

BOOKS

WORKING CLASS HISTORY

al police and fire department, as well as the reorganization of poor relief in the 1860s.

Above all, however, the new industrialists' interests in government—particularly in the police power—stemmed from the fact that the workers they were harnessing to the new machines were not mere factors of production, but thinking men and women who stubbornly clung to a faith in "equal rights."

Time and again over the 19th century—in the Workingmen's party of the 1830s, in the Great Strike of 1860 (the largest strike prior to the Civil War), in the Knights of St. Crispin (1868-1872), the great commonwealth of shoeworkers, and finally during the mid-'80s when shoemakers contributed a key battalion to the ultimate expression of 19th century working class radicalism, the Knights of Labor—Lynn workers left evidence of a collective power and identity derived in part from memories of the old household-based shoeworking community.

The advent of the Crispins indicated that the old artisan's sense of his rightful place in the republic had been transferred to a younger, often Irish, generation of factory workers. This forward-looking industrial organization not only laid down wage rates for the trade, but also contested capitalist control of government. As late as 1888 Lynn shoeworkers were able to capture the mayoralty with a Workingmen's ticket.

Business victory.

It is true that in each period the Lynn factory owners were able to beat back opposition to their rule of work and society. Enjoying an overwhelming advantage in the marketplace, and able to resort in crisis to the courts, the police or even the militia, they managed in hard times to drive back worker organization and in other times to allow class polarization to dissipate in the political boosterism of city-building.

As Dawley points out, "while recognition must be paid to the supremacy of business in the political economy of the nation at large, facile generalizations about the popular acceptance of business leadership at all levels of life and notions of America as a middle-class society do not square with examples like Lynn."

Dawley confronts the big questions even when he cannot always supply the most convincing answers. Given the robust tradition of shoeworker protest, he wonders why these workers never developed a revolutionary consciousness, why (in their thinking at least) they never took on the system as a whole. Here, of course, he is up against the question of American exceptionalism, which one must either challenge or explain.

Unfortunately, in this reviewer's opinion, Dawley accepts the latter option and spins a complex explanation based on the idea that bitter class conflict at the work-

place continually expired on contact with the American political system. Dawley states flatly that the "ballot box was the coffin of class consciousness" in the U.S.

Unity of work and politics.

Probably without meaning to, Dawley ends up forcing a sharp distinction between consciousness spawned at the workplace (class consciousness) and consciousness rooted in other areas of the culture (political class conciliation). His own evidence, however, indicates the constant, inseparable interaction of work, culture, and politics.

Thus the Great Strike of 1860 is inaugurated on Washington's birthday and pro-strike demonstrators arrange themselves by ward groups. Did the "coffin" of class consciousness in this case suddenly become its cradle? Or had we not better abandon a rigid separation of work from other sources of consciousness?

Within non-revolutionary limits, 19th century American politics will also likely show greater working-class self-expression than Dawley's study reveals. Nevertheless, his very provocativeness on such a thorny, but crucial subject typifies the author's daring and mercifully separates *Class and Community* from the somewhat school of social history.

—Leon Fink

Leon Fink is a professor of history at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

Transitory socialism in Oklahoma

WHEN THE FARMERS VOTED RED: The Gospel of Socialism in the Oklahoma Countryside, 1910-1924

By Garin Burbank
Greenwood Press, Westport, 1976, \$13.95

Garin Burbank opens this book on a personal note. He began the research as a graduate student at Berkeley, "inspired by angry dissatisfaction with the general direction of American politics in the 1960s." His original design was to discover among the Oklahoma socialists of the early 20th century a radical essence analogous to his contemporary frame of mind.

He didn't, and the book explains where his early notions went astray.

The "spectacular and regrettably brief" achievements of the Socialist party in Oklahoma begin with the campaign in which, with Eugene V. Debs as their candidate for president, the Sooner socialists garnered 7 percent of the state's vote. By 1914, they were getting 21 percent.

The heart of the crusade was the Green Corn Rebellion, an uprising of tenant farmers against the propertied classes. In Oklahoma these included the Democratic party. However "progressive" in its national visage (in the period of William Jennings Bryan and later, Woodrow Wilson), locally it was the foremost antagonist of the SP. "As aspirants to middle-class decency," the Democrats, in Burbank's view, "feared the sullen hostility of the local lower classes."

Books that examine the Social-

ist party of the U.S. have heretofore been urban-focused. What makes Burbank's work especially welcome is that the radicalism he studies was related to rural poverty (low farm values, a high percentage of farm tenancy and of mortgaged property, and dependency on cotton and wheat as staple crops). The centers of socialist strength in Oklahoma were the Red River countries of the south, the wheatlands of the west and the coal mining region. Cities provided very little consistent support.

The heart of the book is Burbank's consuming interest in ideology. He argues that a significant connection existed between evangelical religion and political radicalism, which ultimately led to the rapid demise of the movement. "There was predictably more of Leviticus than of Marx." Although under certain political and economic circumstances a significant number of farmers were attracted to the promise of socialism, in the end even the most committed adherents succumbed to the entrenched forces of corporate capitalism. Socialism in Oklahoma was a brief and "transitory moment" in the development of modern America.

Burbank's fine case study deserves wide dissemination and should be issued in a less expensive paperback format to that end.

—Michael H. Ebner

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Socialist History

Tempests in teapots in American Trotskyism

THE PROPHET'S ARMY:

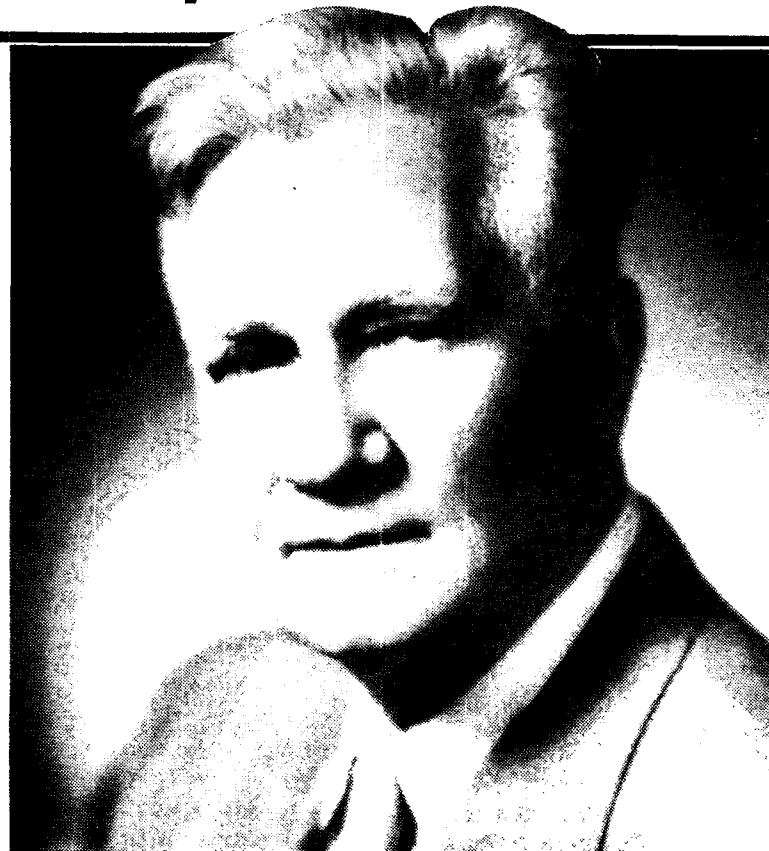
Trotskyism in America, 1928-1941

By Constance Ashton Myers
Greenwood Press, \$16.95

Constance Ashton Myers has written a comprehensive and concise narrative history of the Trotskyist movement in the U.S.: the story of James P. Cannon organizing a "left opposition" in the American Communist party in 1928; the Dunne brothers igniting the Minneapolis teamsters strike in 1934; the Trotskyists raiding the Socialist party in the "French turn" of 1936; and finally Max Shachtman precipitating a mass exodus from the Socialist Workers party in 1940.

Myers concludes that political sectarianism doomed the Trotskyist movement in the United States. "Trotskyists spoke a language either unintelligible or distasteful to working people, the class that party leaders most wanted to attract," the author says. "All of its convolutions, splits over minute points of doctrine, and internal struggles over power seemed only tempests in a teapot."

While Myers condemns sectarianism, she herself occasionally falls into sectarian interpretations. She approvingly reiterates Irving Howe's opinion that Communist leaders promoted "weak men," but she presents no historical evidence to substantiate this accusation against the character of Communist leaders. She also faces in-



James P. Cannon, the founder of American Trotskyism.

to the "autocratic" Trotsky and his "henchman" Cannon, invariably finding their positions "doctrinaire."

Many veteran radicals will disagree with Myers' judgement that "Shachtman was no factionalist." Although Shachtman insisted that factionalists provoked him, he often responded in kind, and Myers' own evidence tends to refute her generalization.

All historians entrap themselves to some degree in their

own interpretive rhetoric, and Myers' interpretive errors fall within the normal range of human fallibility. Socialist history is, in any event, filled with land mines. Myers presents many new facts and many fresh ideas about Trotskyism in the U.S. Her book is a valuable contribution to radical history.

—John Harper

John Harper teaches at District Council 37 Campus of the College of New Rochelle, N.Y.

The German Communist party before Hitler

INSIDE GERMAN COMMUNISM—Memoirs of Party Life in the Weimar Republic

By Rosa Levine-Meyer, Urizen, N.Y., \$8.95

From the end of World War I to the Nazi era (1918-1933) the German Communist party (KPD) was the strongest in Europe.

Throughout the period, the party scored electoral triumphs, most notably in the parliamentary elections of 1924 and 1928 when it won 3.25 million votes, and the presidential elections of 1932 when its total leapt to 6 million. Twice in December-January 1918-19 and in March 1921 the KPD attempted to seize power through "proletarian actions." Ultimately, however, it failed not only to overtake its rivals on the left, but to fend off the growing menace of the fascist right.

Why went wrong? Rosa Levine-Meyer was in a position to know.

Of Russian-Jewish descent, she came to Germany at the age of 20 and there married Eugen Levine, leader of the short-lived Soviet Republic in Bavaria (1918-19). After his capture and execution by right-wing forces, she met and married Ernst Meyer, leader of the KPD's right wing—the factor favoring limited cooperation with the left



wing of the largely reformist German Socialist party (SPD).

Rosa and Ernst lived only for the party. With the exception of some personal anecdotes about leading party figures in Germany and the USSR and a love letter from Ernst (printed without comment) Ms. Levine-Meyer writes nothing about their personal lives.

The party, as her memoirs show, was repeatedly convulsed by factional infighting between its far left wing (which focused on ideological purity and shunned association with the SPD and non-party groups) and its more moderate wing. Increasingly, the party took its ideological tone as well as its marching orders from the Comintern headquarters in Moscow.

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The tragedy of the KPD was that during the crucial years from 1929 to 1933 it was so intent on the "correct line," so busy denouncing and opposing the SPD that it neglected the formation of a united front against the Nazis. Stalin and other Soviet leaders were convinced that the USSR was threatened with attack not by the Germans, but by Britain and France. In both these countries social democrats were among the mainstays of the bourgeois ruling order. Moscow therefore ordered Communist parties throughout Europe to break off united front activity at the time it was most needed and to wage ceaseless ideological warfare against the "social fascists."

As Ms. Levine-Meyers shows, this allowed the party's far left to gain ascendancy with disastrous results. The trade union movement was weakened by the creation of separate, Communist unions. The party became dogmatic, undemocratic and obsequious to the "great man" in the Kremlin. In the name of "bolshevization," "double-crossing [and] lies became daily practice under the left...accompanied by perse-

cution of intellectuals." Hopelessly fractured, the left was unable to mount an effective resistance to the Nazis after Hitler became Chancellor in January 1933.

Inside German Communism takes us to the years of the early Purge Trials. Ms. Levine-Meyer portrays a number of individuals who became apologists for Stalin's totalitarianism, conscious of their own mendacity, but so devoted to the party and immersed in its life that they preferred to "sell out" rather than risk expulsion.

These memoirs tell us too little about what the KPD meant to the rank and file and do not adequately analyze the party's successes and failures in the historical and political context of the Weimar Republic. They do, however, give the reader a very good sense of what it meant to eat, sleep and live for the party, convinced that the revolution might be within grasp, even as the party was abandoning and betraying some of its best leaders and ideals.

—David M. Szonyi

David M. Szonyi is a doctoral candidate in modern European history and frequently reviews for *In These Times*.

tic element in human existence. This diminishes rather than illuminates the problem of humanity's imprisonment, which is his major concern. The quasi-allegorical escape in which Farragut "dies" in order to become free again stands in stark contrast to more naturalistic (and overtly political) accounts of prison life in America today.

Cheever's soul is not on ice—his pen lends it the wings of an angel.

Reality is a fashionable element in Joan Didion's new novel, *A Book of Common Prayer*. West coast radical chic, Latin American revolution, middle class ennui serve as the milieu of her story of a middle-aged California woman's disaffection from life. It is essentially the same story Didion told in *Play It As It Lays*—the fall from a position of wholeness and security into a place where fear and terror reigns.

The first-person narrator, a Yankee anthropologist who is the widow of a Latin American dictator, should have lent this novel depth and a more expansive view of the main character's suffering. Instead, it merely adds another layer of coldness to the entrenched Didion style. In her earlier fiction, it was already nearly as deformed as the pitiable creature born to the drugged, slightly demented and damaged Charlotte Douglass whose daughter Marin has run off a la Patty Hearst to play revolutionary.

Didion's soul is pure ice. She attempted to write a novel that would allow us to read between the lines of last year's newspapers, but gave us instead a book that falls between the stools of exploitation and explication.

Set for the most part in Iowa City, John Casey's first novel, *An American Romance*, sidesteps its way into the heart and minds of those who care about everyday things. A graduate student named Anya who wants to wrest herself free from the enervating daily round of Chicago intellectual life and a natural man named Mac who builds things, represent for Casey the paradigm of modern lovers. The case he constructs for them (as they build a repertory theater on the outskirts of Iowa University) is bold in its reach but overlong.

Fiction for Casey grows out of the facts of gritty, nitty living together in a quasi-commune complete with VD and a troupe of actors. Unfortunately, it's too much like life in Berryman's *Dream Song #14*, often boring, but we must not say so.

William Humphrey is author of several distinguished but not widely known novels of Texas life. His newest book-length work is the autobiographical *Farther Off From Heaven*, in which he reconstructs his boyhood in light of the traumatic death one summer night in 1937 of his auto mechanic father.

The elder Humphrey was a fiery bantam Texan, who left behind a boyhood as a share-cropper's son to become a hunter and tracker in the woods of east Texas and then an auto mechanic, Clarksburg's finest.

The pains and intricacies of southwestern class and caste have never been so finely rendered as in Humphrey's prose elegy to his lost parent and to all the lost dus-

ty days of his childhood. This carefully composed, unassuming quest for the reality of one writer's past outshines Cheever's lustrious allegory, Didion's pretentious *roman a clef* and Casey's

garrulous carnival of the ordinary present.

—Alan Cheuse

Alan Cheuse teaches English at Bennington College and reviews fiction for *In These Times*.

Best-seller built around tomorrow's headlines

PARIS ONE

By James Brady
Delacorte, N.Y., \$8.95

Superficially at least, the most distinctive feature of *Paris One* is its topicality.

The book's plot, which revolves around the attempt of a large Delaware chemical concern to take over one of the last great Parisian houses of fashion, occurs against the background of a French election: Valéry Giscard d'Estaing versus a left popular front. The book's hero, Anthony Winslow, obtains his job with a New York merchant bank after helping Felix Rohatyn "save" the city from bankruptcy. And when Winslow leaves for France, he flies out of Kennedy airport on the Concorde supersonic transport. Only a half dozen picketing housewives remain to see him go.

Paris One is a 300-page novel, and it was written in three months. Author James Brady, formerly editor of *Women's Wear Daily* and now editor of *New York* magazine, relies so heavily on current events that it is tempting to note instances where he was wrong about what would have taken place by the time of the book's publication. e.g., no Concorde has yet departed from Kennedy. But the point to be made is not how good a prophet Brady is, but how he uses current events to provide an instant social texture, which is thin but easily apprehended.

Brady has a sharp eye for people and writes well. *Paris One* is cleverly done, fast-paced, with a good deal of intrigue and sus-



Alex Goffroy

Author-editor James Brady

pense. All of which accounts for its continuing popularity.

He also delivers an extremely damning indictment of the practices of modern corporations—although he cops out in the end through the book's most stereotyped characters, the banker with integrity and the whore with the heart of gold.

The resultant anti-climax is dictated by the imperatives of aiming for the best-seller list. Nevertheless, *Paris One* is indicative of a shift in popular consciousness. It would seem that the same imperatives that make an author cop out, also permit him to ascribe violence, duplicity and murder to a multinational corporation as if these were only slightly exceptional business practices.

—Joel Blau

Best-seller built around the history of a family

THE THORN BIRDS

By Colleen McCullough
Harper & Row, 1977

The Thorn Birds is a best-selling novel of the kind that deserves to be described as "romantic" and "sprawling." Some popular novels achieve their place on the most-wanted list by mixing sex and violence. *The Thorn Birds* is subtler.

The novel belongs to the genre of family sagas—in this case the Cleary family, who run one of the largest sheep ranches in Australia. We follow them through three generations from their impoverished beginnings in New Zealand circa 1915 to the late 1960s, by which time their grand-daughter is a great star of the London stage and their grandson is a Vatican priest.

The plot is rich and elaborately detailed. Many things can happen to a family in 50 years, and a family saga is not likely to leave anything out. As a consequence we have unrequited love and other suffering, and death by drowning, heart attack and prairie fire.

The purpose of narrating all these misfortunes seems to be the reaffirmation of the durability of the family. The Clearys are able to persevere through just about anything. The problem is that this casts some doubt on the integrity of the story.

The Clearys' ability to survive, of course, is not unrelated to their wealth. Colleen McCullough is strangely oblivious to this point. She seems to be using the family fortune to create a feeling of romantic excitement, while their misfortunes soothe our incipient envy and tell us that the rich are just like us after all because they also suffer.

These two themes—that families survive and that the rich are just like the rest of us—are tranquilizing medicine for what is currently unhinging the American mind. McCullough is on to something. She knows what's troubling us and wants to pat us all on the head.

Needless to say, we should not bend down.

—J.B.

Fiction et al.



Jerry Bauer

Autobiographer William Humphrey.

Four ways of dealing with American reality

FALCONER

By John Cheever
Knopf, \$7.95

A BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER

By Joan Didion
Simon & Schuster, \$8.95

AN AMERICAN ROMANCE

By John Casey
Atheneum, \$9.95

FARTHER OFF FROM HEAVEN

By William Humphrey
Knopf, \$8.95

John Cheever's new novel, a long-awaited affair, plunks the reader down inside Falconer pri-

son, into the cell and mind of a fratricidal WASP named Farragut, whose special condition comes to stand for the condition of us all.

Farragut is a drug addict (never a believable one) who murdered his brother and suffers imprisonment as a result. From the initial moments in which a fellow prisoner steals his expensive wrist-watch on through his love affair with a seedy young swindler, his petty insanities and laments and the facts of his incarceration make great sense. But Cheever turns the real surreal in order to dramatize the fantas-