

Reviews

Women at the centre

Cathy Porter, *Alexandra Kollontai: A Biography*, The Merlin Press, 2nd revised edition, 2013, 530 pages, illustrated, paperback ISBN 9780850366402, £20

Cathy Porter's account of Kollontai's life is an unhurried, suspense-packed journey through one of the most troubled times in history, following the development of Marxist parties, the crisis of socialist politics during World War One, and the Russian Revolution. Woven in the historical make-up of the times are Kollontai's idealistic writings about women's equal role in a socialist society and free love's benefits. A generous and granular biography, *Alexandra Kollontai* reads like a Tolstoy novel stripped of the effusive love stories to the barebones of revolutionary ideas.

Born in an upper-class liberal Russo-Finnish family, Alexandra, or Shura as she was called, proved to be a temperamental and against-the-grain little girl. At the age of six, she read army generals' accounts and planned revolutions at a friend's sleepover; glimpsed what most adults tried to ignore, how the poor fared and perished; became guilt-ridden by her private, tutor-led education and her family's many riches; and started to despise the regime for the way it handled the Bulgarian revolutionaries. On all accounts, even from an early age, she was first a socialist, caring for the many, rather than a feminist.

Growing up, Kollontai's penchant for education became evident when, after passing her exams and getting her teacher diploma, she continued studying with hopes of becoming a writer. While her older sisters were getting married, she started teaching evening classes to workers at the local museum, sneaking in some socialist ideas between literacy lessons.

She fell in love with her cousin and, despite her parents' disapproval, she succeeded in marrying him and having a son, Mischa. Four years into her marriage, however, feeling suffocated and purposeless, she left her husband and son and moved to Zurich for a year to study Marxist economy. This was the turning point in Kollontai's life, when she decided that the continuation of her studies and passion for writing, as well as her activism, preceded her desire to have a family life. Despite the sacrifices, she had a deep understanding of what brought her true contentment in life and had the power to carry it through. It was an utmost feminist statement, although calling it so might belittle her agonizing compromise as a mother.

Freed from the confines of an old society, Kollontai started publishing articles in various socialist journals and writing books based on her workers' studies, met key members of the movement such as Rosa Luxemburg, Lenin and Bukharin, addressed factory meetings and took part in demonstrations. At the core of her work was the stoic organising of women workers inside the Social Democratic Party, while strongly opposing movements such as the Women's Union for thinking that one movement can represent all women with their opposing class interests.

Forced into exile in Germany, she continued her socialist agitation in workers' towns in the Rhineland where she was immensely successful, even without the support of her bureaucrat comrades. Following months of working all over Europe, she returned to Germany and was joined by her son a day before the First World War was declared in 1914. After a few days in prison as a suspected Russian spy, she fled to Denmark, Sweden and then Norway where being in close counsel with Lenin re-focused her efforts towards anti-war propaganda, encouraging soldiers to fraternise across national divides and turn against the real enemy, capitalism. Speaking against the war brought her fame in America, where she did a five-month long tour, exposed beautifully by Porter in its wildness, sense of adventure, exhaustion and disappointment that brought forth in Kollontai these words:

‘And as I finally saw it properly for the first time, on a cold clear day in spring, I couldn't believe my eyes. Was that the Statue of Liberty, so tiny and lost against the skyscrapers of Wall Street? Was this powerless figure, shrinking before the all-powerful guardians of capital, really the image we had imagined when we arrived? Is it the insolence of the kings of capital, daily curtailing the freedoms won by the blood of the forefathers of the modern Uncle Sam, that forces it to shrink and curl up in shame?’

With the Tsar's abdication in 1917, she returned to Russia in the midst of the revolution and for the next few years her activism focused on including women in the new country that was being built, advancing her seminal work on legislation on maternity protection, women workers' rights and marriage law. Kollontai's refusal to forego the 'women issue' and focus on the socialist dream, as well as her Bolshevik past and affiliation with Lenin, turned her into *persona non grata* when Stalin came to power. Due to her fame at home and abroad, she was not banished but 'rewarded' with diplomatic posts in Norway, Mexico and Sweden, while many other Bolsheviks were exiled or executed. However, with the Second World War ensuing, Kollontai's successful efforts to negotiate with Finland and

Sweden and keep war with Russia at bay brought her back into favour in Russia, as well as securing her a nomination for the Nobel Peace Prize at the end of her career.

Riveting and insightful about Kollontai's work and its magnitude, vignettes about workers all across Europe, including England, pepper the biography:

'Halls were so packed that women had to ask men to leave and give up their places to them. Husbands stayed at home with the children for a change, while their wives, the captive housewives, went to meetings. Berlin was a seething sea of women ... The day set the tradition for a working women's day of exceptional militancy.'

In this second edition of Kollontai's biography, Porter had the cumbersome task of sifting through thousands of pages of books, articles, letters, diaries and memoirs in order to deliver a story with a chronological timeline, without obliterating the substance of Kollontai's activism. Not surprisingly, the result is somewhat intimidating, through the sheer number of political events described and famous socialists mentioned, as well as the weighty ideas about women's emancipation and sexual revolution, ideas we still grapple with to this day. The writing is clear and earnest, which takes away from the burden, but the progress is slow and the main concepts are not explained further, which makes the pace of events and ideas almost too quick to follow. The book demands extensive periods of research as well as meditation. *Alexandra Kollontai* has the potential to be a true delight for the connoisseur by providing an alternative historical account of Russia and the socialist movement. However, what makes it transcend time is Kollontai's chief belief that women should be at the centre of the economy, not the periphery.

Lucia Sweet

Satan in the Suburbs

Rupa Huq, *On the Edge – The Contested Cultures of English Suburbia*, Lawrence & Wishart, 2013, 206 pages, paperback ISBN 9781907103728, £15.99

The author is a sociology lecturer and an active participant in local Labour Party politics in Ealing. She held the office of Deputy Lady Mayoress from 2010-2011. Her connection with Ealing undoubtedly meant that the riots

there in 2011, which were particularly bad, must have had a particular resonance for her. So much so that the Preface discusses the rioting in some depth as a vivid example of how much things have changed in suburbia. Ealing, which gained some notoriety for its film studios and their gentle post-war comedies, would seem an unlikely setting for a suburban riot, but it does exemplify the theme of *On the Edge*: the changing nature of suburbia.

The term 'suburbia' used to suggest localities adjacent to the countryside, peopled by the respectable middle-class, almost exclusively white, where traditional gender roles were the norm, in owner-occupied detached or semi-detached housing. Ideally, it is a haven of relative peace and quiet, free from the hustle and bustle of city life. But the reality of suburbia has changed dramatically; the suburbs defined by *On the Edge* are those urban areas we are left with having deducted the inner city and the commercial centre. This constitutes most housing. As one quoted commentator opines: 'suburbia is where 80% of the population live'.

The author is naturally aware of the changes in economic stability which have enveloped more and more sectors of the community since 1979, and what this means for community and national politics. *On the Edge* is clearly directed at Ed Miliband's Labour Party to assist in policy decisions and election strategy. New Labour always clung to the conservative vision of a suburbanised 'middle-England' when it came to determining policies. Now many find themselves with insufficient money and insecure employment, or no employment, and dependent on ever-reducing welfare support. All this would suggest a move to the Left, but the majority may well remember that New Labour had a hand in their present predicament. Some years ago, Tony Blair discovered his average suburban voter in 'Sierra Man', who shed his Conservative attachment to become 'Mondeo Man', and voted Labour into office in 1997. This transformation was purportedly brought about as the result of the party ditching anything smacking of that sure vote loser – socialism. Frankly, the author offers little advice on policy, but she does find it necessary to tell us twice, in fact, that her front room was a venue for David Miliband to speak to local party activists during his campaign for the leadership of the Labour Party. If Labour is to win in the suburbs again, it will not be enough to coast in on the back of popular contempt for the Coalition and continue with the same old New Labour 'Tory Lite' policies. Matters in the suburbs, given a continuation of the present government agenda, could be pretty explosive even with a staged pre-election mini-boom. The author sees the possibility of a renewed activism to which she wants Labour to respond and harness. She may be right, but I think to do this Ed Miliband needs not just to 'turn the page' on New Labour but also to consign it to the waste bin.

Rupa Huq has obviously done a lot of work to make her book as informative as possible. The sources are copious, and research interviews and focus group meetings were utilised in ‘multi-sited fieldwork and textual study’. It would definitely serve as an excellent and informative read for sociology students in school and university. One of the most interesting interviews is with Jon Cruddas, the MP for Dagenham and Rainham, who has his own take on suburbia in the context of his working-class constituency which has been de-industrialised and hung out to dry. He finds it a ‘great place’ with a vibrant community where ‘people will tell you what they think’, that is subject to rapid change within an increasingly complex neighbourhood. He brushes aside with contempt the inroads the British National Party has made in Dagenham, and certainly the threat seems to have receded, often due to the BNP’s own ineptitude. He remarks ‘I don’t lose any sleep about the BNP as I have seen them up close and they are not scary, they’re just shit/crap/rubbish’.

In addition to the more generalised discussion, there are chapters on faith in the suburbs, on voting behaviour, consuming and shopping, and extremism. The latter starts with a reference to Bertrand Russell’s short story entitled *Satan in the Suburbs* where the devil sets up business to kindly bring adventure and danger to ‘the humdrum uniformity of life in our great metropolis’. We have, however, no need for such palliatives, since the suburbs are not immune from misguided violence perpetrated by its sons. Some suburbs are perceived as the site of hate crimes, such as the killing of Stephen Lawrence, youth stabbings, and the sexual exploitation of minors. The BNP is discussed at length, as is the impact of fundamentalism and extremism in the Muslim community. There are interviews with members of the Muslim community who have been attracted to fundamentalist organisations, including those banned by the government, which are quite interesting for what they reveal. The authorities showed their ineptitude by thrusting on this community the so-called ‘Preventing Violent Extremism Strategy’ (Prevent) scheme. This scheme seemed predicated on the assumption that the Muslim community as a whole was committed to fundamentalism, and counter-intervention was required to prevent Muslims teetering into committing violent acts. This had a major and negative effect on the Islamic community, in spite of the financial largesse which was made available by the government.

The author has largely succeeded in her stated aim, which was to show the changes that have occurred in what she defines as ‘English suburbia’ since 1979. Unfortunately, we are now in the midst of yet another bout of neo-liberal experimentation with the privatisation of large chunks of the

state itself, coupled with the consequent deterioration of living and working conditions for many. Present hardship combines with a palpable fear for the future that stalks many suburbs, and only a decisive break with present government policies can rectify the situation. *On the Edge* makes a contribution to the necessary debate to hone the right strategy.

John Daniels

They have got it wrong

Seumas Milne, *The Revenge of History: The Battle for the Twenty-first Century*, Verso, 2012, 320 pages, hardback ISBN 9781844679638, £20, paperback ISBN 9781781680919, £9.99

This book consists of Seumas Milne's *Guardian* pieces, running from 1997 to 2012. It is a big and very important book, and I am reviewing it at length with many quotations from the text. I should have reviewed it before, but I was writing my own book. The 'revenge of history' in the title refers to the financial collapse of the much vaunted world capitalist economy and, at the same time, the disastrous outcome of the wars launched, without UN support, by the United States and United Kingdom in Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, and elsewhere in Africa. As Naomi Klein says in her note on the cover, it is a relief to read such a book amid all the spin woven by governments and press and find the facts of what has really happened to most people's lives in the last twenty-five years. *The Revenge of History* is not only most readable, with an excellent long explanatory introduction, but supported by the most rigorous presentation of the statistical evidence.

Boasting about the so-called 'economic recovery' has become more strident since the book was first written but, even by 2011, Seumas Milne was arguing:

'It is almost as if the politicians have been asleep for the past three years. It was after all the City and its reckless speculation that brought us to this pass ... The price being paid in wasted lives and broken public services is the direct result of the City's uncontrolled derivatives trading and monumental debts – far outweighing the public debt run up to clear their wreckage - that sparked the 2008 crash.'

To deal, first, with the power of the financial institutions, Seumas Milne recommends adoption of the 'Tobin' tax on financial transactions, but this is rejected by the UK's Coalition Government as inevitably haemorrhaging business from the City to New York and the East. The tragedy is that both

New Labour and Conservative governments have reduced manufacturing and mining in the UK and relied on financial services to provide 10% of national income, with less than 4% of the national work force. The ‘Tobin’ tax needs international support, and if the UK was a full financial member of the European Union, it would probably get it.

One of the main features of the last twenty-five years in the UK has been the privatising of public services including prisons, schools and even the National Health Service, a process begun by New Labour and continued as a principle of government by the Tories. Seumas Milne does not exaggerate the result in concluding, as he wrote in 2011:

‘The evidence has built up remorselessly over two decades that privatisation of public services is expensive, drives down pay and conditions, reduces transparency and accountability, increases bureaucracy and political corruption and corrodes the ethos and character of the service.’

You could hardly draw up a more damning indictment. Milne goes on:

‘Months of leaks of staggering cuts and carefully timed announcements of raids on middle-class incomes, from child benefit to tuition fees, were used to soften up the public for today’s package with the preposterous theme of “we’re all in this together”.’

He also makes the important point:

‘By clinging to a halfway house of hands-off part nationalisation, the government is getting the worst of both worlds. Billions have been pumped into banks to support economic recovery (and been lost as their shares have tanked), but lending has actually fallen, while cash has been used to shore up profitability.’

Seumas Milne quotes Mervyn King, the former Governor of the Bank of England, expressing surprise in March 2011, ‘that the degree of public anger has not been greater’! And it has not just been in the UK that standards of living are shown by Milne, with detailed figures, to have been falling, unemployment and poverty increasing, but equally in the US and throughout southern Europe, to the point that the whole future of the Eurozone is in question. And what is the problem? Austerity cuts to protect a broken system. ‘It is not the Greek economy that is being rescued,’ Milne writes in 2011, ‘but European and US banks exposed to Greek debt’.

Not surprisingly, most of the book consists in the discussion of terrorism and war, and the message throughout is that Western policies have been fuelling, not fighting, terror by their wars of intervention. The claim for ‘humanitarian’ intervention is challenged by Milne at the very beginning

of his book, in dealing with the air assaults by the US, supported by Britain, against Serbia, Iraq, Afghanistan, Sudan, and Sierra Leone, without the sanction of the UN.

‘What credibility,’ he asks, ‘can there be in a policy which claims to be based on a moral imperative, but only punishes ethnic cleansing and human rights abuse by regimes that refuse to toe the Western line?’

Milne gives particular attention to the cases of Kosovo and Serbia and of Georgia and Ossetia, and presents a key argument of his book:

‘Far from helping to rehabilitate liberal interventionism, the Kosovo experience highlights the fatal flaws at its heart. By supporting one side in a civil war, bypassing the UN and acting as judge and jury in their own case, the Western powers exacerbated the humanitarian crisis, bequeathed a legacy of impoverished occupation and failed to resolve the underlying conflict. They also laid the ground for the lawless devastation of Iraq: the bitter fruit of the Kosovo war.’

It was not only in Iraq and Afghanistan. Perhaps the most surprising element in Seumas Milne’s world review is the strength of his criticism of Israel’s treatment of the Palestinian Arabs and the lessons he draws for explaining Arab and Muslim consequent violence, including the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Centre and elsewhere in the US. The responses to such explanations, openly examined in a *Guardian* full-spectrum debate, Milne describes as ‘deranged’. It was called the ‘babble of idiots’, and Milne quotes Michael Gove, current Secretary of State for Education, writing that the *Guardian* had become a ‘Prada-Meinhof gang of fifth columnists’ – so much for English education! The statistics which Milne quotes of the expulsion of Palestinians, the annexation of their lands, left with just 22% of historic Palestine, and divided up by walls, and the numbers slaughtered over the years, in the thousands compared with Israel’s few hundred killed, are mind-boggling. Of course, they do not excuse al-Qaeda, but they go far to explain it, and create some understanding for Iran’s nuclear ambitions.

Seumas Milne reviews at length the Middle East situation today. The chaos that followed Mubarak’s overthrow in Egypt and election of a Muslim Brotherhood government was still to come. The Arab revolt is still playing and the power of the West is under challenge. He writes in 2010:

‘... after more than half a century, the US still has to rely on laughably unrepresentative autocracies and dictatorships to shore up its domination of the Middle East and its resources. While Arab emirs and election-rigging presidents fear the influence of Iran and only wearily bring themselves to raise

the Palestinians with their imperial sponsors, their people regard Israel and the US itself as the threats to their security and strongly support Iran's nuclear programme – as the most recent (2010) US-conducted poll in the region demonstrated.'

Obama's expansion of the use of drones to eliminate those accused of terrorism only inflames Muslim opinion. This is treated in the media as Islamism with often no distinction, as Milne shows even Prime Minister Cameron fails to make, between the few extremists and the many moderates.

It seems incredible that Tony Blair, as the Middle East envoy of the US led 'Quartet', can be quoted by Milne claiming in support of US defence of Mubarak's regime with \$3 billion a year, that the Egyptian president, who had jailed and tortured thousands, was 'immensely courageous and a force for good'. But, if he ever was, he was not thought to be so for much longer by the Egyptian people! Milne gives a passing tribute to WikiLeaks 'for opening up some of the institutions of global power to scrutiny and performing a democratic service in the process. Their next target is said to be the banks, says Milne, and adds, 'bring it on!' But WikiLeaks was stopped in its tracks.

The new player challenging US dominance does not come from Europe but from the rise of the more than a billion-strong people of China. As Seumas Milne writes:

'It has turned China into a global super economic power, raised its national income by more than 9 per cent a year for three decades, and lifted hundreds of millions out of poverty – but at a cost of sweeping and corrupt privatisation, a decline in health and education provision, environmental degradation, the creation of a fabulously wealthy élite and a block on civil and democratic advance.'

Meanwhile, China's purchases of raw materials has given a boost in Latin America to achieve what Milne describes as 'the wave of progressive change' that has swept away the old élites and brought a string of radical socialist and social-democratic governments from Ecuador to Brazil, Paraguay to Argentina challenging US domination and neo-liberal orthodoxy, breaking down social and racial inequality, building regional integration (including even isolated Cuba which Milne hails as the socialist forerunner) and taking back resources from corporate control.

It is these progressive changes, combined with the successes in the Western countries of the 'Occupy' movements and industrial 'Days of Action' that give Seumas Milne grounds for hope of democratic social

advance in the future, and he cites the extraordinary success of his paper, *The Guardian*, doubling the traffic on its website in the US. Milne concludes:

‘The policies and programmes pouring out of the trade union movement, NGOs, political parties and think tanks – on climate change, jobs, green investment, public services, trade, finance, international institutions and global justice – are voluminous and serious. The problem is not a shortage of alternatives, but a lack of political muscle so far to make them work.’

Michael Barratt Brown

High Marx

Jonathan Sperber, *Karl Marx: A Nineteenth-Century Life*, W W Norton & Co, 2013, 668 pages, hardback ISBN 9780871404671, £25.00

*‘What can the England of 1940 have in common
with the England of 1840?’ (Orwell)*

*‘Was the nineteenth century really that long ago?’
(Peter Gordon, New Republic, reviewing Sperber)*

Sperber’s claim to novelty, tediously reiterated, is that he puts Marx in his own time, instead of the allegedly universal habit of viewing him through contemporary eyes. Nothing new about this. It’s the approach of pros (e.g. Hobsbawm and Prawer, here largely ignored), antis (‘rooted in the circumstances of its time’: AJP Taylor’s Introduction to the Penguin *Communist Manifesto*; ‘Marx was a child of his time’: Paul Johnson, *The Intellectuals* – both ignored), and neutrals (R. Schlesinger, *Marx: His Time and Ours*, 1950). As Orwell (‘The English Revolution’) summarised: ‘The Marxists were looking at the modern world through nineteenth-century spectacles’.

This book is both biography and Marxist primer. Sperber catalogues every last family member (Karl was as misomaterial as Mrs Thatcher), every obscure sectarian rival (internecine Trotskyist groupuscule feuding has a long pedigree), every last carbuncle – Marx’s health report in later years makes as grim reading as Samuel Johnson’s, enhancing one’s admiration for what he then achieved.

Not a hagiography, though. Marx’s shortcomings are not overlooked, from his irascibility to fathering an illegitimate child on his long-suffering housemaid (Sperber convincingly verifies this soap opera which had

Engels claiming paternity – endorsed by the boy being named Fred – against the hard-core of disbelieving admirers), to his cranky obsession that Palmerston was a Russian spy, along with the rival notion that he himself was Bismarck's private secretary, prefiguring Internet conspiracy theories; cf. Alf Garnett's belief that Stalin was an American agent.

Sperber's detailed résumés of Marx's major theoretical works, while clear and jargon-free, are hard slogging, inevitably. Volume One of *Capital* deserved praise for its classical foundations (Aristotle, above all), literary breadth (the reader never gets a sense of Marx's 'bookworming', superbly detailed in S. S. Praver's *Karl Marx and World Literature*, astonishingly omitted from Sperber's bibliography; cf. my review in *Spokesman 115*) and its multifarious humour. What other economics treatise dismisses a rival's work as 'shit' and details an aristocratic lady's fellatio skills?

Easiest to read is the *Communist Manifesto*, rightly seen as a tract for the moment, some of which may be dismissed as lapel-grabbing rhetoric: hard to believe that Marx, the devoted husband and father, really believed in abolition of the family.

Occasional shafts of wit enliven Sperber's own generally stolid prose. I specially liked 'while the French may have been godless subversives, they were, at least, Catholic godless subversives'(p 15).

His often sarcastic criticisms of Marx's intellectual tergiversations, though, are misplaced, indeed contradicting his trumpeted 'novelty'. Of course, Marx often changed tack – how could he not in the century's constant economic, political, and social changes? As (perhaps, some question the attribution) Keynes remarked, 'when the facts change, I change my mind,' whilst many great names (Churchill, Twain, Wilde, etc.) have deprecated consistency of belief.

Sperber is unduly suspicious of Engels as a reliable source for Marx's ideological actions. One might question some details, not the overall picture – I see Fred as playing Boswell to Karl's Johnson or Plato to Socrates. Given his attitude, it's odd that the author ignores the claims of Henderson and Challoner (1958) that Engels falsified quotations to bolster his version of Mancunian material misery, or for that matter the same accusation against Marx levelled by David Felix (*Marx as Politician*, 1983) and Leslie Page (*Karl Marx and the Critical Examination of his Works*, 1987).

Here, everyone should sympathise with Engels having to struggle with Marx's abominable handwriting, castigated by his schoolmasters in the *Abitur* – cacography is one thing I have in common with him.

Primary source documentation is meticulously based on the latest

editions of *Marx-Engels-Gesamtausgabe* (MEGA), *Marx/Engels Collected Works* (MECW), and cognate collections. Amy Wendling's 'Comparing Two Editions of Marx-Engels Collected Works', *Socialism and Democracy* 19 (2005), pages 181-189, might have been mentioned.

Despite its 13 pages, the secondary bibliography is eccentric and lacunose. Since he's aware (p 362) of its many errors, why bother with Isaiah Berlin (who admitted to Christopher Hitchens that he knew little about Marx or Marxism) at the expense of superior Marx biographies by, for example, Shlomo Avineri (1968), E H Carr (1934), Rolf Hosfeld (2009), Arnold Künzli (1966), and Saul Padover (1980)? Readers might also have been alerted to Alexander Kluge's 'News from Ideological Antiquity', a 9-hour film about *Capital*. No, Brad Pitt does NOT play Karl!

Although mentioned in the text (pps. xiii-xiv, 262), David Rjazanov's (shot in Stalin's Great Terror) pioneering work as founder of the Marx-Engels Institute is not drawn upon. Much of this is now Englished online. While rightly and fascinatingly devoting much space to Jenny Marx, Sperber omits Mary Gabriel's *Love and Capital: Karl and Jenny Marx and the Birth of a Revolution* (2011). The credit for solving Marx's abortive dedication of *Capital* to Charles Darwin, given to Francis Wheen's derivative account (p. 596 n. 12), belongs rather to Margaret Fay's seminal article in *Journal of the History of Ideas* 39 (1978), pages 133-146. Bruno Bauer (p. 571, n. 43) is not all that neglected, being the subject of here unmentioned books by Martin Kegel (1909) and Douglas Moggach (2009).

Minutiae. P. 29: Marx's *Abitur* essay on Roman history deserved mention, rightly seen by biographer Franz Mehring (1918; cf. my 1988 edition) as containing seeds of his mature thought. P. 66: The thesis on ancient Greek atomism is not relegated to 'today's academic cubbyholes', being highly praised by emphatically non-Marxist classicist Cyril Bailey; cf. N. D. Livergood, *Activity in Marx's Philosophy* (1967). P. 115: Marx was certainly, not 'probably', influenced by Rousseau; cf. Praver 367 n. 49. P. 123: Religion as opiate of the people is an expression also attributed to, for example, De Sade and Friedrich Novalis, c. 1797. Pp. 126 & 132: Marx's philosophy-proletariat-revolution dichotomy and ridicule of advertising are possible influences on Orwell's *1984* and *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*. P. 143: On 'Alienation', see, of course, Ken Coates. P. 203: The 'Idiocy of Rural Life' has been alternatively explained via Greek 'idiotes' as referring to lack of political rather than mental sense. P. 335: Praver (265) is more sympathetic to *Herr Vogt*, also elucidating the 'obscure' Da-Da appellation. Pps. 405 & 422: Sperber's 'corrected' translations of the German *Enthüllungen* and *Ware* do not hold water. P. 437: Marx's Latin outburst is a

Horace quotation. Pps. 447-454 & 535: Marx was prescient on Third World agriculture's political importance and on the CPGB's controversial pamphlet on the peaceful way to Socialism. P. 526: Contrast Prawer's (358) warmer view of the Gotha Programme Critique. P. 549: José Martí is surely not an 'unexpected source' of praise for Marx

Other reviews have run the gamut from 'obtuse, starchy, and tedious' (anon, *Kirkus Reviews*) to 'absorbing and meticulous' (Jonathan Freedland, *New York Times*, March 29, 2013) to 'magnificent' (Sheila Rowbotham, *THES*, April 25, 2013). Though mindful of the Thatcher dictum that the middle of the road gets you knocked down from both sides, there I stand. The pluses (above all, chapter 12, 'The Private Man') outweigh the minuses ('Spots on the Sun', as Palme Dutt in the less reputable context of Stalin's crimes). Unless new treasures surface from *MEGA*, *MECW*, or elsewhere, Sperber should long dominate – high marks for his Marx.

Barry Baldwin

Clash

Colin Firth and Anthony Arnone with David Horspool, *The People Speak – Voices that Changed Britain*, Canongate, 2012, 544 pages, hardback ISBN 9780857864451, £17.99

A couple of years ago, I reviewed a book for *The Spokesman*, entitled *A Radical History of Britain* by Edward Vallance. I recommended it. About the same time, I also read *The Pilgrimage of Grace* by Geoffrey Moorhouse and *The Peasants' Revolt* by Alastair Dunn (both highly recommended). Even though Geoffrey Moorhouse is a well-known writer, I doubt sales were high. They are for *Spokesman*-type people. Along comes Colin Firth, a very good and well-known actor who edits this book with others. His name alone should ensure a much wider reading public. I hope so. It is a superb book; an anthology of fierce rhetoric against social injustice and how to combat it. You can read straight through or dip into *The People Speak*. The pieces are short. You will find your own pearls. You can knock off a couple over a cup of tea or during a coffee break.

The part that interested me most was the chapter on vivisection, but every reader will find something in it for them. What moved me was the extraordinary courage many faced under sentence of death, often executed by torture (although Margaret Clitheroe – 1586 – seems to have had a death wish).

There are a few weak points, but they are rare and easily forgiven. I don't know if the English language has degenerated so much, but most of the excerpts of the first decade of our own 21st century just cannot begin to compare to what has come before. That is not to say that the cause is not right and just; it's just that it smacks of agit-prop-speak and whines (it's just not *roight*, I didn't *orta* be allowed, something must be done). There is nothing of the poetic passion of the other pieces that an intelligent actor like Colin Firth might love to declaim or recite.

You might skip most of the poetry, too, except of course Saint Rabbie Burns and Dickens, who I always thought of as a middling Victorian novelist. His poem 'The Fine Old English Gentleman', new version, 7/8/1841, leaves bitter old satirists such as Pope and Swift in the shade.

I would also leave out the lyrics. Words set to music are just for that, the music. Most opera librettos without the music would shrivel up and die of shame. The same applies here. There are some lyrics by *The Clash*, a band I recently discovered and find brilliant, although I don't know the song here. But the lyrics on the page seem boring and banal; they need driving, rocking music to put them over.

The Rolling Stones' 'Street Fighting Man', also quoted here, I know very well. It fired us up at the time to go on the next march or demonstration, thinking of ourselves as 'street fighting men' while we rolled up the next joint. If you listen closely to the lyrics, which is difficult to do with all those guitars and Charlie Watts on drums, or read them here, it is actually a very conservative song: never mind the street fighting, what can a poor boy do but play in a rock 'n' roll band? Much safer; a few drug busts, maybe, lots of money, and no real danger. During their long career, *The Stones* have remained largely 'apolitical'.

I'm wary of big stars going 'political', though I don't deny their right to do so. Bono is a bore, but then I find U2 awful. So is Richard Gere, but he is a lousy actor. However, Sean Penn, as good and as an intelligent actor as Colin Firth, has probably done more to put Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner's Argentina and Hugo Chavez's (RIP) Venezuela in the public eye than any political commentator could possibly have done. They are famous. You may not like it but that's the way it goes and, come to think of it, the best part of a recent issue of *The Spokesman* was Roger Waters' speech about Palestine at the UN. But then, Pink Floyd is one of the world's greatest rock bands. So carry on Colin, keep writing and editing.

The sub-title of *The People Speak*, 'Voices that changed Britain', is a misnomer. Nothing has changed. Of course, that is not quite true. We no longer send children down mines (no mines), nor up chimneys (no

chimneys), nor do we hang people. Yet, the gap between the high-earners and low-earners (if they have a job) grows ever wider. We seem to be at permanent war, and the country has sprawling ‘estates’. They used to be called slums. Here in Latin America they are called *favelas*, *villas miserias*, *barrios marginados*; in other parts of the world they are described as ‘shanty towns’. Such places often have several things in common: despair, anger, outrage and loss of hope and, thus, drugs, violence and alcohol.

So what is the solution? There isn’t one. You can be a good liberal and go on all the marches and demonstrations knowing it will make no difference (except it relieves your sense of guilt), or get really heavy and go violent and that brings a lot of problems. Singing in a rock ‘n’ roll band is fine, and brings much pleasure, but it will change nothing. You have to be a street fighting man or woman. This is a great book. Buy it, read it, dip into it, and you won’t be disappointed.

Nigel Potter, Honduras

DIY

Rob Hopkins, *The Power of Just Doing Stuff: How Local Action Can Change the World*, Green Books, 2013, 160 pages, paperback ISBN 9780857841179, £8.99

Rob Hopkins is co-founder of the Transition Movement and author of the *Transition Handbook*. This book is a real DIY introduction for those who want to learn how to ‘Do It Yourself’ in forming and developing community action and, most particularly, in responding to climate change.

Hopkins believes that ‘there is a near universal agreement that what we need now are jobs, economic activity, stronger and happier communities and community resilience’. Hopkins is careful to define the various elements in resilience, which we need to cope with surprises and disruptions, even as we work to fend them off. He lists the ‘cavalry’ required to put the big idea into practice, and includes government, business and millionaires, but under ‘what else?’ he does not include trade unions. This must be a real weakness in the whole book. Hopkins believes that the threat of climate change truly creates ‘an opportunity to shift our direction of travel to one built on foundations of social justice, fairness, well-being and happiness, entrepreneurship, the vitality of local economies, resilience, sustainability and inclusion’. This requires, as Hopkins insists, a measure of reflection on progress made – and the

setbacks – in each of these objectives.

The aim of a transition economy, according to Hopkins, is to build another economy, alongside the current, highly vulnerable, energy-intensive, debt-generating, high carbon economy; one that is more appropriate to our times. It can be seen, Hopkins suggests, ‘in the local food movement, in the explosion in pop-up shops (temporary retail stores), craft breweries, the growth of social enterprises, the rebirth of independent record shops, the growth of social enterprises, the flowering of community renewable energy systems ...’ ‘Such radical change’, he insists, ‘will have to go beyond minor behavioural changes, and re-using our plastic bags, to building an economy that provides local employment, goods and services and that is intentionally supported by the local community in terms of both investment and purchasing decisions’.

Hopkins ends the book with a number of stories – from Bath, Slaithwaite, and Buxton – of pioneer plants, breaking through the tarmac of business-as-usual. ‘They contain a taste, a seed’, he suggests, ‘of a new, more de-centralised, more fairly distributed, more appropriate and more resilient economy’. He adds, in conclusion, a list of further readings from Transition publications – altogether a most inspiring introduction to what you can do yourself – DIY! But it still leaves unresolved the instability in the global order of great national powers all seeking to meet their energy crisis by individual actions with no common aim.

Michael Barratt Brown

The Guts

Roddy Doyle, *The Guts*, Jonathan Cape, 2013, 328 pages, hardback ISBN 9780224098328, £12.99

Bowel cancer may sound unpromising material for Roddy Doyle’s new novel, *The Guts*, but he soon had me laughing out loud. Jimmy Rabbitte, erstwhile manager of The Commitments, not quite Dublin’s answer to Sam and Dave, has surgery and chemo to endure, but the toughest task is upholding those around him. Told with characteristic aplomb, purple prose and great timing, the impoverishment of a generation of Dubs provides the backdrop for Doyle’s return to Northside musical roots. He once promised to write for *The Spokesman* and requested a deadline. How does Saturday sound?

TS

Asylum seekers ate one's swans

Greg Philo, Emma Briant and Pauline Donald, *Bad News for Refugees*, Pluto Press, 2013, 216 pages, Paperback ISBN 9780745334325, £16.99

To belong is a basic psychological need. To achieve a sense of belonging we look for similarities between ourselves and a desired group, at the same time exaggerating the differences in groups we do not feel a part of. This need not be malicious in intent, but merely a way of developing personal identity. However, the power of these strategies to unite large numbers of people against specific social targets increasingly appears in the form of public smear campaigns.

Bad News for Refugees examines the media culture surrounding immigration and asylum, suggesting how and why common misgivings emerge, and how selective news coverage isolates refugees from society at large. Philo *et al* focus on two periods of media coverage during 2006 and 2011, and conduct a comparative analysis of media platforms and their portrayals of asylum issues. Orientating around common assumptions favoured by the media, they identify recurrent trends in coverage and question the reliability of information presented. Factors such as climate change, the role of the West in global displacement, and its responsibility to shelter those affected are also discussed, widening the usual debate.

Perhaps the most practical information to be gained from this book is its clarification of the legal rights and assistance available to refugees in the UK; information that ought to be as accessible to the public as it is here. Transparency in this area would challenge the fundamental misconceptions of asylum that many hold. Another great strength is the inclusion of insights from within the media world, and personal accounts from refugees. These are crucial in humanising not only asylum seekers, but also, to some extent, journalists – anonymous reports of in-house agendas and bullying reveal the murky depths to which some newspaper organisations will go.

More important, however, is that *Bad News for Refugees* chooses to address refugees' lack of voice within the media, and in doing so raises topics not pursued by mainstream outlets. When so much of immigration coverage is dominated by threatening imagery, to hear from refugees themselves is a refreshing, though often unsettling, alternative. Ordinarily, there does seem to be a lack of interest in the human consequences of the asylum process, with most ready to reduce the issue to the idea of so-called 'illegal immigration'. As the authors make a point of explaining, this is one of the most misleading and paradoxical concepts associated with refugees.

James Curran (Goldsmiths, University of London) notes the book's 'meticulous scholarship', and meticulous it certainly is. Despite the benefits of a thorough approach to this topic, it's not a read that will suit everyone. Scrutinising so much input in detail means you can end up swimming in denigrating newspaper buzzwords, trying to remember the particular effects you're supposed to associate with each. Points do repeat themselves, but this is in the interest of a consistent evaluation. At any rate, the repetition here is arguably less insidious than that in the tabloids, where themes that ought to be getting stagnant are reworked in ever more lurid ways.

Worryingly, the evidence supporting such stories is often even thinner on the ground than first appears. *The Sun's* absurd 'Swan Bake' story – which will be very familiar indeed by the end of the book – is one of the most prominent reports that was revealed to have been made up. The story claimed asylum seekers trapped and barbecued protected swans (move over, Freddie Starr!), though *The Sun* was later unable to verify its sources and was forced to print a correction in a later issue. No one likes to be lied to, let alone have to pay 60p for the privilege. The recent, high-profile Leveson Inquiry threw some light onto unscrupulous conduct in the media, which might encourage us all to think more critically about news sources from now on.

During the Leveson Inquiry, witness and moral philosopher Professor Baroness Onora O'Neill mentioned 'the extent to which exposure to media content is unchosen'. However ludicrous a story, the danger is that the imagery plays on the mind, and when things are easy to recall, the boundary between fact and fiction begins to stand for less. Thus, falsehoods and half-truths enter the generally damaging asylum narrative, and foster a culture of mistrust that overshadows the many potential benefits of immigration. This isn't to say that these attitudes begin and end solely in the headlines, although it is plain to see how they fan the flames of existing worries.

Tragically, as accounts in *Bad News for Refugees* show, biased reporting also convinces those closest to the matter, particularly, of an imagined hierarchy of worth amongst refugees. Picture the scene: an elderly woman asks a refugee worker about the people she works with, and how many are 'genuine'. Not a wildly unexpected remark, perhaps, but there is a crucial detail about her. She is the wife of a Polish refugee from Auschwitz. There are some parallels between current media practices and ideological behaviour of the last century that surely no one wants to draw.

Bad News for Refugees confirms the extent of the correlation between media coverage, public opinion and legislation. The immense power of the press is emphasised to contrast choices made against options available – turning a profit is repeatedly seen to be favoured over demanding responsible

actions from policy makers. This book ultimately judges the treatment of asylum issues to vilify asylum seekers, immigrants and refugees, and above all to conflate the terms in an effort to further negative perceptions. A revealing and informative book in many ways that would make a valuable addition to the reading list of every journalism course in the country.

Nicole Morris

Encountering Jamal the Bloodshedder

Anbara Salam Khalidi, translated by Tarif Khalidi, *Memoirs of an Early Arab Feminist: The Life and Activism of Anbara Salam Khalidi*, Pluto Press, 2013, 184 pages, 17 photographs, hardback ISBN 9780745333571, £55, paperback ISBN 9780745333564, £16.99

A highly intelligent child from a wealthy middle-class family, Anbara Salam Khalidi seeks out the company of a small street urchin whom she passionately envies.

‘These encounters with the beggar girl stirred in me hidden and inscrutable imaginings of a liberated and untrammelled life.’

The book charts her determined search for freedom for herself and her Arab sisters against the backdrop of a grand historical sweep. She is born into one empire, moves to a second on marriage, and undergoes the imposition of a third – one which is still eating up her adopted homeland nearly three decades after her death. Born into Ottoman-ruled Beirut in 1897, Anbara flees to Syria during World War One, moves to British-occupied Jerusalem to join her Palestinian husband, only to become an exile again in the wake of the creation of the State of Israel. She did throw off the ‘iron cage’ of the veil as the photos in the book prove. (What would she make of the current fashion of adopting the hijab as a political statement?)

Anbara’s family was clearly influential or ‘notable’, to use the terminology of the time. They are on intimate terms with the future King Feisal of Iraq and become professors at the prestigious American University of Beirut (AUB) and Oxford. Anbara was a precocious child. She impresses the Iranian prime minister with her knowledge of Persian history whilst still at school. Aged 15 she has an article splashed on the front page of a newspaper and is prevailed upon to address Jamal the Bloodshedder – of whom more later – whilst still in her teens. ‘For the only time in my life I thanked God for my veil,’ she says of that meeting. She cites the importance

of women activists in early Islam and condemns the view that listening to a woman's voice was religiously illicit, characterising the idea as part of 'outworn traditions that bore no relationship to our religion'.

Anbara was educated at a convent along with children of other notables – Christian and Muslim – and then at a school with a Christian headmistress whom she hero-worships. She longs to attend a lecture by her heroine at the American University of Beirut. Her carriage is stopped on its way by busybodies who think young ladies shouldn't be out at night. She doesn't want to embarrass her dad so she goes home but finds herself all over the papers the next day, anyway, accused of wantonness.

Making her first trip to Europe, age 28, Anbara removes her veil on the ship and sports a hat once she gets to Marseilles. When she reaches Britain, the free press enchants her – on a visit to the *Daily Express* she likens it to an independent state. And with breathtaking ignorance of what it's all about, she is thrilled at how citizens obey the state during the General Strike. But, regretting the 'vulgarity, loose morality and drunkenness' of some, her overwhelming impression of the freedom of English girls causes her real pain.

She asks King Feisal:

'What favour has she won with God to deserve all this freedom ... and what sin have I, the Arab girl, committed in God's sight to deserve as punishment a life filled with repression and denial?'

The King turns to her father: 'Abu Ali,' he says, 'Keep a sharp eye on that daughter of yours. In her heart she carries a revolution!'

There's a lot of revolution in this book. We get a vivid picture of life under the Turkish regime and the burgeoning Arab resistance to what she calls the 'turkifying' of the Ottoman Empire. The regime went out of its way to marginalise and humiliate the millions of Arabs who lived in so much of its territory. The provocations could hardly fail to result in rebellion. Parallels between the situation then and Israel's policies towards occupied Palestinians are striking.

Ever the feminist, Anbara has set her own face against marrying anyone she doesn't know. She falls for a young Arab nationalist, wooed by his revolutionary newspaper articles. With the help of a friend, she conspires to meet him, though it's the height of 'shamelessness' to do so. Needless to say, the meetings are chaste, but the relationship – intense and loving – is doomed. He is hanged by Jamal the Bloodshedder for his patriotic aspirations.

We learn a good deal about this Jamal Pasha – part of the government which ran the empire during World War One. His tribunals are likened to

the Spanish Inquisition with their enthusiastic use of torture:

‘... group after group was hanged until he had decimated the élite of the Arab world, writers, poets, journalists ... It was as if he wanted to mete out to Arab families what he had meted out to the Armenians in the early years of the war ... it may be that Jamal and his clique wanted to ethnically cleanse all Ottoman lands from any ethnicities other than the Turanian’ [Turkish nationalists].

As well as the struggle to break free from Turkey, Anbara warns of the Zionist project.

‘... my generation, although preoccupied with Turkish injustice, was not entirely blind to another far more insidious danger ...’

The Zionist massacre of villagers of Deir Yassin near Jerusalem and the assassination of Swedish diplomat, Count Folke Bernadotte, are recorded, as is the ‘juggernaut’ of Israeli propaganda which repeatedly blames the victim.

‘With the passage of years, my heart grew ever more sick as I witnessed the evils visited on Palestine, the terrible exile of its people and the flagrant injustice that it has met with among the circles of power in the world, to the point where the light of truth is now almost extinguished.’

Sadly, this extraordinary woman lived to see the country of her birth invaded by Israel and, subsequently, tear itself apart. The Lebanese Civil War was still raging when she died in 1986. Yet, in spite of all the terrible events she lived through and the personal tragedies she suffered, her inspiring strength and goodness shine through this first English translation of her memoirs.

Sharen Green

Dickens *resurgens*

Claire Tomalin, *Charles Dickens: A Life*, Penguin, 2012, 576 pages, hardback ISBN 9780670917679, £30, paperback ISBN 9780141036939 £9.99

What a pleasure after a solid diet of political economy to read a new biography of perhaps, after Shakespeare, our greatest English author, from Claire Tomalin, biographer among others of Pepys, Thomas Hardy, and Dickens’s secret last love, Nelly Ternan (*The Invisible Woman*). This is the latest of several biographies of Dickens, but must be the most comprehensive, drawing on letters and diaries not earlier available. Any

one who has read even some of Dickens's novels or seen the films will have learnt something of the nature of their author. In fact, they will have learnt more than they realise. In a fascinating account by Dostoevsky of an interview he had with Dickens, quoted by Tomalin, Dickens confessed to Dostoevsky what he would never reveal at home, and I quote,

‘There were two people in him, he told me, one who feels as he ought to feel and one who feels the opposite. From the one who feels the opposite I make my evil characters, from the one who feels as a man ought to feel I try to live my life ... He told me that all the good simple people in his novels, Little Nell, even the holy simpletons like Barnaby Rudge, are what he wanted to have been, and his villains were what he was (or rather what he found in himself) his cruelty, his attacks of causeless enmity towards those who were helpless and looked to him for comfort, his shrinking from those whom he ought to love, being used up in what he wrote.’

The revelation of the man in this quotation from Dostoevsky appears only too clearly in the life that Claire Tomalin describes. There was the man of whom the prevailing view in his daughter Katie's words was ‘as a joyous, jocose gentleman walking about the world with a plum pudding and a bowl of punch’ – a view which she asked Bernard Shaw to correct. For, she had suffered along with her eight brothers and sisters from Dickens's desertion of their mother for another woman, with whom he had another child who died.

The ‘joyous, jocose gentleman’ is very much in evidence in the middle sections of Claire Tomalin's book. What is said about Dickens's early years does much to explain the dual character. His father was a hopeless spendthrift consigned to a debtor's prison. Charles was never given any proper education, but sent to work in a blacking factory. His career as a writer was almost entirely self-made. When he did begin to make money there were always the financial demands of his father and his brothers to be met.

The central section of Claire Tomalin's life I found the most interesting, and indeed surprising in view of Dickens's own self-denigration to Dostoevsky. While in many ways neglecting his own family, his charitable activity was endless. Along with his life-long friend John Forster, Tomalin says of them

‘As writers too they felt themselves to be on the side of the poor and oppressed and believed that art could be used to attack injustice and cruelty, to mock the great and to insist on the human value of the lowest members of society.’

That is only too clear from reading about the Artful Dodger, Snike, Nell, Barnaby, Micawber, Mr Dick, etc. But what was new to me was the amount of time and care, and money, that Dickens devoted to charitable causes, for the Guild of Literature and Art, for the ‘Ragged Schools’,

above all for the ‘Home for the Homeless’ at Shepherd’s Bush, which Miss Coutts helped him to found, for prostitutes and other women in danger. Even Dickens’s new periodical, in Dickens’s words, had the aim of ‘the raising up of those that are down and the general improvement of our social condition’. As Claire Tomalin writes:

‘It is hard to believe there is only one man writing novels, articles and letters, producing a *Child’s History of England*, editing, organising his children’s education, advising Miss Coutts on good works, agitating on questions of political reform, public health, housing and sewerage, travelling, acting, making speeches, raising money and working off his excess energy in his customary twelve mile walks.’

I have myself tried to emulate such a programme with nothing even approaching Dickens’s success. His was truly miraculous.

The last section of Tomalin’s book is heartbreaking – Dickens’s desertion of his wife, estrangement from his children, abandonment of his charitable works and friendship with Miss Coutts, all the secrecy about his love for Nelly Ternan, his gout and other physical pains, his desperate effort to keep his scheduled readings going and to finish the last chapters of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*. The awful part of the story was his breaking with friends and family. As Tomalin comments about Dickens: ‘once he had drawn the line, he was pitiless’. But he could still be received by Gladstone and by Disraeli and by his friend, Lord John Russell, and could order cases of cigars and of sherry and champagne and assorted wines for his homes in Gad’s Hill and Regents Park and entertain. His dear friend, John Forster, never deserted him. In the end, although Dickens had willed a simple funeral, he was buried in Westminster Abbey. As Forster wrote of the burial in his biography: ‘The solemnity had not lost by the simplicity. Nothing so grand or touching could have accompanied it, as the stillness and silence of the vast cathedral.’

As Longfellow, his friend in America, wrote, ‘Dickens was so full of life that it did not seem possible that he could die’. And Tomalin goes on through a long list of versions of Charles Dickens to end her book –

‘The giver of parties, the magician, the traveller ... The Francophile, the player of games, the lover of circuses, the maker of punch, the country squire, the editor, the Chief, the smoker, the drinker, the dancer of reels and hornpipes, the actor, the ham. Too mixed to be a gentleman – but wonderful. The irreplaceable and unrepeatable Boz ... And above and beyond every other description simply the great hard-working writer who set nineteenth century London before our eyes and who noticed and celebrated the small people living on the margins of society ...’

Michael Barratt Brown