

Editor: Autobiography 1931-1945

Kingsley Martin

Hutchinson, 340 pp., 42s.

IN THE BOUTS OF NOSTALGIA which at present seem to dominate the British literary and television scene there is at the moment a special vogue for all kinds of imaginary reconstructions and mythology about a period called 'the thirties'. It is therefore useful that Kingsley Martin, who can speak with authentic authority as having been the undisputed centre of a social milieu during that period, has embalmed within the covers of a book all the well-intentioned illusions and confusions of what unkind critics used to call 'the middle-muddle left' and what he describes with characteristic frankness as the 'eggheads' who always 'found the greatest difficulty in making up their minds' and shared his special capacity for 'seeing seven sides to every question'.

The *New Statesman*, as we used to know it under the editorship of the world-weary cynic Clifford Sharp, was a right-wing Fabian organ, only made useful by its research supplements, and enlivened from its normal dullness by the sparkling eruptions of Shaw—most notably his 'Common Sense About the War' which punctured the jingo mania in the autumn of 1914. When the hitherto little known Kingsley Martin took over in 1930, he revealed himself rapidly as an editor of genius, who successfully cannibalised the other organs in the same field, the *Nation*, the *Athenaeum* and *Week End Review*, multiplied circulation six-fold, within four years had made the journal a profit-making concern, whereas previous backers had had to fork out £100,000 to pay for deficits, and established his organ as the indispensable monopoly organ gathering around itself, even if in sharp dispute, all the highly disparate 157

varieties of the intellectual and literary left.

The period in question, from 1931 to 1945, was a period of great mass struggles. The battles of the unemployed and the Hunger Marches, with Hannington and the Communists in the leadership, while the right-wing Labour and trade union leadership tried to ban them (Hannington's *Never On Our Knees* gives the true record). The battles against Mosley and his stormtroopers, backed by the police, when the workers, led by the Communist Party, stopped fascism from dominating the streets of London as it had done the streets of Berlin and Rome, while the right-wing Labour and trade union leaders told the workers to stay at home and leave the streets clear for Mosley. The battle for the Spanish Republic, when the inspiration of Harry Pollitt and the Communist Party initiated the formation of the British Battalion of the International Brigade. The battle against the Munich betrayal, when the voice of the Communist MP Gallacher was the sole voice in Parliament denouncing the betrayal at the time, while the Labour Party leaders had cried 'Godspeed' to Chamberlain and Churchill remained slumped and silent. The culminating battles of the second world war, when the Communists were the first to expose the Chamberlain-Daladier strategy of the phoney war, and, after the great alliance for victory had at last been achieved, the giant demonstrations organised by the Communist Party in Trafalgar Square for the Second Front exceeding in scale any demonstrations that have been held since 1945.

Little echo of this popular record of mass struggle will be found in this book, which moves in a different world of coterie discussions, lunches and behind-the-scenes talks with influential big names in the corridors of

power, endless speculations, endless memoranda—and at each decisive point, wobble. The intentions are admirable, sincere, earnest: concern over the advance of fascism; desire for stopping the advance of fascism; for collective security; for the alliance with the Soviet Union. But then always at the critical point comes the wobble. This is glaringly revealed even in the very inadequate account given of the history of the period and the fight against appeasement.

Hitler's military occupation of the Rhineland in 1936. Characteristically the Anglo-French passive acceptance of this appears (so also in all the conventional accounts) as if it were the first milestone in the 'appeasement', that is, rearmament of Hitler—ignoring the host of previous actions from the first accession of Hitler to power, when the British Prime Minister MacDonald on behalf of the National Government immediately proposed the doubling of the German army and halving of the French army, to the key decisive step of the British-German Naval Treaty of 1935 which officially and unilaterally tore up the restrictions on German rearmament, and gave Germany 100 per cent equality in submarines. But even if we accept the test of the Rhineland in 1936 as the first test of the attitude to the 'appeasement' of Hitler, what was the attitude of the heroes of the *New Statesman*?

'Why, we asked ourselves, should we try to prevent Germany occupying German territory, knowing full well that if Hitler was forced to withdraw he would merely wait for another day when he was stronger'? (p. 169).

The attempt to make a stand to stop Hitler's aggression was bound to be in vain anyway.

'People seem to think that a tough line towards Hitler, when he in-

vaded the Rhineland or attacked Czechoslovakia two years later, would have prevented the war. In fact, as we now know, if Hitler had been resolutely opposed in 1936 he would have withdrawn and waited for a better opportunity' (p. 24).

Or take the test of sanctions against Mussolini's war on Ethiopia. At the critical point the heroes put their trust in Sir Samuel Hoare and Sir John Simon:

'I was among the excited speculators at Geneva when Sir Samuel made this speech . . . Instead of Sir John Simon explaining why the Covenant could not be invoked, here was a plain-speaking Foreign Secretary boldly declaring that Britain favoured collective security. I rang up my paper and reported that Britain after all intended business. I was not alone in believing that the British Government meant what it said' (p. 177).

Of course disillusionment followed after Moses Primrose had come home with his gross of green spectacles. 'It was a deception and confusion.'

And Munich? The heroes even anticipated *The Times* in advocating already on August 27, 1938, the amputation of Czechoslovakia for the benefit of Hitler:

'If Hitler agrees to accept a solution with Czechoslovakia, it may still be possible, if the Czechs make an imaginative offer of partnership to the Sudeten Germans, to reconcile them to the existing frontiers. But if Lord Runciman reports that this is impossible, the question of frontier revision, difficult though it is, should at once be tackled. The strategical value of the Bohemian frontier should not be made the occasion of a world war' (*New Statesman and Nation*, 27.8.38).

Wryly remarking that 'this was a mistake which I was never allowed to

forget', he still attempts to defend it by citing the distinguished company in which he trod the Munich road, including the advice of Keynes ('bluff to the hilt, and if the bluff is called, back out'), Churchill's approval of the Runciman mission—of course no mention of Gallacher—and the argument which he still seems to consider true that 'world war was inevitable if we stuck to our pledge without a Soviet alliance, and it was my duty to say so'. He fails to take into account the information now available that the Soviet Union had prepared a full military stand by Czechoslovakia to resist Hitler, even if Britain and France refused to act, and had given this message to their Ambassador in Prague, but that Masaryk and Benes, owing to their Western connections, committed the fatal blunder of accepting the Anglo-French *diktat* for the partition of Czechoslovakia rather than save the independence of Czechoslovakia with Soviet aid—as still had to be done later, after much greater costs.

To follow this melancholy record through all its convolutions would take too long. The misconceptions on communist policy and Soviet policy follow commonplace lines.

It is more profitable to consider what lessons can be drawn for the Left today. A little more recognition of class forces and realities would have helped. Kingsley Martin boasts that he escaped 'falling into the easy fallacies of orthodox Marxism'. Certainly it is evident he knew nothing of it save from the usual second-hand hostile sources, since he actually believes that Marxism teaches that man is 'a purely economic animal' (p. 200 and *passim*), whereas he triumphantly proclaims in his final review that men go to war 'for many reasons—dynastic, national, economic or religious' and 'men are aggressive

animals'. Truly the enthronement of banality and virgin ignorance of Marxism.

Nevertheless, any necessary criticism should not obscure the fact that there is an abundance of most readable and often illuminating information and sidelights in this book, conversations with personages, and all kinds of memoranda, including a most damning reproduction of innumerable memoranda by Keynes, illustrating his grasshopper mind. There is a fascinating interview with Trotsky in Mexico in 1937, with whom he raised the question in relation to the public trials in Moscow: 'Why did none of the accused men imitate Dimitrov?' in view of the presence of the world press, at which Trotsky became 'very animated' and declared that these correspondents were all 'paid prostitutes of Moscow':

'It was here that I began to demur.

I had certainly been influenced by some of these "prostitutes". "The arch-villain among the press men", Trotsky shouted, "was Walter Duranty" of the *New York Times*. How much did I think Pritt had been paid to write his account of things? I explained that I knew Pritt well, that he might have been deceived, might even be accused of credulity, but that he was not open to bribes.

'Trotsky and I had a regular wrangle on this point, and I am afraid I failed to convince him. To see him get up and shout abuse at Mr. Pritt was most revealing. He seemed to believe that anyone who had a word to say for Stalin or who hesitated to denounce the whole trial as a frame-up must be in the pay of Moscow.' There is no doubt that, whatever the differences on policies of the period, this book is a rich historical treasure-trove.

R.P.D.

SHAPE THE FUTURE NOW

WHAT someone once called 'the monthly miracle' is the scope of the articles we pack into our 48 pages. With so many demanding issues at stake we could fill many times this space with contributions from those in the labour movement who turn to *LM* as a forum of progressive opinion. But the wealth of thought-provoking material in our magazine is not achieving its full impact if it fails to reach the people who could gain most from reading it.

This is where we depend so greatly on our friends—every donation sent helps us to introduce *LM* to wider circles, every new reader in turn brings the welcome potential of increased cash and circulation. Peace, racialism, the prices and incomes policy are all dealt with in depth in our magazine—is there anyone who is not affected by these questions?

A London reader puts things in perspective: 'The new film "2001—A Space Odyssey" takes us on a fantastic voyage into the future. It seems to me that the shape of things to come depends on what we do today, that's why the rôle of *LM* is so vital; it shows how people in the labour movement can play their part in shaping the future *now*. To make the marvels of 2001 come true we must ensure that *LM* never lacks the means to make its monthly "Peace Odyssey". I hope this donation will be the first of many.'

This kind of practical help is an urgent necessity if we are to meet the menacing problem of price rises and seize the present opportunities for winning hundreds of new readers for our journal.

Helen Falber.

£97 4s. 4d.

REGULAR DONATIONS came from: C.M.T., £5; S.Y., £1; A. Allan, £5; Southend Branch, 15s; T. Crichton, £6; R. McLeod, £2; J. Rink, 5s; J. Tarver, £1; 'Oliver Twist and friends', 15s; L. Bates, 5s; Blackburn Branch, 3s; Oldham Branch, 2s; J. and J. Pinkerton, 5s; W. E. Rounce, 5s; A. Berger, £1; G.L., 2s 6d; D. H. Strathern and friends, 10s; The Butcher family, 10s; 'S. Mill', £1; R.F.B. £6; Les Perkins, 2s 6d; Marie Philibert, 5s; L. Hadfield, 5s; L. Paul, 10s; Bob Stewart, £1; M. Bell, £2; Cambridge Union CP, £3; E. Sheldon, £1; E. Strachan Rogers, £2 2s; Kitty Millward and friends, 7s 6d; 'Socialist Sailor', £2; E.J.B., 10s; A. Hanrahan, £1 10s 1d; J. A. Purton, 7s 6d; K. and B.R. (USA), £2 8s 10d; J.D. (Canada), 7s 7d; A.M.T. (for Fernando and Guilherme), 1s.

OTHER DONATIONS INCLUDE: M. Joules, £1; W. Strachan, £1; D. R. Morrison, 11s. 6d; H. Smith, 10s; N. Finchley, £1 7s; P. G. Husbonds, £1 13s; A. C. Blogg, £1 13s; W. R. Hunt, £1; 'J', 4s 6d; J. Green, 16s 6d; W.H.S. (Canada), £2; J.B. (Canada), 8s; L.N. (Canada), 8s; T. Powell, 3s; F. P. Forster, 5s; R. Hodgkinson, 15s; D.E.T. (Australia), £5; W. J. Fairman, 3s; S. Craven, 13s; Mrs. M. P. Barrass, 13s; C. Grant, 15s; J. W. R. Clark, £3; G. Coulouris, 10s; D. O. Mitchell, 13s; C. G. Roberts, £1 6s 6d; J. Colvin, 3s; E. M. Berlyn, 7s 3d; D. H. Calcutt, £1 6s; B. Spencer, £2; M. Morgan, 10s; ANON, £10; F. H. Stokes, 5s; H. Fisher, 13s; P. Watkins, 3s; J.D.S. (Canada), 7s 11d; J.D. (Canada), £4 3s 8d; M. Paton, £1 3s.

Our thanks to you all,
Co-op No. L99482

134 Ballards Lane, London, N.3.
01-346 5135

Published by The Trinity Trust, distributed by Unity Publications (Finchley), Ltd., and printed by London Caledonian Press Ltd. (T.U.), Watford, Herts.