

Reviews

What Price the Planet?

Al Gore, *An Inconvenient Truth*, Bloomsbury, 2006, 324 pages, ISBN 978-0747589068, £14.99

Steve Jones, *Coral: A Pessimist in Paradise*, Little Brown, 2007, 242 pages, ISBN 978-0316729383, £15.99

Larry Lohman, *Carbon Dating in Development Dialogue*, no. 48, September 2006, 360 pages, Hammarskjold Foundation, Sweden

Colin Leys & Leo Panich, *Coming to Terms with Nature*, *Socialist Register*, 2007, 364 pages, Merlin Press, ISBN 978-0850365788, £14.95

James Lovelock, *The Revenge of Gaia*, Penguin, Allen Lane, 2006, 192 pages, ISBN 978-0713999143, £16.99

It has been said that human beings are the only animals which foul their own nest. The damage we have done to our planet, Earth, is detailed in these books, with due warnings of the destruction that is to come if we do not change our ways. The main threat comes from our insatiable extraction of fossil carbon deposits from the earth's surface to fuel our whole economic system, and the release of these deposits as carbon dioxide into the air and oceans with the consequent global warming. At the same time we are cutting down forests, over-fishing the seas, ruining the coral reefs, polluting the air, turning land into desert, while expanding populations as if the resources of the planet were endless. These are the matters dealt with in these books, but all the authors who, with the exception of Al Gore, are scientific experts in their own fields, regard global warming as the most serious threat, and all see this as primarily the result of human actions. Sun spots and the wobble of the earth on its axis are not regarded as the prime suspects. And yet, one cannot forget that it was only 70,000 years ago that the last ice age ended, and the coming and going of this massive climate change was sudden and no fault of the tiny human population on earth at the time.

The main concern of all these authors is naturally, what can be done in time to avert total human catastrophe. In the much vaunted Kyoto Protocol the governments of the Developed Countries, the main perpetrators of carbon emission, promised to make planned reductions in their emissions. President Bush withdrew the United States from this agreement, since he did not believe in global warming, but the US negotiators had already inserted into the Kyoto Protocol a whole series of measures for a system of carbon trading which would allow the big energy companies to buy exemptions from the planned carbon reductions. These have not been so widely advertised, but they form the substance of the 350 page Swedish study under review and of one of the *Socialist Register* studies. In effect these exemptions make a nonsense of the whole agreement. As one wit put it, it is as if a bigamist or polygamist found an unmarried person or persons of the same sex who were then paid to abstain from marriage so that their illegal

practices could continue. It is in fact worse than this. First, because it is the poor countries which are persuaded to contribute to the rich countries' immunities. Second, because there is no adequate regulation of the bargains, many of which are phoney, and the result is that no actual cuts in carbon emissions are made. The allocation of carbon allowances, so-called 'emission rights' under the Kyoto Protocol, was made to countries at a certain percentage below what they said they were emitting in 1990. Then these rights in Europe were transferred to countries which transferred them to their several industrial sectors, leading in the case of the United Kingdom to annual 'gifts' in excess of actual average emissions over the years 1998-2003 (*Carbon Trading* Table 2. p.89).

When it comes to the *trading* of rights by individual companies, this has been compared to the medieval Christian practice of the sale of indulgencies to offset sins (Achim Brunnengraber of the Free University of Berlin in *Socialist Register*, p.220). Two instruments are provided to states – to issue certificates corresponding to their assigned amount of emissions. Trading is planned for 2008 onwards. One instrument, the Joint Implementation provision (JI), relates to projects involving investment in carbon reducing measures in an industrial country (mostly Eastern Europe) by another such country. The other, the Clean Development Mechanism (CDM), relates to investment in a Developing Country. Several hundred projects were already under consideration by June 2006. Examples of such investments are more efficient power stations, windmills and water power and, most popular, forestation schemes. These investments can then be set as credits against reduction obligations. There are several difficulties about both Joint Implementations and Clean Development Mechanisms. Such investments might have taken place without this incentive and it is not easy to calculate what the actual carbon savings are and how comparable they are to what is being reduced from the investor's carbon emission obligations.

The Swedish study of *Carbon Trading* emphasises an even more serious objection. The United States experience of controlling pollution through marketing devices, on which the Kyoto measures were based, has revealed that in the words of the Heinrich Böll Foundation of Berlin 'the "polluter pays" principle has been turned into "the polluter buys his way out principle".' The result is that emissions markets are only stop-gap measures, structurally biased against the kind of radical change needed to tackle global warming. (*Carbon Trading*, p.117). They do nothing to end the way the capitalist economy is 'locked in', often by state subsidies and by the International Financial Institutions' programmes, to high fossil fuel use – in military spending, untaxed airplane fuel, motorways, out of town supermarkets, centralised power plants, etc. Similarly, the emphasis on trading and markets brings in the whole panoply of financial mediation – jobbers and brokers, consultants and lawyers, insurance and speculation – the very heart of the capitalist system.

The *Socialist Register's* issue on 'Coming to Terms with Nature' is aimed to find a socialist alternative to the dictates of capital. The unsustainable nature of the capitalist system is explored in several essays and the implications of disaster

made clear, but answers are not evident. The trading answer is well disposed of, but nothing put in its place except suggestions of 'far-reaching structural change'. The volume ends with a lament at the failure of 'red' and 'green' forces to work together. The contribution by Frieder Otto Wolf, one-time German Euro-MP, offers a particularly tragic account of the failure of the German Greens to build an eco-socialist national party. A final contribution recognises, however, the limits to 'eco-localism'. The *Socialist Register* editors in the end hope only that the essays will provoke discussion and perhaps rescue the possibility of democratic planning from the 'failed practices of authoritarian communism'.

Al Gore's book, which is beautifully illustrated (but rather irritatingly studded with pictures of him and his family) and now made into a film, describes in detail just what is happening to the planet as a result of global warming, and what will happen if no steps are taken to reduce carbon use, but it has a rather limited list of recommendations. Apart from carbon trading and especially tree planting, he pleads for a more responsible consumerism among individual families. It is hardly the 'catalyst for change' which he hopes for.

Steve Jones, Professor of Genetics at University College London, gave the Reith lectures in 1991 and is the author of several books of popular science. His book *Coral: A Pessimist in Paradise* I have included in this review because of the beauty of his writing, fitting the beauty of its subject, which our pollution of the seas has almost destroyed, but he has no expectation that human folly will cease. The coral reefs, he concludes, 'only remind us that our extinction is as certain as is theirs. Whether it will take place in the slow course of evolutionary time or in the near future, as our own imprudence causes Nature to take her revenge, neither Newton nor Darwin can tell.'

No review of books on the prospects for the planet earth would be complete without mention of James Lovelock's concept of 'Gaia', the Greek earth goddess who gave her name to all the words we have which begin with 'ge'. 'Gaia' for Lovelock is a biosphere which has evolved as an 'active adaptive control system able to maintain the earth in homeostasis' – an equilibrium temperature for organisms' growth and optimum acidity, salinity and oxygen. It is all this which human greed and imprudence are destroying with inevitable dire consequences for the future of the planet and life on it.

Lovelock is a distinguished English scientist, Companion of Honour, author of over 200 scientific papers and three books, who at the age of 86 has written this warning book on 'Why the earth is fighting back and how we can save humanity'. The warnings are spelt out with full scientific evidence, carefully cited mainly from the Inter-governmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). While global warming is accepted as a natural phenomenon between ice ages, human activity from our excessive consumption of energy using up the carbon deposits in the earth's surface is enormously speeding up the process so as to melt down the ice caps, raising sea levels to a height which will flood many of the world's major cities. On top of this we have been polluting the oceans and destroying the earth's forest cover both of which absorbed much of the carbon dioxide (CO₂) released by

the consumption practices of our rapidly increasing population.

Lovelock does not believe that any of the measures being proposed to halt the warming process – by converting from coal, oil and gas to hydro, wind power, solar, hydrogen and biofuels or by tree planting, let alone carbon trading – will work in time to prevent disaster. There is no such thing, he believes, as sustainable development, only sustainable retreat. We have to learn to replace economic growth by economic reduction, but how within the next 30 years? Lovelock sees the only hope in bringing up our children to have faith in a Gaia who expects care and restraint rather than in a God who requires them to be ‘fruitful and multiply and replenish the earth and subdue it’. In the meantime, he says that ‘we should now be preparing for a rise of sea level, spells of near intolerable heat like that in Central Europe in 2003 and storms of unprecedented severity’. ‘The immediate need’, he goes on, ‘is safe and secure sources of energy to keep the lights of civilisation burning and for the preparation of our defences against rising sea levels’. And here he will offend most conservationists by recommending nuclear fission, until our scientists can master nuclear fusion.

Michael Barratt Brown

Attlee's Life

Francis Beckett, *Clem Attlee*, Politico's, 2007, 338 pages, paperback ISBN 9781842751923, £14.99

Francis Beckett's biography of Clem Attlee was first published in 1997. This new edition is very much to be welcomed. It includes a few revisions made as a result of subsequent interviews conducted by the author. They add to the understanding of Attlee's role in the evolution of Labour's policy during his period as Labour leader and as Prime Minister.

Beckett's book is well written and compels attention from the first page to the last. The material for it was well researched, covering the entire period of Attlee's association with the labour movement from the time when he first joined the Independent Labour Party in 1907 until his death some 60 years later. It is a sympathetic biography about Attlee's opinions and actions, but it gives a fair showing to the standpoint of those in the Labour Party who were to his left, notably Aneurin Bevan.

What emerges is a rounded portrait of Attlee as a man with a deep commitment to social justice, a determination to eliminate poverty, deprivation and squalor, and an inclination to the left rather than to the right of the labour movement. He was convinced of the indispensable role of the Labour Party as an instrument of social change within a parliamentary democracy. He was happy with a party structure based fundamentally upon trade union affiliations and individual membership.

Attlee was, nevertheless, influenced by the circumstances of his birth and upbringing. He was born into a well-to-do upper middle class family. His father

was a prosperous solicitor who, in 1906, became the President of the Law Society. In politics his father supported the more radical wing of the Liberal Party. Clement Attlee's childhood was spent in a very comfortable home with the amenities of the time and servants to meet the domestic needs of the family.

Clement Attlee had the education expected by his social origin: attendance at a fashionable public school, Haileybury, followed by admission to and graduation from Oxford University. He became a lawyer, though he had little enthusiasm for legal work.

In 1906 he was introduced to a boys' club in a slum area in Limehouse in the East End of London. It was known as Haileybury House, and had been established by some former pupils of the Haileybury public school to help clergy, who were also Old Haileyburians, and who were active in the area. This introduction to the poverty and deprivation of the East End was to transform Clement Attlee's life and thinking. By 1907 he was working and living in the area. From being a young man with not very strong views he became a socialist and joined the ILP. At that time, the Stepney branch of the ILP had about 20 members.

Attlee had his initiation as a very nervous political speaker at a small open-air meeting in a street in Stepney. His audience consisted of a few ILP members and a very small number of passers-by. Shortly afterwards he stood as an ILP candidate for the Stepney Borough Council. He polled 67 votes. By this time, politics was beginning to dominate his life.

When the First World War began in 1914 Attlee volunteered for service almost immediately. Many active ILP members opposed the war and became conscientious objectors. Attlee's elder brother was a conscientious objector. Attlee's reasons for enlisting were very unusual. He later wrote that he did not accept the cry of 'Your King and Country Need You', nor was he 'convinced of Germany's sole guilt'. On the other hand, he said that it appeared wrong to him to let others make a sacrifice whilst he stood by, especially as he was unmarried. He fought in the army at Gallipoli, was wounded fighting near Suez, and was finally posted to the Western Front in Europe. He was promoted to the rank of Major.

After his demobilisation Clement Attlee returned to Stepney and renewed his activity in the labour movement. In November 1919 Labour won a majority in the municipal elections in Stepney, and Attlee was appointed Mayor of the borough. Shortly afterwards he became the chairman of the Association of Labour Mayors in London boroughs. In 1922 he was elected to Parliament for the Stepney constituency of Limehouse. He was re-elected in 1924 and became a junior Minister in the first ever Labour government. He was again elected in 1929 with a substantial majority, and in 1930 was appointed to the government as the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster. In the following year he became Postmaster General.

In the crisis of 1931, which led to the downfall of the Labour Government, Clem Attlee sided with those who refused to accept cuts in unemployment benefit. He supported the expressed opposition of the trade union movement. The Labour Prime Minister and Chancellor of the Exchequer, together with a number of other

MPs, broke away and joined with the Conservatives and a number of Liberals to form a National Government. It secured a huge majority of more than 500 in the succeeding General Election. Labour was reduced to 46 MPs, of whom only three had Front Bench experience: George Lansbury, Stafford Cripps and Clement Attlee.

George Lansbury was elected as Leader of the Parliamentary Party and Attlee as Deputy Leader. Attlee admired Lansbury and loyally served under him. In 1935 Lansbury resigned after being attacked by Ernest Bevin at the Labour Party conference because of his pacifist response to Italy's attack on Abyssinia. The conference called for sanctions against Italy. This was not supported by either Lansbury or Cripps, but was supported by Attlee.

The 1935 General Election was lost by Labour, though the party increased its representation to 154 MPs. A new leader had to be elected. On the first ballot there were three candidates: Attlee, Herbert Morrison and Arthur Greenwood. Attlee secured the most votes on the first ballot but did not have an absolute majority. Arthur Greenwood was eliminated. On the second ballot Attlee defeated Morrison by 88 votes to 48.

Thus began the final ascent to the future return of a majority Labour Government with Attlee as leader. In 1945 he became Prime Minister after a General Election in which Labour secured an overall majority of 146. It was a memorable and sensational victory. The Conservatives were led by Winston Churchill. Labour's election manifesto called for economic planning, the extension of social ownership, a radical programme of social welfare and the building of affordable houses.

What is the evidence to justify the view – or to contradict the view – that Attlee preferred to lead from the left of centre rather than from the right of centre of the labour movement? There can be no doubt of his very strong views about social security. He became Prime Minister at a time of great economic difficulty at the end of the Second World War, but he was totally committed to bringing about improvements in social welfare. He carried out Labour's programme.

The National Insurance Act, the Industrial Injuries Act, the National Assistance Act, the housing programme and, above all, the introduction of the National Health Service, justified the claim that, in comparison with anything that had existed before, Labour was in the process of establishing a 'welfare state'. This could not have been done without the dedication of the Prime Minister. Moreover, he appointed and supported Aneurin Bevan, the principal figure on the left of the Party, to lead the thrust on health and housing.

One of the principal figures on the right of the Parliamentary Party, and perhaps the principal figure, was Herbert Morrison. It was more than a difference of personality that led Attlee to be wary of him. There were differences of political approach. One of the earliest differences centred on the imprisonment of George Lansbury, the then leader of Poplar Council, who, following the First World War, joined with other Labour councillors in refusing to pay the borough's precepts to the London County Council, then under Conservative control. The Poplar

councillors wanted to use the money to help the unemployed. Attlee supported Lansbury. Morrison, the leader of the neighbouring Hackney Council, denounced Lansbury.

In the second half of the 1930s, Attlee was firm in his support for the Popular Front Government of Spain in its resistance to the revolt of General Franco and the armed assistance given to Franco by the fascist dictators of Italy and Germany. Attlee denounced the British Government for its one-sided policy of so called non-intervention, which made it 'an accessory to the attempt to murder democracy in Spain'.

Up to the year 1936 the constituency representatives on the National Executive Committee of the Labour Party were elected by the whole of the annual conference. This meant, in effect, that the big unions had the predominant influence. Attlee was among those who pressed that the constituencies should elect their own representatives on the NEC. In 1937 this right was granted. For years afterwards – indeed to the present time – this change has ensured the presence of left-wingers on the NEC.

Attlee played a key role in the decision of the 1945 Labour Government to recognise the right of Indian independence. Power was transferred without political or military resistance from Britain. It was an historic step forward.

Attlee's influence was also important, indeed decisive, in preventing the expulsion of Aneurin Bevan from the Labour Party in 1954 after Bevan had led 62 Labour MPs in opposition to the Government's support for nuclear weapons. Arthur Deakin, the then leader of the TGWU, was frustrated in his attempt to exclude Aneurin Bevan.

After these many indications of the left-of-centre influence of Attlee, how was it then, it might be asked, that the Labour Government under the leadership of Attlee committed itself to US leadership in the initial stages of the Cold War? The consequences of this decision – a heavy rearmament programme, a stringent wages policy at a time of rising profits and prices, the introduction of a two-year period of conscription to the armed forces, charges for certain NHS services, brakes on the housing programme and support for German rearmament – led eventually to a strong movement of dissent within the labour movement. It culminated in the resignation of Aneurin Bevan, Harold Wilson and John Freeman from the Labour Government.

The answer to this question is that in 1945 Attlee did not begin his premiership with the intention of being a partisan in a Cold War. Francis Beckett provides evidence in his book that at the beginning of the Cold War Attlee was less responsive to US pressure than the Foreign Secretary, Ernest Bevin. He changed in 1947. He was undoubtedly influenced by Ernest Bevin, whom he admired. Bevin had stood by the Labour Party in 1931-32, and his example influenced the trade union movement. Francis Beckett suggests that from that period Attlee and Bevin were 'soulmates'.

Secondly, Attlee was certainly influenced by Britain's very difficult economic situation in the post-war period. The economic pressure of the US Government

under Truman, and the possible dire consequences for the British economy if the British Government failed to support the US in the 'Cold War' were, no doubt, very much in his mind.

Thirdly, by 1947 it was becoming clear that within Eastern Europe the Soviet Union was determined to consolidate its grip, even to the point of purging communist leaders who did not 'toe the line' on every issue. Other political leaders who were not communists had little or no opportunity for democratic dissent.

For those of us who remain proud of so many of the achievements of the 1945 Labour Government and of the role of Attlee, it is necessary to acknowledge that in the controversies symbolised by the Bevanite movement of dissent, 'Keep Left', it was the dissenters who were right in warning of the dangers of the alignment of Britain with many aspects of US foreign policy.

It is worth adding an important footnote in relation to the attitude of Attlee. According to evidence available to Francis Beckett, Attlee would have preferred Aneurin Bevan to Hugh Gaitskell as Leader of the Party, though he believed it was not possible at the time for Bevan to secure the leadership. Francis Beckett also reveals that Attlee preferred Harold Wilson to Hugh Gaitskell.

J.E.Mortimer

Bukharin's Prison Writings

Nikolai Bukharin, translated by George Shriver, *Socialism and Its Culture*, 258 pages, Seagull Books, ISBN 978 1 90542 222 7, £16.99

Up-to-the-minute capitalist globalism here presents itself at the service of ancient Communism. The Prison Manuscripts of Nikolai Bukharin, written in unbelievable 'medieval' circumstances during his detention prior to the mock trial which sentenced him to death, have been appearing in a series of volumes from different publishers. I reviewed one of these a year ago, but here there appears another, typeset in Calcutta and printed in Kings Lynn. This example of international capitalist co-operation stands in marked contrast (which would have astonished Bukharin) to the troubled evolution of the former Soviet Union. Where, today, is the

'respect and comradeship in the relations between collective farmers of Turkmenistan and those of Ukraine, those of Tajikistan and those of Georgia, those of the Moscow region and those of Azerbaijan, those of Siberia, and those of Birobijan (the Jewish autonomous region in the Soviet Far East) ...'?

It is unfortunately hazardous to believe one's own propaganda too deeply, and this kind of belief is a hallmark of Bukharin's posthumous book. He argues that the mutual respect and comradeship of the farmers

'is evident at the congresses held by collective farmers where the most important decisions are made in common.'

It is true that some collective farms have survived in a relatively healthy condition, especially in Belarus. But the collegiality of decision making withered long since, if it had ever truly existed.

Of course, Bukharin was locked in prison, with no access to research materials, and he had to write from memory. Equally significantly, he was actually writing for a known audience of one, who alone held the power of life and death over him. This was not a time to try to induct Stalin into a more objective understanding of social conditions in the Soviet Union, and of the relative powers of different social groups there. Whatever Bukharin said would have to echo official propaganda in all substantial matters. The only relative freedom of movement would be in matters of high ideology.

Even here, flatulent slogans are by no means avoided.

‘The USSR is showing the world a model of brotherhood and unity among nationalities. This is not the abstract cosmopolitanism of a utopian rationalist who fails to see the real particularities and distinctive features among nationalities ...’

There would soon be time to explore these real particularities when whole nationalities were being deported, very shortly after Bukharin’s own extinction. This trauma had effects which lived on long after the Second World War, and erupted in a series of bloody conflicts in the declining years of the USSR, which persist and indeed get worse.

In short, Bukharin’s parting thoughts have not weathered well. Since they were marshalled under such adverse conditions, it is not really reasonable to expect that they might. Quite aside from any appeal for clemency for himself, which must have been a part of his thinking, even if unstated, these prison writings were certainly aimed at securing a reprieve for his wife and young son, Anna Larina and Yuri. Anna was half his age, and very beautiful. He doted on her. But in fact, Anna had already been sent to the Gulag before these writings were finished, and Yuri was already placed into foster care.

Steve Cohen, Bukharin’s biographer, who describes his valiant efforts to recover the Prison Manuscripts, tells us how Anna and Yuri were reunited, after she had made a prolonged journey through Stalin’s prisons, labour camps and Siberian exile, and after Yuri had spent two decades under a different family name, in various foster homes and orphanages. Brought together again in 1956, they met up with Bukharin’s biographer before the rehabilitation in 1988.

Bukharin was a cultivated man and could be highly persuasive. But he was also capable of lucid analysis and sober political judgement, which qualities are not very evident in these Prison Manuscripts. If Stalin’s purge of the old Bolsheviks was not simply an aberration, then it needed explanation. Evidently this cannot be found in these pages. Attempts to explain would certainly bring down on those who were presumptuous enough to embark upon them, condign punishment.

This was the fate of Trotsky, who was already in exile, and who was, in 1940, murdered by a KGB agent in Mexico (as is now known, with direct support from Moscow). It happens that Trotsky had published, in 1936, his remarkable book on

The Revolution Betrayed. Readers of Bukharin's Prison Manuscripts will be mainly motivated by the desire to understand the poignant tragedy of their author. If they are looking for a real light on the subject of the manuscripts, then they should certainly begin their reading with *The Revolution Betrayed*, however far they may subsequently succeed in going beyond it.

Since 1936 we in the West have also become familiar with another Russian voice, which was not at that time very widely available. This was the voice of André Platonov, a certified 'unstable element' who left the Communist Party in 1921. It was only a year after Bukharin's rehabilitation that saw the publication in the Soviet Union of *The Foundation Pit*, which had been written long before, from 1929-30. A group of workers are digging an immense pit, to lay the foundations of a colossal building, intended to house the local proletariat in its entirety. This, of course, is destined never to be built.

Platonov captures the extraordinary mixture of hope and despair 'by which many ordinary people must have lived during Stalin's revolution from above'. Perhaps those who seek to understand Bukharin's tortured last manuscripts, to do him justice need Platonov as their guide.

Ken Coates

Africa Education

Michael Wolfers, *Thomas Hodgkin: Wandering Scholar*, Merlin Press, 2007, 256 pages, hardback ISBN 9780850365801, £40, paperback ISBN 9780850365818, £16.95

Thomas Hodgkin (1910-1982) was a crusader for the education and advancement of the peoples of Africa and of the developing countries in general and a pioneer in the study of the pre-colonial history of sub-Saharan Africa. In 2000, Thomas' daughter, Elizabeth, and Michael Wolfers published his *Letters from Africa 1947-56*, sent mainly to his wife, Dorothy Crowfoot Hodgkin, O.M., a Nobel chemistry laureate. These represent a fascinating and informed commentary on Africa during the period of the transition from colonialism to independence. Michael Wolfers has now followed this up with a detailed biography of the author of these letters, which provides a gripping account of a life devoted to learning and the cause of human emancipation.

Thomas Hodgkin was a scion of an affluent, intellectual and well-connected family whose roots go back to seventeenth century Cotswold Quakers. His paternal grandfather, Thomas Hodgkin, was a banker and historian, who wrote *Italy and Her Invaders* in eight volumes: his maternal grandfather, A. L. Smith, was a pioneer of the Workers' Educational Association and Master of Balliol College, Oxford; his father, Robin Hodgkin, was Provost of Queen's College, Oxford and a historian, who wrote *A History of the Anglo-Saxons* in two volumes. Family relationships and friendships linked him to establishment figures from

Archbishop William Temple to well-known poets, archaeologists, academics, civil servants and politicians.

After completing his education at Winchester and Balliol, Thomas was appointed to the Palestine Civil Service in 1934, at the time of the British mandate. Having already developed left-wing views, he became increasingly uncomfortable about British repression of the Arabs for opposing unlimited Jewish immigration and resigned his position. Back in London, he joined the Communist Party, participated in demonstrations and wrote for the League Against Imperialism and *Labour Monthly*. He tried secondary school teaching, but decided it was not for him and moved into WEA lecturing – eventually securing a post as a WEA tutor in North Staffordshire in 1939. This brought him into contact with George Wigg, a former regular soldier, who was the North Staffs WEA district secretary.

Thomas' post was regarded as a reserved occupation and he continued in it throughout the Second World War. He helped George Wigg to lobby for Army education and, in the 1945 General Election, took part in the campaign in which Wigg was elected as the Labour MP for Dudley. In return, George Wigg pushed him to apply for the secretaryship of the University of Oxford Delegacy for Extra-Mural Studies, and to promote the university extension course in Africa when he was appointed.

This led to a succession of extended trips to Africa, during the course of which he became familiar with nationalist and religious leaders, businessmen, trade unionists, writers, journalists and others, in addition to initiating higher education on a significant scale. When the Cold War led to anti-Communist witch-hunting, Thomas resigned from the Communist Party in 1949 and from the Oxford Extra-Mural Delegacy in 1952.

He was, however, sufficiently well known as an expert on Africa to support himself by lecturing and writing. In 1956, he produced a widely acclaimed book, *Nationalism in Colonial Africa*. Along with Basil Davidson, he helped lead the way in encouraging the study of African history. His *Nigerian Perspectives*, first published in 1960, with an enlarged second edition in 1975, became a seminal source for historians of Africa. In addition, he wrote innumerable articles and contributed to other books. In 1981, he published *Vietnam: The Revolutionary Path*.

He regarded himself as a Marxist, but he was not dogmatic. Although he rejoined the Communist Party in 1976, after 27 years, it was never at the centre of his activity. He was, however, totally committed to progressive causes. I remember his unflagging support for Liberation's campaign against the execution, detention and ill-treatment of political prisoners by President Nimeiry of the Sudan in the early 1970s.

Michael Wolfers' book is a magnificent record of a fascinating life. In addition to its political content, it provides much information on Thomas' personal idiosyncrasies, his permissive attitudes, his relationships with people in all walks of life, and his extended and talented family. I had difficulty in putting it down before I had finished reading it.

All who are interested in Africa and the developing countries, in historical research and in learning more about this outstanding personality should read this book. I recommend it without reservation.

Stan Newens
with grateful acknowledgements to Liberation

Fire over Fylingdales

Blaise Vyner, *Fylingdales – Wildfire and Archaeology, North York Moors National Park, 2007, 44 pages, ISBN 978 1 904622 14 3, £5.75*

The journey by road from York to Whitby, on the north-east coast of England, takes you over the empty uplands of the North York Moors. At the town of Pickering, a red sign points north towards 'RAF Fylingdales'. Then the road climbs steadily, running beside the great declivity known as The Hole of Horcum, before pitching sharply downwards. There, up on the right, stands a three-sided, truncated, concrete pyramid at the centre of 'RAF Fylingdales'.

Fylingdales provides a major link in the chain that makes up the United States' Ballistic Missile Early Warning System that encircles the northern hemisphere. Other stations in the system are at Thule in Greenland and Clear in Alaska. Fylingdales sends data directly to US Space Command in Cheyenne Mountain, Colorado Springs. It also forms part of a growing network comprising the globally dispersed anti-ballistic missile system which the US is developing apace, following President Bush's unilateral withdrawal, in 2002, from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty which his country had concluded with the Soviet Union thirty years earlier.

In September 2003, the North Yorkshire base was almost engulfed. A wildfire swept across Fylingdales Moor, burning everything in its path. Amidst the ashes of the vegetation was revealed a variety of ancient features. These included examples of 'rock art' – rocks decorated with cup-marks and other motifs – some of them dating from the late Neolithic period, 5,000 years ago.

'The wildfire presented both an opportunity and a challenge,' according to Blaise Vyner, the author of this short account published by the North York Moors National Park. 'The opportunity was to record the detail of the archaeology: the challenge was to do this before the urgent regeneration of the vegetation.' Now, according to the author, the overall detail of the archaeology of Fylingdales Moor is better known than anywhere else on the North York Moors. Before the fire there were some 150 known archaeological sites; now there are more than 2,000.

The fire left a blackened moonscape. This is graphically represented in an exhibition at Whitby Museum called 'Fire Over Fylingdales', for which project this short guide has been produced. Blackened wood from the Moor forms naturalistic sculptures. In amongst the photographs of stranded leverets and displaced hawks there is one of the 120 foot high pyramid, which houses a solid-

state phased-array radar (SSPAR) with a range of 3,000 miles. Above it flies a Spitfire aircraft, commemorating earlier campaigns. The background is suffused with orange. The wildfire came very close to the base.

Whose ballistic missiles might Fylingdales give early warning of? In 2002, members of Subterranea Britannica, 'a society devoted to the study and investigation of man-made ... and man-used underground places', toured the site. An informative account of their visit posted online (www.subbrit.org.uk) records that:

'Our hosts ran a tape of a missile launch from the Barents Sea which had been recorded some time earlier and we were able to see the plot appear on screen and follow the drill and identification of the object to validation point. We all asked heaps of questions and were told that there had not been a validated launch call for at least three years although one was made some time ago when a Soviet Typhoon class submarine launched a test missile from the polar ice cap towards Russia. Normally all sides involved in test launches of ballistic missiles notifies (sic) everyone else so as not to cause false alarms of attack. On this occasion the Russians hadn't informed anybody and tensions were said to have been "high".'

More tense moments at RAF Fylingdales look likely as the US pushes ahead with plans to extend its missile defence network by upgrading the facility at Fylingdales itself, while constructing a completely new radar in the Czech Republic and installing interceptor missiles in Poland. The Pentagon has also expressed a wish to place a radar base in the Caucasus. In response, the Russians are testing new long-range ballistic missiles which they say can beat the interceptors.

During the long history of human habitation on Fylingdales Moor, the fortress erected around RAF Fylingdales surely marks a low point.

Tony Simpson

Why do we still have a Bank of England?

Andrew McDonald (editor), *Reinventing Britain: Constitutional Change under New Labour*, Politico's Publishing, 2007, 288 pages, hardback ISBN 978-1842752081, £19.99

Reinventing Britain is the timely publication of a series of essays investigating constitutional change under New Labour. No sooner is this handy review of the range of constitutional changes brought in under the Blair administration published than the incoming Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, publishes a green paper entitled 'The Governance of Britain', promising a debate on the possibility of a written British constitution and Bill of Rights and granting Parliament the right to vote on legislation arising from international agreements such as the recently agreed European Union amending treaty.

In terms of quantity, the legislative work pursued since 1997 amounted to 41

separate pieces of legislation, not including that pertaining to Northern Ireland. Looking at this workload one is struck by the fact that it difficult to view it as a discernible programme underpinned and steered by an overriding idea of what should constitute a constitution for a 21st century nation state. Three themes do appear: the decentralisation of power through, in the case of Scotland and Wales, devolution; the rights of citizens combined with a more open society; and, almost as an add-on, the reform of the judiciary.

The lack of an overarching idea of the direction the reforms were to take taxes Lord Falconer of Thoroton QC in the foreword where he explains that 'it is egalitarianism that that has shaped our approach to constitutional reform. It is no longer acceptable that hereditary peers should dominate the House of Lords'. Fine words as long as you leave your brain in idle and pass by the thought that Lord Falconer owes his position to the pernicious system of patronage, which has been ruthlessly exploited by his former school chum and flatmate Tony Blair. In typical unabashed New Labour fashion he tells us that 'Our ambition (Old Fetesians, I presume) was to leave behind the politics of division and to nurture an egalitarian society'. What he didn't explain was that their way of doing this would be to dissolve the Labour Party as the traditional champion of the class of the politically dispossessed.

Whilst not disagreeing with the argument that society should be underpinned by a commitment to human rights, New Labour's love affair with this concept is, I'm afraid, based on the neoconservative view of individual rights which, happily for them, is designed to atomise any possibility of organising a collective response to a social wrong.

Devolution has provided us with an interesting case study. Who would have thought, even one year ago, that Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland would be governed by executives containing nationalists. The curse of Mr Blair's sofa extended far and wide such that his cosy behind-the-scenes dealing with the devolved executives, when they were run by Labour, has brought into relief imperfections in the constitutional settlement. A recent front page in the Scottish newspaper *The Herald* illustrates the point with the headline 'Warning to Labour MPs over "wrecking the Union"'. The strong words from Jack Straw, Westminster's Justice Secretary in charge of constitutional matters, who warned his English parliamentary colleagues that they were on 'very dangerous ground', illustrate alarm that not only are David Cameron's Conservatives raising the so-called English Question early into a Brown premiership, but so also are Labour MPs south of the border. What is more, it is a devilishly difficult problem to solve. In England the problem is perceived to be the unfairness of Scottish MPs voting on purely English matters, which are now devolved. Plus there is the fact that the so-called Barnett Formula, which divides tax revenues within the United Kingdom between the devolved nations, is perceived to be unfair. In Scotland the SNP has undoubtedly attracted the radicals on which Labour has historically relied for its majorities simply because New Labour has been ignoring their demands in order to woo the voters in England, who will now be the ones most likely to be

whipped up by the *Daily Mail* and *Telegraph* over what they perceive as an unfair distribution of mainly English tax revenues.

Brown's response to this 'Gordian' knot is nothing more than a smoke screen. Elements of his plan to deliver a new 'constitutional settlement' for Britain have been designed to ensure that he cannot be accused of being a Scottish prime minister influencing and controlling key parts of the English establishment, ranging from the Church of England to senior positions in England's ancient seats of learning.

One also has to question New Labour's past record on openness and reform within the Party. The Party's Policy Forums are designed to be held behind closed doors. No votes are taken, and the outcomes are invariably identical to the executive paper on which they started the discussions. The so-called Warwick agreement with the trade unions is a case in point. Agreed to get money from the unions before the 2005 election, and buried without even a decent funeral after the elections.

There is no doubt that *Reinventing Britain* is a handy reference base for locating the setting-off point for Brown's grandly titled 'The Governance of Britain', but closer examination of the latter document does not excite. For instance, on sending troops into armed conflict the reality will be that government whips will prevail. A pre-Queen's Speech debate will most likely mean the Government will still push its programme through. A written constitution will follow the logic of the British position regarding the European Union Charter of Rights with little for the labour movement to cheer about. I could go on but it is important to note that a new web site has appeared in Scotland under the banner 'Constitutional Convention'. Devolution has always been considered to be a process in Scotland, or North Britain, as Gordon Brown may soon prefer to call it. But if he is so keen on Britishness, why do we still have a Bank of England, and why are agreements with Ireland always Anglo-Irish?

Henry McCubbin

Second World War

Harry Ratner, *A Socialist at War: In the Pioneer Corps, Socialist Platform Ltd, BCM 7646, London WC1N 3XX*

Harry Ratner enlisted in the Pioneer Corps during the Second World War, and here records a most unusual memoir. He believes that the pioneers have had a bad press, and is anxious to put the record straight on this matter. But Harry was also a Trotskyist, who believed the war to be an imperialist undertaking on both sides, so that his point of view was unusual to say the least. It certainly complicated his life at the time, but he has no regrets about that, in spite of the fact that he has changed his opinions about Trotskyism, and, indeed, Marxism. From his independent standpoint, he records a strikingly objective picture, engaging in its

honesty. The colonels will not want the Corps to be celebrated by so unconventional an historian, but there may be many others who can replace them as avid readers.

JP

Belltoons

Steve Bell, *My Vision for a New You*, Methuen in association with Guardian Books, 164 pages, hardback ISBN 9780413775933, £12.99

‘You can be successful just like Tony Blair. Use this guide and you can reach your goals. Don’t and you won’t. Steve Bell dreamed up this book based on long imaginary conversations with Britain’s [once] most powerful man. In his day job Steve Bell is an award winning political cartoonist for The Guardian.’

So reads the blurb for Steve Bell’s eighth collection of cartoons, some of which decorate this issue. Readers of *The Spokesman* will, of course, already be very familiar with his work. We gladly celebrate this addition to the list.

TS

