

Reviews

Africa

John Pampallis and Maryke Bailey, *A Brief History of South Africa: From the Earliest Times to the Mandela Presidency*, Jacana Media, 2021, 360 pages, paperback ISBN 9781928232957, £12.99

I used to say the year 1652 must be inscribed on my forehead. That was the date drilled into young South African minds in the 1950s to mark ‘the beginning of our country’s history’. The erasure of anything beyond a white European colonial narrative was the norm under apartheid as it was in Britain. Even in the mid 1960s, Hugh Trevor-Roper, Oxford’s Regius Professor of Modern History, could declare: ‘There is only the history of Europe in Africa. The rest is largely darkness ... and darkness is not a subject for history.’

It took the work of historians such as Belgian Jan Vansina, Nigeria’s Kenneth Dike and Jacob Ajayi, and British scholars Roland Oliver and John Fage to address this ignorance of Africa. But, perhaps more than any other writer, it was British historian-cum-journalist (and ex-WW2 Partisan) Basil Davidson who for over fifty years actively disseminated knowledge about the continent’s past and present – including colonial shadows, ongoing challenges of development, and key questions of capitalism or socialism.

John Pampallis has been involved in education throughout his working life, including nine years teaching at the African National Congress’s school for young exiles in Tanzania. From 1989, he was involved in ANC education policy development as well as publishing a number of books on South African history. Maryke Bailey, co-author of *A Brief History of South Africa*, is a history teacher. The book is essentially, but not exclusively, a resource for teachers or study groups, formal or informal. The suggested educational activities aim to encourage critical thinking and debate among students.

Part A consists of a chronological narrative from pre-17th century societies to the Mandela Presidency (1994-1999). The second part revolves around nine themes: Economy; Bantustans; Schooling; Poverty and Inequality; Life under Apartheid – Urban and Rural; Women’s Struggles; Trade Union Movement; South Africa’s Constitutions; International Solidarity Against Apartheid.

Each chapter in both sections is followed by Discussion Questions in

which the authors encourage readers to explore and probe historical legacies, as well as to debate ‘What’s to be done?’ These are followed by lists of Additional Readings. Many of these refer to online resources, including documents digitalized for South African History Online. Finally, an Appendix for Teachers consists of 60 pages of Text Engagement Activities (which can be photocopied), followed by an Index.

Inevitably, the huge task of condensing the complex narratives of South Africa into ‘A Brief History’ leads to omissions. With Themes considered from a contemporary perspective, I would have liked to see Corruption as a separate theme. It is mentioned, in passing, under the theme of South Africa’s Bantustans where the authors note ‘many bantustans developed into one-party states that were supported by the apartheid security forces’. (p206) However, there’s much more to understand about the roots of contemporary corruption. Prof Steven Friedman dates it back to Jan van Riebeeck and colonization in 1652. (‘How corruption in South Africa is deeply rooted in the country’s past and why that matters’, 28.8.2020)

I would also have appreciated a theme focused on the Culture of Violence, pulling together violations of human rights by the apartheid government and, as acknowledged at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, ‘killings and torture in MK [uMkhonto we Sizwe] camps, committed by itself [ANC] and its allies during the course of the struggle’. (p184) I would have liked the authors to explore the differences in culture of the ANC as an exiled political organization engaged in military struggle and the culture of emerging trade unions and civil rights organizations inside the country, pushing for militant but non-violent negotiation.

Despite its gaps, *A Brief History of South Africa* is a commendable resource for teachers and students. The authors are realistic about how much remains unfulfilled in terms of constitutional rights. For example, under the theme of Women’s Struggles, after citing some of the victories, they conclude that ‘Patriarchal attitudes persist at all levels of society... the triple oppression of race, class and gender, although officially illegal, remains a fact of life for most of them. Eliminating it remains one of the big challenges of a democratic South Africa’. (p259) I think readers will come away from this book conscious not just of the struggle so far but of how many challenges South Africans still face ahead.

Beverley Naidoo

Childhood under occupation

Beverley Naidoo, *Children of the Stone City*, HarperCollins Children's Books, 2022, 272 pages, hardback ISBN 9780008471743, £12.99

Beverley Naidoo grew up in a South Africa which was bitterly divided by apartheid. As a student in the early 1960s she began to question the privileges that she enjoyed and became active in the anti-apartheid movement, eventually moving to Britain in the late 1960s. From the effects of apartheid to the trauma of refugees and asylum seekers, her books explore the experiences of children living under pressure.

Now in her eighties, Naidoo is as perceptive as ever, tackling issues of inequality, the arbitrary abuse of power, and the role of advocacy. In her latest Young Adult novel, *Children of the Stone City*, we are again given the perspective of children caught up in a bewildering system of oppression which has divided society into the powerful 'Permitteds' and the powerless 'Nons'. We are not told where in the world the Stone City is, nor are we told what distinguishes the Permitteds from the Nons. Apart from a later reference to language, there seem to be no obvious differences such as skin colour or religion.

We can see features of the society which are familiar from both historical and current examples. In the first chapter we are told that the children 'avoided using the alleys where Permitted flags hung out of windows in houses that not long ago had belonged to Non families'. Later, we see an eviction with household goods piled up on the street while a Permitted family takes possession of a former Non home. Nons require a permit to live and work in the Stone City; the Permitted Police is a fearsome presence and failure to obtain a permit means banishment beyond The Wall.

It's several years since I worked in schools and I wondered what connections a young reader might make, so asked Martha, aged 14, to read the book and report back. Martha recognised elements of apartheid, having read one of Naidoo's earlier books, but also the Berlin Wall and, more recently, Trump's Border Wall. She also agreed with me that the ambiguity of the setting was deliberate and gave the story a sense of universality to challenge our notions of power and discrimination anywhere in the world.

Naidoo gives her readers an insight into the consequences of a divisive system through the lives of three children, Adam aged 12, his younger sister Leila, and their friend Zak. In the early chapters we see the

importance of family and community support, especially when Adam and Leila's father dies suddenly, leaving the renewal of their mother's permit looking precarious. If she loses the permit the family will have to leave the city, putting an end to the children's attendance at music school. For Adam, a talented violinist, this would be the end of all his dreams.

Adam's grandmother explains that these divisions were not always the case. In the 'Time Before' the two groups lived amicably side by side and were all governed by the 'OverPower'. Then terrible things happened to the Permitteds 'OverSeas' and many 'came here'. It was when some Permitted leaders claimed that the land belonged to them and nobody else that the trouble started.

By now an adult reader can recognise the conflicting claims of Israelis and Palestinians. This is a topic which receives little attention in schools, largely because it is so politically sensitive, and teachers are wary of the fine line between criticism of the State of Israel and anti-Semitism.

In her Author's Note at the end of the book, Naidoo explains that she was inspired to write this story after meeting young Palestinian readers but that she left her setting deliberately ambiguous. 'I hope readers may be stirred to think about the consequences for all children in societies powerfully divided into Permitteds and Nons.' She points out that Permitteds and Nons can exist anywhere. Indeed, in her own case she was born in South Africa as a Permitted, but had she been born in Occupied Europe in 1943 to her Jewish mother, she would have been a Non.

In *Children of the Stone City* we are drawn into this frightening world. Adam has been well schooled by his father to avoid trouble and keep clear of potential confrontation with Permitteds. Zak is more headstrong and a brush with a group of Permitted youths leads to a midnight police raid on the homes of both boys and their arrest as terrorists. Despite their youth, Adam and Zak are subjected to 'questioning' by the police, which is designed to break them physically and intimidate them into signing false confessions written in a language they can't read. Adam understands what is happening and resists just long enough for help to arrive in the shape of a campaigning Permitted lawyer, Ms Roth. Zak on the other hand, alone, frightened and physically abused, signs a confession and is trapped within the system. Adam now faces the increased danger of his mother's permit being revoked. His only hope is to use his musical talent to attract the attention of a visiting famous violinist who might speak up on their behalf and expose to the world the injustices within the Stone City.

I found the treatment of the boys in police custody shocking, as did Martha, but she was aware that such things could and do happen to

children in many situations today. Adam's saviour, the lawyer Ms Roth, is a powerful example of the need for advocacy to assert the human rights of any oppressed group. In the author's words, she is one of the Permitteds 'who refuse to have their humanity limited'. Her voice can confront injustice from within the system and challenge the legality of Adam's interrogation. This invites us to question our own actions when faced with the abuse of power within our own societies.

Adam's appeal to the foreign visiting violinist also highlights the role of the international community in speaking up for oppressed groups and keeping the spotlight on the actions of intolerant regimes.

Martha thought the level of this book's language was aimed at the 10-12 age group, but that the issues raised need some discussion. She said, 'you need a level of awareness of History and Politics to fully process this book,' and I agree. This book would be an excellent class text for years 7 or 8 at Secondary level. While History teachers may be limited by the curriculum, an English lesson may have more freedom to explore the challenging issues raised by the story of Adam and his friends.

Children of the Stone City is a daring book which confronts injustices that blight the lives of far too many children in today's divided world.

Ailish D'Arcy

With contributions from Martha Elston

Edith Summerskill

Mary Honeyball, *Edith Summerskill –The Life and Times of a Pioneering Feminist Labour MP*, Bloomsbury, 288 pages, 2022, ISBN 9781350252425, £25

Mary Honeyball's carefully researched biography of Dr Edith Summerskill is important and well timed. The COVID pandemic has scared and humbled us, as we found ourselves so dependent on the teams of doctors, nurses and ancillary workers in the National Health Service, who we celebrated with painted hearts on notice boards and clapped every Thursday for OUR NHS; a service free for everyone, from cradle to grave; Prime Minister to the poorest homeless person living on the streets of a city or in the Outer Hebrides. The NHS epitomises the radicalism of the post-war Labour Government led by Clement Attlee, and personified by Nye Bevan. Yet the outspokenly feminist contribution of Dr. Edith is seldom acknowledged.

Edith Summerskill is written with natural empathy and admiration and

uses a broad historical focus. Mary Honeyball's many years in the Labour Movement have been especially focused on issues of gender equality. As an elected Member of the European Parliament from 2000 to 2019, she served on and became vice-chair of the Women's Rights and Gender Equality Committee. This gives the book insight and personal meaning, whilst its celebration of the post-war administration is a reminder of the power of government to become the agent of lasting change and reform when new, politically-driven ideas are linked to their swift implementation. It was a fascinating time to live through.

My own mother was herself a great admirer of Dr. Edith Summerskill, not least because she was one of the earliest trained health visitors in the 1920s. She appreciated Edith's outspoken clarity in prioritising key pieces of legislation. For example, The Milk (Special Designations) Bill became law in May 1949. It decreed that all retail milk had to be sold with designations that indicated it was free of tuberculosis (TB), or 'TT tested', sterilised or pasteurised. In Edith's opening speech she renamed the Bill the 'Milk (Save the Children) Bill' and, on its Royal Assent, referred to it 'with her customary self-belief', says Honeyball, as 'my finest hour'.

Dr Edith Summerskill was married to a doctor, Jeffrey Samuel. Their practice lay in some of the poorer areas of London. Throughout her life, she kept foremost her pride and devotion to her work as a doctor. It directly informed her politics, and Honeyball spells out how she used the self-confidence it gave her to spell out opinions and policy in a very clear, simple way. Never afraid to raise controversial issues, in 1936 she reminded the National Conference of Labour Women that 13 per cent of women died following an abortion. She was not supported, but opposition within official Labour circles never deterred her championing new causes for women rights, whether it was easier access to birth control, which took many years to achieve, treating venereal disease, or when she first ran for a Parliamentary seat in Bury, where she upset a Roman Catholic priest with her views on contraception and abortion.

Well before the outbreak of the Second World War, Edith and Jeffrey joined the newly founded Socialist Medical Association (SMA). They were big supporters of the League of Nations initiatives in the 1930s, as Edith's political ambitions became stronger.

It is striking that she referred to herself as a feminist, in a matter of fact way, decades before this was common in politics at local or national level. There were 11 women Members of Parliament when Edith was first elected in 1938, but only her and Eleanor Rathbone openly accepted and used the term feminist as a description of their views. Their partnership triggered a question which Edith put to the Secretary of Health, in July

1939, as she asked whether a woman, if she requested it, should be allowed an analgesic during childbirth.

Dr Summerskill was certainly eager to make her mark. Mary Honeyball discovered how dejected Edith felt after her maiden speech, and how her friend, Josiah Wedgwood, MP for Newcastle-under-Lyme, passed her a note saying: ‘Dear Lady, There are many times in life when courage is the thing that counts — Josh’. In 1941, she published a book entitled *Birth without Fear*. Honeyball paints a picture of a tall, dominant, well-dressed woman, with a fur scarf and hat, not so much flaunting attention, but as a strong woman, one with commanding authority as she made her intentions clear, however controversial they were.

Throughout the war, Dr Summerskill helped lay the foundations of a nationwide health service based on equality, doctor first and politician second. She was powerful and influential because her campaigns were based on professional experience, both as a woman and in general practice. Always with a special focus on women, she brought home the stresses of childbirth and disabilities such as rickets, which especially affected the poor. She got to know Beveridge well and strongly supported his proposal for a children’s allowance, which was introduced in 1945. But, as ever, Edith felt it was not strong enough and should be paid directly to mothers. For many, writes Honeyball,

‘Dr Edith will always be remembered for her virtually single-handed efforts to establish women in the Home Guard in a fully combative role, and campaigned for them to receive the same compensation as men for war injuries and also for more nurseries so that women could do their bit without having to worry about childcare.’

Above all, Honeyball suggests that:

‘Edith put women on the map. Women’s concerns — childbirth, breast feeding, care of children, women’s pensions, rights for housewives — were now on the political agenda. Between 1939 and 1945, Dr Edith Summerskill made a huge contribution to the struggle for women to be seen as citizens in their own right and to have economic and social equality with men.’

According to Honeyball, Edith got on well with Clement Attlee and must have been disappointed not to be given the Health brief after Labour’s massive victory in 1945. Instead, she became Minister of Food, typically

throwing herself into the nitty-gritty of government, again bringing her professional background to bear on the job of rationing in order to ensure the very best balanced diet for all. Again, I have memories of my mother's health visitor background and her support of Summerskill despite managing a difficult and not always popular job, as she was labelled the woman who argued that margarine was just as good as, if not more tasty than, butter.

Dr Summerskill was also attracted to the limelight of media and became a regular radio voice on programmes such as *The Brains Trust*. Parliamentary life and culture meant she travelled more, enjoying new experiences, and making fresh contacts. She badly wanted it to continue. The parliamentarian and politician, rather than the doctor, started to predominate. As with MPs before and since, Parliament becomes seductive.

Edith became an elected member of Labour's National Executive Committee in its Women's Section in 1944. Other colleagues who became MPs and key members of the Attlee Cabinet and Government after the 1945 landslide victory were by then in the limelight. As a senior member of the NEC she inevitably had to 'take sides' in personality as well as political differences. The Labour Party had become deeply divided over nuclear weapons with Nye Bevan leading the left-wing body of opinion. Was she 'left' or 'right' wing; Gaitskellite or Bevanite? Ever loyal to the Party Leader, first Attlee, then Gaitskell, the answer became clear. She found herself, as the incumbent Chair of the Party, dealing with the proposal to remove the Labour whip from Nye Bevan over the government decision to test a hydrogen bomb. Bevan lost the committee decision, and many of her former women colleagues such as Jennie Lee and Barbara Castle never forgave her. Her Parliamentary career had been seriously threatened when boundary changes brought together West with East Fulham in one constituency, whose members chose Michael Stewart rather than Edith to fight the seat. Instead, she was selected for Warrington in 1955 and won, and eventually left the House of Commons in 1961. She accepted a peerage and settled to life in the House of Lords.

Mary Honeyball's book brings these 20 tumultuous years back to life. Despite her valuable work for women's health over those years, it has been Nye Bevan and the NHS, not Edith Summerskill, who has held the stage.

Helen Jackson

One face or two?

Nick Thomas-Symonds, *Harold Wilson: The Winner*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2022, 532 pages, hardback, ISBN 9781474611954, £25.00

Thomas-Symonds is, as I write, Shadow Secretary of State for International Trade. Hence, there is an obvious pro-Labour bias, manifest in his two previous biographies of Clement Attlee and Nye Bevan. Since Wilson is Keir Starmer's political hero – he frequently evokes the 'white heat of technology' speech – this book should do no harm to Thomas-Symonds' Party prospects. However, whatever you think of Harold Wilson, this is a must-read.

The book comprises 20 suggestively titled chapters, framed by Introduction and Conclusion, fortified by 46 pages of end-notes, an 11-page, multi-part Bibliography including electronic courses, serviceable Index, and a handful of photos of Wilson from childhood to farewell dinner with Queen, including the first-ever shot of Prime Ministerial knees (on Scilly Isles beach). It is well written, jargon-free, laced with humour. It is impossible, of course, for a reviewer to check every statement. I note one factual mistake, minor in context, but odd. He mentions (p.282) that Australian Prime Minister Harold Holt had died in office. In fact, Holt vanished mysteriously, his body never found, giving rise to competing theories of accident, suicide, assassination.

In my Nottingham Trot days, I had the standard sectarian contempt for Wilson, an attitude long since transferred to Tony Blair. This volume frequently dwindles into hagiography, a counter blast to such contrary works as *Harold Wilson: The Unprincipled Prime Minister*, edited by Andrew Crines and Kevin Hickson (2016).

Wilson came in for a wide range of abuse, most famously the epigram 'Only two things wrong with Harold Wilson – his face.' LBJ dubbed him a 'con-man' (thanks to his refusal to send British troops to Vietnam whilst, in an example of Doublethink, supporting the war). At a different level, there were the ceaseless insults levelled by television comic character Alf Garnett, though he did commend Harold for smoking a pipe. This was, in fact, something of a stage property; at home, Wilson smoked cigars. Likewise, his famous Gannex raincoat, invented in 1951; Harold wanted to be seen as keeping up with the times.

Ken Coates (predictably absent from the Bibliography) would have loathed this book. He unsparingly denounced Wilson in *The Week* (1964-

68, initially co-edited with Robin Blackburn and, later, by Pat Jordan); in such pamphlets as *The Dirty War in Mr Wilson: Or How He Stopped Worrying About Vietnam and Learned to Love the Dollar* (for the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign); culminating in his voluminous *The Crisis of British Socialism: Essays on the rise of Harold Wilson and the fall of the Labour Party* (1971, with grotesque ‘reversible turncoat’ cartoon cover). That a Labour author could eulogize Wilson would have been quite beyond our Ken.

Thomas-Symonds does condemn Wilson on occasion, for example on his behaviour over compensation for the Aberfan tragedy (p264). He prevaricates over responsibility for the notorious honours list (dubbed, with Marcia Williams in mind, the ‘Lavender List’). Williams, an ultimately enigmatic character, receives an enormous amount of attention throughout the book. Thomas-Symonds rightly disbelieves the claim (once made by herself) that Wilson had an affair with her. He was no womaniser, being a family man devoted to wife Mary who also gets much deserved attention for her poetry (quoting some first-rate examples) and care for Harold as he descended into dementia. When *Private Eye’s* ‘Mrs Wilson’s Diary’ (spoof of BBC’s venerable Mrs Dale’s) was turned into a movie, Wilson took care to edit and censor the script.

Likewise, the author rightly dismisses the rumours and accusations that Wilson was a Soviet agent. This nonsense went back to his early visits to Moscow and praise for Soviet achievements in industry and science — the latter, perhaps in his mind, chiming with his famous 1963 vision of Britain as ‘forged in the white heat of this (scientific) revolution,’ with which Thomas-Symonds begins his book. Overlooked is how Wilson snubbed Stalin by ignoring a dinner invitation, hardly the act of a fellow-traveller.

Thomas-Symonds admits that Wilson was devious in his dealings with high-ranking colleagues/rivals such as Benn, Bevan, Brown, Callaghan, Gaitskell, *et hoc genus omne*), but reasonably points out they were often the same. Nor did he rival such vituperations as Bevan’s famous characterization of Gaitskell as ‘a desiccated calculating machine’. Factional infighting is nothing new in the Labour Party. Likewise with the Tories, who do it differently.

The author also concedes that Wilson was, until pushed off it, adroit at sitting on the fence over such key issues as devaluation of the pound sterling, Europe, and nationalization of industries. On this last, impetus was provided by Anthony Crosland’s *The Future of Socialism* (1956), which exposed the flaws in traditional nationalization, offering alternative models. Wilson entertained similar notions, but must have disagreed with

Crosland's notorious ambition: 'If it's the last thing I do, I'm going to destroy every fucking grammar school in England'. Wilson's own grammar school education was the catalyst for his outstanding performance at Oxford and multifarious academic achievements and writings, very thoroughly and admiringly described in this book. Here, I ride my usual pro-grammar school hobby horse as one who profited from education at The Lincoln School. This issue goes back to Attlee's 1945-50 term, when 'Red' Ellen Wilkinson bravely defended grammar schools as the best hope for working-class advancement. (The above does NOT apply to Ted Heath.)

Wilson is also let off too lightly regarding the 1966 Seamen's strike (pp234-38). He famously denounced it as the work of 'a tightly-knit group of politically motivated men'. But, as Thomas-Symonds' own narrative shows, the seamen had a very good case, despite the communists.

Thomas-Symonds deals even-handedly with Wilson's long-standing struggles with Ian Smith in Rhodesia, as it was then called, and with the *In Place of Strife* manifesto, where there is much on Wilson's loyal supporter, Barbara Castle.

Chapter 13 is a key one for the laudable achievements of the Wilson years: The Race Relations Acts; legalization of male homosexuality; legalization of abortion; equal pay for women; The Open University (Wilson's pet project). Much of this was the work of Roy Jenkins, nicknamed 'Old Beaujolais' by Wilson (p399).

Wilson facilitated these reforms, whilst privately unenthusiastic about some of them (abortion, perhaps also homosexual law reform). As he insisted, 'the Labour Movement is a moral crusade or it is nothing'.

Morgan Phillips, Labour Party General Secretary, proclaimed that 'the Labour Party owes more to Methodism than to Marxism'. Wilson never forgot the Congregationalist beliefs of his father, Herbert. He claimed never to have read Marx. A trifle disingenuous, surely; Marx must have cropped up in his Oxford Philosophy, Politics and Economics (PPE) course. Perhaps he was too pre-occupied with his 'heavy Latin texts', a subject he chose at school.

There are many definitions of 'Socialism': for easy instance, Herbert Morrison's 'Socialism is what the Labour Party does'. The word frequently tripped from Wilson's lips; it had to.

Reform or Revolution? The Great Divide. British voters have repeatedly demonstrated they have no appetite for Trotskyite-led upheaval. Orwell ('the English revolution', *The Lion and the Unicorn*, 1941) briefly flirted with this fantasy, influenced no doubt by his Independent Labour Party

(ILP) connections. In 1951, the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) in ‘The British Road to Socialism’ gave it up as a bad job, switching to the parliamentary route, to the fury of such diehards as Edward Upward; cf. my discussion of this in *Spokesman* 127, 2015, pages 96-98.

I recall wandering around a Nottinghamshire mining village trying to flog Gerry Healy’s Socialist Labour League’s papers. At one house, I was politely rebuffed by a dear old duck with the words,

‘Sorry, we’re not Socialists, we’re Labour.’

Some may feel this equally applied to our ’Arold ...

Barry Baldwin

Lost Parliament

Dianne Hayter, David Harley, *The Forgotten Tribe: British MEPs 1979-2020*, John Harper Publishing, 2022, 320 pages, paperback ISBN 9781739143602

Residents of Rushcliffe in Nottinghamshire, such as myself, voted Labour in European Parliamentary elections and saw at least one Labour Party representative amongst five for the East Midlands Constituency. Otherwise, for Westminster, Ken Clarke was returned for Rushcliffe year after year, until he grew tired of the UKIP-tending Conservative Party. Prior to Jack Straw’s European electoral ‘reforms’ of 1999, which let Farage into the EP, Rushcliffe electors could put their cross beside individual candidates. So it was, in 1989, that we elected Ken Coates as the Member of the European Parliament for Nottingham. In due course, I worked in Ken’s constituency office and, during the next decade, came to appreciate how much effective casework went through it.

Representing coalfield areas of Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire, there was a host of environmental issues such as opencast mining, air pollution and associated health problems including childhood asthma; polluted minewaters; as well as industrial emissions including poisonous dioxins in rivers. We raised these issues with the then Environmental Commissioner, Ritt Bjerregaard, and she consistently sent helpful responses indicating which directives addressed which environmental issues. In a good number of cases, the Commission raised our complaints with the UK authorities. When Michael Meacher became an environmental minister in Tony Blair’s first government in 1997, we found an ally who was able and willing to respond constructively to our concerns raised via Commissioner

Bjerregaard. So it was that the long process of environmental remediation of our old coalfield areas advanced somewhat.

I recount this story to illustrate how hands-on in their constituencies MEPs could be. Brexit has removed that democratic option from people in Britain, along with their European Union citizenship. MEPs and Commission officials are no longer required to respond to communications from Britons, as their status as EU citizens has been annulled. In addition, there is no longer external scrutiny by the Commission of adherence to European directives by the authorities in Britain. So, for example, we see bathing waters in Cornwall discoloured with untreated sewage. Surfers Against Sewage no longer carry their wet suits and boards to rue Wiertz in Brussels to lobby their MEPs about this illegal and unnecessary environmental pollution, with its serious implications for inshore fisheries. Britain's political and democratic decline is deepened by the removal of its cohort of Members of the European Parliament.

The Forgotten Tribe assembles 35 contributions from diverse hands on aspects of European Parliamentary experience ranging from Caroline Lucas on the environment, David Harley's affectionate essay on John Hume, to Alan Donnelly on German Reunification. As Donnelly wrote in *European Labour Forum* magazine in winter 1990-91, 'the fall of the Berlin Wall ... precipitated changes in the post-war political structure of Europe which no political commentators could have foreseen'. Actually, some in Germany and elsewhere had been working towards reunification for some years; it was one of the reasons why the Soviet Peace Committee bitterly criticised preparations for the second European Nuclear Disarmament Convention in Berlin in 1983. Several END activists were elected to the European Parliament in 1989, including Ken Coates, Peter Crampton and Michael McGowan. Glyn Ford was already there.

George Parker, political editor of the *Financial Times*, recalls his years as Brussels correspondent among the 'lost tribe' of British MEPs. He would break bread with Nick Clegg, newly elected in 1999. The FT might cover some developments in the Parliament, but most British media ignored it and had little if any experience of the place or the people elected to sit in the hemicycle. Their indifference and occasional contempt for the European Parliament was shared by not a few Westminster politicians. Tony Blair, I think it was, who let slip his view that the EP was a 'Micky Mouse' Parliament. One of the strengths of *The Forgotten Tribe* is that it explains the detailed nature of European Parliamentary work in scrutinising, refining and amending legislation proposed by the Commission and contrasts that with ways of working at Westminster.

There is much praise for British diplomacy and initiative within the European institutions for the 40 years that the UK was part of what has become the European Union. But that was then. Now, Britain struggles in evident decline, exacerbated by the departure of many EU nationals and their partners who no longer feel welcome here. Tough choices lie ahead. Glyn Ford addresses some of these in the final chapter of *Riding Two Horses: Labour and Europe*, published by Spokesman in 2022 (see Spokesman 152 and below). Britain urgently needs honest and informed debate about the European Union in order to rebuild relations on firm foundations.

Tony Simpson

Into the war zone

Yevgenia Belorusets, *Lucky Breaks*, Pushkin Press, 2022, 198 pages, £9.99, ISBN 9781782278726

Serhiy Zhadan, *The Orphanage*, Yale University Press, 2021, 324 pages, £14.99, ISBN 9780300243017

Andrey Kurkov, *Grey Bees*, Maclehose Press, 2022, 352 pages, £9.99, ISBN 9780857059352

Andrey Kurkov, *Diary of an Invasion*, Mountain Leopard Press, 2022, 304 pages, £16.99, ISBN9781914495847

Yevgenia Belorusets' urban fairy tales distil hope from the extraordinary lives of ordinary women – florists, midwives, manicurists, hair stylists, cosmetologists, cleaners, assembly line workers – in Kyiv, Donetsk, Anratsyt, Dnipro and elsewhere across the wider terrain of her work as a photojournalist in Post-Soviet Ukraine. Like the two most recent novels of Kurkov and Zhadan, *Lucky Breaks* belongs to the period separating the onset of separatist hostilities in the Donbas and the annexation of Crimea from the fully-fledged invasion of 2022, but it also builds upon her longer project representing 'vulnerable' groups and minorities, LGBTQ, Roma, the low paid and unemployed: except that now her protagonists come tasked, practically and psychologically, with the additional urgencies of 'the deep penetration of traumatic historical events into the fantasies and experiences of everyday life'. Part sociology, part *vox pop*, part magic realism, the rapidly interwoven encounters of Belorusets' thirty-something narratives are designed to allow each woman to stand her ground, to resist in the name of a greater imaginative freedom what the Norwegian novelist

Karl Ove Knausgård has recently called the ‘Imperialism of the Absolute ... This is what the novel [or fiction] does: it pulls any abstract conception about life, whether political, philosophical or scientific in nature, into the human sphere, where it no longer stands alone but collides with myriad impressions, thoughts, emotions and actions’ [*New Statesman*, Oct-Nov 2022].

If, therefore, *Lucky Breaks* is a war text, it’s a radically unconventional one, the belligerents dismissed to the margins with only a single, arguably patriotic reference, fifty pages in, to the ongoing conflict – ‘July 5, 2014. Strelkov’s forces were leaving Slavyansk’ – and scattered images, that go unexplored, of roadblocks, broken, empty streets, a heroism-seeking Ukrainian soldier whose ‘company sat in dugouts for two months’ intermittently playacting a carnage they, and we, never see: ‘only after a few hours of such battling, which never resulted in casualties, would they fall into the sweet sleep of children’. The collection’s two opening stories, about a ‘gorgeous, perfect woman’ – the *doyenne* of the neighbourhood – who leaves a needle, lethally, in the breast of her nightshirt, and her dark twin from Kharkiv, whose childbirthing methods and other idiosyncrasies earn a reputation for unmitigated evil, seem to step straight out of ancient folklore rather than any modern inferno: they emphasise solipsism and ‘phantasmagoria’, women as the administrators, for good or ill, of their own ways of existing, whatever the external forces bearing down on them. Many are indeed refugees from the war zone, all are shown, as Beloruset’s ever-widening critique unfolds, to suffer from forms of entrapment characteristic of the economic system and gender relationships in her society as a whole. The pathos attending their responses can be overwhelming: one woman tethers herself to a bench in Independence Square, the site of the Maidan uprising, renouncing all but the barest contact with a history that consigns her to this subordinate role: right on cue, ‘A person carried three bouquets past the woman and threw one of them to her. He threw the bouquet as if her were throwing a bone to a dog’. Her sarcastic retort, ‘I am a living monument ... but a monument that is soft, unstable and wobbly’ recalls Taras Schevchenko’s ‘Kateryna’, the village girl whose all-too-female susceptibility made her emblematic of 19th century servitude. Another woman wrestles, Chaplin-fashion, with a broken [man’s!] umbrella she continually casts aside and rescues as if it were the only remaining confirmation of her personal tragedy, of the ‘pain, anxiety and fear’ invested in her ‘wartime habits, her wartime tricks of desperate relations with objects, things, the streets’. Residual empowerments like these betoken an individual dignity the standard routes

and nostrums — beauty treatments, horoscopes, oneiromancy, lucky charms (archaic ‘Trypillian’), cults and gurus (here Eco-Buddhist) or a bludgeoning entrepreneurial self-glorification (‘the most successful person in a city populated by losers’) — conspicuously lack.

But there are instances, too, of a social assertiveness and sense of self-worth ready to redefine, at a stroke, the accepted channels of femininity: a florist in Donetsk ‘entirely unsuited to real life ...it was only inside her store that she knew how to exist’, joins the partisans; a young woman slips the leash of her mother’s lifelong advocacy of and expertise in ribbon-making and moves from Manganese to Dnipro to find an identity of her own; workers at the Pyramid Salon in Antratsyt are credited (a rare excursion into political satire), against all the odds, with leading a rebellion of ‘other local hairdressing establishments, a fitness centre and two supermarkets’ against the constant jockeying for control of their city-state in and beyond the Luhansk People’s Republic, military interventions and acts of secession, questions of ‘patronage and influence’ that have ‘lost all meaning for them’.

Lucky Breaks draws a magic circle around all its voices, far, at least temporarily, from the elemental chaos driving the narrative of *The Orphanage* or the lethal history viscerally re-enacted in Zhadan’s early poem on the ‘Executed Renaissance’ of Ukrainian intellectuals in the 1930s – ‘long ago fragments of hot lexemes / grew cold in mouths filled with fear’ – or the bullet fired by a Russian soldier into the head of Schevchenko in Borodyanka in April 2022: ‘where death begins’, Zhadan avers, ‘literature ends’. ‘Living orphaned on earth’, for Schevchenko, was a compound of serfdom, exile, and a longing for national sovereignty redeemable only by force of arms – the stranded, terrorised, fugitive civilians of the Donbas whose halting, ragged progress across the war zone we follow in Zhadan’s novel seem incapable of anything more than an uncomprehending, animal-like endurance. The reader is locked into a sensorium of the body and its negotiation of a wrecked, detritus-filled landscape ruled by marauding, barely differentiated aggressors, survival ‘in the crosshairs’, from moment to moment, as incalculable as the outcome of a soldier’s casual placing of a hand grenade on a barroom counter: ‘all they can do is watch it roll slowly, very slowly, towards the edge, pause, roll over the edge, and plunge to the floor’.

Threaded through the relentless accumulation of atrocities – the insistence on comprehensiveness, on rendering every detail of the shattered physical environment and the dehumanising of its inhabitants (he ‘leaves no stone unturned and no maggot lonely’, as Harold Pinter said of

Beckett) can be overwhelming – is one man’s progress towards something like a countervailing moral affirmation. It’s *his* body that registers, like a seismograph, every tremor in the unceasing war of attrition, every flashpoint on the horizon (‘as if someone’s using power tools behind thick curtains’), that flinches at every speculative movement of a Kalashnikov or T-64, that cowers into the deepest hole in a bombardment. In this sense he’s utterly representative, although never indifferent, even *in extremis*, to the fates of others, appalled by what he encounters of a widespread callousness – ‘No pity for anyone, anyone at all’ – an assessment, on Zhadan’s part, of the durability of social ties that harbours few illusions. Pasha’s decision, in the family home, on the edge of the conflict, to rescue his nephew from a besieged city in occupied territory is merely the precursor of a series of assumed responsibilities and humanitarian impulses always waiting to happen, as if the ‘blood-drenched man ... crying out to him from the [TV] screen, to no avail’ represents, his first instinctive disavowal notwithstanding, a reality of suffering and call to a wider involvement impossible to set aside.

War’s inexorable presence is felt, too, but less apocalyptically, in *Grey Bees*’ fictional Little Starhorodivka, in the Donetsk Oblast, with its two remaining incumbents on bombed-out, adjoining streets, ‘frenemies’ across the political divide, Kurkov employing the same monochrome slow-burning narration familiar from ‘Death and the Penguin’s’ laconic portrayal of innocents adrift in the endemic lawlessness of 90s Kyiv. A corpse in the garden, a Ukrainian soldier shot bearing Christmas gifts to children in nearby Svitle, elicits outrage and compassion but it’s Sergeyich’s concern for the health and productivity of his hives that alone has the power to prise him loose as spring approaches from the hermit-like satisfactions of candle, clock, ‘potbelly’ stove and a silence ‘like a huge bottle of thick glass’. Sergeyich’s Odyssean wanderings in search of a conflict-free sanctuary take him to what he at first perceives to be paradisaical surroundings – the Zaporizhzhian hinterland where ‘southern Ukrainian drivers ... would stop and pick up ripe orange apricots from the grass’ and a fairytale, democratised Crimea, ‘the air ring[ing] with countless unseen bells ... where every living thing – every tree, every vine – has its own voice’. In reality they constitute, like Pasha’s story, a political and cultural education, the discovery at every stage of the inescapable human cost of territorial violation and occupation – a community kneeling by the roadside in their hundreds to mourn a murdered son, lost defending the integrity of the Donbas; the frenzied assault on his own person of a traumatised ex-conscript and self-appointed ‘counter-terrorist’; the

ruthless policing and ethnic hatred of Tatar Muslims administered from Bakhchysarai ('They want to break us') in preparation for a second Soviet-style cleansing; finally, and conclusively, the attempted militarisation of the apiary itself. Sergeyich's transformation into a pro-Tatar activist looks forward, in its inevitability, to the Kurkov of the *Diary of an Invasion*, unashamedly polemical from the Snake Island postage stamp that graces its cover to the (purportedly) samurai epigram with which it ends: 'If you sit on the riverbank for a long time, then sooner or later the corpse of your enemy will float past you downstream'.

One may have doubts about a Manicheanism which repeatedly excoriates a herd mentality that 'still holds the Russian Federation hostage', a people 'writ[ing] gloatingly on their social networks' of war crimes committed in their name while Ukrainians bask in an individualism going all the way back to the 16th-17th century hetmanate: about the intensity and urgency of Kurkov's attachment to cultural and literary expression as such – 'the invisible armour of the human soul' – none. In the short term, however, he writes in May 2022, with no echoing Zelensky, 'every representative of any creative profession must work for their country and for victory in this war'. Beloruset's own 'War Diary', available online and in print by March 2023, matches his in renouncing fiction-making entirely but with a greater emphasis, like her stories, on the personal need contained in any activity designed to offset catastrophe, such as the one she searingly characterises on February 24 as being visited on 'everything human ... [the] great common space where we live and hope for a future'. 'Cleanliness', she wryly concedes of her own ritual attachment to housekeeping, 'is a must in a dark room with taped windows'.

Stephen Winfield

Viva Cuba

Richard Hollis and J S Tennant, *Cuba '62–Preludes to a World Crisis*, Five Leaves, 2022, illustrated, 108 pages, ISBN 9781910170991, £11.99

Richard Hollis was in Cuba in 1962. He spent several weeks there in August and September, departing before the nuclear missile crisis between the Soviet Union and the United States unfolded in October. He had travelled to Cuba because he was curious about 'an attempt to build a new society'. Whilst there, Richard wrote to his wife, Tasha, in London, kept a

diary, and took photographs (some of which he, regrettably, discarded). These items are the ‘inspiration behind this collage of texts and images’ which form *Cuba ’62*. In fact, Richard had made his own collage on return to London in 1962, entitled *I, Eye*. It was a folded broadsheet of some 48 panels conveying his impressions of Cuba in the early years of the Revolution, which he gave away or sold for a penny. Sixty years later, he has designed and laid out this elegant and evocative record of those tumultuous times.

Bertrand Russell was also curious about Cuba and engaged with what was happening there in 1962. As the world was informed by the US about Soviet missile emplacements on the island, Russell went into overdrive. From a rural post office near his home in North Wales, he telegraphed Presidents Kennedy and Khrushchev, as well as U Thant, Secretary General of the United Nations. On 23 October, Russell telegraphed Kennedy saying:

‘Your action desperate. Threat to human survival. No conceivable justification. Civilised man condemns it. We will not have mass murder. Ultimatums mean war. I do not speak for power but plead for civilised man. End this madness.’

To President Khrushchev, Russell was more supplicant:

‘I appeal to you not to be provoked by the unjustifiable action of the United States in Cuba. The world will support caution. Urge condemnation to be sought through United Nations. Precipitous action could mean annihilation for mankind.’

Russell had been corresponding with Khrushchev since late 1957, when he addressed his open letter about nuclear peril to the Soviet President and President Eisenhower of the United States. It began ‘Most Potent Sirs’ and was published in the *New Statesman* on 23 November 1957. Khrushchev responded relatively swiftly, sending his reply to the *Staggers* on 7 December with a request that it be published. John Foster Dulles, US Secretary of State, eventually replied on behalf of President Kennedy, and his letter appeared in the edition of 8 February 1958.

Thereafter, Russell maintained his correspondence with Khrushchev. He had been vehemently opposed to Stalin and the conduct of the Soviet Union under him. But he detected a change of direction under Khrushchev and was able to intervene with him on individual cases of political

repression and, in particular, on behalf of Soviet Jews who wished to go to Israel. Such interventions, often with positive outcomes for the individuals concerned, continued until Khrushchev was removed in 1964, when the Soviet authorities became much less responsive.

Returning to October 1962, Russell discovered that Khrushchev had replied to his telegram entreaty when the press rang him in the middle of the afternoon of 24th October. In a three page letter, Khrushchev said:

'... I understand your worry and anxiety. I should like to assure that the Soviet government will not take any reckless decisions, will not permit itself to be provoked by the unwarranted actions of the United States of America and will do everything to eliminate the situation fraught with irreparable consequences which has arisen in connection with the aggressive actions of the United States Government.'

What aggressive actions had Khrushchev in mind? In addition to US military and covert actions against Cuba itself, Khrushchev also had in mind the positioning of US nuclear armed missiles in Italy and Turkey, within striking distance of Soviet territory. Such forward deployment was apparently an attempt by the United States to reassure NATO allies in Europe. So the nuclear escalatory wheel turned. As recorded in *Cuba '62*, it was the secret US pledge to Khrushchev to remove nuclear-armed missiles from Turkey that unlocked the solution to the Cuban Missile Crisis.

Cuba '62 is particularly poignant about the Soviet missile deployments manned by Ukrainian forces. Many soldiers in these specialist units came from Ukraine, 'for the most part east of the Dnieper', as J S Tennant tells us in his Postscript. The nuclear conundrum continues to plague us, both east and west of that big river, and much further afield in Europe.

Cuba '62 is timely and distinguished publishing from Five Leaves Publications in Nottingham, a UNESCO City of Literature. Uniquely illustrated and beautifully printed, it evokes Cuba's hopes in the early years of its vibrant Revolution.

Tony Simpson

European Parliamentarian

Glyn Ford, *Riding Two Horses – Labour in Europe*, Spokesman, 2022, 400 pages, paperback ISBN 9780851249070, £14.99

In nearly 400 pages of densely packed stories, anecdotes and philosophical reflections, Glyn Ford recounts his 50 years plus of political activity, including his 25 year period as a prominent Member of the European Parliament. It is a rich tapestry, illustrating the multiple ways in which he engaged in politics. Ford rode the two horses — Labour and Europe — in multiple venues extending well beyond Britain and Brussels.

Besides some personal history and tales from youthful travels, the book covers the main political fields in which Ford played a significant role. Besides the European Parliament, with which they are interwoven, they include local government in Tameside; science and science policy; the intricate politics of the two Koreas, Japan and China; challenging election monitoring in several countries; intricate factional battles in the Labour Party; and fighting the far right across Europe. It is all written with an eye to important or amusing details, while setting out the wider contexts and implications.

Ford served as an MEP for 25 years (from 1984 to 2009), during which time he was for four years the UK Labour Leader in the European Parliament and a Deputy Leader of the wider Socialist Group of MEPs — then the largest in the Parliament. This was a period of historic change, as the Parliament was transformed from essentially a consultative forum into a proper legislative chamber whose approval is now required for (almost) all European Union legislation, its budget, international agreements signed by the EU, and the appointment of the European Commission and its President. It was also a time of change in the Labour Party and in the trade union movement, when previous divisions and opposition to Europe gave way to widespread acceptance of, and even some enthusiasm for, the project. The role of Labour MEPs, including Ford himself, in this evolution is covered in some detail. Indeed, he himself was originally an ‘anti-marketeer’, but soon became convinced that leaving Europe would be costly and damaging for Britain, while reforming Europe was possible and offered many opportunities to the Left. Labour’s shift was relatively rapid, but not smooth, and Ford recounts a number of incidents and battles fought, and sets out his sometimes trenchant views of the various Labour figures and leaders involved.

Ford served over time on various Parliamentary committees, and describes his role on them and the issues they faced. They include the committees on Energy, Research & Technology (where his scientific background could be usefully deployed, in a context that became highly political with Reagan's 'Star Wars' proposals); International Trade (a major EU competence, with both economic and geopolitical implications); and Foreign Affairs (not least during the convulsive period of the Iraq war). In his first term, he was elected chair of a Committee of Inquiry into the Growth of Racism and Fascism in Europe and in the next Parliament became the rapporteur for a follow up Committee of Inquiry into Racism and Xenophobia, in the process becoming one of Europe's greatest experts in the field and a target of far-right attacks.

Ford's extra-European activities, not least in East Asia, whether as part of official EP delegations or as a freelancing networker, take a large chunk of the book. His behind-the-scenes contributions to defusing crises on the Korean peninsula make for fascinating reading. His deep knowledge and wide network of contacts in the two Koreas, Japan (where he was a university lecturer in his twenties), and China make these sections of the book a must read for anyone interested in the area and are highly relevant today. His account of EU electoral observation missions in Indonesia show that such missions can sometimes really play an important role.

Riding Two Horses is organised in ten chapters, each with substantial endnotes citing sources, has a select bibliography and a substantial index. Anyone interested in any of the subjects it covers will find much of interest, from perceptive historical explanations, to blow-by-blow accounts of events. It is dense: some sections read as if whole paragraphs had to be condensed into single sentences to cut the page count. It is demanding: some fields require a high degree of prior knowledge to fully understand. It is blunt: Ford can be acerbically dismissive of some of his colleagues. It is entertaining: he has an eye for good anecdotes and yarns. And it is a contribution to the historical record of what British MEPs did and achieved in the European Parliament.

Richard Corbett