

Editorial

Resist Much, Obey Little

We dedicate this issue of *The Spokesman* to Ken Coates, the journal's editor for forty years, from 1970 to 2010. During those decades he oversaw the publication of more than one hundred issues, notching up the ton in 2008 with this comment about the military industrial complex and NATO:

‘If we continue to generate another hundred issues of this journal, while we have breath left, we shall resist these embodiments of militarism, and continue to devote our energies to laying the foundations of the peaceful commonwealth which will come into existence with the abolition of war.’

In *Spokesman 100*, Ken placed the emphasis on democracy, asking was it ‘growing or dying?’ In particular, he revisited democracy at work, which for him, as much as the causes of peace and poverty, was a persistent priority. Now, in a short memoir, written with characteristic clarity, he explains the links between his lifelong campaigns against poverty and for workers’ control.

For a long time, Ken resisted many calls to write his memoirs. ‘In the beginning was the deed,’ was his approach, and he would write prolifically in support of a chosen course of action. Nevertheless, towards the end of his life, he did find time to compose his thoughts and recollections about how he came to leave the pit and go to university, and how work on material poverty fitted with his concerns about alienation, which in due course led to the emergence of the Institute for Workers’ Control, or IWC, as it is popularly known.

So it is that we begin this little collection with two previously unpublished pieces from Ken’s own hand. They may have been works in progress, but they have all the hallmarks and attributes of luminous Coates’ prose. (Ken was very heartened when he heard that his friend, the playwright Trevor Griffiths, had said ‘no one writes like Ken Coates’.)

Trevor urged Ken to record his memoirs, if he wasn’t going to write them. Fortunately, George Lambie, recorder in hand, had approached Ken for an interview about his research into political developments in Britain during the 1970s. Their subsequent conversations probed the evolution of the IWC, including Tony Benn’s participation; the origins of the Alternative Economic Strategy; Labour’s 1973 Programme with its landmark industrial strategy; and Stuart Holland’s pioneering work on European economic recovery, which, as readers of *The Spokesman* will

know, continues to this day. But the discussion also ranged much more widely, to include European Nuclear Disarmament (END), Bukharin and China, and Cuba, as these exchanges reveal.

Michael Barratt Brown, John Daniels, Regan Scott and Bill Silburn add their own reflections about working with Ken Coates. Tony Benn generously gave of his time to be interviewed about his old comrade and friend. Ken Fleet helped edit the contributions; on a daily basis, he worked closely with Ken Coates for more than 40 years, following their initial meeting at the Workers' Educational Association in the 1960s.

Even so, the picture is very much a partial one. Whenever Ken Coates reviewed biographies of Bertrand Russell, with whom he worked closely in the last years of Russell's long life, he usually affirmed the need for more biographies of Russell. Similarly, we need more memoirs of Ken Coates, and cordially invite contributions.

Ken turned to Walt Whitman for the sub-title to his book about the divisions in Communism, *Heresies: Resist Much, Obey Little*, published in 1982. The poet's injunction resonates today, in much the same way as the causes of democracy and peace, which Ken espoused so eloquently for so long.

Tony Simpson

PS We have turned to William Blake, whose work Ken Coates loved, to help illustrate this collection. For our cover, we chose Piero Dorazio, a permanent favourite in the Coates household.

To the States, or any one of them, or any city of the States,
Resist much, obey little;
 Once unquestioning obedience, once fully enslaved;
 Once fully enslaved, no nation, state, city, of this earth,
 ever afterward resumes its liberty.

Walt Whitman: *Leaves of Grass*