

Row, Row, Row, the Boat!

**Harold Wilson Memoirs
1916-1964**

Harold Wilson
Weidenfeld and Nicolson
£14.95 hbk

Union Man

Jack Jones
Collins £15 hbk

HAROLD
WILSON

Just as Neil Kinnock seems set to repeat Harold Wilson's achievement, and to lead Labour from fratricide to electoral victory, Wilson's own memoirs are published. The coincidence poses the unavoidable question: are the two made of the same stuff? Or should the comparison be limited to Wilson's fellow Yorkshireman Roy Hattersley? For at last month's party conference he at least announced that Labour will 'get Britain working again', a direct crib from Wilson's 1964 slogan.

Comparison is important as it is not just a matter of personalities. But a personal response is an unavoidable part of reading an autobiography, and reading Wilson's I wanted to puke. The pettiness and lack of any sense of history or consequence is not the problem so much as the fact that I cannot but admit to an association with it. I believed in Wilson, however briefly, and in a youthful way fought to make him prime minister. This coloured my feelings as I ploughed reluctantly through his tittle-tattle.

Memoirs, 1916-64 is written by vanity out of petty-mindedness. The opening starts with an untruth ('I fought the Treasury to a standstill'), continues with a wincing and pathetic account of Wilson's relationship with the Queen and ends with an unconvincing explanation of his ultimate resignation. All this in six and a half pages entitled 'prologue'. Words such as 'foreword' or 'preface', or even a long one like 'introduction' are, one feels, too unpretentious for 'Lord Rievaulx', who cannot resist

a slippery formulation.

All the same, his recollections provide some morsels for thought. Wilson's formative influences as a child were Arthur Mee's encyclopaedia, the boy scouts and the Empire Exhibition at Wembley in 1924 - to which he was taken in the side-car of his father's motorbike (the famous photograph of him as a boy outside 10 Downing Street dates from that trip). His socialism stemmed from his region (his family and schoolteachers) and his father was one of the insecure middle-class and suffered two long periods of unemployment. Even so, Wilson joined the Liberals on arrival at Oxford, before discarding political affiliation as he strove to excel academically.

In 1940, when he was 24, Wilson was seconded into the cabinet office to help with manpower statistics. He stayed there for two years on the fringe of Churchill's team, once taking minutes of the prime minister's negotiations with de Gaulle. Thereafter, Wilson says, Churchill regarded him as one of 'his boys'. Perhaps. From the many other references to Churchill, we can at least be sure that Wilson saw himself as one of Churchill's boys.

Thus Wilson's mental horizons and social values were formed by the liberal mix of soft imperialism, progressive reform and traditional loyalty. A far more reactionary background than Kinnock's, it would seem. Yet unlike Kinnock today, Wilson was very much the representative of the Left as he led Labour into the 1960s. How is this paradox to be explained?

Wilson's cannot help but display his unalloyed craving for office. Canny, precocious and tremendously hard-working, he played the system for all it was worth and he would have provided radical answers if that is what 'the system' had really wanted. His combination of exceptional talent, absence of principle and total devotion to success is apparent in his memoirs. He had the ability to have been different if this had been insisted upon

by those around him. So we should be cautious about the passionate disgust with which his name is spat out by many on the Right as well as the Left. He has been made into a scapegoat but his formation was exemplary not exceptional.

His programme was change in order all the better to stay the same, because this was the desire of country and party. In 1964, after 13 years of Conservative rule Wilson appealed to popular impatience with Tory failure - he looked back to a time when people were able to look forward. In this way he was able to drape the imagery of progress around nostalgia.

Such an approach, however, calls for a rooted hatred of ideas, rooted, that is, in the labour movement itself. Since the war there have been two attempts to provide the Labour Party with some ideological coherence - those associated with Hugh Gaitskell and Tony Benn. Both were repelled with a great shuddering and groaning. Wilson seemed to confirm his radicalism when he was one of the leading opponents of Gaitskell's efforts to discard nationalisation as a doctrine. But as he makes clear in his recollections of the episode, Wilson was no more for nationalisation than he was against it. The whole argument was 'daft'. Ideology, whether right or left, will get you nowhere. Every case must be judged on its 'practical' merits.

What did - and does - Wilson think, then? He who is now being strongly recommended to us as at least the most successful electoral leader in Labour's history, sums up his 50 years of political experience with these words: 'I consider that the best style of government is like rowing - the ideal solution is to get the boat along as quickly as possible without turning it over'.

Like all sporting analogies (Attlee drew his from cricket, Kinnock shows a preference for soccer) the rules of the game are presumed. What direction should the boat take? This was the issue at stake in the dispute with

Gaitskell, as with Benn. Wilson opposed the former, which placed him on the 'Left' just as Kinnock's opposition to the latter has put him on the 'Right'. But neither deserve such epithets. What they share is a well-founded belief that they can row the boat, in the direction given.

It is interesting to compare Wilson's recollections to those of his contemporary Jack Jones, who led the Transport & General Workers' Union during the 70s and was the architect of the shop stewards movement. Jones writes well, and through the attractive modesty of his formulations his strength of purpose and commitment emerge very clearly.

But for different reasons he shares with Wilson a refusal to reflect upon his times, to argue out what happened and what could have happened to his country and his movement. In his book's early passages (which cover the time when he fought with the International Brigades in Spain) Jones describes how he learnt from practical experience. Later he contrasts his approach to that of 'intellectuals' like Harold Wilson who have no idea how to work with their own people (and to Richard Crossman who 'didn't know his arse from his elbow'). But at the end he describes an incident when he gave a speech about his vision of socialism and prime minister Callaghan leant over to Jones' wife and whispered with astonishment, 'Jack really means what he says!'

The point is evident. It is Jones not Wilson, the docker not the don, who is the real intellectual, committed to his ideas, fighting to have them implemented. Jack Jones sought genuine change according to his own values of working class democracy, by which he judged the system for himself: he set rather than received his direction. The trouble with the Labour Party is not that it seeks to be realistic but that it still takes its notion of 'practicality' from Wilson rather than from Jones. ●

Anthony Barnett

Class Warriors

The Retreat from Class: A New 'True' Socialism

Ellen Meiksins Wood
Verso £6.95 pbk

Working Class Politics in Crisis: Essays on Labour and the State

Leo Panitch
Verso £6.95 pbk

Ellen Meiksins Wood's book is a recent instalment in the continuing saga in which the shining knights of 'class politics' take arms against assorted revisionists. Wood's chosen weapon is an orthodox, but not a crudely reductionist, marxism. The position and role of the working class as exploited collective producer makes it the only possible leading agent of a socialist politics. She concedes that politics does not arise spontaneously out of class position – and needs to be developed in struggle by parties and unions. Yet to be effective it must be grounded in the objective class contradictions of capitalism rather than in mere abstract conceptions.

Not so for the new revisionists. In their recent work, Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe, Barry Hindess, Paul Hirst, Gavin Kitching and others have all severed this link between the working class and the socialist project, suggesting instead that socialism can only be

constructed at the level of politics and ideology. They have disconnected socialism from class and have diluted what is left either into a socialism based on 'general interests' (ie class harmony) or a 'radical democracy' whose collective protagonist is a popular bloc of social forces and movements, with or without the organised working class.

Much of Wood's polemic is well-aimed. She is right, for instance, to censure Laclau and Mouffe for their recent 'dissolution of social reality into discourse'. Yet the ultimate message coming out of her book is a conservative and regressive one, in two respects. First, she applies classical marxist categories in a universal and abstract way, whereas the theoretical revisions of Poulantzas and Laclau were attempts to grapple with real historical situations and practices that simply did not fit those categories. They may in the end have erred too far in the direction of 'autonomising' politics and ideology, but they cannot just be 'corrected' by reaffirming that ideologies belong to classes or that politics reflects class interests.

Second, like other advocates of 'class politics', Wood tends to blur the difference between 'working class' and 'labour movement' and to suggest that they are really one and the same. But the fact is that the labour move-

ment has frequently spoken for, but never directly embodied, the interests of the whole working class. It has conceded no real voice to the mass of women, whether at work or in the home, to black workers, the unemployed or the growing army of part-time and casualized workers.

Leo Panitch, a colleague of Ellen Wood's in the political science department at York University in Toronto, is likewise tough on revisionism. *Working Class Politics in Crisis* opens with a long polemical essay, which among other things criticises Eric Hobsbawm's call for a strategic truce inside the Labour Party and a broad anti-Thatcher popular front.

For Panitch the Labour Party, even when wearing the emperor's new clothes paraded by a media-conscious Kinnock and Hattersley, is historically and structurally, a top-heavy, corporatist party geared to winning elections and integrating classes under a national banner. He suggests that it is naive to think that labour can act in its present unreconstructed form as the centre of a popular alliance of new social forces.

Panitch's proposed remedies to the impasses of labourism are essentially those of the Bennite Left: radical extension of social ownership and control, constitutional reform, greatly increased accountability, and popular participation in

decision-making.

While Panitch is sober enough about assessing the reasons behind Benn's failure in 1979-81 to win wide popular consensus for these measures or to overcome the deep entrenchment of elitist structures and practices within the party itself, he will have no truck with those, Hobsbawm among them, who lay a good part of the blame for the electoral debacle of 1983 on the political 'adventurism' of the Labour left. On the contrary, for Panitch it was at least as much the opposition to constitutional reform by most of the parliamentary leadership and its name-calling and hounding of the Left which brought the party as a whole into discredit in the eyes of many voters.

Panitch is a sharp political analyst, and it is perhaps not his fault that essays written even as little as five years ago now sound distinctly dated. His politics is based around activating a socialist consciousness among a class located in the workplace. But what happens to this politics in the face of the massive growth of unemployment, poverty, restructuring and the low-wage economy that characterise the present phase? Not to mention – and Panitch does not – a politics based around not exclusively class issues: feminism, the anti-nuclear movement, peace. ●

David Forgacs

Moribund Militant

The March of Militant

Michael Crick
Faber and Faber £4.95 pbk

In the White House, they're worried. A party is on the verge of taking power in one of the most strategically important countries in Europe. It is pledged to remove nuclear weapons from its territory, to impose sanctions on South Africa. Even more worrying is its recently acquired inability to tell lies about what it can realistically do about the economy, de-

spite well-established precedents that calling a lie a 'demand' or a 'slogan' koshers it. No problem, Mr President, the firm's got a brilliant idea. We'll unleash entrism on them, guaranteed to have the party turning in on itself.

Of course it's just a paranoid fantasy worthy of the comrades of Militant itself, but it does defy rational explanation that Labour's national executive committee has spent session after session this year dealing with a sub-Trotskyist sect. In this new edition of his book *Militant*, Michael Crick clearly establishes the moral justification for acting

against a body whose self-declared aim is to infiltrate the Labour Party and take it over, or split and destroy it in the process. It takes the moral ground totally from under the feet of those who repeatedly stood up in public and claimed that it was 'just a newspaper'. He adds a new insight into the 'Liverpool connection', the disastrous blunders made by the Tendency there, and the way Neil Kinnock seized the initiative in dealing with them.

The papers first unearthed by a *World in Action* team, the Revolutionary socialist League's constitution and minutes from its early days,

form an appendix to the book, documenting that the 'just a newspaper' was in fact far more than that. Naturally Peter Taaffe, who figures in the documents himself, looked the tv cameras in the lens and denied their reality. But then ignoring reality has been one of the less endearing, if more enduring, of the tendency's habits all along.

This Trotspotter's Wisden documents and explains the changes in the central committee, the changes in policies, the changes in the numbers and nature of Militant's membership. Like the first edition it will be the definitive reference work on the

