

Kevin Morgan: Bolshevism, Syndicalism, and the General Strike. The Lost International World of A.A. Purcell, London, Lawrence & Wishart, 2013. 356 p. (Bolshevism and the British Left. 3). – ISBN 9781905007271.

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This is the third in Kevin Morgan's trilogy on Bolshevism and the British left, the earlier volumes being *Labour Legends: Russian Gold* and *The Webbs and Soviet Communism*.¹ It is less a biography than a prosopography. As Morgan suggests, a monographic treatment of Bolshevism in Britain is rendered problematic by its comparatively small institutional footprint, but much wider influence and amorphous presence. The Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) was one the Comintern's lesser affiliates, while the Profintern remained exceptionally weak in the English-speaking world. However, there was considerable sympathy within the Labour movement with the Bolshevik regime, or at least the perceived aims of the October revolution. The British Trades Union Congress (TUC) sent delegations to Soviet Russia in 1920 and 1924, and established the Anglo-Russian Joint Advisory Council to reconcile the International Federation of Trade Unions and the Profintern, as the Profintern wanted. For its part, the Comintern approved a 'united front' policy for Britain, and the Profintern applied a 'boring from within' tactic of organizing fractions in various unions, which came together as the National Minority Movement in August 1924, with a membership of some 200,000.² Both the CPGB and the Minority Movement contained a high proportion of influential militants who had earned their spurs in strikes, in the wartime shop stewards' movement, and in the Councils of Action formed to stop Britain declaring war on Soviet Russia in 1920. Moreover, the emergence of British communism coincided with the onset of the inter-war economic crises, a revamping of the TUC executive in hopes that it would become the 'general staff' of the working class, and a radicalization of the TUC with the rise of 'lefts' like A.A. Purcell.

Despite his prominence in the 1920s, Purcell has received very little attention, and would probably present a substantial challenge for any biographer. He left no collection of papers, and is depicted here as typical of an elite that was 'colourless, dry, and dull' (p. 14). Morgan frequently compares British Labour leaders unfavourably with their more articulate and theoretically-minded continental counterparts. While a good speaker, Purcell's call for 'preaching, urging, quietly, noisily, in season and out, undiluted working-class solidarity', was, according to Morgan, 'the nearest he ever came to a statement of his political philosophy' (pp. 23-4). Yet it is his 'ordinariness' that makes him so representative, and that is what attracts Morgan, as he seeks to characterise the British left in the 'days of hope' that began with the October revolution and ended with the collapse of the general strike of 1926.³ The emphasis is on the 1920-6 period. Purcell's life before and after is discussed in two summary chapters, and three of the central chapters take the form of essays on Purcell's

¹ Kevin Morgan: *Labour Legends and Russian Gold*, London, Lawrence & Wishart, 2006; Kevin Morgan: *The Webbs and Soviet Communism*, London, Lawrence & Wishart, 2006.

² The best survey of the wider historical context is Daniel F. Calhoun: *The United Front. The TUC and the Russians, 1923-1928*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1976.

³ In 1975 BBC television broadcast a four part series 'Days of Hope' about a working-class family and its connection with events from the Easter Rising of 1916 to the general strike of 1926. It was directed by Ken Loach.

internationalism, Emma Goldman's stay in London between 1924 and 1926 (Goldman was by now an outspoken gadfly on the Bolshevik regime and is critiqued as a counterpoint to Purcell's 'Russian superstition'), and why Purcell preferred the imagined Soviet future to that offered by Fordist America.

Albert Arthur 'Alf' Purcell (1872-1935) was born in London of Irish stock and raised with his family in Keighley, Yorkshire. The Irish background weighed lightly on him, and his penetrating opposition to British imperialism in India contrasted with his myopia about the colonizing role of British trade unions in Ireland. In that respect also, he was all too representative of his colleagues. Working in the furnishing trades, he rose steadily in the ranks of union officialdom, at a time when British union bureaucracy was undergoing a dramatic expansion. By 1898 he was general secretary of the Amalgamated Society of French Polishers, and in 1919 he was elected to the TUC general council. On the left throughout his life, he reflected the shifts in British revolutionism from the Marxism of the Social Democratic Federation to the direct actionism of the Industrial Syndicalist Education League to sympathy with Soviet Russia and, arguably, crypto-Bolshevism. He was also at times a guild socialist and a Labour MP. Though leader of a small union, he became one of the most powerful and best known British trade union officers in the 1920s, and had regular contact with the movement internationally, chairing delegations to Russia, serving as President of the International Federation of Trade Unions, and representing the TUC in the United States and India. His key moment in history came during the general strike, called in solidarity with the Miners' Federation's opposition to pay cuts and longer hours, and he never recovered from the debacle.

Morgan offers a revisionist version of the general strike and presents Purcell as a victim of the powerful Transport Union leader, Ernest Bevin. Rejecting the widespread perception of the strike as the last hurrah of British syndicalism, Morgan argues convincingly that syndicalists treated the actual general strike, as distinct from the Sorelian myth, as problematic and British syndicalists rarely spoke of it. Those who took it seriously, believed it needed to be well planned, sharp, and short. By contrast, the TUC general council had nine months' notice of the cuts to be imposed on the miners, and, notoriously, did nothing until the last minute, not wanting to believe that a strike would be necessary. Most historians accept that the TUC general council's handling of events was inept and its capitulation to the government an embarrassment. Morgan goes further, arguing that Bevin bounced it into an ill-prepared strike merely to give 'point and direction' to 'a widespread feeling that might otherwise have given rise to spontaneous and ungovernable outbursts of militancy' (p. 257). In this hostile reading, Bevin's primary aim was to maintain his own control over the movement and he was chiefly to blame for the unilateral termination of the strike after nine days; he then supplied an alibi for the fiasco in presenting it as an heroic but doomed last-ditch stand of syndicalism, when it was really about discrediting the 'lefts' and consolidating his social democratic control. Relieved that the crisis had passed, the 'rights' were happy to row in behind him. As chairman of the Strike Organisation Committee, and a leading 'left', Purcell was an obvious target for those looking for a scapegoat. The awkwardness of his position was exacerbated by the fact that he was the only member of the TUC general council who was MP for a mining constituency, the Forest of Dean.

Like all else in the book, Morgan's thesis is well researched and exhaustively annotated, and Bevin may well have been so Machiavellian, but one wonders why Purcell was attacked vehemently on all sides, by the 'rights', the 'lefts', the communists, and the Soviets, and why he was so inept in defending himself? There are so many questions. Why did he retreat into a perplexing silence? Why did he fail to defend his safe Labour seat in the 1929 elections

and switch to the constituency of Manchester Moss Side, where the Labour Party hardly existed? Morgan's account is unusually weak here, and an adequate explanation would require less prosopography and more biography. Perhaps the answers are not to be found. As Morgan explains, after the general strike 'except in his union journal it is henceforth difficult to find much record of [Purcell's] views' (p. 281).

Soon after the strike Purcell broke with the communists. Bitterly disappointed with the TUC's surrender to the government, they looked on him as no longer of any consequence. Aleksandr Lozovsky's pamphlet *British and Russian Workers* (December 1926) referred to Purcell and others as 'slippery eels'. Yet he remained pro-Soviet and convinced that Russian trade unions must be a part of any Labour International. A speech to that effect as President of the International Federation of Trade Unions would be his controversial swansong. He was quickly repudiated by the Federation secretary Leon Jouhaux, the congress rejected his renomination as president, and he was widely attacked in the continental social democratic press. The TUC's relations with Russia were deteriorating too. The Anglo-Russian Joint Advisory Council was dissolved in 1927. The Comintern ended its 'united front' policy for Britain, and everywhere else, in 1928 with the adoption of the Third Period theses. And in 1933, the TUC equated the Nazis and the Soviets for their hostility to independent trade unions. Purcell made his final visit to Russia that year, by now a forgotten man, and pursued internationalism through heightened interest in China and India. He busied himself too with local campaigns, ranging from road safety to the dangers of high-rise flats. His death on Christmas eve, 1935, came too soon for him to take any advantage of the popular front. Morgan is in no doubt that he remained a fellow-traveller to the end, and would have welcomed it.

The fascination of this book lies in the subtleties of the relationship between Bolshevism and the British left, and their deft exposition. Transnational history may be at the cutting edge of the discipline, but this study is both transnational and that most challenging form of labour history, an exploration of mentalities. Morgan's fundamental concern is to interrogate the mindset of a movement with a unique world-view, at a time when internationalism meant something. With an excellent command of the diversities of the period, he covers a vast and complex terrain with clarity, insight, and vigour. The interpretations are judicious, and he manages to be fair to all sides (if a trifle sarcastic about Emma Goldman). This volume, like the series, is wholeheartedly recommended.