

Reviews

Life in the Anthropocene

Ian Angus, *Facing the Anthropocene – Fossil capitalism and the crisis of the world system*, Monthly Review Press, 2016, 278 pages, paperback ISBN 9781583676097 \$19, hardback ISBN 9781583676103 \$95, ebook LCCN 2016014078 \$16.15

That the Earth's climate is changing is now beyond dispute: when exactly the changes started is a matter of ongoing scientific investigation and discussion. In this comprehensively detailed book, Ian Angus gives a forensic historical overview of how we arrived at this perilous state and looks at the kind of movement that is needed to combat these deepening disastrous changes in the biosphere. Firstly, we must recognise that the Holocene, typified by interglacial activity, but only slight temporary temperature changes, has come to an end. We are in a new geological phase, the Anthropocene, where Man has become the force driving profound changes in the biosphere. *Facing the Anthropocene* is about the processes involved in the discovery, causation, likely effects, and social ramifications of the present.

In his Foreword, John Bellamy Foster opines that we can probably date the Anthropocene from the period starting with the 'fallout of radionuclides from nuclear weapons' — explosions which commenced in 1945. Prior to this there had been a steady growth in the amount of CO₂ in the atmosphere from increasing industrialisation powered by steam. After the depression of the 1920s and 1930s, which had been the precursor of world war, turmoil and mass poverty, the populace was appeased with higher consumer purchasing power and the superstructure it needed. Many economists refer to this as the 'Golden Age': for the climate scientist it is the 'Great Acceleration'. This is the point at which Man's interference with the biosphere reached a qualitatively different level. Increasing use of chemicals and plastics plus mass car ownership meant a massive increase in the exploitation of all kinds of fossil fuel-based processes. This brought about the consequent release of millions of tonnes of CO₂, which now form a *Sword of Damocles* hovering over our heads. Not content with one potentially world-embracing catastrophe, we also have the ever-present threat of nuclear annihilation. The author draws attention to the US military budget in 2015, which was \$598.5 billion (by 2020 it had risen to \$778 billion, *SIPRI*) — the total world expenditure on defence, calculated by the Transnational Institute, was \$1.7 trillion. Weapons and systems used

by the military require an inordinate amount of fossil fuel and constitute some 10 per cent of the total world CO₂ output.

During the 19th century, some thinkers showed scientific concern over increases in CO₂, but they were few in number. Marx and Engels had a lot to say about Man's relationship with nature, influenced by Justus von Liebig, the German scientist, and Charles Darwin amongst others. In 1895, the Swedish chemist Svanti Arrhenius* calculated that doubling the amount of CO₂ in the atmosphere would lead to an increase in world temperature of between 5° and 6° centigrade. Based on his calculations the Earth would take some 3,000 years to reach this level. However, present scientific knowledge would point to those temperature levels being reached in only 125 years! In the early 20th century, the Soviet geologist Alexei Petrovitch Pavlov named the present period the Anthropocene, because it was Man that Nature had to bend the knee to*

Two graphs on pages 44-45 of *Facing the Anthropocene*, showing *Earth Systems Trends* and *Socioeconomic Trends*, go a long way to making the case for the author's assertion that the so-called *Golden Age* of capitalism took the interference with nature to a new level with a massive increase in CO₂ and other greenhouse gases. The graphs also show that, whilst the Industrial Revolution of the 19th century did increase greenhouse gases, it is the period after 1945 that made the difference.

It took some time for the world of geological climatology to adapt to a new geological time-period, but by 2008 it was generally accepted that the Holocene had been overtaken by the Anthropocene. The question was, if there was a new geological era, when did it begin and what was the likely result? The graphs go a long way to answering the question — all show a massive increase in CO₂ and other greenhouse gases after World War Two. Marx, who puzzled about the fate of capitalism and of the planet, utilised the Hegelian dialectic that quantity could turn into qualitative change. This is particularly relevant when it comes to climate change. The increase in CO₂ together with other greenhouse gases cause a qualitative difference, so that the quantity of emissions reaches a 'tipping point' and the biosphere is dramatically changed. This bodes dire consequences for mankind but also for mass extinction of flora and fauna.

A catastrophe or tipping point was narrowly averted by the observation of two scientists (James Lovelock and Paul Crutzen) that the protective ozone layer of the atmosphere was being eroded by the action of chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs). CFCs were used in a variety of products

*Sofia Andrade, *Slate*, July 27th, 2021

(particularly refrigerators and aerosol sprays) since their discovery in the 1930s. It was intervention by the scientific community which prevented a worldwide catastrophe. Unfortunately, the closing of the ozone hole appears to have been only a temporary respite as it seems to have grown in size with the latest reports stating that the hole is slightly larger than the size of Antarctica.* The problem posed by warming of the Earth's biosphere is much greater.

Whilst various august bodies, both scientific and governmental, continue to warn of impending catastrophe, and governments continue to lay down stipulations to keep any increase below the 1.5° to 2° centigrade level, things continue much as before. As *Facing the Anthropocene* states, the average temperature obviously does not correspond with the actuality of individual areas. The temperature will be different in various locales and at different times of the year, but this doesn't invalidate or fail to give an insightful understanding of what is going on. Chapter 6 delves into this question in some detail, discussing the 'increase in mean temperature' and the 'increase in variance'. This demonstrates that, whatever the area considered, there is always a tendency to show an upward historical rise over the last 200 years. The world is getting hotter, and the pattern is one where temperature is skewed to extremes of heat: glacial melting and the outbreak of forest fires are examples. The seriousness of the situation is highlighted by the *World Health Report* which estimates that, in the period 2030 to 2050, heat will cause 'millions of additional deaths'.

In 1856, Karl Marx was in earnest when he discussed the transformation of many of the cyclical replenishments of the world's natural resources. He compared capitalism to the pagan empires who 'would not drink the nectar but from the scores of the slain'. Truly capitalism is consuming itself. To maintain growth and increase profit, capitalism must constantly grow, as David Harvey has explained:

'That means a total expansion of the total output of social labour. Without that expansion there can be no capital. A zero-growth capitalist economy is an illogical and exclusionary contradiction. It simply cannot exist.'

Seventeen Contractions and the End of Capitalism, 2014

Marx was influenced by the German scientist Justus von Liebig, who carried out an exhaustive study of the reasons for the loss, over time, of fertility of the soil in England. Justus von Liebig can rightly be called the

**Guardian, Helena Horton, Thursday 16 September 2021*

father of organic farming. Earth's flora and fauna, geology and atmosphere were to be seen as cyclical and interactive. He brought a different conception of the dynamics of nature, and this is what capitalism destroys. *Facing the Anthropocene* (Part One) documents the many ways capitalism, past and present, causes this destruction.

Destruction of the Earth's biosphere and its immediate effects are by no means universally felt by the world's population. The effects of desertification, use of nitrogen fertiliser, dumping of huge amounts of plastics, noxious chemicals and metals, together with burning fossil fuels, all have a much greater impact proportionately on the populations of the South and the poor of the Northern hemispheres. For example, flooding mainly affects the poor and women and children are the main casualties. Hurricane Katrina laid bare the structural divide and inequalities in American society. Capitalism in its manic drive for growth creates a surplus of labour who are pushed to the economic side-lines. As David Harvey states:

'Death from starvation of exposed and vulnerable populations and massive habit destruction will not necessarily trouble capital . . .'

The author of *Facing the Anthropocene* is convinced that capitalism is incapable of introducing the necessary changes to the economy to halt the oncoming climate catastrophe. The book reports the case of climate expert Gus Speth who was senior environmental advisor to both Presidents Carter and Clinton, who has been convinced by his experience in government that the capitalist state is not willing to face the facts of climate change.

Part Two of *Facing the Anthropocene* is devoted to the alternative that needs to be implemented — 'Ecosocialism and Human Solidarity'. The pursuit of 'growth' must be replaced by what Angus calls 'substantive equality', so that altruistic aspects of the human character would apply. He mentions that, on many occasions when disaster strikes, one of the first reactions is to help others. The dystopic alternative of a 'survivalist future', where the super-rich use their wealth to escape the results of their actions, is too horrific to contemplate. Some ideas of a future society are set out and Michael Lebowitz's *Charter for Human Development* is quoted, in which is spelt out the particular need for equality between the North and South. Some 28 per cent of the land surface of the Earth is the living area of 'indigenous peoples' and they have a vital role in the preservation of these areas. They have lived in these places for generations and know how to care for and protect them. Indigenous peoples could enhance discussion at the highest levels, with governments and environmental

movements.

A quote from Naomi Klein sets the scene for the most difficult aspect of climate change and threatened mass extinctions — ‘Only mass social movements can save us now’. We need to build these mass movements and we may not have much time to do it! Angus does, however, give some pointers to what such movements could be constructed from. They have to be ‘pluralist’. He remarks in this context that the history of narrow Marxist groups has not led to mass movements, far from it. The attempt to construct the required mass movements cannot be based on a strict doctrinal adherence, but should be formed through united action. We should seek to broaden our evaluation through taking account of political changes and altered scientific knowledge. Movements, large and small, need to join. They should be resolutely anti-imperialist and internationalist. Angus takes a passing swipe at Marxist ‘immobilism’, reinforcing the need for political action, not doctrinal purity. He defends Marxism as an active political theory that provides tools to analyse and act upon that intelligence.

It is time for action. In August 2021, the *Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change* (IPCC) delivered its report on the Earth’s climate. It makes for harrowing reading. If emissions continue at the same rate we will have doubled CO₂ levels by 2100, causing an average increase of 3° centigrade, which would have terrible consequences for life on Earth. If there is an increase in emissions, then a few decades would be enough to bring about cataclysmic change. The *UN 26th Climate Change Conference* (COP—Conference of Parties) was held in Glasgow in late 2021. It fell badly short of the radical measures required to halt further deterioration. *Facing the Anthropocene* is a major contribution to the exposition of the science of climate change for the layman, and a rallying cry to mass all the oppositional movements so desperately needed.

COP26 has been and gone and to quote Adam Sobel, Professor of Earth and Environmental Sciences at Columbia University, in the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* (19/11/2021), the ‘United States bears a disproportionate fraction’ for its failure to offer real hope for zero fossil emissions. If one looks at the history of attempts to halt emissions, at every turn the US has torpedoed such efforts. The Republican domination of the House of Representatives has ensured this failure, but even with the Democrats in charge, Sobel fears the worst. He calls the outcome of COP26 ‘infuriating, depressing, miserable’: George Monbiot is more direct, describing it as a ‘suicide pact’. It looks as if capitalism really has sown the seeds of its own destruction.

John Daniels

'They can find me in all my books'

Joyce Morgan, *The Countess From Kirribilli*, Allen & Unwin, 2021, 344 pages, paperback ISBN 9781760875176, AUD \$32.99 (UK Kindle edition £7.34)

Writing a biography of Elizabeth von Arnim has its challenges. The enigmatic popular author was notoriously guarded when it came to her private life. 'Elizabeth wanted as little known about herself as possible,' Joyce Morgan writes in *The Countess From Kirribilli*: so much so that von Arnim's first book, *Elizabeth and Her German Garden* (1898), was published anonymously. Her subsequent books were simply accredited to the author of the first, and 15 of her eventual 21 books had already been published before she consented to give her first press interview in 1926. And then what did the disarming author say? That she did not understand the public's hunger for information: 'But *why* should they know? What is there to tell them anyhow?' she complained: 'They can find me in all my books.' The interviewer colluded over the tea table, writes Morgan, and the resultant article revealed little about Elizabeth's life not already known in a piece 'long on flowery descriptions... and short on insight' (p. 233). The same cannot be said for Morgan's book, which is a welcome addition to the handful of biographies already written about Elizabeth since her death in 1942; particularly the first, *Elizabeth of the German Garden* (1958), written by Elizabeth's daughter, Liebet, under the pseudonym Leslie de Charms, and Jennifer Walker's 2013 book of same name, subtitled *A Literary Journey* (re-released on Kindle this year).

Morgan's book has a very different flavour to its predecessors. Where the first offers both the benefits and drawbacks of having been written by a close relative, and the second is a detailed study peppered with literary insight gleaned from the relatively recent scholarly examination of von Arnim's work, this new biography celebrates Elizabeth's standing as a successful popular author – or, as Morgan describes her, 'the mysterious and free-spirited literary sensation who beguiled the world'. It is clearly aimed at a wide audience, from those already familiar with Elizabeth to those with only a cursory awareness of her writing; in the spirit of which it skips along apace through her formative years, her first marriage at age 23 to the 37-year-old widower Count Henning August von Arnim-Schlagenthin, and the delivery in quick succession of three of their eventual five children, to arrive (on page 44) at the publication of her first book at the age of 32.

Readers familiar with Elizabeth's story might not be surprised at this. Information concerning her early years is scarce and rather dependent on the journals and letters of her father who was prone to wanderlust, leaving the family on several occasions in the care of his wife for months on end while he travelled unencumbered. New readers, on the other hand – particularly those attracted by the allusion to Elizabeth's Australian roots in its title – might well be disappointed to find that though she was born on 31 August 1866 in Kirribilli, New South Wales, to London-born merchant Henry Herron Beauchamp and his Tasmanian-born wife, 'Louey' Lassetter (and, incidentally, christened Mary Annette, not 'Elizabeth' which became her penname), the whole family leave the antipodes for England (page 6) and Elizabeth never returns. Indeed, Morgan says Elizabeth 'did not retain any particular affection for Australia' and did not 'claim to be an Australian' (page 264). Perhaps this influenced Morgan's decision to relegate her maternal family history to an appendix when it is neither overlong nor would have made the book top heavy had it been included in the first chapter.

Once Elizabeth's pen starts to flow, however, so does this book. Morgan captures the excitement around publication of *German Garden* and press speculation as to the identity of its anonymous author. Though the decision to publish anonymously was necessitated by Elizabeth's position as the wife of a Prussian count, it quickly became an asset, giving the budding author freedom to express with acerbic wit her urbane observations that led reviewers to draw comparisons with Jane Austen and prompted writer Frank Swinnerton to comment that, though whimsical, her books were 'far from innocuous' (page 41). 'She mined her life for the raw material from which she constructed situations, characters and incidents,' Morgan explains (page 40), recognising this as a paradox in one whose desire for privacy bordered on secrecy.

The setting of Elizabeth's first two books was her own home – the remote Pomeranian *schloss*, Nassenheide, that Henning inherited from his father. All inhabitants and guests she considered fair game; most notably, her husband, who appears simply as the Man of Wrath and to whom she dedicated her second book 'with some apologies and much love' (page 47). The arrival soon after its publication of two soon-to-be-very-well-known authors – E. M. Forster, followed by Hugh Walpole – as tutors for their children, provides early evidence that her penchant for teasing – tormenting, even – was not merely restricted to print. Elizabeth has three moods, said Walpole: Charming – 'like her books only more so'; Ragging – 'Now she is unmerciful – attacks you on every side ... until you are

reduced to idiocy'; and Silence – 'the most terrible of all' (pages 76-7).

Morgan relays all this without attempting to explain, sugarcoat, analyse or interpret. She makes effective use of Elizabeth's private journal to describe events that informed and influenced her writing. Many of Elizabeth's books tackled issues pertinent to women of her time: 'she repeatedly challenged women's position in society as well as marriage and domesticity as a woman's life goal,' Morgan tells us (page 59), giving nothing more than the briefest sketch of their plotlines and avoiding analysis that can be found elsewhere. Morgan also draws from the journal evidence of Elizabeth's perpetual self-doubt in her writing abilities ('Mixed feelings – chiefly disgust' (page 47)) – a demon she struggled with throughout her career – which is juxtaposed effectively with the largely positive reviews of her books. After Henning's death in 1910, Morgan notes, Elizabeth symbolically 'shed the outer skin of Mary; the name she had been given at birth' and took on the name of her fictional creation, both publicly and privately as she increasingly moved in London's literary and social circles.

The widowed Elizabeth sold Nassenheide and built herself a chalet in the Swiss mountains where she could write and entertain and where her conflicting need for company and solitude constantly clashed. Friendship with cousin Katherine Mansfield, a tempestuous relationship with H. G. Wells, and disastrous marriage to Bertrand Russell's older brother, Frank, followed. Here in particular – if not, indeed, through much of Elizabeth's adult life – Morgan had paths to navigate as dicey as the one leading to Elizabeth's chalet door which she mercilessly mocked Frank's objection to, with plenty of opportunities to slip up: the 'embroidered and fabricated' (page 276) version Elizabeth presented of her life in her autobiographical *All the Dogs of My Life* (1936); the frankly saucy and possibly exaggerated tale of their affair written by Wells and published posthumously as 'The Episode of Little e' in *Wells in Love* (1984), and a 1986 biography containing errors and embellishments that would have horrified Elizabeth, which Morgan, discretely, does not name. On the whole, Morgan manages well, correcting errors and highlighting differences between these published accounts and Elizabeth's private journal. Occasional slips (Frank 'dabbled with cocaine' (page 108) and 'ran munitions factories' during the Great War (page 159)) are forgivable, given the magnitude of others she effectively sidestepped. As Frank Russell's biographer, I admit, I approach new accounts of their relationship written by Elizabeth enthusiasts with a certain amount of trepidation. This one is essentially fair; yet perhaps their mutual attraction might have been more

understandable if Frank's more appealing tastes and qualities had been recognised. All the men in Elizabeth's life appear here as rather shadowy figures: Henning is the Prussian Count, Frank the Wicked Earl – necessary shorthand, perhaps, but potentially misleading – and the relationship with her father, so influential, is not examined. Surely Elizabeth's comment that she needed a war and a second marriage to really grow up, and her subsequent very different relationship with publisher Alexander Frere, invite greater inquiry. Likewise, passing friendships – such as with Bertie Russell, who played an important part in Elizabeth's life (as she did in his during his incarceration in Brixton Prison) as her marriage with Frank fell apart – are fairly quickly dispatched. This is in keeping with the pace of the book, but may well leave readers wanting more. Morgan mentions but does not comment on Elizabeth's habit of revisiting old haunts – even those with bad memories. Elizabeth falls silent, she tells us, in the darkest moments of her life; and Morgan makes no attempt to intrude. As such, one is left with the impression that this is a biography that might have delved deeper but is nevertheless thoroughly entertaining, and one of which Elizabeth herself might well have approved: plenty enough levity; just enough barbs. 'They can find me in all my books'? They can certainly find her here.

Ruth Derham

Author of *Bertrand's Brother* (Amberley, 2021)

Otherwise is Tyranny

Brenda Hale, *Spider Woman – A Life*, Bodley Head, 2021, 288 pages, hardback ISBN 9781847926593, £20

Women are equal to everything – *omnia feminae acquissimae* is the motto beneath the coat of arms of BRENDA MARJORIE BARONESS HALE OF RICHMOND. The emblem reflects succinctly the flavour of this highly enjoyable autobiography. Born in a small village near Richmond in Yorkshire, it shows four pictures of the castle. This is where she grew up, a very clever child in a close community. Her remarkable career is represented by four scrolls, from reading law at Girton College, Cambridge, and as a practising lawyer first in Family Courts, then Courts of Appeal, to the House of Lords, and finally the Supreme Court. Julian, her husband, is recognised as her 'frog prince' and, finally, her importance and status to us all is recognised by a crown.

There is no spider on the coat of arms, as this became an informal

emblem only after Baroness Hale's famous declaration, on 24 September 2019 amidst inconclusive Parliamentary debates about Brexit, that Prime Minister Boris Johnson's advice to the Queen to prorogue the Westminster Parliament was unlawful and therefore null and void. That event was definitely the main reason I was very keen to hear her talk at Sheffield's Off the Shelf book festival on 31st October 2021. She spoke quietly and simply, covering the many decades of a fascinating life in a way which brought alive how she dealt with each change, knock-back, development in a way that had no egoism, and left me unsurprised that she had reached the highest legal position in the UK making virtually no personal enemies, but with countless admirers. I am several years older than Brenda Hale, and listened avidly to her responses to the interviewer, which consistently stressed her championship of the role of women. At the end, I asked when she had first considered herself a feminist. Towards the end of the 1970s was her clear and confident answer.

Her book is eminently readable. I empathised with her description of the majority of the staff at Richmond Grammar School as 'long serving maiden ladies', and enjoyed the way she described her history teacher's supposed reaction to her wanting to read law, not history, at Girton College, Cambridge, because she was not clever enough, emphasising that she had enjoyed the challenges between King and Parliament in the 17th century so much that she knew exactly why she chose law.

At Manchester she was called to the Bar. Her irreverence for so much of the formalities of our judicial system was in evidence from the beginning. As she described in a letter to her mother,

'I must admit to having as yet little respect for the early stages of becoming a barrister ... the activities leading up to it are expensive, irrelevant, and either boring or embarrassing! Seems a pity. Still it's nice to have it all over, and if anyone else read that last paragraph, I would probably be disbarred.'

She accurately describes the everyday discrimination she experienced in the 1960s, and was inspired by Anthony Lester and Geoffrey Bindman's groundbreaking book, *Race and Law* (1972) to embark on a project that eventually became a book, *Women and the Law*, in 1984. Her daughter Julia was born in 1973 as feminist writers such as Ann Oakley (*The Sociology of Housework*, 1974) were becoming more prolific. Brenda Hale became increasingly keen to challenge the male dominance within the legal profession.

Throughout her autobiography, Brenda Hale doesn't make the cause of

equal opportunity into an 'ism'. Instead, it simply becomes part of her work in public life and the Courts, as she sets out in detail actual cases in matrimonial and family law where her experience and judgment has either taught her new lessons or allowed her judgments to bring about a significant change. This approach makes her descriptions of the driest of legal arguments thrilling and interesting to read by anyone, whether versed in legal practice or not. She says of her writing style, *'I always tried to write in clear accessible language, and to use as few words as I could.'*

As a Law Commissioner within family courts she worked very hard with a built-in passion for equality that runs throughout. Status of any individual concerned in a case is not the point, making the 'rightness' of the decision the paramount factor. *'A large part of my job was persuading the other commissioners to agree with what the family-law team were proposing,'* she explains, since the commissioners' decisions are made collectively. The family law team had, for instance, matrimonial cases involving arguments about rights to property and assets within their brief. *'In those days'* she says, *'the married men in the Lord Chancellor's department did not expect to be divorced but neither did they expect to have to share the ownership of their homes with their wives unless they wanted to'.* Brenda's diplomatic expertise was becoming powerful.

She stresses her belief in the 1980s that no area was more in need of clarification and reform than the care and upbringing of children. She spells out in detail cases some of which are distressing and upsetting yet also place her life and work in the real world. She describes this time of her life, in the run up to the Children's Act 1989 and the subsequent years to 1993 when she married Julian Farrand and was called 'to the Bench' to become a High Court judge, as the happiest days of her life.

Typical of someone more interested in action and work than style or status is her description of becoming a High Court judge as 'quite a performance'. There were problems with her title, a married woman using her maiden name. A suggestion from Mary Arden to call everyone of either gender simply 'Justice' was rejected by the male members, so Mrs Justice Hale it became. (Not Ms as in her words *'many people then associated it, wrongly, with an aggressive form of feminism'*.) Then there were robes, a red woollen dressing gown ... topped off by a wig. Ceremonial occasions such as the opening of Parliament, for example, involved processions in order of seniority, church services and a full Lord Chancellor's breakfast. Sittings in other parts of the country had different traditions. She treasures a silver sixpence dated 1578 presented to her by the Lord Mayor of Newcastle, known as dagger money. After a sitting in

Newcastle it was a tradition that the Lord Mayor would use the following words.

'My Lords, we have to congratulate you upon having completed your labours in this ancient town, and have also to inform you that you travel hence to Carlisle, through a border county much and often infested by the Scots: We therefore present each of your Lordships money to buy therewith a dagger to defend yourselves.'

Hard legal work continued and *Spider Woman* returns to stories illustrated by case detail like that of McFarlane in the Court of Appeal. She mentions 'intense discussion' after she had won over the other two judges in a panel of three to her point of view on one aspect of the case. She enjoyed the camaraderie of her small band of fellow women judges in the Appeal Courts. She describes her aim as first, naturally, to get the answer right and then to persuade the House of Lords of this.

'The route to the right answer, to my mind, was always through the correct legal principles – by interpreting and applying these with an understanding of the social and economic context of the case. The perspective of women, of children, and of other disadvantaged groups had too often been overlooked – the decisions dotted throughout this book illustrate my attempts to correct that.'

And so to the creation of a Supreme Court and her place as its chair, which gave her such prominence, as she walked into the crowded courtroom wearing her black dress with its silver spider to deliver its unanimous conclusions. A day-by-day and almost hour-by-hour record of their discussions is clear and convincing:

'We were bound to conclude, therefore, that the decision to advise Her Majesty to prorogue Parliament was unlawful because it had the effect of frustrating or preventing the ability of Parliament to carry out its constitutional functions without reasonable justification ... The Order in Council to which it led was also unlawful, void and should be quashed ... Parliament had not been prorogued.'

Reading *Spider Woman* has left me wondering whether Brenda Hale is perhaps the best politician we never had! How would she go about the work of drafting legislation to overhaul and reform the antiquated and chaotic make-up of the second chamber, in such a way that persuaded, or

insisted, that their Lords and Ladyships approved a slimmed down version if and when the Supreme Court was asked to work on such a project. It would certainly have ways of introducing equal representation of minority groups within it, and it certainly would cause outrage from some, most likely male traditionalists, which might require all her diplomatic experience to quell.

The clarity with which she exposes the origins of the revered ‘Privy Council’ is a good example of the need for such expertise in politics.

‘The Privy Council is a relic of Empire. People from all over the British Empire could appeal to the monarch, who asked the lawyers on the Privy Council for their advice ... Most countries did away with such appeals when they gained their independence. The only countries that still use the Privy Council are Guernsey, Jersey and the Isle of Man and the few remaining British Overseas Territories, (as former colonies are now known) such as Bermuda, Gibraltar and the Cayman Islands.’

Her final words leave open the question of politician or lawyer – probably both.

‘Political power and legal power are not always the same thing. The rights and freedoms of every individual and enterprise within the country depend on those in political power acting within the powers which the law has given them. Otherwise is tyranny.’

*Helen Jackson
MP for Sheffield Hillsborough 1992-2005*

Chasing Max

Carole Angier, *Speak, Silence: In Search of W. G. Sebald*, Bloomsbury 2021, 618 pages, ISBN 9781526634795, £30

Little is known of the life of / Matthaues Grūnewald of Aschaffenburg: Sebald’s poem ‘After Nature’, his earliest venture into literature (1988), is a triptych of biographies, those of a medieval/Renaissance artist, an 18th century botanist-explorer, and the author himself. It contains both a promise and a warning. On the one hand there’s the ethical stance – “Truth can only really be grasped through the encounter with real individual persons” (to Doris Stoisser, 2001) – informing all his subsequent writing

both as scholar and fictionaliser. On the other, the merging of identities of narrator and subject as he stands before the Erlangen (supposed) self-portrait is precursor to a whole confraternity of Sebaldian lookalikes, marked by the suffering of the ages: *Always the same / gentleness, the same burden of grief / the same irregularity of the eyes, veiled / and sliding downwards into loneliness*. The interior life can be handled only with the utmost delicacy, will not be scrutinised – that averted gaze – except on its own terms, to the point of vanishing, like Sebald's beloved Robert Walser sealed up with his pencil stubs and microscripts in the Waldau clinic and the asylum in Herisau. "This whole business of usurping someone else's life bothers me", he told Carole Angier somewhat presciently in 1996, and the Walser essay is a model of protective kinship, the external events of the Swiss writer's marginalised, impoverished existence reduced to a single page anti-biography of "spectral insubstantiality", the "intense pathos" of his inner world, as with so many of Sebald's distressed subjects, left to the sufferer himself to convey in his own words: "Where there is ash there is actually nothing at all. Tread on ash, and you will barely notice that you have stepped on anything". The greater the affinity, the greater the restraint. The greater the writerly respect, likewise: the emotional force of Walser's self-analysis, says Sebald, is unmatched by anything in 20th century German literature, "even Kafka".

Speak, Silence sets its own limits from the outset, rather than laying claim to a spurious completeness. The first substantial biography to appear on the scene since Sebald's death in 2001, it looks to a wider market than the explosion of text-based academic studies, riven – especially in Germany – by dispute over the author's moral authority, cultural representativeness and the legitimacy of his narrative methods, that has been so pronounced a feature of the last twenty years, and adopts a riskier, more exposed and personal tone as of one engaged in frontline reporting from the real world of lives lived. For this will be, the preface tells us, above all a psychological investigation, the admonition of the title directed at the two aspects of Sebald that most viscerally feed into his creative vision, the "icy grip" of his incurable loneliness and, linking to Angier's own Jewish refugee parentage, his traumatised, lifelong preoccupation with "German responsibility for the Holocaust", or as he put it, "serving under the chimney". The standard divisions and procedures of the genre are all subtly, empathetically and assiduously deployed – a family history, traced back to 1839, witness accounts of Sebald's childhood and upbringing, a plethora of documents freshly unearthed and further witnesses interviewed for every phase of the linear trajectory that stretches

from remote, post-war Southern Bavarian *Wertach im Allgäu* through self-imposed exile to an English professorship and the crowning decade of the '90s, with its four resoundingly uncategorisable prose masterpieces. The story has a reassuring, even thrilling coherence, except that, at every stage, Angier must negotiate what she calls the “smoke and mirrors” of Sebald’s projected self-image, the elusiveness of his relationships on all sides, his constant finessing or manipulation of the facts, even from the beginning. The one episode from ‘After Nature’ that detains her recounts his pregnant mother’s witnessing of the burning of Nürnberg, with the “handful of cells” that was Sebald also retaining his – its – “insane memory” of the event, already plunged into the abyss of ‘The Natural History of Destruction’, as if (Angier’s third wryly dismissive shake of the head) “Rosa had passed her panic to her son in the womb”. As attempts to fashion a personal martyrdom go, this surely rivals Beckett’s “memories” of intrauterine entrapment and murder during the Tavistock sessions with Bion in the 1930s, his identification with the little girl in Jung’s lecture who “had never really been born”.

As an example of the “hyper-vigilant anxiety” that, for Angier, characterises more or less every phase of Sebald’s personal development as man and writer, this would be hard to beat. Her passionate defence of (almost) every trick and swerve of his narrative practice rests ultimately on the documentation of a lifelong penetrability – phobias, depressions, “cris[e]s of melancholy” (J.M.Coetzee) – by “all experience, inner and outer, so that everything he saw, remembered or imagined could overwhelm him”, a condition equivalent to “mirror-touch synaesthesia”. Adorno, cited by Angier, puts such extreme sensitivity to the condition of others in more sociological, inherently political terms: “The authentic artists of the present day are those whose works reverberate with the greatest horror”. Horror pursues the committed artist everywhere, just as it did, again, Beckett: “Yes, [my texts] deal with distress ... On the glass partition between me and the driver were three signs: one asked for help for the blind, another help for orphans, and the third for relief for the war refugees. One does not have to look for distress. It is screaming at you even in the taxis of London”. In Sebald’s case, the deafening inundation takes the form, as the biography tells it, of a staggered series of personal revelations which begins, if one discounts the “handful of cells”, not with images of the concentration camps handed out to uncomprehending 17 year olds, but with the loss of a grandfather: the child Winfried is seen hand in hand with him on their country rambles alongside similar photographs – in that essay half a lifetime later – of an itinerant Walser,

except that the incarcerated writer looks preternaturally alone.

Meanwhile the shadow cast by a demobilised, overbearing *Wehrmacht* father, with his *Deutsche Kriegsweihnacht* (German War Christmas) album containing atrocious pictures from the Polish campaign (later removed, the glue and “jocular captions” still intact) upon Wertach’s orderly, safe, idyllic Alpine world inexorably lengthens, as Sebald’s first published article, for a school rag in 1961, dramatically confirms: Angier considers its “challenging, attacking tone” on behalf of Brecht and in opposition to the contemporary, guilt-laden “complacency and hypocrisy” of West Germany’s theatrical scene a direct precursor of the all-out war he later waged on the *Germanistik* literary status quo as a whole. By the time he came to write ‘Austerlitz’, all pretence of a benign, Biedermier-style Heimat, like the ones he retreated to in the 19th century prose works of Hebel and Stifter, preserved in aspic, had vanished: “As I stared at the smooth grey floor of this pit [in Breendonk detention camp], which seemed to be sinking further and further down ... a picture of our laundry room in W. rose from the abyss and with it, suggested perhaps by the iron hook on a cord from the ceiling, the image of the butcher’s shop I always had to pass on my way to school”.

Angier pinpoints “the seed of his identification with Germany’s betrayed Jews, and of his desire to write about them”, however, in the chance meeting with an émigré landlord, Peter Jordan – astonishingly, the first Jew he came to know personally and the model for Max Ferber in ‘The Emigrants’ – in Manchester in the late 1960s. Jordan’s tale of parents and grandparents butchered by National Socialism (suicide, Theresienstadt, Dachau, Kaunas) triggered much more than that – the compulsive attentiveness certainly to “those on the sidelines ... witnesses that one can trust to fill the emptiness” Sebald’s still laying claim to in his last interview, but not only in relation to a single social pathology or a single Holocaust. Only consider ‘The Rings of Saturn’: the quiet reaches of the Suffolk coastline teem, in his *vagabondage de la tête* (so-called, affectionately, by Marie, his childhood *copine*) with scenes of atrocity, the carnage of the herring fleets, Croatian-Serbian massacres, Belgian colonialism’s “hecatomb of black bodies”, Anglo-French imperialism in China (firestorm, drought, mass starvation), the slave economies of English and Dutch sugar, the industrialisation of nature on a global scale. Angier, really, has nothing of this, or indeed of the Sebald committed to an unflinching objectivity in face of “The reality of total destruction incomprehensible in its extreme contingency” wherever it occurs [‘Air War’]. Even the celebrated Theresienstadt passage in ‘Austerlitz’ derived

from Adler's history that takes us, for perhaps the only time in Sebald's writing, into the abysmal heart of the extermination, in all the madness of its elaboration, fails to get a reference. The biography looks, finally, elsewhere. A robin alights on Sebald's grave, "It's Max!" cries one of the onlookers, we seem to breathe a freer air.

Stephen Winfield

Courage Calls

Helen Jackson, *The People's Republic of South Yorkshire*, 2021, Spokesman Books, 338 pages, paperback ISBN 9780851248967, £12.99

I first read Helen's book when it was published in May 2021. I confess I have only ever visited the City of Sheffield once when I attended a conference at the university. My political life started in 1970s Edinburgh and continued in Plymouth during the 1980-90's, each some 300 miles from Sheffield. So, I did not know much about the city or its surrounding area, although on more than one occasion, Mick Clapham, the former MP for Barnsley West and Penistone, tried to persuade me that 'Barnsley was the centre of the Universe'. Helen was elected for the constituency of Sheffield Hillsborough, to serve alongside 37 other Labour women in the 1992 parliament. As a candidate in the 1997 election, I came to know of her work as the chair of the All-Party Group on Water, a big issue for us in the far southwest with our extraordinarily high water bills. When the pre-publication promotion of her book appeared, I wondered why Helen had chosen to write a political memoir about 1970 -1992 . Why these years rather than her time in Westminster where she served the people of Hillsborough from 1992 until 2005? I was intrigued by the title and the cartoon depiction of a "Save your Bus" banner on the cover. So, I ordered a copy and signed up to listen in to the Zoom book launch.

I enjoyed how Helen the historian brought to life the story of community and politics in Sheffield and South Yorkshire during those years. She shows a keen sense of the way in which one generation builds upon the achievements of their predecessors and pays tribute to many of Sheffield's politicians who served in earlier decades of the century. I was particularly interested to learn of the contribution made by Lady Mabel Smith and her legacy to the area focused especially on the education of girls and women.

But I soon discovered that Helen's book achieves so much more than that. Elected to Sheffield City Council in 1980 this book charts how, through chairing two key committees, she learned about what could bring transformational change to people's lives in the face of political, gender, disability and race discrimination. Without flaunting feminist credentials, she worked patiently to insist that those who made and implemented policy listen to the voices of those on the receiving end of public services at a time when that was not so common. This approach was a very happy fit with the council leadership of David Blunkett and the local Labour Party as they sought to respond to the growing challenges which were affecting Sheffield and other industrial cities and mining communities throughout the UK. She writes about how positive outcomes could be achieved for the whole community as well as individuals; about how collecting data, measuring and publication were key to ensuring that these outcomes were ones that changed lives. Adult Education, the role of the Northern College, Spring Bank camps and the WEA, were allies in ensuring people grew in confidence to express their views and become part of achieving the change they wanted to see. Their well-informed voices mattered on everything from buses and bus fares to the design of homes and the maintenance of lifts; from the role of their council in bringing new jobs to life to ensuring pay audits became the basis of a positive action programme to change the entrenched discriminations holding people back as a result of poverty, gender, race or disability.

Jackson's recollections are enriched by those of others who were active, front of stage and behind the scenes, during a period when change in England's regions and cities was beginning to accelerate. She writes of the real-life impact of policies, directed from London and Westminster by people who knew little, and cared less, about their impact on communities and people hundreds of miles from the capital. Major industrial change brought sky high unemployment, made worse by the dire, disastrously damaging, and divisive policies of the Margaret Thatcher, compounded by her disdain for anything which stood in the way, particularly local government .

What was it like to be a Labour councillor bent on doing your best to help people and communities to survive and thrive in those years? Jackson describes, in sharp contrast to the "we know best, top-down politics" of Thatcher, how local politicians involved Sheffield and South Yorkshire people in shaping their future. This included newcomers, as well as those whose families had lived in the area for generations, as thousands of lives were being shaken by the social and industrial change of the last

three decades of the twentieth century. In the face of rate capping and the threat of being surcharged some unlikely local partnerships were forged to help face down the worst excesses of the impact of these policies on public services. All of this is told in Helen's characteristically calm, self-effacing, matter-of-fact way with the eye and ear of a trained historian.

Her determination to see wider and more equal opportunities for women at work and in family and community life shines through as she tells of how she worked with like-minded others in Sheffield to achieve this; a commitment and experience she later took forward in her role as a Westminster MP. As parliamentary private secretary to Northern Ireland Secretary of State Mo Mowlam, she helped to ensure that the women of Northern Ireland were given a voice in the peace process.

People's Republic should appeal to anyone interested in the history of English local government. The recipes evolved by Sheffield people and politicians, notably David Blunkett, Clive Betts and Richard Caborn, as well as Helen, came to have a lasting influence on the development of local government in England. The Centre for Local Economic Strategies (CLES) was founded in 1986 with significant input from Sheffield and other northern cities and Helen Jackson was one of its early Chairs. It continues to help shape the agenda to this day. Helen's book also chronicles the rich practical experience which these politicians brought to the key roles they played in the 1997 – 2010 parliaments and government and the manifestos which informed them.

Helen the politician is not content with setting out history or simply recording a memoir. Ever practical, her book concludes with a final chapter, **The Way Forward**, drawing themes and lessons from what worked well to deliver change through local democracy, and what did not. The challenges arising from a decade of austerity, the Covid pandemic and climate change make the value of learning from these ever more urgent. She points to the way so much can be achieved if the power of global movements can be effectively harnessed to those with the patience, determination, and courage to work with their local communities in Britain and beyond. This final chapter finishes with the echo of Fawcett's hundred-year-old clarion call, still yet *Courage Calls to Courage Everywhere*.

On re-reading this book ahead of writing this review I was struck by how relevant what Helen writes is to those striving to find new ways to make sense of the world in the face of the dramatic challenges of post Covid recovery and climate change and through the lens of #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter. Wellbeing is a buzz word which people define in

many different ways The Oxford dictionary defines this as the state of being comfortable, healthy or happy. This book could reasonably be subtitled “A Practical Guide to the Politics of Wellbeing”. Of course things move on. We live in a digitally rich information world which in some ways makes it easier to adopt the approaches Helen describes. In other ways the white noise which spreads through these digital interconnections cause problems or become barriers to overcoming them. But the book remains a good and relevant read for any politician, local, regional, or national, who takes seriously their role in achieving the welfare of the people they represent. It is full of practical examples of how the empowerment of local voices, especially of women, in those processes is essential for the effective pursuit of such a goal. In the face of ever deepening cynicism about the capacity of politicians to change lives for the better and about their integrity (a deliberate ploy, many will say, by today’s cavalier, callous government). *People’s Republic* is above all a refreshing reminder that a different politics is possible. Read it if you need a tonic to help you through this second pandemic winter and it may help you to look forward to the spring!

Linda Gilroy

MP for Plymouth Sutton 1997-2010

