

Down And Out

The End Of The Street
Linda Melvern
Methuen, £9.95 hbk

Did 'Wapping' have to happen? In other words, was the pressure of new technology unutilised, markets unserved, profits un-made so great that sooner or later it had to burst, violently, the dam of two centuries' old printers' strength?

The antiquity of printers' resistance to technical change which would rob them of their jobs is attested to in Linda Melvern's carefully crafted study. In 1814, John Walter II, son of the founder and editor of *The Times* had a steam press smuggled piece by piece into Printing House Square.

If management was accustomed to seeing print unions as obstructive brutes and unions to see management as devious bastards 172 years ago, there has been little in the intervening years to prove either wrong. On the management / ownership side, the lure of owning a mouthpiece which could sway opinion and act as a platform from which honours could be grasped and social status enhanced, has proved to be a drug powerful enough to withstand the most shocking losses.

On the unions' side, the nightly perishability of the product has bequeathed a benign gift of industrial muscle. Result: a boozy, cynical, well-heeled, comic, creative, exclusive, absorbing underworld, most alive when most people were going to bed.

Once inside it, it was formidably seductive. It was a man's world, dominated by the East End of London working class who never ceased to be so no matter what their wages or, for that matter, their politics – and who never let either of these dilute their distrust of the management.

A man's world is attractive to most men, at least some of the time: the fact that those outside of it could point with justice to the high wages for little work, to the lack of any

women in high paid jobs, to the finger-on-one-hand number of blacks in warehouses, press rooms, composing rooms, newsrooms and management suites – that all this was and still is a fact cuts little ice with the insiders.

It sometimes even worked. Some of its products are world class: I am partial, but I think the *Financial Times* is in that class; and *The Sun* certainly is. The reasons why the latter is so is that it does what it sets out to do – sell to and organise a mass audience – without a peer in any country in the West. The printing standards are high, very often: and though the place was rightly criticised for its massive inefficiency, it maintained a readership of a higher percentage of the population than similar papers in most other countries.

But it *did* have to change, and though it did not *have* to 'do a Wapping', it was an odds-on chance that it would. Eddie Shah's win over the National Graphical Association at his Stockport Messenger plant late in 1983 and his subsequent launch of *Today* with direct inputting, was a lever which opened up for all newspaper managements a window of opportunity to get progressively deeper staff cuts – Robert Maxwell's Mirror Group had agreed some 2,000 redundancies before 'Wapping' happened, while nearly all other groups had plans on the stocks which would have been thrown out of boardrooms with hollow laughs a year or so before.

But Rupert Murdoch, as Melvern well shows, was in a hurry: he was greatly over-extended in the US, where in 1985 he had laid out \$325m to buy 50% of 20th Century Fox, a month after financing a \$2 billion deal for Metromedia. 'Murdoch', she says, 'was on his way to achieving a global communications empire spanning three continents. But to do it, he had to sort out his problems with his British newspapers. He desperately needed his UK profits. The golden goose could not be allowed to stop laying eggs'.

These eggs were already gold plated: *The Sun* made £26m a year. But, as Mur-

doch told his shareholders in the 1985 News Corporation annual report, profits would grow dramatically without disputes.

Melvorn is at her formidable best when she describes the preparations for the dramatic coup which would bring Wapping to life. In 1984-85, Murdoch saw himself thwarted at every turn by the unions: his papers were plagued by disputes. A plant at Kinning Park in Glasgow, developed to print Scottish and North of England editions of *The Sun* and other News International titles, was not allowed on stream by Sogat, the monopoly print union in Scotland. The pressure was building up.

He lanced the boil by employing, in secret, a team of computer specialists. They successfully set up the Wapping computer systems, trained the journalists and other operators and brought it into service.

Should the print unions have seen the writing on the wall? Of course they should: indeed, they did. Melvern quotes Eric Hammond, general secretary of the electricians' union, using in his own defence a speech by Tony Dubbins, general secretary of the NGA, in 1978.

Dubbins had said that if the NGA did not heave themselves out of the rut of a union in which entry was predicated on a long craft apprenticeship, 'it will not be a case, like King Canute, of getting your feet wet; it will be a case of a massive tidal wave of changing techniques sweeping over this industry, with the creation of an alternative non-union industry or an industry organised by alternative unions'. He was right: but he had done too little to take on his own Fleet Street chapels.

Brenda Dean *might* have done, given more time. Less than a year into her job as Sogat general secretary when the dispute broke, she was a provincial (from Manchester), she was industrially moderate and she was a woman. Her formidable intelligence and talent could carry her over these dis-

advantages in the eyes of her Fleet Street members for a while, and the effectiveness she developed on TV and radio for speaking up for the interests of members, won some respect. But the hard men of her Central London branch knew from the outset she was not one of them. Melvern quotes Tony Isaacs, imperial father of the Sogat *News of the World* machine chapel, as saying 'What she (Dean) was trying to do was to have her executive committee run our dispute. They wanted to make all the decisions then just give us an ultimatum. A London general secretary would have understood the mood... we wanted recognition (at Wapping)'.

Implicit in the book is the view that the chapel leaders at News International have a lot to answer for. The Fleet Street unions were outsmarted, out-spent and outlawed: and though, as Melvern says, they could have done much more to learn what was happening and to act upon that knowledge, it was and is clear that the workforce of Fleet Street has now nowhere to go but down, and that the print culture of Fleet Street has nowhere to go but out.

Wapping *may* have unlocked a door which barred a multiplicity of papers. However, the smart money in the Street (and there is some) is on *this* kind of future: that the big groups will retain their strength, indeed see it increased as others go down the mega-profit road blasted open by Shah and Murdoch. If there are to be new titles, *they* will print them. But the cash released by lower costs will be used by the wiser of the big groups to fund marketing and promotion, and the small companies will find themselves at a continual disadvantage.

It is a compelling but not an attractive vision. It can be proved wrong only by the continuing vitality and talent of papers like this one, which provide something of a political base for more financially ambitious projects like *News on Sunday*. That's hard work, but it's worth it. ●

John Lloyd



Beyond the Boundary

Shattering Illusions

Trevor Carter

Lawrence & Wishart,
£3.95 pbk

Unlike most books of this genre, which have tended to look at what happens at the level of government and governmental politics, Trevor Carter's 'diary' is a record of what happens at the level of the street, housing estates, inner city schools, inside the police stations and more importantly, inside the rhetoric of the Left – thereby beginning to uncover the racism of the Left and of the labour movement.

This is a 'once-upon-a-time' tale, but of our lives. In three of the five chapters, Trevor Carter interrogates the political framework of the West Indian presence in Britain in three phases. The first phase covers 1954-62 and deals with the politics of assimilation and integration in terms of the effects on black people and the intentions of the

state. The central tenets of this period were that immigrants were 'aliens' and that they posed a threat to the stability of schools and society.

Cultural diversity was only tolerated as long as it did not impede progress to integration or challenge the dominance of anglo-centric, white society.

The second phase, 1962-72, he describes as the period of cultural diversity. The advocates of cultural pluralism maintain that our society consists of different groups which are culturally distinctive and separate under the political authority of a neutral state.

What is wrong with this view, as Trevor Carter points out, is that it assumes that all groups within the plural society possess roughly equal amounts of power.

In the third phase, 1972-80s, the agenda he says is being set by black people. However the assertion that the agenda of race politics in the 1980s is being set by black people reveals one of the shortcomings of the book. The ideolo-

gies of multi-culturalism, racism awareness training and anti-racism, which have become the mainstay of the race politics of the 80s, have nothing in common with the business of the black struggle, nor are they shaped or formed by the black experience.

I would argue that the race politics of the 80s has been heavily influenced by the growth of and efficient professionalisation of 'race' issues – that have been described elsewhere as the bureaucratic conversion of community struggles into respectable professional occupations. Multi-culturalism, anti-racism and racism awareness training are just a small part of a whole set of strategies which are to do with the management of black people and black struggles via Scarmanite policies. Black experiences and struggles transcend anti-racism and are not reducible to 'a fight against racism'.

A second problem with the book is brought out by its sub-title ('West Indians in British politics'). By opting

to remain within the boundaries of his own historical resources, Trevor Carter fails to recognise that the black tradition and black struggles are also of Africa, India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. The common struggles around blackness in different parts of the world, with a common history of colonialism and underdevelopment have shaped black politics here in Britain. The absence of this dimension could be misread as an affirmation of an ethnicity which accepts racial and ethnic categories as absolutes rather than as historical, and which refutes altogether the idea of a common struggle. This is compounded by the Left's own failure to perceive the ways in which race underpins working class consciousness, this is a failure the book fails to adequately address. That task is all the more essential in the face of the Left's continuing inability to make a distinction between anti-racism and black struggles. ●

George Shire

Damaged Goods

Sinclair And The 'Sunrise' Technology

Ian Adamson and Richard Kennedy
Penguin, £3.95 pbk



A few years ago, an opinion poll showed that the British public regarded Clive Sinclair as one of the top ten scientists of all time. This bizarre over-estimate of Sinclair's importance tells us something important about the potential of clever marketing – and something sad about the British educational system. But the full Sinclair saga, told well by Adamson and Kennedy, also has powerful lessons for anyone interested in British economic failure and Britain's feeble position as a world technological power.

For the reason why Sinclair shines out as Britain's best-known high technology entrepreneur has nothing to do

with the two skills which normally make companies succeed in advanced industries – innovation and quality. Over the years Sinclair has produced unoriginal goods which have mostly worked badly if at all, made them in ill-run factories with no proper management or quality control, and sold them at the bottom end of the market. The culmination in 1984 and 1985 was the launch of the QL computer – before it existed – and of the C5 electric carpet slipper, which was useless mainly because it incorporated only highly traditional battery technology.

As Adamson and Kennedy tell it, it is no surprise that Sinclair has finally been bought out this year by Amstrad – another British firm of humble origins, this time run on strict cost control, cheap foreign labour, and ruthless quality and marketing methods. For these are exactly the qualities which Sinclair has always lacked. With his origins in the ham-

electronics business, Sinclair is used to dealing with customers who can be used to capitalise the firm by waiting months for goods, and who regard it as all part of the game if what finally arrives fails to work.

This would not matter if information technology itself were a sideshow. But it isn't, of course – it is possibly the leading industry of the coming decade, and one in which the UK had a trade deficit of £1.25 billion in 1985. Labour Party plans for British Telecom and the rest of the British information technology industry have to cope with severe British weakness in all information technology areas. One symptom is the way in which the Japanese have produced Mitsubishi and Sony, and the Americans Apple, while all we can run to is Uncle Clive.

Britain's National Enterprise Board (NEB) backed various information technology businesses including Sinclair (a fiasco), Inmos (a

partial success) and ICL (a reasonable success considering the overwhelming strength of IBM), but its planned successor bodies next time round will be in a world where far more vision and far more money will be needed. Firms not up to global standards of technology are now at a fatal disadvantage in the information technology world.

Oddly enough, Sinclair may just have a role in all this. His newest project, a portable telephone using the latest 'wafer-scale' technology, may for once be a genuine first. If it is, the promise is immense. But if a Labour government backs him again, some care will still be needed. The NEB found Sinclair Radionics giving money to the Conservative Party while it was being funded as part of Labour's industrial policy. Typically enough, Sinclair seems to have passed the episode off as a mild eccentricity. ●

Martin Ince