

# Reviews

## Bright-Eyed Shelley

**Ann Wroe, *Being Shelley: The Poet's Search for Himself*, Jonathan Cape, 452 pages, ISBN 9780224080781, £25**

Shelley, it seems, was not only the poet of the 'Ode to Liberty', 'Ode to the West Wind', 'To a Skylark', 'Prometheus Unbound' and much else; the political activist of Paul Foot's *Red Shelley*, responding to the Peterloo massacre with the 'Mask of Anarchy' and writing an 'Address to the Irish People' in revolt; nor was he just the atheist of the 'Necessity of Atheism', for which he was expelled from Oxford, disinherited by his father, deprived of the custody of his children, and forced into exile in Italy. Nor was he only the lover of five beautiful and very young women by whom he had several children, co-author in effect with his wife, Mary Wollstonecraft, of *Frankenstein*, and bosom friend of Byron. At Eton he was 'mad Shelley' because of his pranks with fireworks, a passion with pyrotechnics he persisted in throughout his short life in electrical and chemical experiments and even in dabbling with alchemy.

Shelley's scientific interests, however, were serious – in his studies of the works of Holbach and Humphrey Davy – and practically applied in his hydraulic work on the reclamation of land from the sea at Tremadoc in North Wales. He was a considerable linguist, making translations not only from the Italian, but from French, Spanish, Latin and ancient Greek. His education at Eton, from which he was twice expelled, embraced both the classics and sciences. On top of all this he liked to sail small boats in storms and heavy seas, which led inevitably to his early death at 30.

Who then was Shelley? This is the quest upon which Ann Wroe has embarked in her new book, deliberately entitled *Being Shelley: the Poet's Search for Himself*. In the blurb she writes,

'Four questions consumed Shelley and coloured everything he wrote. Who or what was he? What was his purpose? Where had he come from? And where was he going? He sought the answers in order to free and empower not only himself, but the whole human race. His revolution would shatter the earth's illusions, shock men and women with new visions, find true Love and Liberty – and take everyone with him.'

To put this passionate and radical quest at the centre of Shelley's life, Ann Wroe has drawn entirely on his known writings, trawling not only his published work in poetry and prose, letters and recorded conversations, but especially his notebooks preserved in the Bodleian Library at Oxford and the Huntingdon Library in San Merino, California.

The book does not take the form of a chronological biography, but, as Wroe insists, 'takes seriously Shelley's statement that a poet "participates in the eternal, the infinite and the one; as far as relates to his conceptions, time and place and number are not"'. Its narrative track is the poet's quest for truth through the steadily

rarefying elements of earth, water, air and fire.’ It is thus divided into four parts, Earth, Water, Air and Fire, each taking about 60 pages. These are then subdivided into chapters, which give the book a certain chronological sequence, but allow the author to capture the continuity of Shelley’s thinking – his quest for truth, beauty, liberty and love – throughout his life.

Earth is where he comes from – his youth, heritage, disinheritance, marriages, debts, exile, an outcast, but with a spirit behind the mask.

Water is where he belongs – on the Thames at Marlowe, on Lake Geneva, in the Bay of Livorno, but also in his dreams, under water and in the reflections of the mind as a mirror of the ‘wide sea of misery’, whose ripples lead inexorably to death.

Air is the power that carries him up from the earth and water into the clouds and mountain tops, that gives him his songs and rushes him forward on the wind so that his poetry survives. ‘Orpheus, torn to pieces, still made music.’

Fire is what literally fires him, in the fireworks and alchemy, the haunting human spirit overcoming evil and even death. As in Plato’s *Phaedrus*, the soul passes on at death to universal love, mind is one infinitesimal part of the One Mind. In his *Adonais*, it is ‘The Light which kindles the Universe ... the fire for which all thirst ... Consuming the clouds of cold mortality.’

The book begins and ends with the fatal voyage in the Ligurian Sea with his friend Edward Williams.

So, what kind of life was lost by Shelley’s impetuosity and suicidal tendencies? The first answer must be a spirit of extra-ordinary vitality, swept, the only appropriate word, by a power throughout his life, which he firmly rejected as Spinoza’s definition of God. What he did concede is that:

‘There is a power by which we are surrounded, like the atmosphere in which some motionless lyre is suspended, which visits us with its *breath* (his emphasis) our silent chords at will, and those who have seen God, have, in the period of their purer and more perfect nature, been harmonised by their own will, to so exquisite [a] consentaneity of powers, as to give forth divinest melody when the breath of universal being sweeps over their frame.’

It has to be said that there are moments in his meanderings, and the crossing out of words and lines in his drafts of poems, when it seems as if the laudanum, which he started to imbibe at Eton, had taken over, rather than any ‘motionless lyre’.

Shelley was a mass of contradictions. He carried pistols, was a good shot and used them, but opposed political violence. He told Leigh Hunt, when talking of reform, ‘I am one of those whom nothing will fully satisfy’ but, by 1815, he told his wife Mary, he had ‘begun to feel that the time for action was not yet ripe in England and that the pen was the only instrument wherewith to prepare the way for better things’. He could cheer revolutions – in Spain, Naples and Greece – but, unlike his friend Byron, could not ‘push them forward’. He was a vegetarian. Byron feared that, if his illegitimate daughter were brought up by the Shelleys, as they proposed, she would ‘perish of starvation and green fruit’. Some of his friends thought his diet made him nervous, weak and fanciful, ‘lightness’, as Wroe comments, ‘being escape from the flesh’. In 1816, he was weighing his daily food

intake. But he could be found feasting on bacon and veal chops well-peppered and shot game in England, and caught fish to eat in Italy.

Wroe sums up his politics:

‘The pragmatic reformer, the stirrer of minds and the enthusiast for associations were only three aspects of his political self. There was always another, burning, waiting, for the moment when other means seemed hopeless. His writings were meant to start destroying and purifying fires, the words searing individually into minds and hearts and igniting, he hoped, a roaring chain reaction.’

Hunt saw him as one of Milton’s rebel angels holding a ‘reed tipt with fire’, about to unloose Satan’s whole artillery against the host of Heaven. Wroe quotes Shelley’s *Revolt of Islam* where he sees the planet Venus, the Morning Star, blazing on the brow of her daemon lover. Kissing her tenderly, breathing a ‘wild dissolving bliss’ through her body, he urged her to fight for liberty and truth, as if he were Milton’s Lucifer luring away the angels to follow his defiance – or, as Wroe adds, ‘as if he were Shelley, bright eyed, loving and subversive’ – Lucifer the devil but also the light bearer, like Shelley.

Shelley himself must have the last word:

‘For the poet not only beholds intensely the present as it is, and discovers those laws according to which present things ought to be ordered, but he beholds the future in the present, and his thoughts are the germs of the flower and the fruit of latest time.’

As he ends his ‘Prometheus Unbound’, where ‘man’ must be read to encompass men and women equally, which Goethe’s *Faust* had inspired and for which Shelley’s experiments in alchemy had suggested the worship and liberation of the discoverer of fire, bound seemingly for ever to the rocky earth, in the air above the waters;

*The loathsome mask has fallen, the man remains  
Sceptreless, free, uncircumscribed, but man  
Equal, unclassed, tribeless and nationless,  
Exempt from awe, worship, degree, the king  
Over himself ...*

*Michael Barratt Brown*

## More Time for Benn

**Tony Benn, selected and edited by Ruth Winstone, *More Time for Politics, Diaries 2001-2007*, Hutchinson, 352 pages, ISBN 9780091920562, £20**

Many people thought that *Free at Last* would be the last volume of Tony Benn’s extraordinary diaries, which had covered a lifetime in Parliament, and eleven years as a Cabinet Minister. In those far off days, Tony Benn was a member of the Labour Party’s National Executive, and firmly, indeed permanently, fixed in the

public eye. Leaving Parliament in May 2001, he might have been expected to enter a period of retirement, resting on his abundant laurels.

But this latest volume records a life of amazing activity, which lives up to the injunction of his wife, Caroline, that leaving Parliament behind would allow him to express himself more fully, with *More Time for Politics*, as he has entitled the work.

I was going to say that this would be the last of the Benn memoirs: but apparently, not so. He is already planning the new sequel, and burning up the miles in his campaigns, which will no doubt find their way into the forthcoming volume, as yet unwritten.

Ruth Winstone tells us that this volume is 'perhaps the most candid' of all that have appeared so far. She has enjoyed editing it for that reason. I found it poignant and at times deeply moving. The death of Caroline brought about a fearful bereavement, which continued to hurt more as the months turned into years. Benn describes himself as driving to Stansgate, sobbing deeply all the way. His grief is palpable and continuous, and perhaps helps to explain his demonic energy as a campaigner.

Shortly after this book was published, he was rising up at 5.00 a.m. to attend a rally of postmen, who were embattled in their recent strike. No doubt his appearance among them would have been a great encouragement. Equally without doubt, there is no other prominent Labour leader who is worth a flicker of support by workers in the postal services, in the unlikely event that they might tentatively offer sympathy in their struggle. The great mystery is how the postmen's leaders have been able to sustain their Union's affiliation to the Labour Party through the rain of blows which it has showered on their members.

But of course, a vast proportion of Benn's efforts, as monitored in detail in these Diaries, concerns the wars in Iraq and elsewhere, and the struggle against them. We thus have a detailed account of the circumstances leading up to the visit to Saddam Hussein, and of the subsequent interview with the Iraqi President on the very eve of the Anglo-American invasion. The dictator told the truth in response to Benn's questions. There were no weapons of mass destruction. But there were plenty of weapons of mass destruction about to fall on Baghdad during the Shock and Awe offensive which was immediately to follow.

Benn describes his interview with an official of the Iraqi Government, Dr. Amir Al Saadi, who was head of the Ministry responsible for weapons of mass destruction, and for negotiations with the Inspectors. Al Saadi was a very convincing witness, who stuck very closely to the scientific evidence. He told Benn of earlier attempts to withhold information from Hans Blix, at the time that he had directed the International Atomic Energy Agency. This experience had persuaded Blix to be extremely cautious about accepting Iraqi protestations. But 'Al Saadi told me that there had been one hundred per cent eradication in 1992 of their whole nuclear programme, all done under the supervision of the IAEA'.

I never met Al Saadi myself, but I did watch him carefully on CNN, when his extensive interviews were televised. I found him a most persuasive witness. Subsequently I read in the press that, after the invasion, Al Saadi had given himself up to the coalition forces. He had figured in the pack of cards of Iraqi

leaders meriting instant arrest. That is how he found himself in prison at Baghdad airport, held in seclusion and extensively debriefed. I began a campaign to secure his release from prison, and we gathered the support of a number of political leaders, across Party boundaries, together with a variety of journalists and lawyers. Tony himself wrote to Jack Straw about the case, and received a reasonable response. But it took an inordinately long while to secure Al Saadi's release, in spite of the fact that the German Government pressed for it, because Mrs. Al Saadi was also a German citizen.

Naturally, these Diaries are full of demonstrations, rallies in Trafalgar Square, and high profile public events. At one point, Benn, exhausted by marching round the town, asks a police horseman for a lift, and is told that he can have one, if he can climb on the horse. He ruefully admits that this task was beyond him, but tells us that it would have been a splendid entry to the demonstration, had it only come about.

But if this is a small part of the politics for which he had more time, there is still quite a lot of time spent on politics of the conventional kind. Part of this flows from his affection for Parliamentary institutions, which ensured that he was given free access to the Palace of Westminster on his retirement. He records his gratitude to the Speaker, Michael Martin, who gave him the Freedom of the House. Evidently, this was very useful, and was indeed heavily used.

The Parliamentary connection goes a long way to explaining the remarkable affection which seems to have grown up between Tony Benn and Ted Heath, and his ability to get on with political opponents. But most people will find the stories which exemplify this fact to be less perplexing than the powerful affinities of family, which make the hammer of Blair and Blairism so unaffectedly proud of the progress of his son, Hilary, up the Parliamentary greasy pole. Of course, he remembers his own progress, and knows better than anyone the difficulties which attended it. And of course, Hilary has been a considerable success in the New Labour Government. But this is a New Labour success, which must surely occasion some mixture of feelings in someone who was so unambiguously typical of the old Labour Party.

Tony Benn has left it to other people to make judgements on all such questions. This book is a masterly editorial labour. It succeeds brilliantly in presenting the real opinions of Benn as they have actually been, unvarnished, unmediated, and certainly unexpurgated. It makes me proud to have known the man whose life it records.

*Ken Coates*

## **Regime Change in Iran?**

**Scott Ritter, *Target Iran: The Truth about the White House's Plans for Regime Change*, Politico's Publishing, 2006, 256 pages, ISBN 9781842751972, £16.99**

Scott Ritter's detailed, thorough analysis of how the Iran crisis has escalated to the point of intense fear of another war in the Gulf could hardly come at a better time.

Ritter, the former UN weapons inspector in Iraq, whose prognosis of the deceit being perpetrated by the US and UK governments with allegations of Iraq's weapons of mass destruction proved correct on every single count, has written this book as a way to warn how another policy of regime change is being sold to the public under the nominal guise of concern over illicit weapons.

What Ritter brings out from the start of the book that many other commentators have shied away from discussing is the extensive role of Israel in the build-up of hostilities. The confrontation between the United States and Iran is, according to Ritter, a 'conflict born in Israel', as Israel perceives Iran as the main strategic challenger to its military dominance of the Middle East. Drawing upon his own familiarity with key Israeli military and intelligence officials, developed during his time as an inspector in Iraq, Ritter shows how Israeli officials and their lobbyists in the United States brought the issue onto the international news agenda from 2002. They continued to stress, with claims that are dubious at best, the danger – in the preferred terminology of the moment, the 'existential danger' – that Iran poses to Israel.

Ritter describes how Israeli lobby groups in the United States, particularly the American-Israeli Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), have tried to steer US policy on Iran. AIPAC's annual conference in March 2007 turned into an anti-Iran rally, with speaker after speaker calling for the United States to harden its policy on Iran. Troublingly, senior US Democrats tried to outflank the Bush administration at the conference by calling for a more aggressive approach. The willingness of the Democrat-controlled Congress to curtail the Bush's administration's plans is seriously in doubt. In a speech to a US pro-Democrat think-tank in February, Nicholas Burns, the third ranking official in the State Department, called Iran 'the most disruptive, negative force in the Middle East'. Al Qaeda, it seems, are old hat for Burns. Blaming Iran for the disaster in Iraq has become standard fare in US policy circles.

In fact, Iran has repeatedly attempted to reach a negotiated compromise with the United States. These offers have been rebuffed, most notably Vice-President Cheney's dismissal of Iran's 2003 proposal for an all-encompassing bargain that traded off Iran's nuclear programme for an end to US-led sanctions. Iran's compliance with international nuclear inspections has been ignored by the United States, which has instead just raised the threshold for what it takes as compliance.

By mixing the politics of regime change in Iran with that of nuclear non-proliferation, Iranian concessions on nuclear issues have been made unlikely: Iran is not going to remove the nuclear option if it thinks the United States is trying to bring its government down, weapons or no weapons. One effect of US inflexibility has been the rise of the radicals within the Iranian political establishment: Mahmoud Ahmedinejad's victory in the 2005 presidential election came on the back of well-known US attempts to foment discontent within Iran.

Ritter speculates persuasively that this was part of a policy not of miscalculation but of intentional provocation. His views on this receive confirmation from a speech of John Bolton, United States ambassador to the UN

until he was ousted in December 2006. Bolton told an AIPAC meeting a month later that he had hoped that Iran would throw the weapons inspectors out of the country, because ‘that kind of reaction would produce a counter-reaction that actually would be more beneficial to us’. In other words, what matters to the Bush administration is not the extent to which Iran’s nuclear programme is contained, but the degree to which the United States can manoeuvre Iran into a position of international isolation, and military action against it can take place.

Nevertheless, what could the United States actually do against Iran? Ritter, for one, thinks the prospect of sustained US military action against Iran is likely. The US moved two aircraft carriers into the Gulf in an overt display of hostility. A spate of articles in recent months has considered the prospect of US or Israeli airstrikes against Iran, with the purpose of destroying nuclear sites there. These articles have mostly been fed by briefings from within the US administration, and are likely to be disinformation, trying to cause fear within the Iranian administration rather than genuine accounts of policy. Iran’s nuclear sites cannot be destroyed by airstrikes, and the only regimes to be destabilised by them would be those of US allies in the Muslim world.

But the raising of tensions, the deepening of US sanctions against Iran, and the increased attempts by the United States to cast the conflict with Iran in sectarian terms – pulling a group of Sunni-led states in the Arab world into a coalition against Shi’a Iran – are all highly dangerous and provocative. The prospects for conflict are very real, even if the Bush administration does not intend it at the moment. *Target Iran* shows us not only how we have arrived at this situation, but also what is happening within the US and Israeli governments that could turn the present crisis into an all-out war.

*Glen Rangwala*  
with grateful acknowledgements to *Palestine News*

## The First Holocaust

**Taner Aksam, *A Shameful Act: The Armenian Genocide and the Question of Turkish Responsibility*, Constable, 496 pages, ISBN 9781845295523, £9.99**

Although the deaths of some one-and-a-half million Armenian citizens of the Ottoman Empire, during the First World War, have been condemned as genocide by most authorities who have studied what occurred, the official Turkish position is that, despite the fact that the events were tragic, they were an unintended result of the war, for which the Armenians themselves bore major responsibility. The assassination in January 2007 of Hrant Dink, a Turkish citizen of Armenian descent who challenged this view, highlights the passions which the issue continues to generate in Turkey down to the present time. Hrant Dink, a journalist, was regarded by Turkish nationalists as a traitor and, before he was brutally murdered, received

numerous threats against his life for denouncing the Armenian massacres.

In 1987, the European Parliament approved a resolution which called upon the Turkish Government to acknowledge the fact that the Armenian massacres were genocide. As a Member of the European Parliament who spoke out in support of the resolution, I was left in no doubt about the strength of Turkish opposition to it. Letters, leaflets, pamphlets and books putting the Turkish case were showered on MEPs as part of a sustained campaign designed to secure the defeat of the resolution. This was not successful, but it meant that it was a hard fight to achieve a majority in favour of the resolution, as many MEPs were undoubtedly influenced by the Turkish onslaught.

Personally, I was convinced of the Armenian case by a huge volume of evidence which cannot be refuted by the Turkish arguments – the Memoirs of Henry Morgenthau, US Ambassador at Constantinople 1913-16; documents presented to Viscount Grey of Falloden by Viscount Bryce; Christopher Walker: *The Survival of a Nation*; the hearings of the Permanent People's Tribunal on the Armenian Genocide, held in Paris in 1984; together with a host of other documents and books, provide an incontestable account of the facts that no contrary arguments can possibly nullify. There were, undoubtedly, attempts by Armenian elements to stir up rebellion against the Ottoman Empire and some committed brutal and inhumane acts. These were not, however, characteristic of the Armenian population of Anatolia as a whole and in no way could they possibly justify the genocidal policies implemented by Ottoman leaders during the First World War.

*A Shameful Act* by Taner Aksam is the first example of an exhaustive study by a Turkish expert which condemns the mass killings as genocide. The book brings forward new evidence to support the arguments of those who contend they were the result of a deliberate policy conceived and implemented by leading members of the Ottoman Government.

The new evidence has been extracted from the records of extraordinary courts martial set up by the Ottoman Government which came to power after the surrender of 1918. In an effort to dissociate itself from the massacres and curry favour at the Paris Peace Conference the new government sought to place responsibility on Talat Pasha, Enver Pasha and Cemal Pasha, the leaders of the Committee of Union and Progress (C.U.P), which was the ruling party during the war years. Sixty-three courts martial, including those of the wartime cabinet members, took place and evidence was provided by top Ottoman army commanders and high ranking officials, amongst others, which made it clear that the massacres had been centrally planned and implemented by a Special Organisation formed for the purpose which recruited former convicts, recent immigrants from the Caucasus and Rumelia, and some Kurds to carry out the killings.

The reason why the documents have not been previously used is that they have been vigorously 'pruned' and scattered, and they are written in Turkish in an Arabic script, which can be read by comparatively few scholars. Significant portions have, furthermore, not come to light.

This book makes it clear that, after the defeats of the Balkan Wars of 1912 and 1913 had led to the loss of 60 per cent of the Ottoman Empire's European



territories, there was a desperate fear in certain ruling circles of the possible break-up of the Turkish homeland in Anatolia. Here, a third of the population was Christian – Armenians, Greeks, Assyrians and others – peoples who had no common identity with the Moslem majority. If the Armenians split away in the east and Greeks in the Aegean region in the west, the integrity of Anatolia would be fundamentally breached and the possibility of links with Turkish peoples in Central Asia destroyed. Leading Turkish nationalists were prepared to be ruthless in the extreme to get rid of the alien population

Secret meetings were held in the Ministry of War, then under the control of Enver Pasha, in May, June and August 1914 to work out plans to force the Greeks to leave. In 1918 it was estimated that between 300,000 and half a million had been evicted from Thrace and hundreds of thousands had died. Action against the Greeks was followed by an even more systematic process to eliminate the Armenians. The Armenian genocide is said to have begun on 24 April 1915. On 24 May, the Ottoman Government reported that 2,345 people had been arrested in Istanbul. Between May and August 1915, the bulk of the Armenian population in the eastern provinces was deported and murdered *en masse*.

Taner Aksam gives a detailed account of the massacres and quotes telegrams presented at the courts martial, which suggest that Dr. Barhaettim Sakir Bey, the chief of the Special Organisation was, in effect, the director of the massacres. Some provincial governors refused to accept the orders sent to them and some were murdered as a result of their obstinacy. The documents leave no doubt, Taner Aksam states, that Talat Pasha was the over all co-ordinator of the deportations and massacres, although he sent some duplicitous telegraphs referring to humane treatment.

The charge of genocide of the Armenian people is confirmed and underpinned by this book which is – most unusually – the work of a Turkish authority. After the Treaty of Sèvres of 10 August 1920, which proposed to create an Armenian state in eastern Anatolia, the courts martial ceased. A nationalist wave led by Kemal Mustafa (Ataturk) swept the country and Turkish responsibility for the massacres was vociferously denied – as it has been, officially, ever since. It was felt that any concession on this issue would greatly have weakened the case for ignoring the Treaty of Sèvres and refusing to accept the establishment of an Armenian State in eastern Anatolia.

However, as Taner Aksam points out, the continuing refusal on the part of the Turkish Government and its people to accept responsibility for the massacres cannot be justified by a blatant refusal to accept the facts. These are set forth in the detailed and expert study which yet again confirms the conclusions reached by other dispassionate scholars. There can be no doubt that the treatment meted out to its Armenian citizens by the Turkish leaders during the First World War constitutes genocide.

If the possibility of further genocidal massacres is to be minimised, it is vital that there should be no cover-up and the Turkish authorities today must accept this sooner or later. Furthermore, those of us who believe in the importance of human rights must never back down on the issue.

The author's courage matches the high quality of his scholarship. This is a very important book and all who believe in international justice and the cause of human rights should read it with care. The Armenian massacres are not an issue of concern to historians alone. They continue to have a vital contemporary relevance which must not be ignored.

*Stan Newens*

## Understanding the Anti-Slavers

**Adam Hochschild, *Bury the Chains: The British Struggle to Abolish Slavery*, Pan Books, 2006, 468 pages, ISBN 978-0330485814, £8.99**

In concluding his introduction to this book, Adam Hochschild quotes the social anthropologist, Margaret Mead: 'Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has'. One such change, the ending of the slave trade, took place, Hochschild's book demonstrates convincingly, as the result, after no more than a life-time's campaigning, of a meeting in the late afternoon of 22 May 1787 at 2 George Yard in the City of London, of twelve men, several of them Quakers, determined to launch a campaign. The date is important, just after the American Revolution and just before the French, neither of which proposed the abolition of slavery, though they certainly encouraged slave revolts.

The success of this campaign has to be set against the enormity of the change that was proposed. The division of societies into slave and free was at that time generally accepted as natural. All previous civilisations were built on slavery – Greek, Roman, Chinese, Indian, Arabian, Aztec. The British, French, Russian and recent American empires were no different. At the end of the Eighteenth Century, Hochschild claims, well over three-quarters of the world's peoples were in some form of bondage. The campaign in Britain, moreover, came up against not only the power of the plantation owners and ship owners, who were well represented in an unreformed Parliament, but against a ruling class that regarded all dissident voices, and especially organised ones, as seditious and even traitorous in the war against France.

Hochschild has researched in depth the writings and activities of the anti-slavery campaigners. In the story he tells, Thomas Clarkson emerges as a heroic figure, several times threatened with assassination, devoting a 16 hour day to the campaign, travelling on horseback in all some 35,000 miles, as Hochschild puts it, 'from waterfront pubs to an audience with an emperor, from the decks of navy ships to parliamentary hearing rooms', flooding Parliament with petitions signed by thousands, organising a boycott of slave grown sugar which 300,000 Britons supported, distributing leaflets and posters, describing the horrendous treatment of African men and women, with drawings of their actual imprisonment cheek by jowl on the slave ships.

Other heroes emerge from the story – Granville Sharp, a musician, pamphleteer and pioneer anti-slavery crusader; John Newton, ex-slave ship captain and later

abolitionist; Olaudah Equiano, whose autobiography introduced thousands of Britons to the life of a slave, who earned his freedom; and, of course, William Wilberforce, who introduced bills in Parliament over four decades. Wilberforce remains by far the best known of the abolitionists. This honour is very unfair to Clarkson in particular, especially since Wilberforce was only concerned with the abolition of the slave trade, not of slavery itself, and opposed the slave revolts. It may be added that Wilberforce was also the man who to save the 'poor benighted heathen' had missionaries sent to India, which, according to William Dalrymple, reviewing in *The Guardian* (25.08.07) the British Museum's current exhibition of Indian art, ended the period of cultural fraternisation between British colonial officials and Hindoos.

An important question which Hochschild raises is how it could come about that it was in Britain and nowhere else that the struggle to abolish slavery took place – in a Britain, moreover, that was building a vast empire and stood to lose most from abolition. Hochschild gives an estimate of a loss of 1.8 per cent of Britain's national income over more than half a century. He suggests three explanations. The first was that the abolitionists developed for the first time a whole range of campaigning tools that have become standard for all subsequent campaigners on other issues: centralised control of regional and local activities, with lists of supporters, lobbying, Parliamentary hearings and petitions, supported by leaflets, posters, newspaper articles, advertisements, cartoons and books, public meetings, demonstrations, consumer boycotts, investigative reporting, slogans and logos and buttons to wear (Wedgwood designed one showing a black man in chains with the surrounding words: 'Am I not a man and a brother?').

That such propaganda was effective depended on Hochschild's second argument – the increase of literacy in Britain and the enormous expansion of publishing in the late Eighteenth Century. It is significant that the first meeting of the abolitionists was in a London printing shop. There were a dozen newspapers published in London in the mid-1780s, most of them dailies, and 49 newspapers elsewhere in Britain and dozens of magazines. Coach travel was growing rapidly with a regular royal mail. By the 1780s more than half the population could read and write, judging by entries in Parish registers. Britain was far ahead of other countries in these respects. The sheer quantity of books published is amazing, particularly by non-conformist churches which were strong supporters of abolition. The Methodist Book Room in London distributed its literature 'by the ton'.

None of this would have been enough to ensure the success of the abolitionists' campaign, if there had not been a wide measure of sympathy for the cause. That this existed at all in an imperial Britain extending white rule over millions of blacks world-wide must be surprising. Hochschild is able to identify, most interestingly, one single factor (and this is his third explanation) that created that sympathy – impressments into the Royal Navy. No inhabitant of London, Liverpool, Bristol or any other British port could walk safely in the streets during the Napoleonic wars without fear of being forcibly seized and marched off by the press gangs. The comparison with African men and women seized in their villages for transport across the Atlantic to work on the slave plantations was only too

close. Pictures of black men and women huddled together in the slave ships evoked a natural reaction that such a fate could await even the most peaceful Englishman going about his daily business. There were no slaves in Britain, apart from wage slaves, and they were confused enough by their apparent market freedom to feel no need to oppose the bondage of others.

This is a long book and fully referenced, but it makes a very good read with many fascinating insights into the nature of the slave trade and conditions on the slave plantations and into the political economy of Britain at the end of the Eighteenth and beginning of the Nineteenth Century. And Hochschild does not fail to make the comparison between the situation of the abolitionists then and movements for social change today. It seems now for most people that world-wide inequalities are only natural and that exploitation of the earth's carbon deposits for private transport by car and plane can go on for ever. All the tools and means for campaigning on such issues are more available than ever with the spread of the internet. There exist here and there many small groups of thoughtful and committed citizens engaged in the relevant campaigns. But who is listening? What could take the place of the press gangs, which would unite people's sense of solidarity without exacerbating their fear of reprisals?

*Michael Barratt Brown*

## Australia's Genocide

**Sven Lindqvist, *Terra Nullius: A Journey Through No One's Land*, Granta Books, 256 pages, ISBN 9781862078956, £10**

This text is unique and merits the encomium printed on the cover of the English edition. Quoting Phillip Knightley, author of *Australia: A Biography of a Nation*, the cover informs readers they are about to read 'the most original work on Australia and its treatment of Aborigines they have ever read'. Its originality lies in the insights and challenging ideas it presents. The bibliography is impressive; so, too, is his critique of earlier intellectual luminaries such as Marx, Durkheim, Kropotkin, Freud, Malinowski, and Alfred Radcliffe-Brown. All sought to understand the social structure and beliefs of the Aborigines.

Lindqvist takes up this challenge and presents his case in the form of a travelogue as he drives through the Northern Territory and Western Australia. Some, including your reviewer, may be irritated by details of the topography, flora and fauna, the quality of his accommodation, and so on. His historical narrative relates to his major themes, rooted in Australia's penal past and enforced settlement, and enriches our understanding of the contemporary country.

Read as a travelogue, the text has little value. Australia is unique in containing major sections of its population who are out and out racists, and who reinforce their mindset by denying the appalling treatment of their indigenous neighbours. As in no other country, historiography is pursued with the intensity of a pit-bull

terrier. In Britain historians contend, in Australia the debate is far more intense and abusive. In Australia, European occupation obliterated a people – in Tasmania the Aborigines were regarded as vermin and exterminated. Elsewhere in Australia it is estimated that nine-tenths of the population were overwhelmed. As Lindqvist documents, they were an inferior race doomed to ‘fade away’, following their contact with Western culture.

Australia has the equivalent of our home-grown holocaust denier, David Irvine. Keith Windshuttle, author of *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History*, claims that no genocide was committed – the massacres were legitimate police actions. He rejects practically everything academic historians have unearthed concerning Aboriginal history. He contends such evidence is a gigantic forgery, intended to deprive Australians of their right to be proud of their history.

Despite the welcome changes introduced by the Keating and Whitlam Governments, the changes in public sentiment and the calls for public figures to apologise for the conduct of their forebears, sections of Australian society refuse to recognise that the past is scarred by major embarrassments. In writing this I suspect that few readers are aware that it was not until 1962 that Aboriginal people acquired the right to vote in both State and Commonwealth elections. Unlike other public figures, John Howard has refused to apologise for the countless misdeeds of his forebears.

Many Australians see through the revisionist rhetoric of Windshuttle and his ilk and recognise they have a duty to apologise and say sorry for the conduct of their forebears. Lindqvist illustrates his point by giving an account of visiting Norway in 1951 where he was chastened for Sweden’s collaboration with Nazi Germany in the early 1940s, despite the fact that he was then only ten. He asks: were his fellow Norwegians right to blame him? It is difficult to fault his reply. It should touch all of us; he insists that persons who over the years have benefited from the crimes of their forebears cannot avoid the burden of guilt. He concludes:

‘When the misdeeds of the past are brought to light, when the perpetrators and their heirs confess and ask for forgiveness, when we do penance and mend our ways and pay the price – then the crime committed has a new setting and a new significance. No longer the inescapable extinction of a people, but its ability to survive and ultimately to have the justice of its claim acknowledged.’

This is a lesson that Australia has still to learn. To visit Australia without first reading *Terra Nullius* could make you a party to the past.

*Peter M. Jackson*

## Shopping Abuse

**Andrew Simms, *Tescopoly: How one shop came out on top and why it matters*, Constable, 372 pages, paperback ISBN 9781845295110, £7.99**

Thankfully this book is not solely about Tesco – rather, the author uses the brand

largely for illustrative purposes to highlight the transformations that have occurred in retailing in general and the effects of these changes, both in local and global terms. Certainly Tesco is by far the dominant presence in grocery retailing in the United Kingdom and the book does, as one would expect, chart its growth both nationally and increasingly internationally. It details the tactics it has used, along with the other three major grocery retailers (Asda/Wal-Mart, Morrisons, Sainsbury's) to achieve their present oligopolistic position. It is a classic tale of neo-liberalist success which comes at a very high price at many different levels in both a global and local context. The book seeks to criticise modern retailing using a number of connected ideas but largely those of radical ecology, neo-Keynesian/development economics, localism and the ideas of E.F.Schumacher: the author is in fact the present Policy Director of the New Economics Foundation (NEF).

The New Economics Foundation campaign on 'clone towns' and 'ghost-town Britain' fits neatly into the arguments propounded, and sees Tesco as leading the charge in the destruction of local shopping centres and local economies. Its record for sharp legal practice in forcing elected councils' acquiescence in the development of out-of-town superstores, often in the teeth of grassroots local community opposition, is documented thoroughly. The supermarkets are not restricted by planning 'red tape' beloved of *Daily Mail* editorials: they have the legal might to get what they want, and the landbank to ensure it's where they want. Tesco, of course, has the largest landbank, which is not merely for internal expansion, but also to restrict the opportunities of competitors.

The book recounts the demise of the local shopkeeper over the last 20 years and links it comparatively with the overall decrease in retail employment, despite the oft repeated reassurances to the contrary by the retail behemoths. The author is convinced that the new forms of chain retailing and brand marketing, largely developed in the United States, are destroying what little local community life remains, leaving us as atomised, solipsistic consumers in the confines of an Orwellian dystopia where the slogans do not yet claim 'war is peace' but do say 'helping you spend less every day'. It is true that community destruction owes much to the siting of out-of-town supermarkets with free parking and the one-stop nature of retail grocery: but we can also cite the manic juggling for many families of childcare, food preparation, domestic duties in general, not forgetting the requirement to put in the longest working hours in Europe. In fact, as the author points out, the name 'supermarket' is a bit of a misnomer. The supermarket is not a market at all, for a market requires ease of price comparison – you cannot check prices when you are physically isolated from competitors. When you are in Tesco you cannot check Asda's price equivalent three miles down the road. As Vance Packard made clear all those years ago, the retailer desires us to lose ourselves in the soothing balm of consumerist excess and dulling of comparative proclivities. For the author our communities, both urban and rural, are being destroyed not by the sameness and uniformity of a centrally planned East European economy, but by 'the reality of dreary market economies, centrally planned by corporations'. The development of Tesco is intimately associated with this process.

Tesco's historical rise from its small beginnings is repeatedly used as an example of innovation leading to success. The book charts the rise of monopolistic retailing both nationally and internationally and the Tesco story in particular: from its humble East End beginnings in 1919 to the Titan of today. It is perhaps not without some irony that a grocer's daughter from Grantham was to be the orchestrator of big capital's virtual annihilation of its cornershop competitor. One can only wonder at the possible consequences if Tesco's development had been a little more precocious! The chimera 'choice' so loved by Thatcher and her later prime-ministerial clones has become for Andrew Simms its very opposite, the very 'death of diversity' – from the constraints placed on suppliers concerning the norms of what constitutes the acceptability for a vegetable by supermarket buyers (tasteless, uniform in size, and blemish free) to the deliberate blandness of much supermarket food. Supermarket practice is the antithesis of diversity, which is visible more in the packaging and the marketing context. Even the Tesco buildings look the bloody same! Simms sees an analogy between Darwinian evolutionary theory with its need for genetic diversity and the economic outcomes of the last 25 years under the neo-liberal economic dispensation. The freedom of markets, not to mention the striving to maximise capital's return, (a point which could have done with perhaps a little more emphasis in the book), has resulted in the very narrowing of diversity in opportunities, both social and economic. The vast majority of mankind is increasingly left with the mere appearance of diversity through consumerist product choice.

The supermarket experience is now in the process of being exported from its Western hemisphere homeland with all the major supermarket chains, Tesco being no exception, expanding in Eastern Europe and South-East Asia in particular. The 'clone town' is becoming an international reality, fed by ever-increasing Third World urbanisation and the continued destruction of the small family-based agricultural unit, subsistence or otherwise. The Third World still has millions of small farmers and, as the control of indigenous food sources is increasingly determined by the requirements of locally operating supermarkets, we can look forward to increasing diminution of local markets with its corollary, the consolidation of larger agriculture units with intensified labour exploitation and product mono-culture. The rates of suicide among small farmers within the Indian sub-continent and South Korea are a grim sign of the process at work.

The relationship between the supermarkets and their suppliers is dealt with in detail, although the facts are not easily obtained given the latter's fear of supermarket retribution for unsanctioned disclosure. In fact, a virtual Mafia-like *omertà* applies to relationships in this area with the retribution for infringement, naturally enough, the exclusion from the approved suppliers list. This situation is not helped by what the author considers a very light regulatory touch by the relevant government authorities, primarily the Office of Fair Trading (OFT) or, as it is more unkindly known, the Office in Favour of Tesco! The recent OFT bearing of its milk teeth over dairy price-fixing by the big four has yet to show blood and, of course, 'in separate statements, Asda, Tesco and Sainsbury's said they would

vigorously defend themselves' (*Guardian* 21/09/07).

Dare one say that the authorities' benign attitude to the supermarkets reflects New Labour's relationship with the retail giants, and Tesco in particular, which has been close, to say the least? Blair's pre-2001 election splutter at a public meeting about the supermarkets' 'armlock' on farmers was swiftly forgotten, as was Gordon Brown's earlier pledge to 'expose and end anti-competitive practices' in his 1999 'rip-off Britain' campaign. The connection between Tesco and New Labour has been particularly matey, with the former helping find timely millions for the Millennium Dome and the sharing of 'human resouces' in the form of Phillip Gould, Blair's one time policy advisor and court sycophant. Unsurprisingly, it seems we can expect little or no change in that close relationship from a Brown Government, with Sir Terry Leahy appointed to Brown's *Business Council for Britain*, along with such luminaries as Damon Buffini (hedge funds) and Alan Sugar (abrasive capitalism's human TV face). Neither does Brown seem unduly worried by Leahy's salary of £4.6 million with a proposed bonus of £10 million. Perhaps he now shares the views of his supposed, erstwhile foe, Peter Mandelson, and is 'intensely relaxed about people getting filthy rich'. One thing is certain – there's no danger of that if you are a shelf stacker at Tesco on £11,100 a year!

The labour force both nationally and internationally gets a pretty raw deal from Tesco and other supermarkets, and *Tescopoly* highlights much of the research many readers will already be familiar with. From banana growers in Honduras to garment workers in Sri Lanka, the price of cheap goods for Western markets is made clear with its attendant distortion of Third World economies and human exploitation. Within the context of the Third World, both the ideas of *Fair Trade* and *Food Sovereignty*, (the latter concerned with the rights of peoples and communities to decide on trading relationships outside their immediate locales), are touched upon. The detrimental environmental effects of supermarket retailing, again now sadly well-known to us all, are mentioned, and it is a testament to the effectiveness of books like this that all the chains have felt it necessary to wage their own 'greenwash' campaigns. The book does relate various fight-backs against supermarket expansion, and the proliferation of local group activities testifies to the strength of feeling against the new retailing, and successes have been recorded. The doughty citizens of Saxmundham have, so far, fought off a Tesco in their town, but they are unfortunately more the exception rather than the rule.

One failing of this terribly worthy book is that it has so little to say about Tesco's own UK employees and their perception of what working for Tesco is like. The position of migrant workers employed by the supermarket's suppliers is well covered, using evidence from the T&G and other sources, and justifiably highlighted as akin to 'modern-day slavery'. Exploitation of both land and factory workers in the South is comprehensively dealt with. The 256,000 UK employees of Tesco, however, nearly 60% of them women, scarcely get a mention. Are they really that quiescent? They shouldn't be if Simms is right: for example, proposals in China under their new Labour Contract Law are superior, in printed rights at



least, to the present terms and conditions of Tesco's UK labour force.

This book is a damning critique of supermarkets in general and Tesco in particular. The case is well made and, although many of the arguments can be found elsewhere, it does come together as a comprehensive survey of the territory. It covers an awful lot of terrain from the ideas of the Slow Food Movement to the yawning and increasing disparities between the élite and the global commons, and, apart from perhaps its wistful approach to a bygone age of small shopkeeping, deserves praise for the cogency of its approach. Many of its ideas and themes deserve to be present in a 21<sup>st</sup> century socialist critique of the *new* capitalism. Whatever happened to the retail co-operative movement? And is George Monbiot right: 'No political challenge can be met by shopping'?

*John Daniels*



## **Bakers, Food & Allied Workers Union**

*Supporting workers in struggle  
Wherever they may be.*

Joe Marino	General Secretary
Ronnie Draper	President
Jackie Barnwell	Vice President

Stanborough House, Great North Road, Stanborough,  
Welwyn Garden City, Hertfordshire. AL8 7TA

Phone 01707 260150 & 01707 259450 | [www.bfawu.org](http://www.bfawu.org)