

# Reviews

## Leen Words

**Neil Fulwood & David Sillitoe (eds.), *More Raw Material: Work inspired by Alan Sillitoe*, Lucifer Press, 2015, 240 pages, paperback ISBN 9780993424106, £9.00**

Inspired by its honorand's own interwoven fiction and familial reminiscences, *Raw Material* (1972), this multi-authored anthology of prose and verse is a splendid tribute to Nottingham's best known (but not only) author. Immediate applause, too, for the physical pleasure afforded by the luxurious, indeed sensuous, paper on which it is printed. I doubt this Nottingham-based press is flush with money, but it has certainly pulled out all the stops here, a rebuking contrast to the many shoddy productions from other quarters. Readers may amplify their pleasure by the YouTube preservation of the book's unveiling at the Nottingham Poetry Festival event in Five Leaves Bookshop. YouTube also has various other Sillitoeana, most delightfully Alan Needham's crawl through twenty-one Nottingham pubs.

Since many remember Sillitoe mainly or exclusively (the film versions helped) through his first two novels – you all know which ones – this comports an important reminder that he regarded himself mainly as a poet, a genre as prominent as his novels and other ventures. Palpable influences here of his mentor, famous Classicist-novelist-poet Robert Graves (an early mentor, who – a somewhat premature act of friendship – in 1965 proposed Sillitoe for the Nobel Prize) and his wife, American poet Ruth Fainlight. Speaking of the latter, unless it was her choice, I would have expected a greater presence here. She is, after all, as eminent in her chosen fields as her husband. But all we get of her is a single-page Preface, a couple of black-and-white snaps, and a single poem, 'The Motorway', adumbrating their joint travels.

By the way, I mentioned Graves' classicism because, whilst in hospital for his tuberculosis, Sillitoe devoted much time to reading Greek and Latin literature in translation – a side of Arthur Seaton's creator not always remembered.

Although not a natural-born Nottinghamian (I'm a Lincolnshire 'Yellowbelly'), Sillitoe's Nottingham is partly mine also. I lived there 1956-62, as undergraduate, graduate, and commuting History lecturer to Loughborough College, before fleeing to Australia. Apart from digs in

Beeston, Chilwell, and West Bridgford, plus a brief ‘crash’ at Pat Jordan’s 4 Dane Street bookshop, I actually lodged in Sillitoe’s Radford whilst toiling not at Raleigh but the other (then) industrial giant, Player’s. I can’t claim to have been a friend of Sillitoe, but met him in group conversations both at university Socialist Society meetings and on the occasional ‘demo’.

Fifty-something contributors comprise this memorial volume, which provides their capsule biographical and bibliographical details, these serving also in lieu of an index. Several naturally recall Sillitoe at personal levels well beyond my own. There is a good deal of poetry, the merits and demerits of each individual piece being beyond my allotted space and competence to dissect. As to the prose entries, largely and rightly in the Sillitoe manner, I am frankly not always sure if we are to take some of them as factual or fictional.

In terms of enjoyment, this need not too much matter. It certainly did not affect my particular pleasure in John King’s ‘See No Evil’ and Mel Fisher’s ‘My Mate Sid’. An unequivocal and poignant essay is Tony Roe’s ‘From Gosling, R’. Gosling evoked Nottingham in his memoir *Personal Copy*, mentioning inter alios local CPGB stalwart John Peck, whom I remember seeing in 1956 being knocked from his Slab Square soapbox by John Daniels (senior) as he was parroting the *Daily Worker* line on Hungary

Ross Bradshaw’s ‘The Nottingham Issue’ is a key element, emphasising as it does that Sillitoe was not some extraordinary local ‘One-Off’, but part of a rich Nottingham tradition of working-class literature. Individuals mentioned include Philip Callow (*The Hosanna Man*, 1956) and Michael Standen (*Start Somewhere*, 1965) on the male side, with a sideways glance at middle-class, Booker Prize-winning novelist Stanley Middleton’s rare excursion into working-class life and culture in *Harris’s Requiem* (1960), and passing mentions of the Broxtowe Estate’s Derrick Buttress (featured elsewhere in the collection) and ephemeral teenage prodigy Pat McGrath (*The Green Leaves of Nottingham*, 1970 – Bradshaw could find no further trace of him, nor could my Google finger).

On the female side, Bradshaw adduces Ruth Adam (no titles cited), Hilda Lewis (*Penny Lace*, 1942), Jenny McLeod (*Stuck up a Tree*, 1998, set in black St Ann’s), and Nicola Monaghan (*The Killing Jar*, 2007, another Broxtowe Estate setting, owing much to Sillitoe’s personal encouragement).

Unlike Samuel Johnson on Milton’s ‘Paradise Lost’, I could have wished this essay longer. No mention of the famous B.S. Johnson’s ‘experimental’ *The Unfortunates* (1969, its settings, notably Forest’s City

Ground, obviously Nottingham). As Sillitoe, Derrick Buttriss moves successfully between memoirs, plays, and poetry. Same goes for Callow and Standen, both far more prolific and applauded than Bradshaw discloses. Jenny Mcleod's plays are singled out in Keith Peacock's *Thatcher's Theatre* (1999), whilst Nicola Monaghan's *The Killing Jar* was described in Hephzibah Anderson's *Guardian* review (available online) as 'a brew of hyperbolic nastiness, pilled up with flat-vowelled literary flourishes ... The rhythm of her language yields its own momentum.'

I least liked Bruce Wilson's mean-spirited attack on Karel Reisz' film of *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*. Of course, *de gustibus non est disputandum* and all that, but I thought Albert Finney ideal as Arthur, and what red-blooded man could not have drooled over the beauty of Shirley Anne Field? Wilson's onslaught on Brenda's abortion is misleading. The gin-hot bath routine is not 'shrugged off', but (unlike the novel) simply fails. Censorship may have played a part here, likewise in reducing Arthur's spewing over a couple to spilling his beer over them.

My Nottingham Classics Professor, Edward Thompson (then involved – as I – with Gerry Healy's Trotskyite circus) remarked to me how astonished he was by the violence in the book. I attended the film's Nottingham premiere, now recalling with amusement the shocked gasps from some ladies at Arthur's using the word 'bloody' – *autres temps autres mœurs* indeed.

The penultimate photograph is of Sillitoe's grave in Highgate Cemetery, suitably sharing space with Karl Marx. A copy of this superlative commemoration should be placed thereon amidst the usual floral tributes.

Barry Baldwin  
Calgary, Canada

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## Russian Interest

**Donald Rayfield, Jeremy Hicks, Olga Makarova (editors), *The Garnett Book of Russian Verse: A Treasury of Russian Poets from 1730 to 1996 (Russian and English Edition)*, Garnett Press, 2013, 688 pages, ISBN 9780956468321, £25**

This beautiful book, the second edition of the original 2000 publication, aims 'to make accessible to the interested reader a body of poetry as significant as anything the human spirit has produced'. Its intended readership ranges from 'those with a rudimentary knowledge but

strong interest in Russian, to university students of Russian literature.’ The latter group will have access to seventy-five poets with useful and discreet cribs on each page. They may be directed to it by tutors and reading lists.

What I find more interesting and exciting is the idea of it being a ‘bedside book for a reader of poetry’. I’m guessing that a proficient reader of Russian might enjoy dipping into its wealth and finding something new every time, but it is also a superb introduction.

The cover is striking, the font clear and the English prose crib unassuming, an aid to unlocking the text rather, the editors claim, than ‘a text with equal rights to the reader’s mind’. That from the introduction which, of course, I did not read before engaging with the poems themselves, but which proved interesting and useful as a history of Russian poetry and its connection with other literatures.

Perhaps I should say at this point that I belong to the group of ‘those with a rudimentary knowledge but strong interest in Russian’. I have started to study it at a time of my life when memorising vocabulary has become harder and the chance of a prolonged immersion in the language is receding rapidly, so I found, as I sat by a fire with the book on my lap, that I was coming to the book as above all else a reader of poetry. I did what I always do with an anthology. I read randomly, albeit slowly, relying heavily on the literal translation, struggling with pronunciation but gradually relaxing into reading whatever caught my eye, the name of a familiar poet, an easily accessible first line. (‘I don’t know ...’ (Osip Mandelshtam), ‘She loves me? She loves me not?’ (Mayakovsky). And anything short.

At this point I felt justified in buying a new and larger dictionary, but it was also at this point that I was able to let go, to read a chosen poem, over and over, sometimes glancing at the translation, but also letting myself become familiar with the structure, the rhymes, the word order and, above all, the rhythm. What matters about getting to grips with a poem, I realised, was not so different from reading in your native language. Which brings me to, perhaps, the most helpful thing about the prose translations at the bottom of the page. They are not intrusive or prescriptive. They reminded me of watching a foreign film with subtitles when you become so engrossed in taking in what’s going on that you feel you are understanding the language as clearly as if you could hear it.

I found some days that one poem was enough. I could tell which parts of speech most words were, but once a poem had caught my attention for long enough I found myself looking up most of the words I didn’t already know. Slow, but kind of mindful. Pointless, one might say, given my

impaired memorising skills, but so rewarding when returning after a night's sleep I found myself, rudimentary knowledge and all, simply reading the text, getting it, letting the whole poem work on me.

Marina Tsvetaeva, one of the poets I was already familiar with through the beautiful versions of Elaine Feinstein, is well represented. I loved 'Two Trees'. Mysterious, but graspable with the help of a translation that doesn't pretend to be other than literal, and Mikhail Lermontov's 'Last Testament' absorbed me for the whole of a journey across Ireland. I'm looking forward, now, to enjoying Pushkin to whom forty-four pages are devoted.

When I first engaged with this book I felt that I would have liked more information about individual poets. Certainly not in the text itself, where you only want the poem, but in the appendix often found in anthologies. The editors explain that lack of space made that an impossible undertaking and refer the reader to encyclopaedias. Fair enough. Moreover, I decided as I spent more and more time just enjoying the experience, one of the joys of engaging in a foreign language and literature is that you owe nothing to the canon, that you find what appeals to you and only then try to put it into context. I'm looking forward to that too. The student of Russian literature to whom I don't seem to have paid much attention might not need this book to be as beautiful to look at, as enticing, as I did. For the reader of poetry, however limited their language proficiency, it is sheer delight.

*Sheelagh Gallagher*

## Disaster Tour

**Antony Loewenstein, *Disaster Capitalism: Making a Killing out of Catastrophe*, Verso, 376 pages, hardback ISBN 9781784781156, £16.99, ebook ISBN 9781784781163, £16.99**

This is a hard-hitting attack on the predatory activities of big business, ever ready to cash in on a catastrophe, whether it is privatising violence in Afghanistan or evicting indigenous people from areas 'needed' for mineral extraction. The rapacious activities of the likes of Serco, Rio Tinto, Halliburton and G4S have been investigated and exposed by the intrepid and independent Australian journalist, Antony Loewenstein. Following the ideas of an earlier work by Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine*, it gives extensive detail of the global phenomenon whereby the policies of Western companies and politicians take advantage of both natural and unnatural catastrophes.

The first chapter takes us to Afghanistan and Pakistan, into the ugly world of the privatised military (mercenaries), who regard killing and torture as all in a day's work. There the US government, aware of the unpopularity of foreign wars, has devolved to private suppliers many of the tasks previously undertaken by the armed services. These contracts are handed to the large corporations who, in turn, sub-contract out the more frontline duties to the likes of the notorious Blackwater. All this is set against a background of abject poverty, chronic drug addiction, war with the Taliban, and grasping corruption at even the highest levels of the Afghan state. The activities of these giant corporations are carried out on a global basis and Loewenstein has necessarily pursued them in many countries.

Loewenstein spent time in Greece, mainly prior to Syriza forming a government, but even then Greece had the dual problems of imposed austerity together with a steady flow of migrants. The author observes the ordinary people of Greece struggling against the dire programme of austerity imposed by the Troika, and the violent victimisation of migrants by the police and the fascist Golden Dawn. *Disaster Capitalism* certainly sets the scene for what has followed, with wholesale privatisation of previously nationalised companies and the intensification of austerity.

In Haiti, Loewenstein is shocked to discover that much of the damage from the earthquake, which struck some five years ago in Port-au-Prince, still exists, whilst Haitians try to eke out a living among the rubble, garbage and sewage-strewn streets. How a country with so much potential could end up in this terrible state is explained. The political corruption, the non-governmental organisations (NGOs) with their 'one-model-fits-all mindset', the interference of foreign states (particularly the United States) in the political life of the country, the squandering of aid, and the failure to release monies to local indigenous civil institutions have all played their part. Finally, to add to the mayhem, are the activities of the multinationals, many of which managed to obtain contracts by backdoor pressure in Washington. These foreign companies often gave poor performance for the Haitians but, of course, made large profits for themselves.

In Papua New Guinea (PNG) it was the same old story of an over-eager government wanting to take a development path that would benefit the few at the expense of the many. The former colonial power, Australia, and a multinational corporation, Rio Tinto, want to control the mineral resources of the massive Panguna mine at Bougainville. The mining had already led to armed conflict from 1989 to 1997, which effectively closed the mine. Now there are plans to reopen it when it has already caused an

environmental disaster with toxic waste containing asbestos and heavy metals, and has ruined much agricultural land with the mine spoil.

The final three chapters illustrate the influence and power of the multinational companies in the developed countries of Australia, the United States and here in the United Kingdom. In the UK, Loewenstein records the largely privatised housing of asylum seekers – a system which has been contracted out by the Home Office to private companies, resulting in often sub-standard housing. Once given refugee status, the people concerned are moved out of the initial dwelling and become the responsibility of inadequately funded charities and the benefits system, often meaning a further deterioration in housing and living arrangements. However, things are a lot bleaker in Campsfield and Yarl's Wood detention centres run by Mitie and Serco, as *Disaster Capitalism* makes clear. The inherently cruel way migrants are treated is exemplified by the killing of Jimmy Mubenga, whilst forcibly restrained as he was being deported to Angola after living in the UK for 14 years with his wife and five children.

In his native Australia the author visits the refugee detention centre on Christmas Island and gathers information on what is actually happening there, and on other islands in the region where refugees are kept. This was despite the efforts of Serco, and the Australian Department of Immigration and Border Protection (DIBP), who indulged in much subterfuge to prevent him interviewing the incarcerated. The ruse of isolating refugees on distant islands away from the mainland was dreamt up by the conservative government of John Howard, who in 2001 directed 438 refugees on board a Norwegian ship to the island of Nauru. This marks yet another chapter in Australia's brutal treatment of any race that is not European in origin.

The section on the United States deals with the companies who make a profit out of the vast prison system. In 1980 the prison population was about 300,000: it is now more than two million, similar in size to Stalin's Gulag at its high point in 1953. The incarcerated are overwhelmingly Latino or black and this leads one to believe that such numbers must be the result of institutional racism, to which the recent police shootings of unarmed people of colour will attest. The author visits prisons, fraternises with prison personnel employed by the private companies, and notes the police with their body armour and latest crowd control equipment, comparable to that of US soldiers in Iraq. Of course, there is a lot of money in the correctional industry, but it goes to the corporate rich; wages for the operatives are usually low, and this applies to many of the areas investigated by the author.

Loewenstein presumably sees ‘Disaster Capitalism’ as a new predatory form of capitalism that has taken root since the demise of the Soviet bloc. What cannot be ignored is the brazen self-confidence that the neo-liberal philosophy and the capitalist restoration in Eastern Europe and China bestowed upon our elite. Although the financial crash of 2008 did temporarily deflate the hubris of our leaders, things have continued in very much the same pattern since, and the gap between the 1% and the rest of us continues to grow.

Whether or not there is another economic type called ‘Disaster Capitalism’ I am not sure. I suspect that the mechanisms of capitalism have often been lubricated by unfortunate occurrences. In this context we should not forget capitalism’s undeniable ability to engender the most cataclysmic of events in the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the form of two world wars. Loewenstein, however, whatever kind of capitalism he calls it, has done an admirable job demonstrating its exploitative and de-humanising effects both in the developing and the developed world. It is a powerful indictment of the predatory nature of multinational companies and their ability to suborn national governments. Also he has shown admirable courage in investigating and writing about areas where violence has been simmering for some time and his book deserves to be widely read. It is packed with information to counter the more supine media analysis of globalisation and its ‘free’ markets that we are routinely bombarded with. *Disaster Capitalism* is full of anecdotal insights and interviews and deserves to be read by everyone who is struggling to bring about a new world order of peace and equality.

*John Daniels*

## Stale Bread

**Jeremy Seabrook, *Pauperland: Poverty and the Poor in Britain*, C. Hurst and Co, 2015, 288 pages, paperback ISBN 9781849045841, £9.99**

With a title *Pauperland* and a front cover illustrating thin-sliced, white bread, this book was always going to be difficult. First published in 2013, Jeremy Seabrook’s exploration of why poverty persists in Britain in the midst of great wealth is now available in paperback. The hardback has been lauded by *The Times*, *The Sunday Times* and *The Guardian* amongst others. Their praiseworthy comments appear on the paperback’s back

cover. Seabrook may be known to *Spokesman* readers for his journalistic forays into a range of social issues over the last fifty years, but what might he be able to say about the history of the poor, and poverty more generally, in Britain?

Seabrook is neither a historian nor a social scientist. In fact, he has little time for the latter or for the ‘numberless functionaries’ whose work involves contact with today’s poor. So his purpose in writing this book is not to present carefully-sourced, historical or social analysis and discussion but, instead, to pose a series of questions to which his answers are simply ‘tentative and provisional’. The questions range over ideas about the nature of poverty and how they have changed over time, from rural to industrial to post-industrial Britain. ‘Far from the least’ of his enquiries is ‘... where do the attitudes which animate popular resentment of the poor come from?’ The questions seem straightforward enough although they are not dealt with straightforwardly by the author because he has deeper concerns about what he calls ‘sufficiency’. Indeed, the idea of ‘sufficiency’ underlies and animates the different chapters and gives Seabrook the opportunity to introduce ‘wealth’ to the discussion. Unfortunately, it also gives him the opportunity to be selective and judgemental to an extraordinary degree.

The first half of *Pauperland* explores how the poor law developed from Elizabethan times through to the 1834 Poor Law and beyond and highlights how attitudes towards poverty and the poor changed over that time. Using contemporaneous writers, philosophers, parliamentary reports and personal accounts Seabrook creates four, long, discursive chapters on the rural poor which mix historical fact, other writers’ views and his own concerns. These sequences are not always easy to follow, although there are some eye-popping views here including commentary on the way the poor law worked in the decades of agricultural depression in the early part of the nineteenth century. For example, writing in 1786, the Reverend Joseph Townsend, vicar of Pewsey in Wiltshire (one of the poorest parts of England) believed that hunger brought the rural poor into line and reinforced proper deference. He bemoaned the poor law as ‘more than liberal’ since ‘... what cause have they [the poor] to fear when they are assured, that if by their indolence and extravagance, by their drunkenness and vices, they should be reduced to want, they shall be abundantly supplied, not only with food and raiment but with their accustomed luxuries at the expence (sic) of others’. As Seabrook points out, Townsend contributed to the hardening of attitudes among those of his class at that time and later. These comments appear in a section devoted to a discussion

of the Speenhamland system of poor law, the Swing riots in 1830-2, and the more restrictive poor laws introduced following an investigatory Commission and legislation in 1834.

A number of points may be made here about Seabrook's writing which also apply more generally to the rest of the book. Firstly, Seabrook's historical analysis is less than careful, especially in explanations of change. For example, contrary to what he says, most landowners at this time did not prefer more generous poor law provision (the Speenhamland system) to stave off civil unrest and neither did the amount paid out nationally to 'paupers' increase in the first part of the nineteenth century. It fell dramatically, even though the numbers needing poor relief who were unemployed or underemployed increased as farmers continued to reduce wages, especially through the use of threshing machinery and the introduction of different work patterns (day labouring instead of annual hiring or boarding). It is these features that precipitated riots, rick-burning and machine breaking across the agricultural south and east of England in 1830-2 and which, for a time at least, delayed the imposition of a more restrictive regime of poor law. A more detailed historical analysis may be found in Hobsbawm and Rude's book *Captain Swing*.

Seabrook's writing style is often overly complicated, value-laden and unclear. For example, he tells us that:

'Burke's animadversions on the Speenhamland system were vindicated. While the "right to life" is a noble principle (echoed over time by the Green and socialist movements) in practice, it meant that farmers were not required to pay a living wage, since the parish would make up the difference.'

Linked to this, the emphasis on answering, however tentatively, a range of broad questions leads him to rely on specific writers and reports which seemingly encapsulate ideas about poverty. He draws a great deal here on Townsend, Burke, the *Report of the Poor Law Commission*, and writings by Jeremy Bentham and Thomas Malthus. A good editor would have chopped a lot. For example, do we need:

'Bentham starkly enunciates the value-system of the self-regulating market, to which he ascribes miraculous powers, since through its workings, human nature, with all its vicious propensities, would emerge, cleansed and capable of social good. Capitalism was to become redemptive: in its baptism of the people by total immersion, it scooped up and absorbed some of the beliefs of Christianity. Similar patterns of feeling would later nourish Marx, whose transforming doctrines also focussed on a form of redemption, albeit secular.'

(p81)

From the overly long to the exceedingly short: chapter 5, 'Voices of the poor', is three pages, made up of personal accounts of five agricultural labourers (the oldest born in 1804, the youngest born in 1844) from different parts of England. These were collected by Jane Cobden Unwin who published them, in 1904, under the title *The hungry forties*. Unsurprisingly given her background, this was a book published in support of free trade (although Seabrook does not tell us that). He tells us that these 'voices' are an 'authentic account of the life of farm labourers in the first half of the nineteenth century'. A social scientist would have made something of these, placing them in context and highlighting particular features, especially incomes and food, but no attempt has been made to do that. This is a great pity as there is much that could be said. Seventy years after Pewsey's Reverend Townsend's complaints about farm labourers' extravagance, the economic situation had not improved. By 1850, Wiltshire, a predominantly rural county, had the highest percentage of paupers to total population at 16.1% despite the 1834 poor law and the deterrent nastiness of the workhouse

Social historian John Burnett pointed out that 'The general state of the rural labourer between 1850-1914 was one of chronic poverty and want, acute in the 1850s, slightly better towards the end' (p.133). He refers to a survey undertaken in 1863 where the nature of meals consumed by agricultural labourers' families across the country was detailed (Burnett, 1989, pp.141-5). Most poor, rural families lived in cottages or huts that had no oven or range and the bulk of food was boiled in a large iron pot over an open fire or fried. A fire would not be lit all the time as many could not afford fuel. In Wiltshire, the normal fare for a family in 1863 was:

Breakfast: water broth, bread and butter;

Dinner: the husband and children have bacon (sometimes), cabbage, bread and butter; the wife had tea;

Supper: potatoes or rice.

Unsurprisingly, a rural exodus during the last thirty years of the nineteenth century saw 100,000 agricultural labourers each decade leaving the land for work in towns and cities, the United States or British colonies. Unfortunately, Seabrook chooses to end this part of the book and this chapter by remarking that the accounts of these agricultural workers were 'coloured by an intense feeling of injustice, and they are not less tendentious than the evidence given by informants to the Commission on the Poor Law'. This is not an appropriate remark to make of people who would often have been

living on the edge of starvation and whose lives we can barely imagine.

Chapter 6, 'The industrial poor', begins:

'By 1834, the ideology governing attitudes towards the poor was settled; and everything that occurred subsequently was a working out of the conflict between doctrines of the free market and the need to temper its most baleful effects by legislation. The context in which this took place was determined, first of all, by a recognition that the best protection for the working (and non-working) poor lay in collective action and organisation. Confronted by the growing assertiveness of the labour movement, governments responded with increasing solicitude, passing laws ... as well as providing public amenities ...' (p.111)

This essentially Whiggish or liberal account, taking no account of class antagonism or struggle, is not followed by a detailed account of how this apparent change of heart occurred and its ameliorative effects on the poor. Instead, Seabrook relies again for his source material on writers' attitudes towards the working class. His antagonism towards Marxism or socialism is revealed here, too, in that the most obvious and influential text from the period (Engels' *Condition of the Working Class in England*) with its descriptions of the poor of Manchester in the 1840s (whose horrendous living conditions were replicated in Leeds, Sheffield, Birmingham and London) was simply referred to in passing as Engels' 'lurid vision of the fate of the working-class'. Astonishingly, Engels and Manchester are not mentioned again while an unknown writer on conditions in Merthyr Tydfil in 1848 is quoted in full.

Seabrook discusses the impact of industrial life on people and communities in the next two chapters. He uses a large number of individual personal histories to illustrate points: from Rowntree's work in London or Booth's researches in York in the early 1900s or his own work, in Lancashire mill towns, in the 1960s. Some accounts are dry and factual, drawn from investigators' notebooks, but Seabrook's are full of dialogue and detail, either real or conjured up in his imagination to recall past times. These accounts provide powerful testimonies of the difficult struggles to survive that many poor people endured up to the 1970s, even with the safety net of the welfare state. But again the writing meanders and is imbued with anger and a strong moral sensibility (which may be acceptable to some but is irritating to others). This is no more so than in his descriptions of the impact of poverty on the industrial poor and the establishment of the welfare state in 1945:

'If conditions were degrading and people perished, poverty also called forth resistance and dignity, mutuality and self-sacrifice, a sensibility reminiscent, if of anything, of the elective holy poverty of the early saints ...' (p.147)

And so it goes on. By Chapter 9, Seabrook has moved on to discuss ‘modernised poverty’. ‘Primitive poverty’ as he calls it ‘exposed most of humankind to hunger, pestilence and the arbitrary rule of the powerful’. Modernised poverty, by contrast, is ‘non-participation ... a punitive exclusion that condemned the poor to wander like souls permanently exiled from Elysium, the inhabitants of a limbo ...’ And it gets worse. The poor today live in

‘slum estates ... where mainly the defeated, the wretched and the demoralised ... remain. Although it requires costly administration to keep them where they belong, no overseers, parish officials or beadles are required to judge whether this is an appropriate place for them, or to bear the costs of despatching them there ... To these, the captive poor, has been entrusted the task of demonstrating the continuing penury of wealthy societies: they are the living embodiment of the need for more economic growth, fed by the strident neediness of their assertive hunger.’ (p.155)

These ‘orphans of the market’ ... ‘are doomed to play out lives of self-harm, destructiveness, wrecking and robbing their own community, stealing from “their own kind”, dealing in forbidden substances, cheating and cozening, an illegal mimicry of approved entrepreneurial activity.’ (p.156)

This is a world away from research findings by social scientists including recent research on St Ann’s in Nottingham (see my review of Lisa McKenzie’s *Getting By in Spokesman 129*) and it beggars belief that he follows this with accounts of individuals and families he has met to show how the ‘neglected interiors of the houses reflect the ragged psychic interiors’ of the ‘deprived’. Do the people he interviews or meets never see what he writes about them? It is Seabrook’s contention that consumerism has destroyed any independent culture that the working class ever had. By contrast:

‘... the slum dwellers of Asia and Africa have memories of self-provisioning – capacity to build a shelter, a remembrance of famine foods and of herbs and plants with healing or nutritious properties ... All such knowledge has been erased from the mental storehouse of the poor in “advanced” societies ... If people live off the dregs of the consumer market, this is because they are the dregs of a labour market ...’ (p.157)

‘The impoverishment of riches’ is the last chapter and it contains Seabrook’s view of what needs to change. In his view, the position of the poor will never be helped by ‘the legions of poverty-abaters’. Instead, definitions of poverty linked to monetary wealth (citing ideas such as Peter

Townsend's relative poverty) should be abandoned. After all, he argues, they are only 'a re-hash of the work of older cartographers of Maps of Pauperland' and 'to abandon redistribution is to acknowledge that the have-nots merit the nothing they possess'. (p.225) Attitudes towards the wealthy also need to change to enable the growth of different values including that simple 'sufficiency' is enough instead of the constant striving after commodities and monetary riches which is consumerism. As with preceding chapters, Seabrook uses other writers to bolster these ideas, but what is notable about this one is that the kernel of these ideas is almost hidden in the overblown metaphorical and religious language and long commentary attacking those he believes have led society in the wrong direction – namely, socialists, the Labour Party, 'poverty-abaters', social scientists, the wealthy, philanthropists and 'goodwill ambassadors'. It is very difficult indeed to get to the end of all this without feeling that the author is flailing around, angry at the world which has been taking little notice for the last fifty years. But this is not a surprise. The language and ideas are largely inaccessible. His views about political and social change seem simplistic. His vision of the future is scarcely realistic. Pauperland and sliced white bread? Thanks - but no thanks.

*Cathy Davis*

## References

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- E.J. Hobsbawm and George Rude. (1969) *Captain Swing*. London: Lawrence and Wishart

## Eight Conflicts

**Patrick Cockburn, *Chaos and Caliphate: The Jihadi Struggle for the Middle East*, OR Books, New York and London, 2016, 428 pages, paperback ISBN 9781682190289, £19, ebook ISBN 9781682190296, £10**

Few journalists are as well informed on the Middle East and Central Asia, their history and current problems, as Patrick Cockburn. Since 2001 – sometimes at great personal risk – he has reported on the various wars in the region and he has now published, in *Chaos and Caliphate*, a selection of his notes, diary entries and reports, plus his reflections and conclusions.

Cockburn points out that there are now eight conflicts being fought in the region: in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Syria, the Yemen, as well as

Somalia, north-east Nigeria, and between Kurds and Turks in Turkey. In the first four of these, military intervention principally by the West and, in the Yemen, principally by Saudi Arabia, has played a key role.

What comes out very clearly from his study is that the policies pursued by the West – even from its own narrow point of view – have largely failed and have compounded problems rather than resolved them.

Cockburn expected the West to encounter insuperable difficulties in Afghanistan. The Taliban were defeated by western military intervention in 2001 but made a comeback subsequently, primarily because of gross errors by the Afghan government of Hamid Karzai and its American backer. It was grossly corrupt. The Taliban retained considerable support within the Pashtun segment of the population (i.e. 42 per cent of the total) and it received the covert backing of Pakistan military intelligence. It remains a serious threat since the withdrawal of western military forces, and Osama bin Laden has achieved his aim of a continuing war between the western allies and the Muslim world.

In the case of Iraq, Cockburn expresses surprise that the US gave so little thought to the political consequences of its invasion. The Americans failed to recognise the divisions between Sunnis, Shias and Kurds. They failed to prevent widespread looting and, by dissolving the Iraqi army, they created a mass of near destitute soldiers. They also failed to realise that, once Saddam Hussein had been overthrown, the bulk of the Iraqi population wanted foreign troops to leave.

In 2006 Cockburn wrote

‘It is seldom realised that the US and Britain have largely provoked the civil war that is raging across central Iraq.’ [p.144]

Cockburn is critical of the application of the term ‘Arab Spring’ to developments in the Middle East and North Africa on the grounds that militant Islamism was an element in these rebellions that was overlooked.

In Libya, the uprising against Gaddafi was supported by Saudi Arabia and the Gulf monarchies – hardly bulwarks of democracy. NATO joined in and organised thousands of air strikes, without which Gaddafi would not have been overthrown. However, as Cockburn’s reports at the time illustrate, David Cameron, British Foreign Secretaries William Hague and Philip Hammond, together with Hillary Clinton, badly misread the situation. The first measure enacted by the transitional government was to end the ban on polygamy. The US ambassador, Chris Stevens, was murdered, and Africans employed under the previous regime – particularly Christians – were persecuted and, in some cases, executed. Civil war

followed. As Cockburn concluded: ‘whatever the Western intentions, the result has been a disaster’. [p.242]

In Syria, the West, along with Saudi Arabia, the Gulf States and Turkey, wanted Bashar Assad to be overthrown and, when mass protests broke out against his rule in 2011, assumed that he would be. Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the West supplied the rebels with arms while Iran, Hezbollah and Russia supported Assad. According to Cockburn, 30 per cent of the population backed Assad, 30 per cent opposed him, and the remaining 40 per cent were not disposed to favour government or rebels.

Appalling as were all the Middle Eastern conflicts, in the Syrian civil war the results were worse, with hundreds of thousands of casualties and millions of refugees generated. In a mixed population comprising Sunnis, Shias, Alawites, Christians, Druze, Yazidis and Kurds, Cockburn identifies five different conflicts: a popular rising against Assad; Sunnis against Shias; Sunnis against Alawites; Iran against the US and Saudi Arabia; Russia against the West.

In the Yemen yet another bitter armed conflict is raging between Saudi Arabia and the Shi’ite Houthis who have driven out their President, Abed Mansour Hadi. Here, the US is supporting the fugitive President and Britain has supplied the Saudis with arms, while the Yemeni population is desperately short of food and water.

Across the region as a whole there is chaos, as indicated in the title of this book. However, there is also, as indicated in the title, the Caliphate. This is the regime otherwise known as ISIS (the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria), ISIL or Daesh, which is seeking to establish a caliphate under Abu Bakr al Baghdadi throughout the Middle East. It has already taken over much of Syria and northern Iraq and is a fanatical Sunni fundamentalist sect which is totally intolerant of all who do not accept it and comply with its tenets. It has its own versions of sharia law, and amputations, beheadings and floggings are regular punishments. Women are reduced to the status of chattels and are forced strictly to obey their husbands, even becoming suicide bombers. Shaving, western-style haircuts, art, music, philosophy, the teaching of evolution, etc., are forbidden. Christians, Shias, Alawites, Yazidis, dissident Sunnis in areas taken over have been killed or enslaved. The Islamic State is seeking to promote terrorism throughout the world to extend its rule.

*Chaos and Caliphate* is an encyclopaedic survey of events and hostilities in the Middle East and neighbouring areas over recent decades and has much to teach us. In the first place, it makes clear the idea that the US, Britain or any other powerful western country can create a western orientated

democracy by military intervention is mistaken. It calls into question the close alliances forged with repressive governments – in particular those of the West with Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States. The efforts of Saudi Arabia to spread its Wahhabi faith is linked to jihadism. As is pointed out, 15 of the 19 hijackers on 9/11 were Saudis, like Osama bin Laden, and when he was killed by US forces, in 2011, Abu Bakr al Baghdadi pledged to launch 100 attacks in revenge for his death. The West averted its eyes when protests against the al Khalifa regime in Bahrain were brutally suppressed.

Patrick Cockburn has provided an invaluable account of the manner in which a quasi medieval reaction is sweeping across the Middle East and adjoining areas and the misguided policies of the West. His book should be read and studied by anyone seeking to understand events in the region and hopefully to campaign for more progressive policies.

*Stan Newens*

## Letters on Albania

**Blendi Fevziu (tr. Majlinda Nishku), *Enver Hoxha: The Iron Fist of Albania*, I. B. Tauris, 2016, 312 pages, hardback ISBN 9781784534851, £25**

The Albanian original of this book appeared in 2011. Fevziu, ubiquitous journalist and TV presenter (see YouTube), graduated from Tirana University in 1991, hence must have been Party-approved. My Tirana contacts tell me he has a reputation among peers for cut-and-paste methods bordering on plagiarism.

Joanna Godfrey (I.B. Tauris editor) informs me this edition is not a straight translation but specially confected for English consumption by leading Albanologist Robert Elsie and Fevziu himself. Not quite sure where this leaves Majlinda Nishku, freelance translator formerly at Tirana University, a non-answerer of e-mails.

Chapter 17 is omitted, this lacuna absurdly requested by Fevziu as of no interest to English readers (Elsie). It would surely have fascinated them with its details of Enver impersonators along with dismissal of the widely-disbelieved story of kidnapped dentist Petar Shapallo, pedalled by Lloyd Jones' *Biografi* (1993); cf. my review, *Friends of Albania Newsletter* (Winter 1993). Various websites offer Carli Ruchala's similar tale featuring an equally suspect Ali Razhedi.

This English version adds a bibliography, an index (Enver himself missing!), and potted biographies of individual Albanians mentioned. But,

apart from excluding occasional endnotes to chapters 1, 3, 5, 16 – why? – it also omits the facsimiles of Hoxha correspondence, and by reproducing only six of the original fifty-three photographs deprives readers of, for example, the macabre snap of Hoxha hand-in-hand with defence minister Beqir Balluku just three months before having him shot – pure 1984.

Neither version mentions YouTube's innumerable Albanian TV items, from Hoxha's speeches and funeral to the 1983 trial of interior minister Kadri Hazbiu from the last great purge.

Elsie's Foreword claims this is 'the first serious book' on Hoxha. Odd, since he reviewed (*Südöst-Forschungen* 53, 1994, 544-546) Thomas Schreiber's *Enver Hodja: Le sultan rouge* (1994). Henry Çili's (Tirana European University) mentions Schreiber, also (getting both name and nationality wrong) Jon Halliday's *The Artful Albanian* (1986), not a biography proper but useful anthology of translated extracts from Hoxha's seventy-nine books with linking commentaries.

Fevziu (mentions Halliday, not Schreiber) unfairly ridicules these as 'mediocre and unrefined, lacking both expression and style'. Hoxha actually wrote with great humour and verve, by far the most readable of East European communist leaders. Also, the best read. Apart from his French teaching, Hoxha knew other languages, writes interestingly about ancient philosophy in *Two Friendly Peoples* (1985 – Albania and Greece), and in *With Stalin* (1978) discusses points of Homeric philology – surely a unique moment for inter-dictator colloquies.

However, Fevziu does demolish the allegation of James Pettier & Miranda Vickers (*Albania: From Anarchy to a Balkan Identity* (2000, p. 13) that Hoxha's later books were ghost-written, he being in dementia. Hoxha actually produced thirteen books during his last years, no signs of mental problems (physically, he suffered from diabetes and cardiac problems – here, one wonders about the role of tactfully-omitted ex-President Sali Berisha, Party-pampered heart specialist) until November 1984. I've seen the video of his Liberation Anniversary speech then – or was this one of those famous doubles?

As always, Hoxha is branded paranoid, both for his purges and those notorious concrete bunkers. Too simplistic. Although numerous individuals fell victim for such imaginary crimes as 'economic sabotage' or as 'enemies of The People', Hoxha was almost unseated to the point of public self-criticism (1947) by interior minister rival Koçi Xoxe, ironically preferred by Stalin as more proletarian than the dapper bourgeois Enver. Problem solved in 1949 when Xoxe was liquidated – allegedly strangled by 'The Butcher of Tirana', Mehmet Shehu.

Nor were fears of invasion unwarranted, given the failed (thanks to Philby's betrayal) Anglo-American assault (1949) and Soviet occupations of Hungary (1956) and Czechoslovakia (1968), especially after the rupture with Khrushchev over de-Stalinisation.

Hoxha executed uncountable thousands. Amnesty International calculated one-third of the population were in labour camps or internal exile. Fevziu provides an exhaustive chamber of horrors. No room, though, for the régime's achievements. As Stalin, Hoxha dragged his country from dark ages to modernity: elimination of illiteracy, country-wide electrification, the first railways – roads less vital, thanks to the ban on private vehicles, this giving Tirana a surrealist calm and an Eden for traffic policemen – the first university, rights for women. He also strove to create full employment (without taxes), maintain both national economic self-sufficiency and independence from power blocs.

Mixed results, but credit for trying, as with attempts to eradicate the age-old blood feuds in the northern mountains (cf. myself, *Chronicles*, January 1998, pp.16-18), now back in full swing.

All Hoxha assessments have two ineluctable topics: novelist Ismail Kadare's life and interior minister Mehmet Shehu's death.

Kadare gets the usual whitewash. I have frequently exposed this charlatan in *ReadySteady/Book* (UK), *I&NS* reviews, letters in *TLS*. Fevziu ignores Albanian newspaper publication (e.g. *Koha Jonë*, May 25, 1996) of Hoxha diary entries attesting their close friendship, Kadare's many privileges (passport, foreign travel, literary and political offices), also disclosures by ex-Sigurimi (Secret Police) Zylyfttar Ramiz and other officers, plus Kapilani Resuli (Macedonian Truth Forum, on-line) that he was an informer (code-name 'General'). Genuine dissidents such as Kasëm Trebeshima and Mehmet Myftiu, punished for courageous public protests, were treated by Kadare with what even his admirer Elsie dubs 'extraordinary vindictiveness'. As for his well-publicized 'defection' to France (1990), sensing the Ramiz Alia régime was in collapse, ex-Romanian dissident blogger Renata Dumitrascu characterizes this as a good example of rat deserting sinking ship.

Tirana Radio (December 18, 1981) announced that Mehmet Shehu had committed suicide in a fit of nervous depression. Following year's newspapers said *u liquidua*. Thanks to Albanian syntactical nuances, this can mean 'killed himself' or 'was killed'. Fevziu (pp. 236, 244) is self-contradictory, as he is when describing Hoxha both as promiscuously gay (p.16) and energetic womanizer (p.31), or when giving Koçi Xoxe two separate birthplaces (pp. 117, 139). Western newspapers talked of 'shoot-

outs' at dinner or at Central Committee meeting (I've heard the same from old Albanian acquaintances), ridiculed by Hoxha in his *Titoites* (1982) where Shehu is denounced (I've seen a cognate video) as a 'poly-agent' spying for half-a-dozen countries – you wonder how he kept his espionage diary straight.

In *Besa* 1 (1994, 19-27), I had a 'scoop' of sorts, publishing the only English translation of an interview published in the Italian Albanian language newspaper *Gazette Shqiptarë* (June 15 & 18, 1993) in which Shehu's chief bodyguard, Ali Çena, gives circumstantial evidence that Shehu was murdered by night at his villa.

None of this is in Fevziu. Nor does he include Jon Halliday's (*London Review of Books*, October 9, 1986) plausible claim – despite lively opposition in its Letters pages – that Party historian Arben Puto 'detonated lethal suspicion in a chronically suspicious mind' when he showed Hoxha some archival British documents naming Shehu as a potential agent.

The mystery remains. Shehu's son, novelist Baskim, inclines to suicide. Kadare leapt in with his (as with everything else) fictional *The Successor* (2011), pointing a finger at Hoxha's widow, Nexmije, as a kind of Borgia or Ptolemaic queen. (Fevziu's estimates of her actual influence wobble throughout.) One question should be obvious: if suicide, why all the frantic attempts to put him in the far-from-unique 'poli-agent' bracket? One answer: on Hoxha's own reckoning, every single interior minister from Xoxhe to Kadriu had been traitors, wryly adding they had been unmasked by The Party, all missed by the Sigurimi!.

Hoxha's sanguinary reign offers little humorous scope. For light relief, Fevziu might have mentioned Enver (youthful memories) consuming eight croissants for his first French breakfast, ironic for one who (diary entry) denounces Harry Pollitt's gluttony at a Moscow conference. Another irony not made clear for English readers is that 'Hoxha/Hodja' means 'priest', nor that his father was an imam, neither pedigree stopping him from proclaiming (1967) Albania the world's first officially atheist country.

On the credit side, Fevziu (p.216) is probably right to deny Hoxha poisoned intimate colleague Hysni Kapo (cp. Stalin and Kirov), and also provides (p.25) a tantalizing glimpse into Soviet infiltration of the Bloomsbury group (cf. Stephen Koch's books on this and its instigator, Willi Münzenberg), also (p.250) Hoxha's doctor Ulli Popa's theory (aired on Albanian TV) supporting Beria's supposed poisoning of Stalin.

Robert Elsie (e-mail) remarks, 'the original was very sloppy. But it is nevertheless a fascinating book' – I agree.

*Barry Baldwin*