elected to the Central Committee of what was

now called the Women's Co-operative Guild. When, in 1889, Mary Lawrenson tendered her resignation as General Secretary, Margaret was put forward and was elected to take her place.

This all happened about the time her father was pushed to resign in Marylebone and accepted a living at Kirby Lonsdale in the Lake District. Margaret moved with her parents and took the opportunity to visit most northern industrial towns to build up the Guild branches there. She did this by arranging topical talks and lectures and insisting on educational objectives. She argued that Guild meetings should not become 'mere mother's meetings'. The wives of skilled workers, who kept the home while their husbands worked, were attracted to join and the membership grew rapidly. However, Margaret was very conscious of the plight of the poorest women and worked hard to draw in and assist women in the most depressed classes.

One of her basic objectives was to provide women with the knowledge and the will to speak at meetings and seek election to Co-operative Society boards and committees, which were totally dominated by men. This did not enhance her standing with male board members, but she was undaunted. She fought relentlessly for women's rights and won Guild members over to support her.

She battled for cheaper divorces and argued for divorce by mutual consent, which was opposed by many members on religious grounds. She campaigned for improvements in Lloyd-George's National Insurance Bill and helped to achieve mothers' allowances. She sought to achieve better wages for low-paid women, supported trade unions, and organised assistance for workers on strike. She devoted immense amounts of effort to campaigns to give women the right to vote and argued for electoral reform to give women and men votes on equal terms.

Margaret was an internationalist and helped to found the International Co-operative Alliance. She was a pacifist and opposed the First World War, which divided the Guild membership. This led, eventually, to the defeat of a resolution at the Guild's national conference calling for peace negotiations and no annexation.

Despite this, Margaret stuck to her beliefs. The result of her work over the years was reflected in the growth of membership. In 1921, the Guild had nearly 50,000 members organised in nearly 800 branches. To the consternation of the membership, Margaret decided to resign in 1921. Apart from the reaction within the Guild, the United Co-operative Board, with whose members she had previously clashed, invited her to chair their Co-operative Congress at Brighton in 1922 – the first woman ever to do

so. Subsequently, she was also granted the Freedom of the Guild with a testimonial of £700.

Margaret lived on to 28 May 1944, along with her former assistant secretary, Lilian Harris, with whom she finally moved to Dorking in Surrey. She suffered from bouts of ill health but, in July 1933, spoke at a huge Guild Congress to mark the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Guild's foundation. She declined to write the history of the Guild but edited two books recording the lives of working class women: *Life as We Have Known It* and *Maternity*. She continued to take an interest in many progressive causes, to which she made bequests in her Will, and remained a deeply committed pacifist to the end of her life.

Ruth Cohen's biography is a magnificent record of the life of a truly outstanding woman who was an inspiration to the Left in Britain and particularly working class women. Not since Jean Gaffin and David Thomas published *The Centenary History of the Co-operative Women's Guild* in 1983 has there been a publication which conveys the tremendous achievements of the Guild as this book does. It is a fascinating, enlightening and inspiring volume. Feminists, co-operators and activists on the Left, apart from readers generally, will benefit greatly from reading it.

*Stan Newens*

## Liverpool at home

**Matthew Thompson, *Reconstructing Public Housing: Liverpool's hidden history of collective alternatives*, Liverpool University Press, 2020, 408 pages, paperback ISBN 9781789621082, £25.95**

Matthew Thompson's new book is a comprehensive and very interesting contribution to a Leverhulme Trust initiative which funded his three-year research project: *'Reimagining the City: New Municipalism and the Future of Economic Democracy'*. Amongst Leverhulme's aims are:

A focus on new municipal initiatives to incubate and stimulate a new co-operative economy – specifically the development of institutional ecosystems for worker owned co-ops and other forms of democratic enterprise, in cities contending with the adverse conditions of global economic restructuring and neoliberal austerity.

I was especially interested because I have also recently been looking through papers relating to the history of economic development in

Sheffield and South Yorkshire during the 1980s, in which I was involved through the City Council and through the Centre for Local Economic Strategies (CLES). I had previously lived in Liverpool, during the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Matthew Thompson reminds us that Engels had little praise for either city as he travelled around the country, condemning the appalling ‘cellar dwellings’ in Liverpool and smoke filled air in Sheffield. In common with the overall aims of Leverhulme Trust, Thompson describes the aim of his book as ‘trying to see in collective alternatives a “real utopian” potential to transform public housing and urban economics’.

Thompson re-uses the word ‘commoning’, recalling the role in England of common areas used by communities for grazing animals, and the village green for festivals and common use. The ‘Diggers Song’, originally told by Gerrard Winstanley and arranged by Leon Rosselson, reflects the utopian view:

‘In 1649, on St Georges hill, a ragged band they called the diggers came to do the people’s will. “We come in peace”, they said, ‘to dig and sow; we come to work the land in common and to make the wasteland grow. We are free men though we are poor. This world was made a treasury for everyone to share. You Diggers all stand up for glory stand up now!’

I was reminded of local research here in Sheffield where a plot several acres in size was simply known as ‘Common Piece’ before being acquired by a local steel-maker following the ‘Enclosure’ legislation, and then used as ‘quality’ housing for himself and other key operatives.

Thompson’s research exposes the totally unsatisfactory state of housing in Liverpool during the 1960s/70s: multi-occupancy and poverty of the Granby street area, between Toxteth and the University, matched by the other unsatisfactory alternative of re-locating swathes of residents and tenants suffering appalling poverty in housing miles away from Liverpool in Skelmersdale, Halewood or Kirkby. It’s useful to be reminded of the significant and positive role played by Shelter and Des McConaghy in setting up the Shelter Neighbourhood Action Plan (SNAP) – an action research project which actually visited and talked with families about their financial needs, and possible futures, rather than being simply on the receiving end of housing new build or restoration decisions by a paternalist local authority. This important movement, along with the Home Office community development projects, offered a way forward through collective housing co-operatives, for which the city became well known.

A number of varied examples are described in detail: Granby Street, Weller Street, co-operatives on the Kirkby estate in Knowsley, and around Eldon Street, established by co-operators he describes as 'Eldonians'. These efforts were taken up by Harold Wilson's Government through Housing Minister, Reg Freeson. Freeson's adviser, a Liverpudlian called Harold Campbell, set up a working party on co-ops, which recommended they register with the Housing Corporation as Housing Associations so that, through the 'fair rents' regime, housing became affordable for those on low incomes for the first time. The book illustrates how Liverpool's experience of co-operative housing linked with the movement away from council tenure as housing associations took hold.

Perhaps Matthew Thompson could have explained more of the historical tradition which had led to decades of Conservative rather than Labour control of Liverpool City Council, despite the example set by Bessie Braddock, MP for Liverpool Exchange from 1945 to 1970, and her husband, Jack, who was also a Labour Councillor.

Surprisingly, Liverpool went Liberal in 1972, which offered the opportunity for this wide variety of co-operative pilots to become established. Thompson's detailed analysis exposes the problems which the Liberal pursuit of 'choice' brought into tenants' movements at the time. He briefly mentions Kirkby, where women made an input into practical solutions to their housing issues, and suggests rightly that housing policy was a key factor in allowing Militant — a very male dominated group which used its opposition to housing co-operatives, in favour of municipalisation in the name of socialism, to gain control of the District Labour Party, and thence Liverpool City Council in the later 1970s. I recognise the author's description of a political culture of 'anarchic syndicalism' from when we lived there, during the period from 1968 to 1974. This contrasted sharply with Sheffield and its solid Labour and trade union solidarity, which dominated throughout its virtually continuous control of the local authority since 1926.

This takes the conclusions of the book, politically, down the road of current assumptions about land and property. Individual owner-occupation, rather than collective or co-operative housing models or indeed private or public sector tenure, are jealously guarded by conservative economists. They celebrate this because of added status and prospective wealth it has offered, during decades of steep house price inflation, to owner-occupied living and associated consumption, with people living in one, two or three car families. Thompson's conclusions are well worth considering, particularly in light of continuing social

inequality, climate changes, and health pandemics.

I was left wishing for a more gendered and racially based interpretation of Liverpool's housing story, especially that the role of women in tenants' movements was more fleshed out. Perhaps a further study might offer some insights along these lines.

*Helen Jackson*

## Walking the tightrope

**Ali Smith, *Summer*, Penguin 2020, 386 pages, ISBN 9780241207062, £16.99**

'You carry your own joy with you wherever you go', wrote Kurt Schwitters in a letter to his wife Helma in April 1941 from Hutchinson Camp at Douglas on the Isle of Man. Schwitters' story, and those of the painter and memoirist Fred Uhlman and their fellow German and Austrian internees – some 1,200 in total – occupy a central place in the last of the novels that make up Ali Smith's mesmerising *Seasons Quartet*, captured, as it were, in a blaze of summer light. Schwitters' release was agonisingly delayed, but he enjoyed the immense good fortune of having washed up among a crowd of like-minded intellectuals and creative spirits in an environment, glowingly detailed by Smith, that was uniquely well-disposed among wartime camp regimes to the practice, however circumscribed, of his particular art: *Merz*, or 'the combination of all conceivable materials for artistic purposes' ... 'an existential project that seeks to lend shape to hapless circumstance' (Roger Cardinal).

Of course, 'A prison is a prison' even for Daniel Gluck, the centenarian magus or Pied Piper of 'arty art' and its lifelong powers of liberation first seen in *Autumn* but here recounting his own journey, and his father's, to Hutchinson as a grim litany of dispossession and tabloid-inspired hostility. Once disembarked, however, as on Prospero's island, the faery wand of Schwitters' porridge sculptures and collages assembled from canteen waste, Uhlman's ink drawings of a child's balloon floating high above the fences and war zones' 'heaped-up hills of skulls' (Mandelshtam on another historical apocalypse comes inexorably to mind) and figures, sacred and profane, from myth and fable cut into the paint on blackout windows to let the light in – works its magical transformation. It's as if an entire world comes together, intoxicated like Smith herself (always!) by the imaginative impulse, in a sharing of artistic projects, gifts, performances and Dadaist happenings light years from the 'coerced community' or

*Zwangsgemeinschaft* of Adler's classic work on Theresienstadt which Daniel appears to refer to, with characteristic playfulness and some prescience, in a letter to his sister in Occupied France. Above all it's the fresh engendering of dialogue, for Smith the *ne plus ultra* of social reconciliation, around simple tokens of esteem – 'There is always a point where a hand reaches out to another hand', she has said – that marks out the enchanted terrain: a Butlin's lapel badge, the one redeeming artefact from an earlier camp, in exchange for lessons in rudimentary English; quality drawing paper from an artist's precious hoard in return for a Heine translation; a bunch of meadowsweet, remembered as a local girl's gift to an internee in a previous war. 'Do you like to see things as they are *and* as they aren't?' Uhlman asks Daniel, in perhaps the ultimate formulation of where the *Quartet* as a whole wants to take us, starting him on his further journey to the guru-like, passionate aestheticism that will make him what one commentator claims is the novels' 'moral centre'. Hutchinson, meanwhile, represents a rare moment of collective enlightenment (encouraged on the ground by a benign officialdom) that not only draws in the 'fine people of Douglas crowded in their hundreds up against the wire', all antagonisms seemingly suspended, to share in the artistic extravaganza, but can also count for its eventual dissolution upon the rectitude of a fair-dealing parliament ('They know you don't put innocent people in prison. The British are just. They're practical. They're forbearing') witheringly counterposed by the shifts in consciousness of the Daniel of 2020, in and out of memory, and grown more cognisant of a systemic malfunction, to the present day: 'Thugs and showmen in power, he says. Nothing new. A clever virus. That's news. The stocks and shares will shake. There'll be people who do very well out of that. One more time we'll find out what's worth more, people or money'.

The stress throughout the four novels, as is well known, has really been on just such a precise, often unforgiving contemporaneity. *Autumn's* opening sentence misquoting Dickens, 'It was the worst of times, it was the worst of times' – the revolutionary ardour, alas, thoroughly discredited – left no doubt about the seriousness, or urgency, of the undertaking, although any reader forewarned in 2016 of the severity of the plunge into crisis upon crisis that followed might very well have responded, like Edgar in *Lear*, 'And worse I may be yet: the worst is not so long as we can say, "This is the worst".' Daniel Gluck, the *Quartet's* first refugee, comes ashore like Odysseus in a swoon of fabulation, dream images, literary and philosophical allusion that takes in artworks by Boubat and Dubuffet, objects of reverence and productive (the former) of an unfolding, complex

symbolism, before the intractable, murderous reality of social division and exclusion intervenes to stop him in his tracks: corpses of migrants, asylum seekers, a drowned child whose image went viral, thrown up on the beachhead alongside holidaymakers ‘under parasols’. Beyond this lie, in short order, the murder of Jo Cox, the virulent antagonisms and demagoguery of the Brexit referendum and its fallout, and the intensifying focus on the degradations of detention – the one issue that comes, if any does, to dominate Smith’s moral agenda from *Winter* and *Spring* onwards. Daniel, stymied, ‘looks from the death to the life, then back to the death again’, at the unbridgeable gap between victimhood and the complacency that endorses it and can only muster, *sotto voce* as it were, the single, despondent phrase ‘The sadness of the world’. How *are* art and literature, for all their mercurial refinements, to respond to the scenes of senseless agony that constantly confront them? In *Artful* (2012), Smith speaks of a ‘magical shifting of the position of observed and observer’, the way what’s witnessed imaginatively rebounds upon the viewer with an implicit call to action – ‘you must change your life’ – and cites a poem by Szymborska, ‘Greek Statue’, which cedes primacy to the human content of the artwork, ‘dismembered’ by time but ‘bloody lucky, never having been alive in the first place: *When someone living dies that way / blood flows at every blow*’.

*Summer*, then, might serve as a test case for where Smith’s evolving priorities, and ours, currently lie. She wrote in 2015 of forty years’ indebtedness to John Berger, his unstinting attentiveness to ‘the otherwise drowned-out and inaudible – the voices of the invisible’, and published, more or less at the same time, her ‘Detainee’s Tale’, the most harrowing account she’s given (Brit the Custody Officer’s ferocious testimony in *Spring* notwithstanding) of what it means to be an immigrant on the receiving end of Her Majesty’s Pleasure. Here, indeed, witnessed at first hand, are the invisible, Ghanaian and Vietnamese, with their all-but-invisible indictment: ‘I thought you would help me’ – suddenly the blandishments of the island confraternity seem a long way off. ‘I am an idiot. But I’m learning’: a pre-2015 Smith and a post-? – anyway, the *Quartet* was to follow. *Summer’s* immediate focus, like its seasonal predecessors, is on her own shock troops, a cast of characters yielding to or defiant of the *Zeitgeist* – ‘All manner of virulent things are happening’, not least a rampant defeatism masquerading as indifference – and on the equivalent of what Robert Schumann called the musician’s task ‘to bring light into the depths of the human soul’. To the latter end, she draws again upon another invisibility, the work of forgotten or under-represented

women artists, ‘bold and independent experimentalist[s]’ like (Marina Warner) herself, all in a sense collagists, chameleons, modernist forerunners: Boty, Mansfield, Hepworth, Tacita Dean, the irrepressibly versatile Aliko Vougioukaki from *Artful*, and now Lorenza Mazzetti, whose London Diary of the Sixties London film scene – comprehensively paraphrased – is an object lesson in joyous creativity against all the odds a traumatised war refugee can encounter (like the Croatian immigrant Lux in *Winter*, she is ‘A girl like a broken bird’). Mazzetti’s image of a walker high on a roof’s edge as if on a tightrope, and freighted perilously with suitcases, speaks to the hope animating the whole cycle, ‘like the blade of a knife’, as Smith has said, ‘and you are balanced on it ... we need to be light as we traverse incredible dark’.

But such a dark! – which even Shakespeare’s late romances, here *The Winter’s Tale*, with their utopian promise of a refracted society returned to health leave as intractable as ever at the novel’s close. *Summer* declines, one feels, to look too far into its depths, at what motivates the drugged and downtrodden signing up to their own expropriation: the evangelist Mercy Bucks’ pro-Trump white revivalists, her ‘tending to them tenderly and pickpocketing them while she does’, or the Wetherspoons drunkard glimpsed ‘crawl[ing] on all fours to the seafront with his trousers and underpants down around his ankles’. The travails of homelessness and destitution, apart from those visited on outsiders (‘How great it is to eat when you’re hungry’ is a refrain running through Mazzetti’s diary), are left largely unexamined – Berger’s *King: A Street Story* is a more compelling guide to *that* invisibility. The propertied, the educated and media-savvy, the artistic, whose tale this chiefly is, nevertheless in nearly every case learn to step down from their wire and engage in the various activisms, political and counter-cultural, that go towards defining what Smith might mean by a true heroism: ‘I am not a hero! I am not a masterpiece! But I am a brother’ proclaims the detainee rescued from incarceration and oblivion by three of *Summer*’s interventionist women, although ‘Hero’, his name, *is* the last word in the book. Hannah Gluck spirits Jews across the Swiss border from France, Iris the Greenham warrior from *Winter* throws open the doors of her sister’s mansion to migrants cynically evicted, because of Covid, from lock-up, delivering in the process the *Quartet*’s most explicit, fulminating denunciation of the Johnson government: ‘I will shout at the walls and the frontiers to break open. I will keep my nose open for the power-shit’, Smith’s Berger tribute promised, and she does.

## Life in Jarrow

**Ellen Wilkinson, *The Town That Was Murdered – The Life Story of Jarrow*, Merlin Press, ISBN 9780850367492, £14.99**

Ellen Wilkinson was born in Manchester in 1891 and became the first woman to sit on the City Council. She was a socialist, feminist, and supported women's suffrage. She was elected as the Labour MP for Jarrow in 1935 and she became the first female minister of education in the 1945 Attlee Government.

This book documents the history of Jarrow and the impact of capitalism on our communities. Many people will recognise the name because of the Jarrow March in 1936 when workers marched to London to raise awareness about their plight. It is particularly poignant for me as, in 2014, I became active in the People's March for the National Health Service, which retraced the steps of those brave workers in 1936. They were inspired by the Jarrow marchers – 200 men who stood up to the extreme poverty of the Depression era in Britain. The NHS protest was led by a group of 24 Darlington mothers and I was very proud to play a small part in the work they did. The NHS continues to face the threats of cuts and privatisation.

Ellen Wilkinson traces the rise of capitalism in the North-East region. It opens with a chapter on the outbreak of cholera in Jarrow, quoting from *The Newcastle Courant* in 1832:

‘One of the most remarkable features it still exhibits. The narrow and dirty lanes in the lower parts of the town, and the confined and ill-ventilated passages which are numerous in the upper, and in which the dwellings of the poor and wretched are situated, have been, with few exceptions, the only places to which the disease has penetrated, and in which it has revelled with all its fatality ... it might also be inferred that it is a malady as far as regards predisposition PECULIAR to the poorer portion of the population.’

Even cholera was somehow the fault of the poor people. Many of us will recognise that this demonisation of poor people continues to this day. We regularly see this blame culture, not only through mainstream media but also across social media.

Early on, Ellen Wilkinson talks about the Jarrow pits and their role in

providing work for the community. It is interesting to note that in the early chapters, when we hear about the treatment of the pit workers and the bonds they 'signed', this reflects so closely on the way the new 'gig' in the UK and globally has impacted on workers' rights. It is also quite shocking the level of victimisation against any worker who was identified with the union and the impact that had on their ability not only to get work but also to organise effectively.

Following the defeat of the 1832 miners' strike, conditions for workers were seriously affected and any attempt to maintain wages was undermined. Jarrow became known as the 'slaughter pit'. The demise of the shipping industry followed some eighty years later. Ellen Wilkinson sets out the stark reality of workers during this period. Not only the hard and enduring work but also the inhumane conditions in which these workers were forced to live. As she points out 'Jarrow, of course, was not the only town where insanitary conditions prevailed during this pirate period of nineteenth century capitalism.... where the health of the workers was not even considered where profit was to be made.'

This book is the story of Jarrow, but it is also the story of so many other towns of the time. It tells of the struggle of workers, of trade unions, and of those who had the courage to speak out. It is also the story of today. Ellen Wilkinson stood alongside the workers of the time. We need more people standing alongside workers now.

The past decade has seen a significant decline in the trade union movement. We have seen the casualisation of the workforce and massive attacks on workers' rights and their working conditions. We have seen the number of children living in poverty increase rapidly in the past few years, and we know that many of these young people are in working families. There is a huge increase in families relying on foodbanks to survive. This is the shocking reality of the world we live in.

The pandemic we are currently living through has shone a bright light on the inequalities in our society. The union movement has seen a resurgence in membership and in workplace activity. We can learn much from our predecessors, from their fights for justice and equality. We need to use this history and the current climate to rebuild the workers' movement and to fight for decent pay, conditions and contracts for workers in Britain and globally. We have nothing to lose but our chains.

*Louise Regan*

**On file**

**James Smith, *British Writers and MI5 Surveillance, 1930-1960*, Cambridge University Press, 2013, 226 pages, hardback ISBN 9781107030824, £75**

Bertrand Russell's Metropolitan Police Special Branch file number was 405/43/1061. We now know this because of documents published as part of the Undercover Policing Inquiry in London, which commenced its proceedings online in November 2020. The Inquiry spans the years from 1968 to the new millennium, with its first phase addressing the activities of the Metropolitan Police Special Demonstration Squad (SDS) between July 1968 and the end of 1972 'approximately'. In the 1960s, the SDS commenced its surveillance of the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign, and the Inquiry has enrolled Ernie Tate and Tariq Ali, active in the VSC and therefore named in these Special Branch reports, as 'core participants'. With notable thoroughness, some Special Branch reports list associated registry files, and one such list includes Bertrand Russell. It is curious that his file appears to have been opened in 1943, when Russell was living in the United States.

Why read this book? First of all, we discover that it is unusual for Special Branch files to see the light of day. Citing sources at the National Archives, James Smith says '...Special Branch has released only a handful of its records and destroyed much of the rest'. Professor Smith has combed some of the more literary of the five thousand or so 'pieces' that MI5, the UK domestic security agency, has chosen to release from the founding of the Secret Service Bureau in 1909 through to a cut-off point in the 1960s. He explains the structure of an MI5 file, and how the service interacts with the Metropolitan Police Special Branch and the external Secret Intelligence Service (MI6), which does not release any 'pieces'. In so doing, he recounts revealing stories of how some of the spied upon, such as George Orwell and Stephen Spender, came to assist or work with the surveillance agencies.

In December 1945, writing in *Tribune*, Orwell asked, 'when a Labour Government takes over, I wonder what happens to Scotland Yard Special Branch? To Military Intelligence? ... We are not told, but such symptoms as there are do not suggest that any very extensive reshuffling is going on.' The London Undercover Policing Inquiry rather bears out that insight. Smith's book is a highly readable and informative attempt to address

Orwell's justified fears and 'understand how these evolving security-intelligence forces monitored the left-wing writers and artists of his generation'. For it is predominantly the Left that authority perceives as 'subversive'. In addition to Orwell and Spender, those who came under the spotlight include Ewan MacColl, Joan Littlewood and Theatre Workshop; the wider Auden Circle; and Arthur Koestler. Professor Smith has performed a notable service in disentangling their stories as told by Britain's spies.

*Anthony Lane*

## Russell and anti-war politics

**Aled Eirug, *The Opposition to the Great War in Wales, 1914-1918*, University of Wales Press, 2018, 250 pages, paperback ISBN 9781786833143, £24.99**

In the middle of World War I, Russell was politically inspired by young socialists and pacifists from the South Wales valleys who flocked to hear him speak against the war. In later years, for private rather than public reasons, he was captivated by the rugged natural beauty of the country's North, where he died in February 1970 —at Plas Penrhyn, the cottage in Penrhyndeudraeth, Merionethshire, where he lived for the last fifteen years of his long life. He was born 97 years previously at Ravenscroft, his parents' "very lonely" country house on the River Wye in the border county of Monmouthshire (*Auto*. 1: 10). It is sometimes easy to forget how large Wales looms in Russell's biography, far more so than it is to overlook his lifelong commitment to international peace. Anti-war politics in a Welsh historical setting is the subject of Aled Eirug's fine study. Observers of Russell's cardinal political preoccupation would likely agree with this author that an understanding of World War I "is incomplete without an appreciation of the diversity of responses to it, including the opposition to the war" (p. xv). This last dimension as it affected wartime Wales is probed in depth by Eirug, whose project gestated for decades as he pursued a career in journalism that included a long stint as head of News and Current Affairs for BBC Wales. But it has been well worth the wait. Eirug has produced not only a valuable addition to the monograph series of which his book is a part ("Studies in Welsh History"), but also to the historiography of the British Home Front as a whole.

In four lengthy chapters, Eirug addresses, first, the religious objections to the war of Welsh Nonconformists, some of whom became c.o.s but

whose churches — aside from a few tiny millenarian sects—remained solidly pro-war. The support and leadership of the British war effort of Russell's political nemesis, David Lloyd George—a national hero in Wales and an embodiment of the historic but loosening bond between Nonconformity and Welsh Liberalism—was crucial in the latter regard. Eirug turns next to the peace politics of the Independent Labour Party (ILP) in Wales and the syndicalist wing of the South West Miners' Federation. In so doing he also presents case studies of two strongholds of anti-war sentiment: Briton Ferry and Merthyr Tydfil, both of which were visited by Russell on his July 1916 speaking tour of South Wales. The former town, a centre of tinplate production, “became a magnet for anti-war speakers from other parts of Britain” and was unflatteringly tagged “little Germany” (p. 68). The term “Merthyrism”, meanwhile, was coined in *The Times* (possibly by the same febrile correspondent later taken to task by Russell in Merthyr's thriving ILP weekly: see n. 9 below) to denote a threatening conjunction of anti-war protest with industrial strife (p. 86). From a metropolitan perspective, this combustible political mix appeared unusually prevalent in this steel town in the heart of the Welsh coalfield—“cradle of the industrial revolution and the birthplace of democratic politics in Wales” (p. 78), where ILP founder Keir Hardie sat as a Labour MP from 1900 until his death in 1915.<sup>1</sup> Chapter 3 is devoted to the organizational work of the two main anti-conscription bodies in Wales—the No-Conscription Fellowship (NCF) and the National Council for Civil Liberties<sup>2</sup> (whose Welsh wing enjoyed considerable success in bridge-building to the labour movement). Finally, Eirug details the diverse experiences of the 900 or so Welsh c.o.s, the vast majority of whom (all bar about 70) accepted some form of alternative service in various civilian and military settings.

Eirug has mined the contemporary Welsh and English newspaper and periodical literature to great effect. He has also consulted many archival sources, including the records of a British intelligence and internal security apparatus increasingly perturbed, as the war dragged on, by anti-war dissent and labour militancy in Wales. It is worth noting that this last trove of official documentation would have been largely inaccessible to Jo Vellacott, whose pioneering investigation of Russell's peace work<sup>3</sup> is cited by Eirug, or to the editors of *Collected Papers* 13 and 14. From Eirug's helpful introductory survey of a rich secondary literature, readers will learn that he intends to modify assumptions made about the fervency of Welsh patriotism during wartime. This historiography has tended to dwell on the pro-war enthusiasm of Wales in counterpoint to its pre-existing anti-

militarism, grounded in the Nonconformist tradition and more entrenched than elsewhere in Britain. Eirug also questions the depiction of pacifism in Wales as largely fragmented and ineffectual and of Welsh ILP branches whose uncompromising anti-war radicalism isolated them from and undermined the labour mainstream. (The ILP's dissenting platform was ultimately embraced by Labour, which became the majority party in Wales after the general election of 1922.) Although he is quite prepared to conclude that "resistance to war was always a minority response" (p. 227), Eirug constructs a convincing picture of a robust, coherent and coordinated anti-war movement in Wales. It was firmly rooted in tight-knit communities and gained impetus from "the jettisoning of the traditional tenets of liberalism" (p. 45)— notably the imposition of conscription and the looming threat of compulsion in industry—as well as war-weariness and a sense of political possibility fuelled by the Russian Revolution.

"High-profile" anti-war figures such as Russell (or Philip Snowden and E. D. Morel, to name but two others of many) whose voices were regularly heard at political gatherings in South Wales certainly contributed to its vigorous culture of dissent. And Russell, for one, was affected quite profoundly by the politically conscious coal miners and steelworkers he encountered as he delivered more than thirty speeches across South Wales in the first three weeks of July 1916. One such individual was Ted Williams, who seems prototypical of the militant "advanced men" of the South West Miners' Federation whose anti-war and trade union activities are discussed by Eirug.<sup>4</sup> Williams obtained a political education at the Central Labour College in London, then lectured for the institution in Wales before returning to mining in wartime as a checkweighman at Mardy and becoming agent for the miners' union at the same colliery after the war. In later years his politics must have softened, for when Russell next met him (in Canberra in 1950), the former Labour MP for Ogmere in Glamorgan was Britain's High Commissioner to Australia. Russell was then engaged in a lecture tour *far* less risky than that undertaken 34 years previously, when both men, as he reported from Australia to his friend Rupert Crawshay-Williams, "were on the verge of going to prison" (26 July 1950; quoted in *Papers* 26: xxix).

Russell embarked upon his journey through South Wales only two days after the appeal of his recent conviction under the Defence of the Realm Act (DORA) was dismissed. During his tour he also learned that he would be prevented from travelling to the United States to lecture at Harvard and, most painfully, that Trinity College Council had deprived him of his lectureship. More reprisals followed in the wake of his speech at the Friends' Meeting House in Cardiff on 6 July—a call for immediate peace

negotiations—after some undoubtedly contentious passages were publicized further by one of his persistent hecklers, Captain W. H. Atherley Jones, a Welsh army officer. The Home Office considered most of Russell's address to be in breach of the same Defence of the Realm Regulation (No. 27) under which he had just been successfully prosecuted. But no charges were laid, lest Russell again use the courtroom as a platform to propound his anti-war views.<sup>5</sup> Instead he was subjected to a no less draconian sanction (but administrative as opposed to judicial) severely restricting his freedom of movement.<sup>6</sup> Russell intended his public speaking in South Wales to be “the first stage in a nation-wide crusade” (*Papers* 13: 420). But as he was now barred from all “prohibited areas” (which covered almost the entire coastline and, among other big cities, Glasgow—another hub of labour unrest), Russell would be prevented, as the head of MI5 minuted approvingly, from further airing “his vicious tenets amongst dockers, miners and transport workers” (quoted *ibid.*, p. lxiv). Russell thought that the War Office had acted against him from the mistaken belief that he had “tried to stir up a strike among the miners in South Wales.... Of course”, he told Lady Ottoline Morrell, “I did nothing of the sort” (4 Sept. 1916; *ibid.*, p. 453). But he *was* trying to drum up support for the peace movement and had spread his defiant “stop-the-war” message all over South Wales.<sup>7</sup> As intimated to him by two departmental officials (see 69 in *Papers* 13), it was probably this provocation that caused him to fall foul of DORA again—and not for the last time.<sup>8</sup>

While Russell was thus restrained, Welsh branches of the ILP and NCF (Russell's hosts at most stops on his itinerary) were also facing mounting official scrutiny and repression (Eirug, pp. 69–71, 152–4)—as well as public anger and opprobrium (which Eirug downplays somewhat). For example, it was the trial and conviction in May 1916 of two NCF members in Cefn (near Merthyr), for distributing the “Everett Leaflet” (49 in *Papers* 13), which prompted Russell publicly to declare his authorship of this anti-conscription tract and goad the authorities into prosecuting him (see 54 *ibid.*). South Wales had been a source of governmental disquiet ever since a successful miners' strike (over wages) in July 1915. Glamorgan's zealous Chief Constable regarded his jurisdiction as a hotbed of disloyalty that needed to be deterred by the exemplary punishment of the worst culprits. As a result, a number of alleged DORA offences reported by the county constabulary were tried during the first two years of the war. Subsequently, the “more emollient approach” (p. 69) of higher civilian and military authorities usually prevailed, although the latter could always fall back on sweeping extra-judicial powers vested in them by the same emergency legislation.

As Eirug notes (pp. 72–3, 154–5), Russell was exhilarated by his generally receptive working-class audiences in South Wales. Many of his dissenting peers had already written off predominantly patriotic British labour and, like the left-wing journalist H. N. Brailsford, saw hope for the fulfilment of a progressive international agenda only “in a revolt of the saner middle-class Liberals” (quoted in *Papers* 13: xxiv). But Russell acquired a more class-based outlook on the war and a new confidence in the potential for cross-class political collaboration. The following year, after accepting an offer from the Merthyr Tydfil *Pioneer* to write a monthly column, he used his first submission to this leading organ of the ILP in Wales to issue a forthright appeal to labour in apocalyptic language that foresaw (and even welcomed) class conflict:

[E]ither Labour or Capital must ultimately go down. There will not be enough wealth in the country for both to prosper. Either the growth of Socialism will secure for Labour a more adequate share of the national wealth, or else Capital, backed by the State and the Army, will succeed in reducing Labour to a servile condition, in which wages will be only just sufficient to support life. This was the condition of Labour at the end of the Napoleonic Wars, and if our present masters have their way, it will be its condition again when this war ends.<sup>9</sup>

Russell felt that he was largely preaching to the converted in the Welsh mining and steel communities he visited (p. 155), but he clearly experienced a less friendly reception when he publicly attacked British war policy in Cardiff (see above). Four months later (on 11 November 1916) a much more violent display of organized rowdyism (combined with police inaction) resulted in the break-up of an anti-conscription meeting at Cory Hall in the Welsh capital. In his detailed account of this brazen challenge to public order and of its polarized social and political backdrop, Brock Millman emphasizes the “splintered working-class reaction to the war”—not only in Wales, where the politics of class and nation, previously complementary, were now at odds, but more widely across Britain.<sup>10</sup> Eirug focuses instead (pp. 131–2) on the impressive level of dissenting participation achieved when the disrupted event was finally staged in the largest indoor venue in Merthyr a few weeks after the Cardiff fiasco.

Popular patriotic hostility (and government surveillance and police harassment) did not suppress the surge of political optimism that spread through the Welsh peace movement after Russian Tsarism was overthrown

in March 1917. Russell too participated in the ensuing “Summer of Hope” (see *Papers* 14, Pt. v). Buoyed by the largely non-violent end of Tsarist rule and its replacement by a provisional government determined to leave the war, Russell was persuaded (albeit only briefly) that all warring states could forge a similar synthesis of pacifism and revolution. On 3 June he addressed the storied Leeds Convention (40 *ibid.*), held in solidarity with the Russian Revolution and whose delegates included a militant socialist contingent from Wales. To build on the radical and anti-war momentum generated at Leeds, follow-up meetings were arranged in several of the Welsh towns where Russell had spoken in July 1916, while district councils of workers’ and soldiers’ deputies were to be set up throughout Britain. Indeed, Russell was elected to the London body, only to witness the riot which prevented its inaugural gathering from taking place in Southgate’s socialist and pacifist Brotherhood Church (see 61 *ibid.*). The following day (29 July) a similarly violent fate befell the founding conference of the Welsh district council in Swansea, and any prospect of British Soviets—always chimerical perhaps, as Eirug implies (pp. 101–2)—quickly dissipated.

The chapters on the anti-conscription struggle and the travails of Welsh c.o.s examine at a granular level issues that perplexed Russell as acting chair of the NCF’s National Committee throughout 1917: tensions between “absolutists” and “alternativists”, harsh prison terms and conditions inflicted on the former, unrest fomented by the latter in quasi-penal Home Office work camps, and the role of local tribunals and other administrative bodies in interpreting and implementing the “conscience clause” of the Military Service Acts.<sup>11</sup> The most fundamental dilemma for the c.o. movement, abundantly clear in the Welsh context so meticulously reconstructed by Eirug, was preserving the common purpose of such a theologically and politically disparate group. For “quietist” religious c.o.s, refusing to enlist was often an expression only of an individual peace witness. “Whilst all who opposed the war opposed the extension of conscription”, as Eirug puts it, “not all who opposed conscription opposed the war” (p. 160). But the politically committed resistance to conscription strove (with only limited success) to hitch this campaign to a broader peace effort. Russell and others wanted to end not only the suffering and hardship of the c.o.s but the war itself. For readers with a particular interest in these and other pivotal episodes in Russell’s eventful political life during World War I, or those simply curious about modern Welsh history, *The Opposition to the Great War in Wales* has much to offer.

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**Notes**

1. In the ensuing by-election, however, the ideological fault-line cut by the war through working-class Wales was glaringly revealed. The ILP dissenter who was Labour's official candidate was defeated by the fervently pro-war miners' agent (i.e. trade union official) who ran against him (also for the ILP) after losing a bitterly fought nomination contest. The victorious C. B. Stanton, MP, later led the Cardiff mob that attacked a public protest of conscription in the so-called "Battle of Cory Hall" (see Millman, *Managing Domestic Dissent in First World War Britain*, Ch. 6).
2. Formed as the National Council against Conscription shortly after the *first* Military Service Act became law in January 1916.
3. I.e. *Conscientious Objection: Bertrand Russell and the Pacifists in the First World War* (2015; 1st ed., 1980).
4. He is not positively identified by Eirug but may well be the "Ted Williams" who is mentioned in passing (p. 149) in connection with the Pontypridd branch of the NCF.
5. See the reviewer's "Russell and the Other DORA, 1916-18" (2018), pp. 108-9.
6. By a War Office order dated 1 September 1916 and issued under Defence of the Realm Regulation No. 14.
7. A Home Office transcription of Russell's Cardiff address (63 in *Papers* 13), prepared from shorthand taken by a reporter for the city's *Western Mail*, is regrettably the "only extant account of a complete speech on his Welsh tour" (*ibid.*, p. 420). *The Pioneer's* reports of meetings addressed by Russell in Tai-bach, Merthyr and Abercanaid (8 July 1916, p. 2 and 15 July 1916, p. 4) indicate that he spoke in the same political vein at these events as in Cardiff.
8. See *The Brixton Letters*.
9. "The Times on Revolution" (1917), p. I (74 in *Papers* 14).
10. *Managing Domestic Dissent*, pp. 138-47 (quotation at 139).
11. See *Papers* 14, Pts. II and IV especially.

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