

Reviews

New Labour's Inequality

John Hills, Tom Sefton and Kitty Stewart (editors), *Towards a More Equal Society? Poverty, Inequality and Policy since 1997: Case Studies on Poverty, Place & Policy*, Policy Press, 432 pages, paperback ISBN 9781847422019, £22.99

Kate Pickett, Richard G. Wilkinson, *The Spirit Level: Why more equal societies almost always do better*, Allen Lane, 320 pages, hardback. ISBN 9781846140396, £20

The New Labour administrations of both Tony Blair and Gordon Brown have been sharply criticised in the current financial crisis for their obeisance to the City of London, their deregulation of financial activity, and reliance on a supposedly self-regulating market. Much less has been said about their original promise to create a more equal society. Now these two books have been published, which examine in close detail the actual results of government social policies in the decade after New Labour came to power with a massive majority in 1997, and held on to power with only slightly reduced majorities in the two subsequent elections. The period was one of steady economic growth and low inflation, which should have provided the opportunity to build a more equal society in Britain, following the glaring increase in inequalities during the previous Conservative administrations of Margaret Thatcher and John Major.

The evidence presented in the big book edited by Hills, Sefton and Stewart, under the auspices of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, reveals that, in the event, some very slight reduction in the gap between the income of the top 20% of UK income earners and the bottom 20% was achieved in the first seven years of New Labour. After that, the gap opened up again, most especially between the top 1%, and 0.1%, and the rest. The UK remained the most unequal society of all the developed industrial societies with the exception of the United States and Portugal. In Tony Blair's most fervently promised undertaking, the ending of child poverty, some measures making for improvements were made, but these too failed, even before the disasters of 2008 overtook New Labour. Before these disasters, the poverty of pensioners had not been addressed and the credit crisis was threatening all pensions, while high figures of employment among men and women, which had helped to reduce poverty levels, had begun to collapse as the credit crisis unfolded.

In summarising the trends before and after 1997 in 31 different

indicators of poverty and social exclusion, the results of the studies made by the eighteen authors published in the book, the editors, Hills, Sefton and Stewart, conclude that just under half the indicators, 14, were better and the rest either steady (9) or worse (8); but in relating the first five years of Government to the second, as many as half were better in the first but only one in eight in the second.

'Education, education, education' was Tony Blair's trumpet call at his Election, and there is no doubt that much money has been spent by his Government on this public service, with a large increase from 4.7% to 5.5% of the national income (GDP). This involved much higher spending per pupil and reduced class numbers, especially in disadvantaged schools and areas, along with new pre-school provision, such as Sure Start. The question being asked by the authors of the chapter on 'New Labour's top priority' is how far the stubborn relationship between social disadvantage and under achievement' is being broken. There is no word in the chapter on the continuing tax advantages of private schools, which cater for 15% of the population but supply most of the entrants to Oxford and Cambridge, and most of the judges, barristers, senior civil servants and journalists. Even within the state system the academic/vocational division remains, with 'grammar' and 'secondary modern' selection at the age of 11 continuing in many areas, and with new 'academies' receiving private, often 'faith' based, endowments. The gaps here seem likely to grow as both New Labour and Tory policies alike move towards more privatisation and 'marketisation' in schooling. In Higher Education the aim of achieving 50% of post-school men and women in universities was never reached, and the proportion particularly of adult students fell back sharply when fees were introduced in 2005. Adult education has, indeed, been the main victim of New Labour's recent cuts, made in the mistaken belief that skills training can take place without some basic education in a situation where at least a quarter of the population, even in the workplace, are not functionally literate and a third are innumerate, according to the Government's own 2006 Treasury Review by Lord Leitch.

After education, health has been the great recipient of New Labour government funding. Once again privatisation, especially of capital cost through Private Finance Initiative funding, and a belief in 'reform' with the aim of greater personal choice, have been the enemy of egalitarian aims. A service that was once intended to be universally free at the point of delivery, except for a payment for medicines, dentistry and spectacles by all but school children, pensioners and those on benefit, has come to be supplemented for many by private provision through individual insurance. The time of many doctors has become divided between their public patients

and their private patients. The old hierarchy of medical superintendents, consultants, registrars, almoners, matrons, staff nurses and others has been replaced by a plethora of managers at every level, with targets set from on high for patient turnover, waiting time, delivery and cost.

A succession of studies in the book describe how several different groups have fared under New Labour, which might be expected to be disadvantaged and even excluded in an unequal society. The first and largest of these is, of course, women, whose position is described in several chapters. While girls' attainment at school now far surpasses that of boys, the gap in earnings remains the widest among all industrialised economies. The earnings gap has been narrowed under New Labour for full-time employment, but is still very wide for part-time employment, partly as a result of allowance for flexible hours. For all higher posts the glass ceiling is still firmly in place. On the other hand, New Labour's policy of encouraging women, especially single parents, to find work, and take the advantages of tax credits, has greatly reduced poverty levels. In health the picture is much less rosy. 'Inequalities have worsened among women to a significantly greater extent than among men,' is how the chapter on health concludes the evidence. 'This is true,' the authors write, 'across a wide range of indicators, from life expectancy to obesity; from mental health to cardio-vascular disease.'

Other chapters cover the way in which ethnic minorities and migrants have fared under New Labour. There is no doubt that, with few exceptions, educational levels have risen and unemployment levels have declined for ethnic minorities. Some groups have done better than others, and this is particularly true of the Indians. However, this has not eradicated ethnic inequalities. Employment inequality remains, despite little evidence that foreign competition has undermined local employment. However, the prospects after the credit crisis do not look good for ethnic minorities or immigrants, because strong prejudices remain and will become active in a period of rising unemployment. The further prejudice that ethnic minorities and immigrants make greater use of the health service than others has no foundation.

New Labour began its administration with a great sweep of programmes to reduce the wide differences in well-being between neighbourhoods in the United Kingdom. Examples were the New Deal for Communities and the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund. The research recorded in several chapters of the book suggest that there was subsequently a marked tailing off of such local initiatives in favour of more centralised solutions. Northern Ireland seems to have suffered particular neglect. Unemployment

rates continued to be much higher in the north of England and in Scotland, Wales and Ireland, and the financial crisis is likely to make this worse.

Finally, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation book contains a chapter towards its end which compares UK experience of reducing inequality under New Labour with that of other industrialised countries. In the field of education, participation in education of children between 15 and 19, science and maths results and measures of health and well-being of 11 to 15 year olds have all improved enough to push the UK up the international rankings. So has the child poverty rate in non-working households. On the other hand, indicators of general child poverty, measured after taxes and transfers, and of teenage birth rates, which improved at first under New Labour, were not maintained. Worst of all, income inequality and literacy rates have worsened relatively, and continued failure of child poverty improvement would be serious. So would continuation of the inherited problem of low pay and the relatively low level of skills in the UK.

Comparison of inequality in the UK with that in other countries is the main subject of the second book under review, the so-called *Spirit Level* written by Pickett and Wilkinson, which seeks to understand ‘why more equal societies almost always do better’. That is to say that not only the unequal members do better, but that the whole society’s performance is better. The facts are plain: that among the developed economies the more unequal societies have less sense of well being, are more violent, suffer more mental illness, take more drugs and alcohol, are generally less healthy with a greater incidence of obesity, and that, ironically, these problems have worsened as average incomes and wealth have increased. The authors are concerned to answer the question, ‘why should that be?’ Their first answer points to the stresses of life and the pressures of consumerism and envy, as old communities and hierarchies give way to a universal individualism. But they pursue the question in a succession of chapters on different issues – on mental health and drug and alcohol abuse, on physical health, obesity and life expectancy, on educational performance, on teenage births and deprivation, on violence, prisons and punishment, and on social mobility – before considering the basis for a better society.

The result is a fascinating story with deep insights into the human condition. On each of these issues a comparison is made by the authors from the available evidence for each of the developed industrial countries, and also for each of the states of the US, with the degree of inequality recorded. On every issue the worst incidence correlates with the worst social inequality. The authors accept that this does not prove that inequalities are the cause of the problems. The inequalities might arise

from the bad experiences, not the other way round. But the great number of cases of correlation with inequalities suggests otherwise. It might also happen that a concentration of population suffering inequalities might simply be outnumbering the rest. However, in the cases of mental illness, drug and alcohol abuse, obesity, teenage pregnancy, homicide and other violence, it is not at all necessarily among the less equal that these misfortunes occur. Rather the opposite is true.

This leaves us with two questions: why should social inequality have these unfortunate effects, and why are they getting worse? It cannot be said that all these misfortunes are just part of the human condition, because in societies, both in different countries and in the different US states, where there is less inequality, things are much better. The authors do suggest that in early human evolution we have a dual ape inheritance – one more competitive like the chimpanzees, one more co-operative like the bonobos. *Homo sapiens* perhaps survived through a combination of both, capable of adapting to different circumstances. What has happened in developed economies today is that competition has been encouraged at the expense of co-operation, with very stressful results. Many of our illnesses – depression, violence, over-eating, drug and alcohol abuse, early deaths – can be shown to be the result of increased stress. Societies where competition is much less, and traditions of co-operation have survived the onslaught of consumerism, have done much better.

In their last chapters the authors raise the environmental question of the survival of the planet earth, and take hope from the human capacity for co-operation and from the fact that we can live very well without all the energy-using consumer goods and services that surround us. Cuba, they give as an example of such co-operative survival, where health and education standards are high, and much assistance is given to developing countries. If those of us in the developed industrial countries could but agree to reduce massively our carbon consumption to a reasonable allowance and, on the way, pay the developing countries for their unused carbon allowance, we might all survive. It does not require a sudden revolutionary change, so the authors believe, but small step-by-step determined measures. They are being very optimistic, but they can point to the much higher contributions from Cuba and from the more equal, developed societies to aid for developing countries. Certainly there are enough resources, with the important exception of oil, still available on the planet for all to live comfortably if we could only distribute them more equally. If only?

Michael Barratt Brown

Miners

Lewis Jones, *Cwmardy and We Live*, Parthian Books and The Library of Wales, 882 pages including a foreword by Hywel Francis MP, paperback ISBN 1902638832, £9.99

Cwmardy is Lewis Jones's fictional name for a mining valley closely resembling Clydach Vale off the Rhondda Valley in South Wales. His carefully written novel describes the life and times of the Roberts family of mineworkers in the early years of the twentieth century. The story is about the struggle of coal miners to establish an effective trade union – and the equally determined methods of the mine owners to prevent such representation. Those methods included strike breaking by recruiting workers into company unions, intimidation and blacklisting of union activists, lockouts and the use of an enlarged police force and the military.

We Live is a second novel and a sequel, published posthumously two years later in 1939, continuing the story of the principal characters, Len Roberts and his wife Mary, both Communist Party activists, until Len's death in Spain as a member of the International Brigade resisting the Fascist revolution. Apart from this latter detail, which perhaps was written by a survivor of Lewis Jones, the novels can be seen as largely autobiographical. Lewis Jones was himself a coal miner from the age of 12, a checkweighman, later a student at the London Central Labour College, a Communist Party activist, and a Glamorgan county councillor.

The novels provide much authentic detail of the domestic and working lives of miners and their families. At work there was only weak regulation of such matters as adequate ventilation and adequate supplies of roof supports. Electric cap lamps came much later, and working lights were flame safety lamps whose light output was less than the candles used in non-gassy mines. Nystagmus, a vision defect associated with work in such conditions, became a recognised industrial disease. Dust diseases caused the deaths of more than 500 miners a year in the United Kingdom until the 1970s. Fatal injuries from falls of ground, the use of vehicles and machinery, fires, explosions and inundations and other causes exceeded 1,000 a year at the start of the century. In the fifty years between 1903 and 1952, 50,502 miners were killed in the UK. In 1987-8 the total number of miners killed in the nationalised British Coal mines was eight.

At work there were infestations of rodents and insects, and negligible provision for personal hygiene. Pit head baths were not generally provided until the 1930s. Miners' wives and daughters were the unpaid workers of

the industry because laundered work clothes were not provided until long after nationalisation. The use of a galvanised steel bath in front of the kitchen fire was a daily routine, even when the mineworker had presented himself for work below ground and returned home because he was not offered work that day.

The author's dramatic accounts of lockouts, riots, picketing and a 'stay-down' strike are recognisably based on real events, with understatement rather than hyperbole. The miners of the Rhondda Valley have been described by historians as the most militant in Wales.¹ Their objectives from the previous century had included public ownership of the industry,² and the novels provide plenty of fact-based explanations for that. They also attribute the Cwmardy miners' frustration with their union full-time agent's friendly relationship with the mine owners as a cause of much militancy. The agent, called Ezra, is Mary's father, who supported Len as a young union activist. There are similarities between Ezra and William Abraham, known as Mabon, born in 1842, who became a Rhondda miners' agent and later the Lib-Lab MP for the Rhondda. Ezra in retirement from the union became an office employee of the mine owner, a fictional Lord Cwmardy, who later walked eight miles at the head of Ezra's funeral procession to a crematorium.

In the real events in the Rhondda, company recruited strike-breakers were protected by extra police drafted from distant forces. Pickets and protesters were assaulted in baton charges, arrested, prosecuted and imprisoned. The author of *Cwmardy* has 'Big Jim' Roberts, the hard drinking Boer war veteran father of Len, felling a policeman for manhandling his wife. In other confrontations the author comfortingly left out much detail of real events. Miners resisted baton charges with pickaxe handles – colliers' mandrills with the steel removed. Using a mandrill to cut coal for several hours a shift is a skill not found in many policemen.³ Miners also knew all about horses, and could bring down a mounted policeman without serious injury to the horse using nothing more than a pointed broom handle.

The police were supported by the military in South Wales in 1895, 1898 and 1910, on the initiatives of magistrates or Chief Constables often in response to calls from mine owners. Some magistrates were mine owners. In November 1910, Winston Churchill as Home Secretary appointed Major-General Nevil Macready to be in charge of troops and other forces. Home Office correspondence and Hansard records of debates in the House of Commons, quoted by R Page Arnot⁴, show that the intention of the Home Office had been to disabuse the mine owners of the notion that such

deployments were at their discretion, to assign costs to the local authority, and to assert the authority of central government. On November 8th, Churchill delayed the deployment of troops from Swindon and ordered that cavalry remain at Cardiff. On 19th November 1910, he replied by telegram to a letter from the Chief Constable of Glamorgan:

‘Your letter of the 18th; you are quite right to act vigorously with your police force against serious riot. A certain amount of minor friction is, however, inseparable from the present situation. Both sides are unreasonable in many ways, and I should recommend you to go gently in small matters. – Churchill.’

Michael Thomas in *The Death of an Industry*⁵ probably used local newspaper accounts to record that, on November 26 1910, at Ely colliery near Tonypandy, Captain Paterson in command of a squad of the Somerset Light Infantry with fixed bayonets and live ammunition helped to restore order after an attack on police who were protecting would-be strike breakers. No ammunition was used, but one of General Macready’s reports contains mention of ‘a little gentle persuasion with the bayonet’ in Tonypandy on November 21st. His same report states that no casualties were reported, but that

‘Many young men of the valley found that sitting down was accompanied with a certain amount of discomfort for several days.’⁶

One of the accounts of a stay-down strike, which one hopes is fictional, is of the potentially murderous use of a 30 hundredweight coal tram filled with horse dung made to run away down an inclined underground roadway by the striking miners, whose lamps were no longer alight, to disperse officials and others who were approaching to remove them from the mine.

Representation by an effective trade union was essential to resolve such conflict. The coal trade was volatile, especially in South Wales with its high rank, low volatile coals favoured by the merchant navy and the Royal Navy. In good times miners’ earnings were twice those of agricultural workers, and the profits from the colliery owners’ investments were vast. Many of the growing immigrant population of the valleys had houses with cold water taps and water closets, rare in rural areas. Miners investing their labour and their lives needed a minimum wage to maintain their ability for physical work, and to mitigate casual employment on varying piece-work price lists, and arbitrary conditions such as payment only for lump coal.

The novels have relevance today not least because our capitalist system once more requires urgent regulation to protect people and the planet. The UK Labour government has cause to re-examine its New Labour claims

that it is no longer necessary to have in public ownership some of the means of production, distribution and exchange. The management of the credit crisis and its effects is proving difficult, and one suspects that the public are ready to be persuaded that having the banks in public ownership, rather than just absorbing £200 billions of public money, may be a good idea after all. Readers of the novels will find some vindication of the Marxist analyses of people such as Lewis Jones who saw human rights abuses, links between industry and the military, Fascism and war as endemic characteristics of capitalism. If he were alive today he would surely wonder why the world spends more than one trillion dollars a year on weapons, while no such sum is yet made available to mitigate climate change, resource depletion, pollution, hunger and disease.

A preface to the novel *Cwmardy* states that Lewis Jones joined the Communist Party in the 1920s, but an interesting foreword by Hywel Francis, the son of Dai Francis, a Spanish civil war veteran, includes an account by Billy Griffiths, another Spanish war veteran, which suggests that Lewis Jones was no Stalinist. At the Seventh World Congress of the Communist International in Moscow, in 1935, thousands rose from their seats when Stalin arrived but Lewis Jones failed to stand. He embarrassed the British delegation and was reprimanded by the party on his return to Britain. Hywel Francis is the author of *Miners Against Fascism* (1984) and is now Labour MP for Aberavon.⁷ His foreword makes clear his enthusiasm for the re-publication of these novels by Parthian and The Library of Wales – a Welsh Assembly Government project to make Welsh literature written in English more widely available.

Christopher Gifford

References

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3. *South Wales Miners – a History of the South Wales Miners' Federation 1898–1914*, p194, Robin Page Arnot, George Allen and Unwin, 1967
4. Ibid
5. Michael Thomas in *The Death of an Industry*, Colben Systems Pte Ltd, 2004, p49.
6. Robin Page Arnot; op. cit.
7. Also co-author with David Smith of *The Fed – a History of the South Wales Miners in the Twentieth Century*, Lawrence and Wishart Ltd, 1980.

Red October

Margarita Tupitsyn (Editor), *Rodchenko & Popova: Defining Constructivism*, Tate Publishing, 192 pages, paperback ISBN 9781854377968, £24.99

Tumultuous years followed the Russian Revolution of October 1917. While the war in France raged on, civil war engulfed large tracts of Russia as the White armies, supported by Churchill among others, sought to overthrow the new Bolshevik regime.

Russia's cities starved as grain supplies from the countryside dried up. Millions of poorer peasants produced barely enough to subsist. More prosperous ones, known as kulaks, tended to horde any surplus as the currency collapsed and everyday goods became unavailable. Requisitioning, as part of 'war communism', forcibly extracted some limited supplies for the newly created Red Army, which was fighting the Whites with notable success. But millions of people left the cities in search of food in the countryside. The situation was made much worse when drought caused the harvest to fail, which gave rise to a terrible famine that spread throughout the Volga basin and beyond, starting in spring 1921, and continuing into the following year.

At the landmark Tenth Congress of the Russian Communist Party (Bolsheviks), in March 1921, while Red Army soldiers fought to suppress a rebellion by sailors based at the fortress of Kronstadt, Lenin argued for a New Economic Policy, or NEP. The survival of the new Soviet state was in question, as Kronstadt and other rebellions indicated. The sailors were demanding concessions for workers and peasants, as well as the free election of Soviets. Lenin struggled to address some of these grievances. Under the New Economic Policy, limited private trade was to be permitted. This was particularly directed at restoring agricultural production in the countryside so that, in turn, the cities and their industrial workers could be fed. Kulaks could once again employ other peasants in order to boost production. Lenin envisaged that this policy might continue for a number of years. It survived his death, in 1924, when Bukharin became its leading advocate, but was eventually abandoned by Stalin, in 1928, notwithstanding his earlier support for the policy, in opposition to Trotsky's criticisms.

So it comes as a refreshing surprise that, during all this tumult, the artists Aleksandr Rodchenko and Liubov Popova, together with members of their circle such as the poet Vladimir Mayakovsky , were engaged, often humorously and always creatively, in their own representational

constructions of the new Soviet state. Geometry, pattern and line (frequently straight) preoccupied them, whilst colour was ultimately distilled to ‘Pure Red Colour, Pure Yellow Colour, Pure Blue Colour’ in Rodchenko’s three oil-on-canvas panels of 1921. Typography was usually red and black, strikingly bold, and geometrically varied. Its influence endures to this day.

For these artists were embarked on the new Soviet adventure. There was a studied consciousness of equality. ‘The Female Journalist’, in Kuleshov’s 1927 film of that title, (for which Rodchenko designed sets), is confronted by a woman cleaner sweeping papers from the newsroom floor. They meet on a wooden gangway, the journalist in her modern dress and bob haircut, the cleaner anonymous under a broad-brimmed hat, back to camera. Nearby, the presses roll, great reels of paper waiting their turn as printers tend the mighty machine. The heyday of NEP was already passing, and the ‘nepmen’ and business women increasingly satirised.

Film flourished in Russia during the years after the Revolution. Rodchenko’s 1925 poster design for Sergei Eisenstein’s ‘Battleship Potemkin’, a landmark in Soviet film, includes a notably conventional drawing of the infant in its runaway pram descending an imaginary stairway. Rodchenko’s interest in the camera was growing, as he himself recorded in a beautiful ‘Self-Caricature’, executed in gouache and pencil, also in 1925.

Popova was already dead. She and her young son were carried off by scarlet fever during the epidemic of 1924. A posthumous exhibition of her work was put on in Moscow, for which Rodchenko designed a catalogue with characteristically monumental typography on the cover, reflecting aspects of Popova’s own typographical style.

She had evidently been much engaged in designing fabric and clothing prior to her death. One delicate design in gouache has the hammer in blue and the sickle coloured red. (The Tate Modern has produced aprons and kerchiefs made from the fabric for sale in its shop.) But her dress designs, such as those for summer 1924, usually feature more abstract designs. As private trade grew under the New Economic Policy, Rodchenko and Popova designed simple advertisements to promote the products of the Red October biscuit factory and other state enterprises.

That such endeavours were termed ‘Constructivism’ was what the recent exhibition at the Tate Modern set about trying to define. In doing so, it mounted an exhibition that is full of creativity, enthusiasm and experimentation. The young Soviet Union, as represented here, was light years away from its feudal, tsarist antecedent. It looked forward to the

coming century, not back, and anticipated much of the design and taste that came to characterise modernity in the decades that were to follow. That influence is far from spent, as this exhibition made crystal clear.

In 1925, Rodchenko accompanied his design for the Workers' Club, replete with reading room, chess-boards, and films, to the Paris Exhibition, where it was a great success. The young Soviet Union was emerging, by degree, from international isolation. The recent Tate Modern exhibition, and its excellent catalogue, emphasise how high their hopes were.

Tony Simpson

Doubt Everything

Jan Willem Stutje, *Ernest Mandel: A Rebel's Dream Deferred*, Verso, 392 pages, hardback ISBN 9781844673162, £19.99

Ernest Mandel was a remarkable man, and I suppose he has to be described as a charismatic orator. In general, I rather prefer my politics without charisma, which is commonly used to bedazzle and befuddle the innocent punters. But Mandel was truly exceptional.

I first met him when I was invited to visit the 5th World Congress of the Fourth International in 1957. He delivered a report, which was over two hours long, speaking in voluble French. He then delivered it again in German, and finally he gave it to us in English. I don't really remember much of what he said, and I don't really approve of very long speeches, leave alone long speeches in three languages. But I am bound to admit that this was a *tour de force*, even if I have not remembered it. Mandel was a most impressive person, personally a charmer, and intellectually formidable.

None the less, the 5th World Congress of the Fourth International was a nearly total shambles, and I found it distinctly off-putting. There was one notable public quarrel, which I could understand, and one more concealed dispute at which I could only guess. The public rumpus was between the majority of the South American delegation, which was quite numerous, and the majority of the Europeans. The South Americans were led by Juan Posadas, who was also good at long speeches, although the long speeches were not so good in content. Posadas believed that the third World War was inevitable, and he devoutly wished that the Russians and Chinese would get on with it. Many of the Trotskyists could be faulted in their attitude to this analysis, but Posadas had major faults.

I was already a disciple of Bertrand Russell, and a passionately

convinced proponent of nuclear disarmament. In particular, I believed that any future World War would very likely mean the end of the species, and I therefore thought that everyone should bend their efforts to preventing it rather than encouraging any of the belligerents. This meant that I had no sympathy whatever with Posadas, whatever might be his opinions on lesser questions, and I was underwhelmed by this Congress, even though I met some extraordinarily interesting people there. There was the Norwegian Socialist MP who had given asylum to Trotsky in exile, for instance, and there was young Lily Peng, the daughter of the venerable Chinese leader. I spent some pleasant hours on the beach with her, while the comrades were dutifully sharpening their applied dogmatics, in closed sessions to which visitors were not invited.

It was easy to see Mandel as a different kettle of fish from the head bangers. Subsequent generations have frequently wondered how such a very clever man could be so comprehensively involved in the affairs of the Fourth International, which has generated continuous factional squabbles and sectarian disputes on a truly inhibiting scale. Mandel himself was a polemicist to match the best of them. But he could also be an inspiring teacher, and indeed he inspired a remarkable following among European students. I was one of those who fell under his spell, and I have never regretted the fact, because he taught me a great deal. But perhaps the most important thing he taught me was to stand on my own feet, and not to follow anyone, be they never so persuasive.

Mandel was a loyal partisan of Trotsky and wrote what is possibly the best book on Trotsky's ideas. (*Trotsky – a Study in the Dynamic of his Thought*, Verso, 1979.)

Jan Willem Stutje has given us a large-scale biography, and it will certainly help to keep Mandel's memory fresh. It explains his induction into political activism during the Second World War. He grew up in Belgium, and was thrust into political activism during the Nazi occupation. Ernest's father was a Polish socialist, highly skilled in the diamond trade, who had, during the First World War, fled to Belgium and then Holland in order to avoid conscription into the Austrian army. Ernest was ten years old when Hitler came to absolute power, so that, in his late teens, when the Nazis overran most of Western Europe, he was ready to join the resistance.

He had joined a small Trotskyist group in Antwerp in 1939, and at the age of sixteen he was arrested for leafleting the German soldiers of the occupation army. He was released from internment camp with the complicity of the German guards with whom he argued, who had themselves been members of the forbidden Social Democratic and Communist Parties

in Germany in pre-Hitler days before their suppression. This experience confirmed him in an internationalist outlook, which refused to condemn whole nations for the actions of those set in authority over them.

Jan Willem Stutje describes Mandel's activities in the resistance, which became more and more audacious as the war wore on.

But these activities did not result in the overthrow of capitalism, as the Fourth International had ardently hoped. Neither did it bring an end to the rule of bureaucracy in Russia. Instead, Russian-sponsored governments were put in place all across Eastern Europe, and the influence of Stalinism became even more pervasive. This influence brought the most intelligent governors of capitalism into a much more realistic assessment of their situation. The German and French élites clearly decided that readying themselves for the third World War might be a mistake, and under Monnet's inspiration, they established the European Coal and Steel Community, as a prototype for a European federalism which would, by fusing the coal and steel industries, both eliminate the possibility of further intra-European wars, and, as significantly, help generate possibilities for a regime of European welfare which might stand some hope of stemming the advance of Communist Parties, already the largest in Italy and France. Trotskyists took a long time to catch up with these events, even when they were very clever, but it is not surprising that they provoked strenuous ideological debates.

By the time that things had settled down in the 1950s, most Trotskyists had decided that they should devote their efforts to attempting to work within pre-established big parties of Labour. In Social Democratic Parties this was really nothing new, but in Communist Parties it involved a pretty substantial trauma, because these were still very much official formations, following the Russian line in every detail.

Mandel applied himself to his work within the Belgian Socialist Party with considerable effect. Under his influence the lively weekly, *La Gauche*, was established, followed by a Flemish sister paper. Mandel became an economic advisor to the Belgian Trade Unions, and an influential leader of the Belgian Left.

Stutje is disappointingly brief in his treatment of this episode in the Mandel story, because the campaign for 'structural reforms' and for workers' control had a resonance which exerted influence far beyond Belgium itself. I remember publishing a translation of the workers' control programme of the FGTB (socialist) trade union, and suggesting that European workers now needed to follow the classical advice of Rosa Luxembourg, and 'learn to speak Belgian'. But the leaders of the Belgian socialists themselves were not keen on speaking Belgian, and *La Gauche* was told to shut up shop. When

it refused, Mandel and his closest sympathisers found themselves once more in isolation, even if they had won widespread respect.

Stutje has not quite got the story of Mandel's second visit to Cuba in focus. I secured this invitation for him when I met Fidel Castro earlier that year. I was representing the Russell Foundation in some talks we had about the developing worldwide opposition to the American war in Vietnam. Ernest subsequently made the trip to Havana with his new wife, Gisela Scholtz, a very beautiful young woman, dynamic and clever who carried a tragic burden of illness.

I assume that Castro was in no way willing to compromise his diplomatic achievements by entering into serious talks with a prominent Trotskyist leader. In this respect he differed from Che Guevara. Ernest was shown the sights, and one of the functionaries who entertained him, told me during the OLAS conference which took place shortly after his visit that, 'Your professor was not a very practical chap, but his woman was most promising, a crack shot'. I don't know what passed between my professor and his Cuban interlocutors, but the Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 was soon to bring about an estrangement between the Cuban leadership and a wide cross-section of the European left.

It is at this point that Stutje can follow his own enthusiasms in tracing Mandel's story, by treating on his major writings on *Marxist Economic Theory*. At the time I tried very hard to find a publisher for an English translation which was finally taken up by the Merlin Press, thanks very much to the intervention of Ralph Miliband. Brian Pearce produced a splendidly readable version. The book was to appear in many other languages, and to exert an influence which helped to transform views of Marx and Marxism throughout the Western world.

Mandel had been a close correspondent and admirer of Roman Rosdolsky, the exiled Ukrainian scholar, who had acquired one of the very few copies of Marx's crucially important *Grundrisse* that existed in the West. At the time this was unknown to the overwhelming majority of Marxian specialists, although it was the real foundation upon which the later *Capital* was to rest.

Rosdolsky saw it as his special mission to analyse the *Grundrisse* and make it available to a much wider audience, because it would dispel a large number of incorrect assumptions about the 'Marxism' of Marx. His book, *The Making of Marx's Capital*, had a significant influence on Mandel, and Stutje offers a tantalising glimpse of the correspondence between the two men. Rosdolsky had a profound admiration for Trotsky but a less than reverent view of the Fourth International. In this, he shared the opinions of

Isaac Deutscher, among others. In fact, it does seem to be true that Trotsky's major influence in modern times has been exerted through the agency of people who were very far from true believers. Obviously Mandel was a true believer if ever there was one, but his mind was so open and wide ranging that he could genuinely appreciate the creative spark of Rosdolsky's thought, engaging with him as an equal.

A not totally dissimilar story could be told about Mandel's long and affectionate relationship with Ernst Bloch, another Titan whose exchanges with Mandel are rather tantalisingly glimpsed in Stutje's pages.

There is, of course, another key figure in the Mandel story, who was a core influence on his circle. This was the Greek, Michel Raptis, otherwise known as Pablo. Mandel met him when he was thirty-three years old, and thus a venerable senior among all these youthful activists. His was a significant influence, because he was devoid of the constricting sectarianism which so deformed the vision of so many of his and Mandel's co-thinkers. He led his small band of followers, in spite of their isolation and inexperience, into a heroic international effort to help the Algerian revolution to succeed. This meant that he was able to begin to implement his scheme of self-management in industry as a member of the Algerian revolutionary administration. Mandel and Pablo later quarrelled mightily, and pioneered yet another ferocious split among the kaleidoscopic schisms of the Fourth International. But Mandel had learnt much of his political style from Pablo, and the two men were reconciled towards the end of their lives. Had this happened earlier, who knows, they might both have been more effective. In a team Pablo was a powerfully practical man, and Ernest Mandel was becoming a distinguished theoretician: together, they might have achieved something solid. As a feud, they were fireworks.

Marxist Economic Theory was followed by *Late Capitalism*, *The Second Slump*, and *Long Waves of Capitalist Development*, together with a host of political writings and polemical tracts. The scholarly effort involved in this prodigious output was truly impressive. But it was accompanied by a level of political activism and agitation which is quite mind-boggling. Stutje shows that much of this was of dubious effect, and although I am not qualified to judge many of these matters, it does appear that there were a number of sad miscalculations. The effort to organise the Trotskyist opposition in Poland, for instance, does not appear to have been a glorious chapter in Mandel's story. If Stutje is right about it, it was a calamitous series of mistakes, if not worse.

Of course, the Polish episode was no doubt helped forward and greatly aggravated by the attention of various spooks. It does seem to me that the

Fourth International was blessed by an extraordinary fascination for spooks of all kinds. Its formative years saw an OGPU (or KGB) agent discharging its secretarial functions after the very suspicious death of Trotsky's son, Leon Sedov. Wherever different national groupings emerged thereafter their fascination for spooks seems to have been seriously disproportionate to any real impact they might have had on the political life of the countries in question.

At one time I used to think that the fissiparous nature of Trotskyism ('create two, three, many Fourth Internationals') might have been helped along by some of these agencies. But in the light of subsequent experience in the post-Trotskyist left, I am not entirely sure that the comrades needed help from these agencies when it came to inventing bizarre reasons for forming and reforming a bewildering variety of schisms.

I was involved in the movement for European Nuclear Disarmament at the same time, and I became rather impatient with some of the results of the other, less doctrinaire but equally ill-fated attempts to create a disarmament movement in Poland and elsewhere in Eastern Europe. If the road to hell is paved with good intentions, it is not necessarily true that good intentions will lead to hell. They are more likely to get stuck in the mud of reality, where greater and greater efforts of belief are required to overcome healthy agnosticism.

Rational intentions will encourage freethinking. Not for nothing, Marx told us to doubt everything. The good society will thrive on doubt, and a society that doesn't won't be good.

Ken Coates

Lucky Ashdown

Paddy Ashdown, *A Fortunate Life*, Aurum Press Ltd, 416 pages, hardback ISBN 9781845134198, £20

Slobodan Milosevic told Paddy Ashdown he was the first person to admit that the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) was a terrorist organisation. 'You are the first person sitting in that chair who said during these proceedings that he does not deny that the KLA was a terrorist organisation,' said Milosevic. 'Everybody before you denied that.' (source: Trial Transcript p.2402).

It was 15 March 2002, and the trial of the third President of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia before the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia in The Hague staggered on. Judge Richard May had to

urge the suggestible Baron Ashdown to keep his answers brief and to the point, perhaps for fear that he might let slip other howlers. Milosevic had made a statistical presentation highlighting the spike in KLA attacks, on Albanian as well as Serb communities in Kosovo, during 1998, executed with the particular assistance of the German foreign intelligence organisation, the BND, he said.

Not that you would glean any of this from Paddy Ashdown's remarkably uninformative autobiography. According to the noble Lord, who was a witness for the prosecution, he

'... tried to keep him [Milosevic] tightly confined to the events I had seen and not let him wander off into generalised diatribes about western politicians and the west's "illegal" actions in the recent war.' (p.339)

No wonder the weary Judge wasn't best pleased with the witness.

Lord Ashdown was first 'parachuted' into what had, until very recently, been the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, in August 1992. He arrived in Sarajevo, Bosnia's capital, which was already descending into war as President Alija Izetbegovic sought to secede from the Federal Republic. Izetbegovic, who was to become Ashdown's 'friend', wanted to follow Slovenia and Croatia out of the Federation. (What did Ashdown know of Izetbegovic's other friend, Osama bin Laden, who was welcomed by Izetbegovic together with thousands of other fighters who were dispatched from Pakistan to Bosnia following the defeat and withdrawal of the Russians in Afghanistan in 1988?) These secessions from the Yugoslav Federation were being accomplished with considerable help from the Germans and, in the case of Croatia, the Americans, among others. Who sent Ashdown into Yugoslavia, at this critical juncture in its dissolution, and for what purpose, is not at all clear. But, once he was there, his appetite to interfere was given ample rein.

Not that he hadn't been warned. Fitzroy MacLean, who knew Yugoslavia well and had helped Tito's partisans liberate their country from the Nazi occupation, cautioned Ashdown against encouraging western intervention in Bosnia. He knew what he was talking about, but Ashdown wasn't listening. In fact, he didn't even know at the time that it was MacLean who was offering this advice. Ashdown had been to Yugoslavia twice in a matter of weeks, and he 'knew exactly what should happen – we should intervene'.

Who was the 'we' Ashdown had in mind? By 1995, John Major and Douglas Hurd were already seeking to withdraw British troops who had been deployed to 'safe havens' in Bosnia, which had been set up under UN auspices primarily to protect Bosniak Muslims from attacks by the Bosnian Serbs led by General Mladic. Tony Blair replaced Major in 1997,

and Ashdown had a new friend at court.

It was about this time that the fuse was lit for what became NATO's ten-week-long bombardment of Yugoslavia, as it still was, in 1999. NATO pilots flew more than 38,000 missions, hitting roads, bridges, trains and not a few horse-drawn carts carrying terrified peasants, as well as urban targets including Belgrade, Novi Sad and Pristina, the largest city in Kosovo, which was then still part of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. Hundreds of people were killed, with many more injured. There was also widespread contamination due to the heavy use of depleted uranium weapons, about which NATO was extremely reluctant to provide information to the agencies charged with conducting a clean-up.

Ashdown doesn't play down his role in encouraging a land war in Yugoslavia. After the initial air raids on Belgrade, he had again 'set off' for the region, and was quick to encourage the use of land forces. He writes:

'On the day after I got back [from seeing General Mike Jackson in Macedonia], I received a call from Jonathan Powell, who was in Washington with Blair. He asked for my conclusions from the visit and I told him. He replied that Blair was about to go and see Clinton. Could I please fax my report through immediately, so that he could read it before the meeting? I did so. It was, I believe, at this meeting that Blair finally persuaded Clinton, against the counsel of his closest advisors, that he should be prepared to risk putting US troops in harm's way and start preparing for an opposed invasion if necessary.' [p.329]

It didn't come to that, thanks to the Russians, who persuaded Milosevic to withdraw his forces from Kosovo, something that NATO's increasingly desperate bombardment had failed to accomplish. Two years later, in 2001, Blair proposed Ashdown for the role of High Representative in Bosnia and Herzegovina, whose formal task it was to implement the Dayton Accords pushed through in 1995 by Bill Clinton, with Milosevic's help, as a 'Framework Agreement for Peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina'. Ashdown took up his posting in May 2002. He records his view of the job as being that he:

'could interfere in anything ... And to help me interfere in everything if I wanted to, I had a staff ... of approximately 800 and a budget of some £36 million. And to make interfering in other people's business even more fun, I had an array of formidable powers ... under which I could impose laws, subject only to their eventual endorsement by the domestic parliaments, and remove officials and politicians who were blocking or undermining the implementation of the Dayton agreement.' (p.346-347)

If Ashdown interfered in the Bosnian passport granted to Osama bin Laden, or the fate of the 2,000 Mujahideen from Afghanistan who fought

in the Bosnian Muslim army, (who, according to a report in *The Independent*, were subsequently expelled from the country), he doesn't see fit to tell readers of his autobiography about it. Izetbegovic's Bosnia was a key destination for Osama's cohorts once they were forced to leave Afghanistan and Pakistan, according to John Schindler, who was for many years the chief Balkan expert for the US National Security Council. (See *Spokesman 100* for Michael Barratt Brown's review of Schindler's book *Unholy Terror: Bosnia, Al Qaeda, and the Rise of Global Jihad*.) Indeed, according to Schindler, in 2002, Ashdown actually fired the one member of the Bosnian Government, Munir Alibabic, who was seriously trying to control the Mujahideen and tackle the corruption associated with their activities (Schindler p.290 onwards).

Ashdown had worked for the British secret intelligence organization known as MI6. As far as we know, that organisation seems to have a highly questionable record in Yugoslavia during its last years. It apparently swung from supporting the Serbs to a misconceived plot to assassinate President Milosevic. This plot was picked over in some detail at the long-delayed inquest into the death of Diana, Princess of Wales, in 2007-8. An MI6 witness alleged that Arkan, an irregular soldier with a fearful reputation who was born in Slovenia and grew up in Zagreb and Belgrade, was the actual target of the abortive plot. Why anyone should have thought removing Arkan from the scene might have changed the course of events in Yugoslavia was not clearly explained.

You will look in vain in Lord Ashdown's *Fortunate Life* for any real insights into US/British policy towards Yugoslavia and its destruction, or NATO's expansion eastwards towards Russia. He could have told us something interesting, and broadened our understanding, but has chosen not to do so.

Anthony Lane

Worms-Eye-View

Chris Mullin, *A View from the Foothills: The Diaries of Chris Mullin*, Profile Books, 448 pages, hardback ISBN 9781846682230, £20

In a previous incarnation we knew Chris Mullin as a sea-green incorruptible, a hammer of Labour's parliamentary right wing. Indeed, his major claim to fame as a zealous Bennite was his pamphlet which offered us a primer on how to select and de-select your Member of Parliament. In those far-off days, control of the political machine devolved on

membership of the House of Commons, and all patronage depended on this. Access to Parliament was jealously restricted, and Members could not be ejected for any reason other than the grossest moral perfidy or severe misjudgement of the political odds. In the Bible we were told that it was easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Squadrons of camels could enter and exit the Parliamentary Labour Party at will, before a loyal time-server could be evicted, be he never so incompetent or tainted with sleaze.

In this book, which reveals the modern incarnation of Chris Mullin, this pamphlet is described as a modest contribution to New Labour's resolute efforts to democratise the Labour Party. In fact, it was a shock horror contribution to the dispossession of a thoroughly disreputable section of the fortified political class, who held their Parliamentary seats as if they were a fiefdom, and were kept in place by a small retinue of officials who were empowered to squash any insurrectionary moves against them. Having survived all such squashing, the irrepressible Mullin passed over to the other side, and all the trumpets sounded. Now his *Diaries* celebrate what he calls his view from the foothills, in contradistinction to the view from the Olympian heights, where the really big sleazeballs hang out.

Mullin has given us an amusing book, in which engaging self-deprecation is the keynote. His transition to the lower ranks of the establishment followed a passionate infatuation with Tony Blair, which is one of the stranger phenomena in British Labour history. Tony Blair has been ruthlessly greedy, relentlessly reactionary, a warmonger and war criminal, and all the things that people like the young Mullin would have regarded with nausea. But as the fount of all patronage, Tony Blair became a revered object, referred to throughout this book as 'The Man', whose every gesture was regarded in awe, as a possible token of favours or chastisement to come.

The favours that were likely to come the way of Chris Mullin were not necessarily very elevated.

'Life on the lower ranks of the ministerial ladder is a vast cascade of all the things my many superiors do not wish to do. Today an invitation was passed down from Nick Raynsford's office. His private secretary's note was still attached. It read: 'This is very low priority. Suggest we pass it to Chris Mullin'. I wrote 'No' on it, and waited to see what would happen. Sure enough, within the hour, someone was in my office explaining that it was really of the highest importance ...'

Poor Chris. The higher he rose on the greasy pole, the less important the tasks he was given to perform.

An ideal spot for keeping the drudges busy and simultaneously out of mischief was, of course, on one of the desks of the Foreign Office. Chris found his perch after much nail-biting uncertainty, on the Africa desk. From time to time this mattered to his masters, when Blair was seeking to augment his votes for war in the Security Council of the United Nations. But all that diplomacy came to nothing, leaving behind itself a train of useless interviews, lunches, dinners, and (doubtless, expensive) meetings.

It was not during his ministerial incarnation that Chris Mullin shone, although no doubt he gave satisfaction. Perhaps it would have been better if he didn't.

The part of the book that is riveting describes the run up to the war in Iraq, when The Man is reported as dazzling the Parliamentary Labour Party like a Boa Constrictor. Of course, it is not the snake that harbours the secret of the hypnotism. It is the base instincts of the victims, who cannot wait to be bewitched. Chris Mullin's honest story captivates us, because he normally tries to tell things more or less as they were. But the story of Britain's descent into the Iraq war was not simply the story of a hypnotic confidence trickster, or beguiling politician. A million Iraqis died in this war, and it was obvious from the very beginning moments of shock and awe that we were living through a dreadful experience. Chris Mullin notices some of the torture. He knows quite well how bad it all was.

Surely, a time is coming when no one involved in that slaughter would be deemed fit to hold office of any kind.

Harry Jones

Engels Revived

Tristram Hunt, *The Frock-coated Communist: The Revolutionary Life of Friedrich Engels*, 464 pages, Allen Lane, hardback ISBN 9780713998528, £25

Tristram Hunt has written a worthy sequel to Francis Wheen's *Karl Marx*, but it corrects some of the under-estimation which has grown up around the contribution of the second half of the Marx-Engels collaboration. Engels tends to be depicted as the mere supplier of funds from his family's Manchester textile business to finance Marx's family during the twenty years when Marx laboured over his great work on Capital, nobly took responsibility for siring Marx's child by his house-keeper, and additionally was the editor of the last two volumes of *Capital*. It is recognised that the

Communist Manifesto was a joint work and that Engels, at an early age, wrote *The Condition of the Working Class in England* and, much later, contributed *Socialism Utopian and Scientific*, *The Origins of the Family* and *The Dialectics of Nature*. His book *Anti-Dühring* is claimed as the foundation of German socialism, but also, incorrectly, as a determinist form of scientific materialism, which led to the outrages of Stalinism.

Tristram Hunt in his book tackles all these misunderstandings and distortions. Engels' intimate knowledge of the conditions of labour exploitation in the cotton trade in the first half of the nineteenth century gave Marx the solid basis for his work on Capital. The correspondence between Engels and Marx is replete with examples of the alienation experienced by men and women workers, typical today of Chinese industrialisation, as Hunt comments. The dialectics which both Marx and Engels took from Hegel, and the revolutionary experiences they shared in 1848, cemented their friendship into an immensely productive alliance, in which the contribution of Engels, as Hunt records it, was enormous. Engels' knowledge of European languages made him naturally the corresponding secretary of the First International, co-ordinating the proletarian struggle across the continent.

One strange lacuna in Hunt's book is the slight treatment of the Paris Commune in 1871, two pages compared with a whole chapter of 30 pages devoted to 1848. This is not just a small mistake, but a big one. As a result, not only are the detailed reports missing which were made by Engels of events in France, and became the basis for Marx's *Civil War in France*, but this neglect allows Engels' support for social democracy in Germany and approval of parliamentary activity in England to appear to over-ride his absolute commitment to the inevitability and desirability of proletarian revolution.

Hunt deals with the charge that the exposition of dialectics by Engels in the *Dialectics of Nature* encouraged Stalin to justify, in the *History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolsheviks): Short Course* and in his actions, a determinist view of Communism as an inevitable development that involved all sorts of violence. Engels, without doubt, had for his time a remarkably wide range of knowledge of scientific discoveries, including Darwin's explanation of the Origin of Species, but there is no evidence that he believed in a form of social Darwinism, which made the survival of the fittest depend upon sheer physical force. Hunt gives the charge short shrift, and adds an epilogue to the book which examines and destroys the caricature of Engels as a narrow minded, mechanistic architect of Soviet ideology. By contrast, Engels is shown in

his own later writings to have held an open, critical and humane vision of scientific socialism, with support for a social democratic, parliamentary road for the proletariat, as a step towards a proletarian revolution involving violence in the last resort.

Engels' bourgeois ways are allowed for – as the ‘frock-coated Communist’ – his love of fox hunting (he was a member of the prestigious Cheshire Hunt), his enjoyment of good wines (the list of boxes of champagne, clarets and other wines stacked in the cellars of his Primrose Hill houses is almost endless), and his attraction to beautiful women (though his devotion to the two mill girls he married – successively Lizzy and Mary Burns – was unshakeable, and he was an early champion of women’s rights). He was, perhaps, the first ‘champagne socialist’ – a title which my grandchildren accord to me, with rather less reason. It is this remarkable combination in Engels of pleasure in the good things of life with an unwavering commitment to socialism that so attracts me to the man, and its exposition in Tristram Hunt’s book that gave me so much pleasure.

Michael Barratt Brown

Scotland Can Afford It

Alexander Moffat, Alan Riach, Linda MacDonald-Lewis, *Arts of Resistance: Poets, Portraits and Landscapes of Modern Scotland*, Luath Press, 192 pages, hardback ISBN 9781906307639, £29.99, paperback ISBN 9781906817183, £16.99

This little book follows the conversations of portrait artist Alexander Moffat, poet Alan Riach and historian Linda MacDonald-Lewis at a series of lectures given at the National Galleries of Scotland. Being two well connected artists, and possibly the close connection of their lectures with the Galleries, has allowed them to produce a volume bringing together an excellent collection of illustrations covering the period from late nineteenth century Scotland till today. Truly, it was an epoch of change socially, politically, and of technologies.

Working on the theme that the national has to be developed before engagement can be made in the international milieu, *Arts of Resistance* covers the closeness of the cultural leaders it discusses to the country’s physical attributes as well as its traditions, and its adoption and development of new ideas. All this is developed during the period which

Hobsbawm called ‘The Age of Extremes’. It has also been a period of improvements in transport and communications. All this started prior to the introduction of radio and television, but those media gave an impetus to the exchange of ideas. Whereas, during the age of Burns, his meetings with other artists in Edinburgh were recorded as historic events, in the period after the Second World War there were frequent meetings of our cultural élite during the Edinburgh Festival and, at other times, in Milne’s Bar. Moffat’s illustrations of them, individually and collectively, are included in this volume.

Having had the good fortune to work on documentary programmes recording their views and capturing them at work, it has to be remarked that those artists I met were good company. This may go a long way to explaining the encouraging and enhancing effect they have had collectively on Scottish culture.

Arts of Resistance contain many excerpts from poems by the people it discusses. But one poem they don’t use perhaps encapsulates the crossover from landscape and romance to the hard political, which reveals national failings, but also the recognition of these failings, in the Scottish body politic. Hugh MacDiarmid in his *Third Hymn to Lenin* puts it thus;

*Clever – and yet we cannot solve this problem even;
Civilised – and flaunting such a monstrous sore;
Christian – in flat defiance of all Christ taught;
Proud of our country with this open sewer at our door,
Come, let us shed all this transparent bluff,
Acknowledge our impotence, the prize eunuchs of Europe,
Battening on our shame, and with voices weak as bats’
Proclaiming in ghoulish kirks our base immortal
hope.*

*And what is this impossible problem then?
Only to give a few thousand people enough to eat,
Decent houses and a fair income every week.
What? For nothing? Yes! Scotland can well afford it.
It cannot be done. The poor are always with us,
The Bible says. Would other countries agree?
Clearly we couldn’t unless they did it too.
All the old arguments against ending Slavery!*

All of this still rings true, even today as Scotland has its own

Parliament. This serious side was also accompanied by a biting wit. We must remember that MacDiarmid stood for parliament in a famous by-election in Kinross. He stood as a communist and a nationalist against Sir Alec Douglas-Home. I was at the Cross in Kinross when he berated the Tories for such lack of talent that they had had to exhume their candidate from the House of Lords.

But the frailties of man and woman have been reflected on by other poets. Today's scandal over MPs' expenses, and their duplicity or spin over events up to and including war, is alluded to in Norman MacCaig's gentle but thoughtful poem, 'A man in my position', whose first and final verses target all those whose only defence is that they were told that they were allowed to act dishonourably:

*Hear my words carefully.
Some are spoken
not by me, but
by a man in my position.*

*Until he dies
of my love for you
hear my words carefully –
for who is talking now?*

Art of Resistance pulls together the threads of a period of great creative endeavour in Scotland, which, due to the familiarity and friendship amongst the artistic fraternity, sometimes gives the nation the social flavour of a village. This is not a criticism but, in its own very Scottish way, its strength.

Henry McCubbin

Intruder

Susan Sontag, *Reborn: Early Diaries 1947-1964*, edited by David Rieff, Penguin, 318 pages, hardback ISBN 9780241144312, £16.99

I didn't know who Susan Sontag was before I read this book. Now, I feel I might know more than is desirable. The Preface by her only son, David Rieff, attracted me to Susan Sontag. She is presented as strong minded, opinionated, arrogant, independent, complicated and inspiring. David

Reiff was unsure whether to publish these intimate diaries, but felt his mother's character was so influential that either he 'would organise and present them or someone else would'. So he decided to publish them here in the first of three volumes, which catalogues her early experiences from the tender age of fifteen until thirty-one.

Reborn is filled with entries about the formation of the formidable individual who was Susan Sontag. Her thirst for knowledge, and her desire to escape from home to a life of intellectual stimulation, occupies much of the first two years. Once Sontag arrives at University, at the age of sixteen, her sexual desire for women occupies her thoughts and the page. She is childish about love and desire, which is to be expected of an inexperienced sixteen-year-old, but knowledgeable about books, music and who she is/wants to be. Her determination to be well read, and to understand what she is reading, adds to her precocity. However, this precociousness comes across as arrogance and intolerance towards others.

Susan Sontag does grow up during the sixteen years which *Reborn* covers. During the years of her marriage she writes more about philosophy, as well as the institution of marriage itself, and its limitations for her. She doesn't talk of her sexual desire throughout this period of her life, and seems dulled by the confines of her heterosexual union. Her diaries seem to characterize a freedom to explore herself – Susan Sontag uncovered – and become a place within which to note what constitutes her being.

Her openness and honesty is at times a little embarrassing, and as a reader I felt like an intruder, but a disinterested intruder at best. Had I studied some of her other works (such as *Regarding the Pain of Others*, which actually sounds interesting) before reading this collection of diaries I might have mustered more enthusiasm. I did, however, derive some enjoyment from Susan Sontag's inner monologue. She has lengthened my list of 'books to read'. For that I am appreciative.

Abi Rhodes

Communist Historians

Edited and introduced by David Parker, *Ideology, Absolutism and the English Revolution: Debates of the British Communist Historians 1940-1956*, Lawrence and Wishart, 288 pages, paperback ISBN 9781905007868, £18.99

Here is an outstanding collection of contributions by the most

distinguished British Communist historians from 1940-1956. Christopher Hill, Eric Hobsbawm, Rodney Hilton, Maurice Dobb, Victor Kiernan, Roy Pascal and Brian Pearce figure among the great names, who will entice readers to pick up this remarkable record of a discussion on making sense of the English Revolution, which came to a head more than half a century ago. Early on the journey they will meet another famous name, that of R. Palme Dutt, who sought, on behalf of the Party, to lay down the parameters for a discussion which refused to be tamed by fiat. It must have felt like herding cats.

David Parker provides a lucid introduction to this book, which focuses our attention on the problem of Absolutism in defining the origins and the course of the English Revolution. David Parker has tracked down many of the original papers which emerged in this discussion over several years, and has published them with a comprehensive apparatus of notes which situates them in context.

Jim Smith

* * *

A Brown Study

Alexis Lykiard

In the prudent, doubtful playtime of a dourly downbeat Presbyter,
 shifty bankers, shameless MPs, lived well on jam- and jelly-roll.
 That grail Brown sought to inherit from Blair the pious predator
 resembled a crock of old gilt, sold to a naked emperor;
 dull years of waiting one's turn will tarnish the worthiest soul ...
 When the Speaker scored an own goal, the rules spun right out of control:
 lame excuses scuppered the strong – the Cup game went finally wrong.

June 2009

Alexis Lykiard's collection Unholy Empires is available from Anarchios Press, PO Box 619, Exeter EX1 9JE, price £7.99.