

Reviews

Weighing up the Women's Institute

Maggie Andrews, *The Acceptable Face of Feminism – the Women's Institute as a Social Movement*, revised edition 2015, Lawrence and Wishart, 250 pages, paperback ISBN 9781910448168, £15

Calendar Girls, eleven Women's Institute members, aged between 45 and 65, pictured undertaking domestic tasks in the nude, gave the WI a new lease of life. The impact of this unexpected local initiative is described (along with others) by Maggie Andrews in a new edition of her book (originally published in 1997) which explores how, in her view, the WI became a feminist social movement between 1915 and 1960.

It is not surprising that she identifies distinct periods in the life of the WI when the priorities nationally, at county and at local levels changed. Even so, she argues, the organisation remained 'hugely important' for rural women across a wide spectrum of activities from its formation in 1915 up to 1960.

This book is intended to be a contribution to discussions about the meaning of feminism, especially feminist activity, so the first chapter discusses the nature of feminist history-writing. The chapters that follow focus on specific periods (the formation of the WI in the First World War; the interwar years; the Second World War; the 1950s). Her intention in each of these is to explore what it meant to be a WI member during these distinct periods, the changing appeal of the WI to rural women, and its 'feminist potential' at these different times. Drawing especially on internal WI records, she shows that there were real tensions between the leadership and members during these different times and through changing priorities 'from food production and community service in the earlier period, to consumerism and flower arranging in the 1950s'. Two case study chapters then examine this 'creative tension' in different ways. One looks at how the WI sought to improve rural housing, especially after the two world wars. The second explores how the WI's own residential Denman College was established and maintained up to 1960.

What can be made of the contention that the WI was a specifically feminist social movement, especially in the early years? Andrews argues that the WI 'attempted to challenge the boundaries of the socially constructed role for women, politically, economically and in cultural terms'. We might expect the chapter 'Campaigns' to be the closest to any recognisably feminist activity so it is used in this review to examine Andrews' approach

in more detail. She attempts here to show the extent to which rural housing was a WI concern and in so doing identifies three distinct elements to the home: the 'ideological', the 'pragmatic' and the 'political'.

Andrews states that in the early part of the twentieth century many social commentators of different political persuasions claimed 'the rural home as the embodiment of Englishness and the rural mother as the mother of the nation'. The WI, whilst accepting this view, made use of it, claiming that if this was the case, improvements needed to be made to housing, sanitation and piped water supplies to rural homes. Andrews argues that it was 'validating' and 'empowering' for the Institute to emphasize the importance of the home, especially the rural home (as compared to 'urban slums') as the 'heart of the nation' in the 1920s and 30s.

But, was it? Perhaps at a personal level it was to the many village women who joined the WI then, although politically this period up to the Second World War was contradictory: one of continuing high unemployment for many parts of the North of England, and prosperity and the growth of service industries and the suburbs in the South and Midlands. There was continuing concern about the poor physical condition of many men who had been drawn into the armed services in the First World War, and recognition of the often appalling housing conditions in some cities and towns in which they had grown to adulthood. Looking back now, it could be argued that the 'ideological' role pursued by the WI in relation to the rural home and its significance was at best ambiguous.

On the 'pragmatic' level, what is to be made of WI handicraft activities which sought to 'improve the efficiency, atmosphere or physical environment of the home'? This included making eiderdowns and patchwork quilts, mattresses and pillows, as well as reviving old craft skills. Andrews argues that these were not simply a celebration of domestic skill (and a passive acceptance of the status quo for rural women). Emphasizing to rural women the importance of the rural home to the nation and their learning how to make useful domestic items meant that the home might be seen afresh as an important 'site of reproduction and production rather than consumption'. She also argues that developing skills and knowledge like this offered rural women 'an alternative value system from which to challenge and re-negotiate structures of male power'.

This is not convincing: it feels like 1970s feminist theory laid onto the past. In thinking about why it was so important to make domestic items like this, perhaps it might have been more enlightening to analyse these developments against a background of rural (un)employment for women (and men) and class relationships in rural villages. While 'structures of

male power' (presumably in the home) existed, women also lived in a rural society where strong class-defined relationships and deference, between landowners, farmers and poor working (or non-working) families, persisted up to the Second World War. Part of the WI's role was to encourage and educate women so that they exercised their newly acquired vote responsibly. Meetings were non-partisan (in the sense that party politics was eschewed) and positions of responsibility were open to any woman (and voted on secretly, mirroring formal democratic election practice). But class differences persisted, especially in these early days. The lady from 'the big house' often presided over village WI activities as the local 'chairman' and would have exercised considerable influence. Improving skills in various handicrafts was important but unchallenging of entrenched positions of power and authority at home or in the 'big house'.

But it is Andrews' analysis of her third strand – the 'political' – which is the most disappointing. Underpinning it is the contention that 'the personal is political' – no more so than when engaging in various ways with the local political establishment to improve one's housing conditions. The WI's first Annual General Meeting resolution on housing was in 1918. It read:

'That the provision of a sufficient supply of convenient and sanitary houses being of vital importance to women in the country, County Federations and Women's Institutes are urged to bring pressure to bear upon their local councils ...'

A 'wide variety' of activities followed over the next thirty years. Unfortunately, Andrews' knowledge of the history of the state's role (local and national) in the provision of housing is patchy and simplistic so there is little useful analysis here. A discussion at a local meeting or a letter sent to Home and Country (the national magazine for WI members) is not the same as overt political campaigning or sustained collective activity to get council housing built locally. (And she does not mention at all the significance and difficulty of dealing with tied housing, common in the countryside). It is clear that some Women's Institutes at different times did press their local authority (elected members and officers) to build council housing, submitting detailed surveys of what was required, but it is difficult to judge how much this happened across England and Wales (Scotland had its own organisation) and impossible to say to what extent this activity changed rural women's perception of themselves and their place in the world.

Indeed, Andrews recognises that there were distinct differences between the elite who ran the WI through the national Executive Committee (who knew nothing about the housing conditions of poor rural women) and

many local members. Many village women who were WI members lived in very poor housing without adequate sanitation or water supplies (some rented from employers). They might be more (or less) happy to reveal this to the gaze and discussion of other women. The assumption that local WIs might challenge their local authority to 'do more' was perhaps expecting too much, although Andrews makes the point that the process of engagement with this issue was an important initial step to political awareness for many women who might have seen for the first time that their material circumstances were not set in stone.

Andrews' strength is cultural history and changing perceptions of domesticity (she is a Professor of Cultural History at Worcester University) and the discussion of the WI is stronger in these areas than in those on the politics and provision of council housing and improved sanitation and water supplies. She provides a great deal of detail about the growth of the WI and a fascinating picture emerges of the role of the WI during the First and Second World Wars, but at times, for this reviewer at least, there is too much descriptive detail, too many long quotations, and proofreading falters, too. She also has a tendency to make sweeping and unsubstantiated statements or theoretical leaps of faith to move her argument along.

Finally, Maggie Andrews identifies that the Women's Institute changed during the 1950s: the 'creative tension' disappeared and the organisation became more middle class and consumerist. It is a great pity that she claims this was due in part to 'the failure of the 1945 Labour Government to do very much for women'. She makes no acknowledgement that this Labour Government established the National Health Service in 1948. Neither does she recognise Aneurin Bevan's achievement in ensuring that local authorities built well over half a million new council homes to a very high standard in a handful of post-war years and ensured the repair of thousands upon thousands more (see Davis and Wigfield, 2010). By 1948, nearly 750,000 had been built or repaired/improved in the face of worsening economic conditions and extreme shortages of bricks, slates and timber. Did this not enhance the lives of women? So the question remains as to whether the WI up to 1960 can be regarded as 'the acceptable face of feminism'. Despite the WI's considerable achievements, especially during wartime, the jury is still out on that one!

Cathy Davis

Reference:

Cathy Davis and Alan Wigfield (2010) *Housing – Did it have to be like this? A socialist critique of New Labour's performance*, Nottingham: Spokesman Books, for Socialist Renewal.

Ghosts

William J. Maxwell, *F.B. Eyes: How J. Edgar Hoover's Ghostreaders Framed African American Literature*, Princeton University Press, 2015, 368 pages, hardback ISBN 9780691130200, £22.95

Douglas Field, *All Those Strangers: The Art and Lives of James Baldwin*, Oxford University Press, 248 pages, hardback ISBN 9780199384150, £22.99

There is a poem by Richard Wright called 'The FB Eye Blues', referring to the surveillance of American citizens by the Bureau's all-seeing eye. Or rather, by its distortive and only partially-sighted eye. William J. Maxwell has held on to that image and developed it to represent the whole troubled history of FBI responses to black American writers, and vice versa.

It is a fascinating tale, if rather boringly told. Maxwell analyses the critical methods adopted by the covert readers of the FBI in their surveillance of literary meaning, but also the ways in which black American writers ended up writing with such readers in mind. Most interestingly, perhaps, he argues that the FBI's 'ghostreaders' were not passive receivers of the literature in question: they actually helped to create the academic field of black studies. As one of his five 'theses' puts it, 'The FBI Is Perhaps the Most Dedicated and Influential Forgotten Critic of African American Literature'.

Commenting on the dearth of college courses on which the books of black writers were being studied in the middle of the century, Maxwell adds that 'FBI reading' was

'eager to tackle African American writing. In this respect, if none other whatsoever, the FBI's various Book Review sections outpaced the language and literature programmes of America's historically black universities' (p.149)

In 1919, FBI editors produced an anthology entitled *Radicalism and Sedition Among the Negroes as Reflected in Their Publications*. Maxwell drily comments that this 'is one of the better anthologies of early New Negro poetry, beating James Weldon Johnson's *Book of American Negro Poetry* to the punch by three years, and [Alain] Locke's New Negro edition of the *Survey Graphic* by half a modernist generation' (p.55). More significant is the fact that its compilers saw the New Negro poetry as holding the key to the connection between African Americans and communism. This held their attention for decades.

The prevailing orthodoxy of America's academic literary critics, the so-called New Criticism, sought to analyse texts in a pure state, divorced from context. The FBI, on the other hand, followed the conventions of 'biographical-historical criticism', thereby allowing for contextual, social factors to have influenced meaning. Theirs was political reading at its most instrumental. 'Demystifying the political leanings of texts in every genre, FBI criticism came to mirror that variety of Marxist literary analysis both closest to the concerns of mainline literary historicism (text X echoes political tendency Y) and most likely to devolve into political prescription (text X *should* echo political tendency Y)' (p.147). Given the hegemony of the New Criticism in American universities at that time, as Maxwell wryly points out,

'Thanks to the nature of the "extrinsic background" postwar FBI ghostreaders researched when pursuing the scholarly side of their dual roles ... very few would have won tenure prior to the mainstreaming of academic Marxism. With the blessing of FBI headquarters, they calculated quanta of ideology with a precision usually confined to students of Raymond Williams, Terry Eagleton, and Fredric Jameson' (p.147)

It may be that a good deal of the FBI's famous obtuseness was, in fact, strategically performed, the intention being to trick the intellectual classes into taking comfort in their own superiority and thereby lowering their guard. However, so intense was the Bureau's interest in literature that they were liable at times to confuse books with real life. On one occasion they arrested everyone who went to a meeting of something called the Tolstoi Club. Those of us who write in less pressured circumstances may have to suppress an envious longing to be taken as seriously as this.

J. Edgar Hoover himself was often directly consulted about black American writing: Maxwell says he was 'expected by some to perform the office later filled by *The Oxford Companion to African American Literature* or the *Encyclopedia Africana*' (p.169). But most of the people who wrote to him about such literature did so in the expectation that he would have it censored. In January 1965, for instance, a Baptist from Fort Worth suggested he ban James Baldwin's novel *Another Country* on the grounds of its portrayal of 'Drug addiction and Sex perversion at its vilest' (p.171). Hoover himself had jotted in Baldwin's file: 'Isn't Baldwin a well known pervert?'

Never content to function as interested bystanders, still less disinterested ones, the G-men became actively engaged in all its fields of interest. They were, on a massive scale, agents provocateurs. So, as well

as being specialist literary critics, members of the Bureau were also producers of original literature, albeit only in pastiche.

‘FBI police-readers spent the final years of the Hoover administration rearming themselves as full-blown police-writers, crafting new tools of active literacy to complement their new encouragement of active violence. Singling out the Black Power phase of Bureau counterliterature, this is to say, was a hunger to speak the foe’s literary language’ (pp.112-13)

Meanwhile, general rumours of surveillance inhibited African American creativity. (Much the same happened to lesbian and gay writers, too.) More than that: many writers started to think of the FBI as their readers. As Maxwell puts it, ‘from the Harlem Renaissance through the Black Arts movement, this literature had every reason to recognise that FBI agents ranked with its most reliable and formidable readers’ (p.222). One paradoxical but logical consequence of this recognition that they might as well actually address their work to the enemy was an adoption of greater transparency – if you like, a more clearly politicised literature. It does not seem hyperbolic, therefore, when Maxwell calls the G-men ‘a readership whose undigested legacy continues to touch African American writing today’ (p.274).

James Baldwin was of especial interest to the Bureau: his FBI file eventually amounted to 1,884 pages. Compare that with Richard Wright’s (276 pages), Truman Capote’s (110 pages), John Steinbeck’s (94 pages) and Henry Miller’s (9 pages). As its title suggests, Douglas Field’s book is a group biography of ‘all those strangers called Jimmy Baldwin’ (Baldwin’s own description of himself). What this boils down to, according to its Introduction, is a focus on a few previously under-emphasised aspects of Baldwin’s life: ‘his life on the Left, his FBI files, and his relationships to Africa, to the civil rights and Black Arts Movements’ (*sic*). Field also proposes to address some major themes of Baldwin’s time: ‘the Cold War, African American literary history, religion, spirituality, and transnationalism’. Finally, he seeks to establish that ‘Baldwin’s ideas and writing – like those of most writers – were often in flux’ (p.3). This scrappy summary of the book’s contents shows quite clearly that it is not going to be a complete biography of one Jimmy Baldwin, let alone all the other strangers. The parts do not amount to a whole.

According to one FBI report, Martin Luther King was put off by the ‘poetic exaggeration’ in Baldwin’s treatment of race issues. This would seem strange, coming from the author of ‘I have a dream!’ Baldwin’s

openness wrong-footed the FBI, too, who could not conceive of a homosexual man who was not blackmailable as such. However, Baldwin did realise that as a spokesman for black Americans he had to tone down his gayness. Various attacks, the worst of which came from Eldridge Cleaver in *Soul on Ice* (1968), left him in no doubt about this.

Field pays judicious attention to Baldwin's faith, putting his critique of white churches in context, detailing his criticisms of black churches for their lack of love, and outlining his call for a return to the values of early Christianity. Interestingly, he combines this analysis with an examination of Baldwin's sexual attitudes, which always included an insistence that, for all its necessary physicality, sex should always include a spiritual component. Even this drew the fire of men you might have expected to be his allies. Ralph Ellison, for instance, said he 'doesn't know the difference between getting religion and going homo' (p.99).

We are constantly reminded of the dialectical energy driving much of Baldwin's fiction, even if the engagement is not always the one most routinely expected of him. Field says of *Another Country* that it 'can be read less as a timely social comment on emerging civil rights tensions ... but more as a reply to prominent critics such as Lionel Trilling, who insisted in the late 1940s that racial matters were subordinate to class as a focus for the novelist' (p.6). That may be why, although the character Rufus is based on Baldwin's friend Eugene Worth, who had encouraged him to join the Young People's Socialist League, Rufus is not described as being on the Left at all. In a great novel that so ambitiously fuses the politics of sexuality and race, Baldwin had determined his own priorities.

Gregory Woods

The City's Love

For one brief golden moment rare like wine,
 The gracious city swept across the line;
 Oblivious of the color of my skin,
 Forgetting that I was an alien guest,
 She bent to me, my hostile heart to win,
 Caught me in passion to her pillowy breast;
 The great, proud city, seized with a strange love,
 Bowed down for one flame hour my pride to prove.

Claude McKay, 1889-1948

The Negro Speaks of Rivers

I've known rivers:

I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than the
flow of human blood in human veins.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young.

I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.

I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it.

I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln
went down to New Orleans, and I've seen its muddy
bosom turn all golden in the sunset.

I've known rivers:

Ancient, dusky rivers.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

Langston Hughes, 1902-1967

Comic at War

Hillary L Chute, *Disaster Drawn: Visual Witness, Comics, and Documentary Form*, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2016, 336 pages, hardback ISBN 9780674504516, £25.95

Hillary Chute puts forward a convincing and comprehensive argument that comics as a medium are perfectly positioned to act as documentary, as a form of witnessing, as a means of engaging and prodding history (particularly war-generated and traumatic histories). The artist is able to enter spaces that have previously gone unreported either due to censorship – there are no photographs from the torture chamber – or because many stories of ordinary lives have simply been ignored because they do not fit snugly into dominant ideologies.

Culture doesn't exist in a vacuum. It is the product of a never-ending struggle to make sense of the world and our lives. If there is one thing that

links all people, no matter what our religion, gender, sexuality or postcode, it is war. We've been kicking the living shit out of each other for centuries for a whole variety of reasons. Therefore a central question throughout *Disaster Drawn* is how war generates new forms of visual-verbal witness. And this is what makes this account so important. It is the first sustained critical study of documentary comics.

To do this, Chute blends a mixture of cultural studies, semiotics (textual analysis), literary theory, case studies, history, and critical theory from the likes of Bernard Latour, Roland Barthes and Judith Butler, to ensure a compact genealogy of her subject matter. Although it is largely accessible in tone, you will have to dip into the dictionary on occasion as it can get a little academic at times, although nothing to put off a confident reader. And if you do get lost there are 80 pages of footnotes offering support.

Chute identifies key artists who specialise in visualising war and death from across the ages in Callot, Goya, Nakazawa, Spiegelman and Sacco. To contextualise her arguments we are provided with key illustrations from each artist, all of which are analysed in precise detail to enable a better understanding of their approach. For example, we are taken back to the Thirty Years War via Jacques Callot's aptly named *The Miseries of War*, which captures the complete disregard for the suffering of others. 'The force of its mode of witness is in its attention to observing and revealing endemic suffering on all sides of war' writes Chute, where even ruthless soldiers are 'subjected to atrocious acts of punishment for committing atrocity'. The dog is not so much chasing its tail but ripping it to shreds. These intimate portraits position Callot as the 'first great reporter-artist'. Chute then shows how Callot's work would influence court artist Goya, whose 83 etchings of atrocities in *Disasters of War* begin with haunting first-person modes of address. 'This I Saw' or 'This is how it happened' send shivers down your spine through their complete casualness.

Disaster Drawn positions contemporary comics as part of a long trajectory of works that have each informed and created new idioms, practices and typologies of expression. To fully understand their significance 'the context of the text must be part of the *reading* of the text'. Let's take 1972, which Chute defines as a crucial moment as this is when both sides of the globe came together to bear witness to the very worst atrocities of warring nations. In the East, Hiroshima survivor Keiji Nakazawa's eyewitness account *Ore Wa Mita (I Saw It)* would spawn 'atomic bomb manga' and break down cultural taboos that had previously induced silence surrounding the subject. While in the West, Art Spiegelman's *Maus* would depict Nazism through a very personal

secondary account of Spiegelman's own family's survival of the Poland death camps.

The reason that this new genre emerged at this historical moment is the previous decades had paved the way forward for greater openness and expression, thanks to the battles fought around identity politics (race, sexuality, gender) as well as growing anti-war protests across the world brought about by the latest war in Vietnam. These issues couldn't be spun or swept under the carpet anymore, thanks to the mass ownership of television, which brought all of this death to glorious life *in colour* on the screen. Critic Michael Arlen (1966) described this mediation as ushering in the 'living-room war', and Chute argues that this led to other countries, particularly Japan, to reflect on the past. It is worth noting, however, as Jean Baudrillard has in his collection of three essays, *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*, that we're become increasingly desensitized to violence and now, instead, we witness stylized, selective misrepresentations of conflict through simulacra. Television may have paved the way forward for documenting certain conversations around war but it now functions as a passive medium.

Comics on the other hand, particularly personalised accounts, bring a more human face to suffering and can push the conversation in new directions. Keiji Nakazawa was six when Enola Gay dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima on 6 August 1945. He was saved because a wall fell on him and protected him from the heat of the blast. His friend's mother, who he had been stood next to, was instantly transformed into a blackened corpse. It was 'violence so extreme it appears abstract'. I've read a lot about survivor guilt, particularly in the work of Primo Levi. But, until reading this book, I had never heard of survivors of an atomic bomb suffering stigmatisation due to cultural anxieties and misinformation. In Japan they are known as hibakusha (bomb-affected people) whereby some survivors are treated like lepers.

Nakazawa's mother was pregnant at the time and out of the city when the atomic bomb was dropped. When she returned home the shock was so much she gave birth there and then on the street. The child didn't last long. His mother died in 1966 and was cremated. It is a Japanese funeral practice, after a body has been cremated, for relatives to select major bones and place them in an urn. Due to the radiation, her bones had disintegrated. There was no tangible evidence left of her. Consequently, Nakazawa has made the atomic bomb the focus of his creative endeavours. His mother has become tangible by documenting her story. He has helped break down cultural taboos by daring to talk about them. He will not be shamed. Phew.

Usually I judge a book by how long it takes me to read it, and *Disaster Drawn* took a staggering five months. Often this would be a bad sign, but there's a more pragmatic reason for my slowness at turning the page. I was so drawn in by stories such as Keiji Nakazawa that I had to pause and go and read his, and the other featured artists, comics. So, through one book for review, I ended up reading 20. Talking of which, *Spokesman* readers may want to try *Hydrogen Bomb Funnies* (1970) by Robert Crumb in which his character, Mr. Sketchum, writes a letter to Bertrand Russell, believing he may like what he has to say. Mr. Sketchum steps out on a glorious hot day and happily marches down to the post box full of hope. I won't tell you the ending. Let's just end on hope.

James Walker

Denial

Janam Mukherjee, *Hungry Bengal: War, Famine and the End of Empire*, C. Hurst & Co, 342 pages, hardback ISBN 9781849044318, £30

This book is not for the faint-hearted. As you progress through the text, feelings of horror, anger and disgust for the hypocrisy and blind indifference of contemporaneous politicians, colonial administrators, local industrialists and military commanders are engendered. We are talking about some five million lives lost and yet the facts surrounding the 1943 famine and its aftermath are hardly touched upon in most biographies of the major players, or for that matter in much historical writing on the period. Surely the number of deaths makes it genocidal in volume: whether it is genocidal in terms of culpability is for the reader to decide.

The primary responsibility for the instigation of the famine must rest with the British War Cabinet which decided to continue, and in fact increase, the export of wheat and rice from India when the situation was already getting grim. The British decision was taken in the context of one of the worst military debacles ever suffered by Britain: the surrender of Singapore and the subsequent occupation of Burma (the latter was the major exporter of rice for the area). The Japanese Imperial army was expected (wrongly) to invade India. At this time the civil government of India was ostensibly in local hands under legislation enacted in 1937, but 'discretionary' powers were retained by the colonial power. No attempt was made to consult when the London War Cabinet instructed Governor

Herbert to institute a 'scorched earth' policy under the euphemism '*Denial*'. The term was used for the seizure of crops in order to deprive the Japanese invader of food, and additionally the destruction or impounding of all boats. The Japanese would then be bogged down in the enormous delta region of the confluence of those two great rivers and their tributaries, the Brahmaputra and the Ganges, without sustenance and without adequate transport. Some 43,000 boats used for fishing, harvesting and transportation were destroyed, thus denying the means of subsistence to thousands of people. Other matters intensified what was rapidly becoming an acute situation with high food prices and with many unable to obtain food from their usual sources. Some 600,000 Indian workers from Burma, fleeing from the Japanese, added to the difficulties. (British personnel had been evacuated weeks earlier.) These workers had to walk with their families hundreds of miles having been abandoned by the British. Additionally, a cyclone hit one district of Bengal causing thousands of deaths, together with possibly as many as two million people made homeless.

Meanwhile, implementation of the *Denial* policy inevitably, in some areas, led to open revolt and many evictions. Consequent disturbances were put down vigorously by the colonial power, resulting in 10,000 deaths and many more imprisonments. Yet the export of rice from India continued apace and the price of foodstuffs went even higher, far too high for the impoverished. Fortunes for some were made by famine conditions and, as Calcutta was a centre of industry and crucial to the war effort (it was also a major transit stop for allied troops), factory workers were given sufficient rations to continue working while the countryside starved. Many factories were owned by Indian merchants and industrialists who, in turn, funded the Congress Party or the Moslem League. By July 1942, the Congress Party was in open revolt, demanding the British compensate boat owners and those peasants who had lost their land and crops during the *Denial* process. Although Ghandi and the Congress leadership advocated non-violent protest, the violence was on a scale not seen since the mutiny of 1857. Ghandi and the Congress leadership were promptly arrested with the former declaring he would fast to death if held in captivity. To prevent him dying in prison, he was released when ill and then arrested again when well. While this was going on colonial officials and the War Cabinet in London debated his fate. Churchill all along was hostile to making any concessions to the people of India. As Leopold Amery, Secretary of State for India, remarked, Churchill knew 'as much of the Indian problem as George III did of the American colonies'. But it was not only Churchill's

knowledge of India that was lacking; his out-and-out racism meant he opposed allowing any substantial shipments of rice or wheat to relieve the appalling suffering and deaths caused by the famine. This was in spite of the appeals of the colonial officials on the ground in India, who tried to make Churchill see the dangers of a potential full-scale rebellion. His rejoinder was that ‘starvation of anyhow underfed Bengalis is less serious than that of the sturdy Greeks’. He is quoted as remarking in one fiery cabinet meeting: ‘I hate Indians. They are a beastly people with a beastly religion.’ All this is carefully documented in *Churchill’s Secret War* by Madhusree Mukerjee (Basic Books, 2010). Our writer, Janam Mukherjee, criticises the above book for glossing over the role of the Indian party leaders and their unresponsiveness to the suffering of the famine victims. The party leaders were heavily indebted to many rich food merchants and home-grown industrial capitalists who made a fortune from war production and the famine conditions.

By early 1943, the famine had taken a real grip of the countryside and thousands of the starving trudged to Calcutta hoping for relief, only to die on its streets. With Churchill still refusing to allow shipping to be earmarked for food relief in anything like the amount needed, the situation was dire. The authorities were overwhelmed by the dead and the dying as the untouchable caste, which traditionally saw to the dead, was depleted by the famine. The Viceroy, the Marquess of Linlithgow, never visited Bengal, and resigned in October 1943 to be succeeded by Field Marshal Wavell. Wavell, accompanied by his wife, visited Calcutta incognito before formally taking up his post, and after viewing what must have been a city of horror, immediately ordered the military to mount relief operations, but it was ‘too little, too late’. By then millions had died.

The agony of the starving was intensified by the endemic diseases of the subcontinent, such as cholera, smallpox, malaria and a variety of intestinal parasites. But the worst feature was the effect of starvation on the mind of the victims, and *Hungry Bengal* gives many heart-rending examples. Of course, the authorities became worried that this state of affairs would have a deleterious effect on the troops in transit and those stationed in India. The authorities were overwhelmed by the sheer scale of the problem, and the disposal of the dead and dying was often left to vultures and dogs, or bodies were thrown into rivers to make their bloated progression.

Scarcity of food persisted throughout this period. Although at its severest in 1943 and 1944, scarcity was still a factor in 1946 when serious conflict between Moslem and Hindu communities broke out. The occasion for rioting in Calcutta was a Moslem ‘Day of Action’ which led to 3,468

corpses needing burial, according to official figures. It is safe to assume that the death toll was significantly greater than that. In fact, corpses were shoved into sewers, rivers and mass graves, or were even left in heaps for birds and animals to devour. The authorities claimed that rioting was stopped in a few days, but a more realistic calculation would make it last significantly longer. At its end, the Hindu and Moslem areas of housing were consolidated into two large blocs. The rioting centred on minority areas, both Hindu and Muslim, where the smaller community enclave was expelled or exterminated by fire, rapine and murder. The Calcutta riot was a clear signpost of what was to come, with even greater slaughter at partition, and the birth of Pakistan. The scars of this period have not been quick to heal and the period since 1947 has seen several wars, leaving the world with a nuclear stalemate between Pakistan and India. The plight of the peasants of Bengal seems relatively precarious to this day and, from time to time, religious rioting takes place in both nations. By far the most worrying of all the tensions between the two countries is their ability to use nuclear weapons against each other.

Hungry Bengal is an exhaustive study of an event that should be universally recognised and remembered as one of the horrific crimes of the 20th century. The book exposes the reality of a country under the tutelage of a colonial power, and destroys the myth that British imperial rule was somehow better than that of other European powers. Those interlocutors who wish to put a gloss on British colonialism need to be reminded of occurrences such as the Bengal famine. This forensic account of these terrible events should enable us to dispel the myths of a benign colonialism.

John Daniels

Alpine

Robert Wainwright, *The Maverick Mountaineer: The Remarkable Life of George Ingle Finch*, Allen & Unwin, 2016, 416 pages, hardback ISBN 9781760111922, £17.99

This fascinating biography by Robert Wainwright ranges across three areas in the life of Australian George Ingle Finch: his exploits as a mountaineer, his personal life, and his career as an innovative scientist and university-based researcher.

Attempts to climb the world's highest mountain are linked in the public

mind to two mountaineers. The first, George Leigh Mallory, disappeared on Mount Everest in 1924 (his body was found on the north face of the mountain in 1999); the second, Edmund Hillary, reached the summit of Everest in 1953. The name George Ingle Finch is much less well known. However, Finch contributed much to the Everest story, having taken part in the 1922 expedition when he became the first climber to reach an altitude of more than 8000 metres.

George Finch was an unorthodox mountaineer. He argued for the use of portable oxygen equipment at high altitudes, as well as introducing down-filled clothing in place of the traditional tweeds favoured by the gentlemen mountaineers of his day. He eschewed the company of professional mountain guides when climbing in the Swiss Alps, a practice frowned upon by the mountaineering establishment of the time, in particular the Alpine Club based in London. Gaining recognition through his ability on routes in the Swiss Alps when he was studying at the Federal High School in Zurich, Finch was soon elected to membership of the Academic Alpine Club of Zurich, a group which made unguided ascents. His weekends were spent, mostly in the company of his brother Maxwell, making ascents of Alpine peaks, and Robert Wainwright includes much detail of Finch's exploits in the Swiss Alps, showing how Finch became a formidable climber, with great ability in snow and ice technique. Finch's notable Alpine ascents brought him to the attention of John Farrar, president of the Alpine Club in London.

Finch was considered for inclusion in the 1921 expedition to Everest, in spite of the doubts held by John Farrar, the expedition leader, about guideless climbers. However, he was rejected on medical grounds. (George Mallory, who had a strong track record of rock climbs in the Alps, did take part.)

The 1922 expedition party included both Finch and Mallory. By way of preparation for this attempt on Everest, Finch spent much time and effort testing the performance of cooking stoves and developing the use of oxygen equipment for high altitude climbing. The use of oxygen in mountaineering was controversial and 'unsportsmanlike', in Mallory's and others' opinion. Nevertheless, Finch went on to prove the value of oxygen during his attempt on the summit with Geoffrey Bruce. It is also worth noting that the two 'big names' — Mallory and Hillary — both used oxygen, as did many other mountaineers in the years following Hillary's successful ascent of Everest. It was only in 1978 that Reinhold Messner and Peter Habeler finally made the first ascent of Everest without oxygen.

After the 1922 expedition, Finch and the Everest Committee had a

strained relationship. The Establishment figures of the Alpine Club and the Royal Geographical Society were more at ease with privately educated graduates of British universities than with George Finch. The secretary of the committee, Arthur Hinks, did not support Finch's inclusion in the 1924 expedition, ostensibly because of Finch's accepting money for lectures. George did not climb in the Himalaya again. However, he continued mountaineering until 1931, when a companion fell to his death during an ascent of the Jungfrau.

Finch's personal life was also remarkable. His first two marriages failed, but at the third attempt he seems to have made things work and that marriage produced three daughters.

Finch's professional life is a story of success in his chosen field of physical chemistry. Indeed, he had a distinguished career at Imperial College, London, where he opened doors to much new knowledge and thinking.

In common with many other unorthodox figures in the climbing world, Finch's life went full circle. In 1959 he was elected President of the Alpine Club. He took more senior appointments in the world of academia. Whether Finch became less of a maverick with age, or whether the Establishment welcomed him with open arms, are questions left open, just as the question of whether Mallory had been to the summit of Everest before he perished remains unanswered.

The Maverick Mountaineer makes a very interesting read.

Peter Massingham

Grazed by sheep

Jones the Planner – Adrian Jones & Chris Matthews, *Cities of the North*, Five Leaves, 2016, 200 pages, colour illustrated, paperback ISBN 9781910170342, £13.99

The Trent Valley is, perhaps, a surprising vantage point from which to survey England's cities of the North. But anyone who enjoyed *Towns in Britain* (Five Leaves 2014) will be familiar with the singular, professional, slightly whimsical, and highly readable commentaries that flow from the pens of Adrian Jones and Chris Matthews (aka Jones the Planner) (see *Spokesman* 126).

This elegant new volume, richly illustrated in colour, takes us to Manchester and Stockport, Sheffield and Wakefield, Leeds and Bradford,

Hull and Newcastle, concluding its tour in Liverpool. These are not places I know well, although I've visited all of them. *Cities of the North* prompts return train journeys northwards from the Midlands, providing the ideal vade-mecum.

Political sub-text underpins precise assessments by an experienced town planner (Jones) and an accomplished local historian (Matthews). That Chris Matthews is also a very talented book designer makes *Cities of the North* a joy to read and handle. Let's visit Leeds, by way of example, specifically Holbeck Urban Village,

'... a distinctive place and a real asset to Leeds. However, its immediate context is business-park-type offices with large car parks, a legacy of the UDC era [Environment Minister Michael Heseltine's Urban Development Corporation, established in the 1980s] and great areas of dereliction, which you could say are the legacy of the policies of neo-liberalism.'

For Jones and Matthews champion sustained urban planning and proper funding of the public realm. They remind us of real civic achievements in sanitation, health, housing, education, and transport, in the days before neo-liberals plundered the public realm. Our cities were made habitable by such provision. Nowadays, typically, education is fractured by the insistence on creating company schools 'limited by guarantee', in place of local authority ones. Some will thrive, but many other schools will sink without local council support, while demand for places continues to rise. Other public services face similar depredations.

By the narrowest of margins, Leeds voted to stay in the European Union, in contrast to Yorkshire's other cities, Bradford, Hull, Sheffield, and Wakefield, which all voted 'out'. Rural Yorkshire, including the old coalfield areas devastated by pit closures, also voted 'out', often by thumping margins. European comparisons remain relevant, as Jones and Matthews highlight Leeds' inadequate public transport and excessive reliance on cars, in contrast to smaller cities such as Nottingham and Sheffield, let alone continental European ones. How will Leeds fare in Brexitland?

A stroll through Holbeck brings us to

'... Temple Mills, one of Leeds' greatest building and one of international importance. It was designed in 1838 by the Egyptologist Joseph Bonomi Junior.'

In November 2015, Burberry announced plans to restore the listed flax mill, weave there, and manufacture trench coats on the site using Yorkshire gabardine cloth. The project has a budget of £50 million. Then, in July

2016, a few weeks after the Brexit vote, Burberry ‘paused’ the project to see how leaving the European Union might affect their business. Will Temple Mills ever work again:

‘The vast weaving shed behind is, unusually, single-storey with a flat roof which was insulated with turf, reputedly grazed by sheep.’ (P97)

Cities of the North is a welcome addition to the growing list of pioneering publishing from the English Midlands.

Anthony Lane

