

I. The Labour Movement

Lawrence Black

Labour at 100

Rather than presiding over the demise of Labour History, Tony Blair and New Labour have renewed interest in it. In part because New Labour has cast Labour's past in a different light. Historians have started to suggest suburbia was the vital territory and language of post-war British politics and that via pollsters like Mark Abrams, suburban candidates like Merlyn Rees and modernisers like Harold Wilson, Labour was graduating to its Blairite apogee. Indeed the temptation to locate progenitors of Blairism is one less welcome product of New Labour's electoral success. The status of "original Blairite" is hotly contested. Denis Healey claims to have been preaching 'pure Blairism' as early as the 1950s; David Owen (more, but not entirely plausibly) proposes the 1980s' Social Democratic Party nudged Labour towards modernisation and David Marquand has wondered if Ramsay MacDonald (at the time referred to as the 'new Gladstone') was the Blair of the 1920s.¹

Other recent studies resonate with New Labour interests, but more critically and historically. The vicissitudes of Europe, national identity and constitutional reform (all issues close to New Labour) have variously been the subject of new research by Roger Broad, Paul Ward, Andrew Chadwick and John Morrison.² Foreign policy too and Britain's relationship with the USA have prompted new studies.³ Political communication – New Labour's chief talent in its critics' eyes – is receiving overdue consideration.⁴

Kevin Jefferys' collection on *Leading Labour*, reflects on the role of leadership – a particular theme under Blair. It contains sketches of Labour leaders, many by recent biographers. Par-

1 Mark Clapson, 'Suburbia and Party Politics', *History Today* (September 2001), 16-18. Healey and Owen in Brian Brivati, Richard Heffernan (eds.), *The Labour Party: A Centenary History* (Basingstoke, 2000), 165, 166–169. David Marquand, 'Ramsay Macdonald Revisited', *Renewal* 8:1 (2000), 7–14.

2 Roger Broad, *Labour's European Dilemmas: From Bevin to Blair* (Basingstoke, 2001); Paul Ward, *Red Flag and Union Jack: Englishness, Patriotism, and the British Left, 1881–1924* (Woodbridge, 1998). Andrew Chadwick, *Augmenting Democracy: Political Movements and Constitutional Movements During the Rise of Labour, 1900–1924* (Aldershot, 1999) John Morrison, *Reforming Britain: New Labour, New Constitution* (London, 2001).

3 Mark Wickham-Jones, Richard Little (eds.), *New Labour's Foreign Policy: A New Moral Crusade?* (Manchester, 2000); Peter Jones, *America and the Labour Party: The Special Relationship at Work* (London, 1997).

4 See Dominic Wring, 'Machiavellian Communication: the role of "Spin Doctoring" and "Image-making" in Early and Late Twentieth Century British Politics', in Phil Harris, Andrew Lock, Patricia Rees (eds.), *Machiavelli, Marketing and Management* (London, 2000) and "'Selling Socialism": The Marketing of the "very old" British Labour Party', *European Journal of Marketing* 35: 9,10 (2001).

ticularly interesting is Keith Laybourn's account of Party Chairman before MacDonald became the first 'leader' in 1922, recovering figures like William Adamson (chairman, 1917–1920). Andrew Thorpe's account of George Lansbury (leader 1932–1935) revises the view of a saintly to a more astute politician whom, like Macdonald shortly before him, fell because he put his own principles ahead of party. The book's introduction alludes to the difficulties Labour leaders have faced reconciling party members and the wider electorate. 'Popularity among the party faithful', Jefferys argues, has tended to be 'in inverse relationship to the standing of a leader among the voters at large'.⁵

New Labour has also revived critiques of Labour's inadequacies as a socialist vehicle. 'Parliamentary socialism', a project critiqued for its flawed attempts at socialist reform by Ralph Miliband in the early 1960s, is now argued by Leys and Panitch, to have ground to a halt.⁶ Not that all (or even most) research is a by-product of New Labour – other recent monographs have re-assessed the 1929–1931 government or started to provide the fascinating but narrow accounts of political cultures with which the British Communist Party is better served at present.⁷

Potentially most importantly for its long-term health, New Labour's shake-up of some of the complacencies of old Labour has been accompanied by methodological shifts. Notably a revival of interest in political ideas and a recognition of politics as an agency in its own right, rather than simply the reflection of underlying social and economic forces. Parties, in short, did not inevitably benefit or suffer because of social change. This is evident in a number of the studies reviewed here.

As such, this is not necessarily much more than a return to a 'primacy of the political' approach. What is newer (indeed often termed 'new political history') is a questioning of the ordering and proximity of this relationship between political and social change. Parties are seen not only to have a role in making their own fortunes, but in constructing social and political identities and redefining their audience. The language and other discourse (symbolic, communicative and activist practice) parties use can be regarded as imputing meaning to as much as reflecting a pre-existing social "reality". And it is as evidence of attempts to successfully achieve this – rather than of being in tune with pre-existing interests and experiences – that party rhetoric and organisation should be read. The unstable (and often tenuous) relations between social context and party suggests parties' perceptions of voters and social change and how viably it addressed these mattered as much as any other factor. In post-modern hands this has tended to attack the category of class, but need not necessarily. It is the more contingent than pre-determined account of political fortunes forwarded that is most important. Above all, it denotes a wariness of

5 Kevin Jefferys (ed.), *Leading Labour: From Keir Hardie to Tony Blair* (London, 1999), xv.

6 Leo Panitch, Colin Leys, *The End of Parliamentary Socialism: From New Left to New Labour* (London, 2001).

7 Neil Riddell, *Labour in Crisis: The Second Labour Government, 1929–1931* (Manchester, 1999).
Duncan Hall, *'A Pleasant Change from Politics': Music and the British Labour Movement Between the Wars* (Cheltenham, 2001).

either seeing social class translate into political preference or of regarding voters and parties to be in a close and fixed relationship with voters rationally assessing party performance.⁸

These shifts were not inspired by New Labour, but rather by a methodological turn from sociological determinism in explaining electoral behaviour and class in explaining Labour's rise – although these remain salient themes for historians like Keith Laybourn.⁹ But they can also be seen to be co-terminus with New Labour's professed interest in political-constitutional issues, in communicating closely with voters and “public opinion”, its re-making of the party's fortunes and the broad coalition and constituency at which it pitches.

Celebrating?

There wasn't much of a party. Turning 100 was passed over with the briefest of commemorations, as if dwelling long might raise too many awkward episodes or stir too many ghosts. Labour's 1999 conference (closest to the 27–28th February anniversary) magazine-cum-brochure (£3), alongside adverts for Nestle and Labour cufflinks (£ 9), included a piece by journalist Anthony Howard on ‘The People that made the People's Party’. Concentrating mainly on the party leaders, skirting the awkward period of the 1970s (by arguing Labour's chief failure was that of Jim Callaghan not to call an election in 1978) and weighing in at 26 pages – it made for fairly light reading. The same conference saw a one-hour ‘Centenary Show’ hosted by actor and Labour National Executive Committee member Tony Robinson in Bournemouth's Pavilion Theatre at which the party's new website was also launched. Howard's piece was reproduced in a *Centenary Celebration* brochure in 2000 – issued notably for Tony Blair's speech to a centenary gathering on the 27th February 2000 at the Old Vic Theatre in London.¹⁰

Elsewhere the Fabian Society, amongst the party's founders, held a day conference at the LSE with Neil Kinnock, David Marquand and Will Hutton amongst speakers. Edmund Dell published a weighty tome drawing insightfully on his own experiences as a Labour cabinet minister 1976–1978, but mainly on the memoirs and diaries of leading party figures. Surprisingly, for an inter-war Communist who joined the Social Democratic Party (SDP) on its foundation in 1981, one of Dell's themes is ‘the retreat to New Labour’. Though Dell's case becomes more transparent once it is clear he ascribes Labour's shortcomings to its commitment to socialism. More strictly centennial reflections came from Stan Newens (a Labour MP and MEP, 1964–1999), who published an account of Labour's Eastern region and Joe Haines (formerly Harold Wilson's press secretary and *Daily Mirror* political editor) who con-

8 See Jon Lawrence, Miles Taylor (eds.), *Party, State and Society: Electoral behaviour in Britain since 1820* (Aldershot, 1997)

9 See Keith Laybourn, *A Century of Labour: A History of the Labour Party 1900–2000* (Stroud, 2000) and ‘The Rise of Labour and Decline of Liberalism: The State of the Debate’, *History* 80:259 (1995).

10 Labour Party, *Centenary Celebration* (London, 2000) and 1999 *Conference: the magazine* – Special Souvenir Centenary Issue (London, 1999) thanks to Labour Party HQ, Millbank for these.

tributed a piece to New Labour's house magazine *Inside Labour*.¹¹ Again these were sketches more than analyses, mementos more than celebrations. It was not then that Labour's centenary was forgotten, but that it was marked privately, rather than celebrated publicly.

Past anniversaries generated rather more enthusiasm. Labour's half-century in 1950 was accompanied by official publications and historical accounts championing (in the title of the *Daily Herald* editor and PR advisor to Attlee, Francis Williams' tome) Labour's *Fifty Years' March*.¹² The Golden Jubilee of the Parliamentary Labour Party was also celebrated in 1956. A film was planned to be shown around Britain in a mobile cinema, but abandoned because of cost. A project for a major historical work was dropped too because H. Scott Lindsay (Parliamentary Party secretary 1918–1944), reported many documents in the House of Commons had been destroyed during the war. Nonetheless, there was a service at Westminster Abbey, a cabaret and dinner-dance, regional demonstrations and a pamphlet proclaiming Labour *The Voice of the People*.¹³ Historical interest was evident too, in the likes of J.H. Stewart Reid's, *The Origins of the British Labour Party*. Indeed 1956 seemed a poignant year for Labour. It saw the 50th anniversary of the Women's Labour League, the death of the last survivor from the 1900 Memorial Hall foundation meeting, Arthur Hayday¹⁴ and the TUC shift its office out of Transport House, which the two had shared since 1928. Might it be that 1906, which saw the Labour Representation Committee change its name to the Labour Party, was more of an anniversary than 1900?

Equally Labour's anniversaries were more low key than some of those in continental social democratic parties – hinting this might be not only a feature of Labour's own culture, but of British (in comparison with continental European) political culture more generally.¹⁵ Notwithstanding this, future cultural historians reflecting on why Labour, despite its largest-ever parliamentary majority, was so subdued a centurion are likely to centre upon New Labour's unease about the movement's past. Unease rather than indifference – because as Steve Fielding shows in *Labour's First Century* (see below) New Labour has a quite specific vision of the party's past, but one that largely haunts it. How Labour recalls its past discloses much about

11 Edmund Dell, *A Strange Eventful History: Democratic Socialism in Britain* (London, 1999). Stan Newens, *A Brief History of 100 Years of the Labour Party in the Eastern Region* (Harlow, 2000). Joe Haines, 'Labour: 100 Years of Struggle', *Inside Labour* 1:4 (February 2000), 13–28.

12 Labour Party, *Marching On, 1900–1950: Golden Jubilee of the Labour Party* (London, 1950). Francis Williams, *Fifty Years March: The Rise of the Labour Party* (London, n.d. [1949]). Herbert Tracey (ed.), *The British Labour Party: Its History Growth, Policy and Leaders* 3 vols. (London, 1948) – an updated version of Tracey's 1925 publication.

13 National Museum of Labour History (NMLH), Labour Party Papers, General Secretary (Morgan Phillips) papers, GS/PLP50/3, 33i, 39 (Box 22), GS/PLPF1/50 (Box 9). Labour Party, *The Voice of the People* (London, 1956), 9 – on H. Scott Lindsay.

14 On Hayday, NMLH GS/Dea/209–210 (Box 21). J.H.S. Reid, *The Origins of the British Labour Party* (Minneapolis, 1955).

15 On this issue see Stefan Berger, *The British Labour Party and the German Social Democrats, 1900–1931* (Oxford, 1994), 144–146. Klaus Misgeld, Karl Molin, Klas Amark (eds.) (translated by Jan Teeland), *Creating Social Democracy: A Century of the Social Democratic Labour Party in Sweden* (Pittsburgh, 1992).

its present. If it is any guide, it shows New Labour to be more uncertain about celebrating its past as a blueprint for the future than it was when younger. More recent events, like the 1992 Sheffield rally, which far from foretelling a Labour victory, became a symbol of its defeat, have also guarded against Labour indulging in too much self-celebration.¹⁶ Indeed the British left's resilient puritan streak has meant it often been seen as comparatively poor at arranging parties and such like. Nancy Mitford's popular mid-century novel, *The Pursuit of Love*, complained that left-wing parties tended to be 'gloomy'. John O'Farrell's authentically hilarious account of life in Labour during the 1980s, describes the 'humourless' style of the left and even a character who 'decided *smiling* was right-wing'.¹⁷ So perhaps it was best Labour did not arrange its own shindig. New Labour's less-than-successful experience with the Millennium Dome would suggest it had not shed this legacy of its past.

Perhaps 1997 had sapped the need for a celebration, but most pressingly there was also the business of government to be getting on with, something of a novelty in Labour's first century. This perhaps was the point – Labour's first century had also been a mainly Conservative century. Even if the second half of the century was more social democratic, more often than not Labour was not the party administering it. Celebrating the party past had, as Blair told the Old Vic audience, to be tempered by knowledge that 'we have been out of power more often than in power' and when 'we have lost we have been divided and out of touch'.¹⁸

Centenary Histories

Duncan Tanner, Pat Thane and Nick Tiratsoo's collection, *Labour's First Century*, suggests there was rather more to praise in Labour's past.¹⁹ The editors argue Labour has 'a record which contains far more success than failure, including policies which have vastly improved the lot of those Labour exists to serve.' (p. 5) Thane's tracing of 'Labour and Welfare' is particularly apt to be positive. It finds 'substance behind the soundbites' and 'continuities between New Labour welfare policies and deep-rooted Labour traditions' (p. 114) Stephen Howe finds continuities between new and old Labour in a rhetoric of collective security and with Victorian radical liberalism. Jose Harris too, in her survey of major themes (rather than debates) in 'Labour's Political and Social Thought', locates New Labour antecedents not only in the likes of revisionist Tony Crosland, but in the more unexpected guise of Harold Laski. Intriguingly, Harris holds that Crosland's real quarry in *The Future of Socialism* (1956) was Laski's political philosophy rather than the Webbs or traditional Fabianism.

16 On the Sheffield rally see, Richard Heffernan, Mike Marqusee, *Defeat from the Jaws of Victory: Inside Kinnock's Labour Party* (London, 1992), 319.

17 Nancy Mitford, *The Pursuit of Love* (Harmondsworth, 1945–1952 edition), 113, 127. John O'Farrell, *Things Can Only Get Better: Eighteen Miserable Years in the Life of a Labour Supporter* (London, 1998), 58–59.

18 Script of speech, Tony Blair, 27th February 2000, Old Vic, London.

19 Duncan Tanner, Pat Thane, Nick Tiratsoo (eds.), *Labour's First Century* (Cambridge, 2000).

Established experts contribute chapters on important and familiar themes like the economy (Jim Tomlinson) and the trade unions (Alistair Reid). More novel is the constitutional focus of Miles Taylor. Prompted by New Labour's remaking of the constitution, Taylor's thesis is that this is no new interest for Labour as most commentators have assumed, but one the party has always held. Taylor's is also a case for seeing Labour not just as a party interested in industry and the economy, but in political progress, rights and legislative efficiency too. Taylor traces this through thinkers like Laski, G.D.H.Cole and John Mackintosh and the reforming Lord Presidents, Richard Crossman and Herbert Morrison. This stretches – not entirely persuasively when Taylor confesses Labour 'had secured the centre of the constitution only to find it coming apart at the edges' (p. 171) with the "break-up of Britain" in the 1970s – the emphasis in Biagini and Reid's *Currents of Radicalism* on the continuity between popular radical Liberalism, New Liberalism before 1914 and early Labour politics.²⁰ Whilst affirming New Labour's liberal leanings, it also undermines those claiming to be rejoining Labour with these.

Also original and productive (and more critical) is Martin Francis' chapter on 'Labour and Gender'. This is novel in regarding Labour (like British society) as a site at which gender is contested and unstable. Francis acknowledges the advances women have made through the Labour Party, but argues these were partial. This was not simply because of structural anti-female bias in a party dominated by men and a masculine ethos – for Labour's masculinity was similarly quite fluid – but because party discourse on consumption, sexuality and the 'personal sphere' could particularly hamper its appeal to and understanding of women. The notion of consumers and their concerns as frivolous or selfish and of affluence as corrupting weighed against Labour. Other contributors back up this impression. Tiratsoo notes the persistence of a certain machismo amongst New Labour's leadership elite and Stefan Berger remarks that in European terms Labour has been behind the pace on feminism.

Also welcome, for countering the view of Labour as a somehow unique political entity, is the comparative perspective on Labour's history introduced by Berger. This builds upon his comparative study of Labour and the German SPD. The focus is mainly on Europe, but links and contrasts with the USA and Australia are also introduced. Contesting the orthodox view of Labour as insular, Berger situates the party much more in the mainstream of Western European (especially north western) social democracy. Indeed Berger regards it as the 'pacesetter' of European reformism during and after the Second World War and more recently under Blair. Part of Berger's case is that the European left too has nationalist and parochial streaks – as Sassoon argues it has tended to operate within the nation-state framework – and that there is little exceptionally British in this. Internationalism and nationalism (from 'little England' radicalism to more populist strains) have always co-existed in Labour, but could it be Berger errs to too sympathetic a view? Anti-German and anti-American sentiment has often cropped up in Labour – Howe even points out Douglas Jay's distaste for foreign food whilst a minister

²⁰ Eugenio Biagini, Alistair Reid (eds.), *Currents of Radicalism: Popular radicalism, organised labour and party politics in Britain, 1850–1914* (Cambridge, 1991).

in the 1960s. Wickham-Jones, for instance, has recently suggested that Labour was not as insular as has been assumed, but that the party was distinctive in important ways and that it was only by 1992 that it was for the first time in the van of European social democracy.²¹

New in both subject matter and approach is Jon Lawrence's account of Labour and the myths it has lived by – the narratives and versions of the party's past that have informed the identity of the party and its members. Lawrence's interest is not in debunking myths, but in the 'shared stories about the past – stories which, *regardless of their veracity*, have helped to shape political identities within the twentieth-century Labour Party.' (p. 342) This entails a reading of sources (autobiography especially) not for 'facts', but for how the party's past is reconstructed, imagined for present consumption. What the subjectivity of such stories discloses is precisely their use to a historian of party culture and mentalities. This is not some post-modern exercise in textual analysis, but can explain much about how a party behaves and why. Lawrence focuses on accounts of the bravery and fortitude of the party's founders and how they lead the duped masses out of the (and their) dimness. The heroism of the party's rise is offset by the betrayal of Macdonald in 1931. The familiar language of betrayal is also explored through the SDP split in 1981. The triumph of 1945 and the hold it exerted over the party and how the divisions of the 1950s were a drama contesting the party's legacy complete this provocative piece of cultural history.

The relevance of this approach is replicated in Fielding's discussion of 'New Labour and the past'. Far from disinterested in the party's past, New Labour is positively fixated by its recent history and anxious to distance itself from it. It takes then a highly partial view of Labour's history, drawing a line in the sand at 1994, but also cleaving allegiance to timeless Labour values not specific policies (the party's failing in the 1970s and 1980s). Critics of New Labour's newness sure up the efforts to break with past associations. Equally this approach suggests Blair has brought Labour full circle – Clause Four was revised in 1995 for the same reasons the new constitution had been adopted in 1918, in an attempt to broaden the party's social constituency.

Fielding assesses New Labour's relationship to debates amongst earlier 'modernisers' like revisionists Crosland and Roy Jenkins and to turn-of-the-century New Liberalism and the common ideological territory shared by the two traditions. Lib-Labism has always been a presence in Labour thinking. A 1962 survey in *New Society* found Lloyd George to be second only to Keir Hardie (and only one vote behind at that) in early influences on current Labour MPs.²² Earlier Liberal thinkers like Hobhouse were easier to bookmark than the likes of Jenkins, still tarred by the 1981 betrayal. The tentative ideology of New Labour also reflects a belief that 'political allegiances were weaker than ever before' and required the party to be

21 See Berger, *The British Labour Party and the German Social Democrats*. Donald Sassoon, *One Hundred Years of Socialism: The West European Left in the Twentieth Century* (London, 1996). Mark Wickham-Jones, 'An Insular Party? Labour's century in Comparative Perspective', *Renewal* 8:1 (2000), 22.

22 K.J.W. Alexander, Alexander Hobbs, 'What influences Labour MPs?', *New Society* 11 (13 December 1962), 12. See also, Marc Stears, Stuart White, 'New Liberalism revisited', *Imprints* 5:3 (2001).

much more mutative (p. 385). Thus also the muted centenary – the past being no longer seen as a reliable guide to the future.

What Fielding infers is that nothing is more traditional than the use of history in party contests and upheavals. The party's past remains then very much a political resource and a potent category to be reconfigured for contemporary use. This corresponds with Marquand's point at the Fabian Society's centenary conference that 'the idea of being new has always been part of the mental furniture of the Labour movement' from MacDonald, through the 1945 manifesto, *Let Us Face the Future*, Bevin's 'third way' in the Cold War to 1950s' revisionism.²³

Besides questioning the veracity of a new/old dichotomy in Labour, *Labour's First Century* also highlights the party's uneasy relationship with the people. This chimes with Blairite themes of too often losing touch with the people. Tiratsoo's chapter evokes a sense of the often marginalized, but also self-isolating methods and languages in which Labour politics have been conducted. The limits to Labour's electoral performance in its first century are ascribed to the strengths of Labour's opponents (the Conservatives and media) and their financial resources, but also the limited popular appeal of its own vision. This proposes the uses of political culture and a more 'social history' of politics to describe and evoke a sense of popular politics in practice over stricter psephological analyses, rational choice models or electoral sociology approaches. Tiratsoo's theme is picked up by a number of contributors. Thane notes the authoritarian and moral tones that have sometimes accompanied Labour's fondness for "top-down", state planning and Tomlinson the disparaging attitudes towards popular consumerism which it is suggested marked, 'a puzzling discomfort' towards 'the higher living standards Labour has fought to achieve for as many of the population as possible.' These could readily spill into scepticism of 'the people' themselves – Duncan Tanner cites a Labour member in the 1920s complaining of having to canvass amongst 'drink sodden, coarse folk'. (pp. 73, 270).

Scholarly a presence as it is there are some notable absences from the themes chosen to mark *Labour's First Century*. Why for instance a chapter devoted to gender, but not class – a concept salient both in Labour's political discourse and in how historians have analysed the party? Ethnicity and immigration obtain scant coverage – although this again raises the question of the gaps between Labour's vision, popular attitudes and its own actions. The 1968 Commonwealth Immigration Act preventing the entry to Britain of Kenyan Asians, Randell Hansen has recently argued, saw Labour's nationalism in tune with popular prejudices, but some way from the moral or radical high ground.²⁴ This was amongst the least happy episodes in its past. Similar omissions are evident in Brian Brivati and Richard Heffernan's, *The Labour Party: A Centenary History*. The Co-op (as usual) is largely ignored. Perhaps most surprisingly given the salience of the theme to discussions of New Labour and a growing body of research,

23 David Marquand, 'History Today', *Fabian Review* 112:1 (Spring 2000), 2.

24 Randell Hansen, 'The Kenyan Asians, British Politics and the Commonwealth Immigrants Act, 1968', *Historical Journal* 42:3 (1999).

neither collection explicitly addresses political communication techniques, party propaganda and the visual or uses of advertising, television and opinion polling.

Brivati and Heffernan's collection is closer to the spirit of an "official" volume. It was published on the 27th February and with a preface from Michael Foot (Labour leader 1980–1983) and foreword from Tony Blair.²⁵ The second of its three parts contains 'Centenary Reflections' from contemporary politicians. That these seven contribute merely 22 pages evinces unease at celebrating the centenary. Sadly, some might also have been trimmed. Denis Healey's 'In Defence of New Labour' could have been shortened to its title and is poor fare from the writer of such a swish autobiography. If Angela Eagle MP's authoritarian sounding 'Report Card' on the party's century is read as an audit of current Labour thinking, then it is disturbing. It abounds with oxymorons ('almost instantaneous') and non-sentences (the second or penultimate). It concludes on the thought that 'far from being the end of history, I think that we are embarking on another exciting chapter.' (p. 185) That would be true of pretty much any chapter after this, but there is much to admire in other parts of this volume.

The opening section offers a useful chronological survey, although it frustratingly omits the vital period between the end of the First World War and the first Labour government, adds little to existing single-authored accounts and tends to lack their coherence. Readers requiring such an overview are probably best directed to Laybourn's *A Century of Labour* or Thorpe's *History of the British Labour Party*.²⁶ Otherwise, a fairly conventional tale is told – the focus being on parliament, general elections, left/right battles, relations with the trade unions and the usual turning points like the breakdown of the post-war 'consensus' in 1976. This standard 'high political' approach leaves some gaps – readers get less sense of how Labour dealt with post-1945 social and cultural changes (affluence, consumerism, permissiveness), of party culture and ethos or of the party at the local level and its relationship with voters.

Some of these gaps are filled by the final, thematic section. Not least Lewis Baston's chapter on 'Labour Local Government' covers material too often relegated to local studies and shows the importance of this to the party's existence. Andrew Chadwick provides an overview of the debates about Labour's rise and supplanting of the Liberals as the main anti-Conservative party. Chadwick argues this is better understood over a longer period (to 1945) than is usual, emphasises Labour's similarity to its 'main progressive rival' to 1918 and thus 'the contingency of Labour's political development' rather than the usual candidates – the 'rise of class politics' or First World War. (p. 341) Trade Unions receive extensive coverage. Robert Taylor's chapter (in addition to his contribution to the chronological section on the Unions and Labour's foundation) focuses on the Transport General Workers' Union during the leadership of Arthur Deakin and Frank Cousins to 1964 and Steve Ludlam brings the story up to the present day.

25 Brian Brivati, 'Is the Party Over?', *Fabian Review* 111:4 (Winter 1999), 3.

26 Andrew Thorpe, *A History of the British Labour Party* (Basingstoke, 2000 – 2nd edition).

The focus remains mainly on ‘high’ politics – international and parliamentary affairs and policy. Brivati’s promisingly cultural-sounding discussion of ‘Labour’s literary dominance’ centres only on the memoirs and diaries of leading MPs. But this focus does not exclude newer areas from examination, such as attitudes towards European integration, detailed by Heffernan or the rhetoric of ‘modernisation’ in Labour’s post-war industrial policies, examined by Brivati.²⁷ Both suggest a shift – for Heffernan in an increasingly pro-European approach after 1983 and for Brivati in an increasingly pro-private sector approach after the 1987–1989 policy review. With Tudor Jones’ survey of the revision of Clause IV – the ultimate symbol of ‘old’ Labour – this tends to verify an impression of the novelty of New Labour.

In other ways the tone is more critical of Labour and than *Labour’s First Century*. Ludlam is more pessimistic than Reid about the prospects of Labour’s future relations with the Unions. Nick Ellison finds that on welfare policy (with the exception of the Attlee administration), ‘Labour has struggled to bridge the gap between vision and practical achievement’. (p. 443) Contrary to Thane, Ellison sees a sharp break from welfare collectivism in New Labour’s approach. It is hard to demur from Christine Collette’s conclusion ‘that present Labour history is heterosexist’ and mainly written about and by men when just three of the 24 contributors are women (and Collette the only historian amongst these three). In all the books reviewed here Labour is consistently found to be lacking in its record on women. In short, *The Labour Party: A Centenary History* is an uneven collection with an inchoate air at times, but important nonetheless.

Labour’s centenary has prompted a number of regional studies that bring useful nuances and detail to the corpus on Labour’s past. Duncan Tanner, Chris Williams and Deian Hopkin’s *The Labour Party in Wales 1900–2000* is given a non-parochial agenda by Williams’ opening historiographical survey.²⁸ This situates it not only in terms of labour history, but of Labour’s place in Welsh history and of themes in political history. Thus in common with the national centenary histories, Neil Evans and Dot Jones’ contribution finds Welsh Labour’s record of involving women or acting on their behalf, to be ‘lamentable’ – although ‘no other political party can boast a better performance.’ (p. 236) Otherwise five themes are spotlighted: the heterogeneity of Wales and of Labour’s appeal; the fluid relationship between socio-economic and political change; Labour’s engagement with the national question and devolutionary pressures; the ‘social history’ of activism and party culture and political ideas.

Again this signals a shift to recognise the autonomous role of political activity and ideas in understanding Labour’s past. This is perhaps most evident in R. Merfyn Jones and Iain Rhys Jones’ discussion of ‘Labour and the Nation’ which observes that far from a recent interest, ‘Labour and the national question have been inseparable’ during the twentieth century. This does not mean the two were at ease – it is clear devolutionary opinion in Labour from the

27 On which for the inter-war see, Andrew Thorpe, ‘The Industrial Meaning of “Gradualism: The Labour Party and Industry, 1918–1931”, *Journal of British Studies* 35 (1996).

28 Duncan Tanner, Chris Williams, Deian Hopkin (eds.), *The Labour Party in Wales 1900–2000* (Cardiff, 2000).

1970s was not only a desire to speak for such sentiments in Wales, but also provoked by the electoral threat of Welsh nationalism. A customary Labour disposition until then was that Labour could best represent Welsh interests and culture without what one Welsh Labour MP, Leo Abse, described in 1979 (campaigning against devolution in that year's referendum) as, 'a miserable parish pump assembly at Cardiff.' (pp. 261, 257).

Williams' introduction suggests not only that politics mattered in its own right, but alludes to its involvement in the construction of political and social identities. In other ways the emphasis is a more traditional one of an economic and social base to politics. Eddie May suggests 'the pattern of Labour politics were in large part reflections of the changing social and economic structure of Wales' and the introduction concurs with James Griffiths (Labour MP for Llanelli 1945–1970 and Welsh Secretary of State, 1964–1966) that Labour should be seen as 'a faithful mirror of the life and struggles of the Welsh people.' Labour also tends to be seen as responding to, more than being involved in constructing a constituency of support. As Tanner puts it, in mining areas Labour 'had some roots in people's experiences and loyalties', but how these came about and were articulated is less certain. Thus, whilst relations between socio-economic and political change are not regarded as fixed, the former is still seen to precede and pre-exist the latter.²⁹ Yet if the relationship between social and political change is dynamic and unstable, this is not to say this approach is incorrect.

Certainly the volume eschews the romantic habit of viewing Labour through the radical flog of the South Wales coalfields – it is a strongly researched study of the politics of place. Union militants and Marxist autodidacts have their place, but so does what Tanner terms the 'practical socialism' delivered by the small bands of activists (middle class besides working class) who sustained Labour's presence in rural, tourist and North Wales. As Elizabeth Andrews, Women's organiser in Wales between 1919 and 1948, observed, 'it is the PLODDERS that do the work of the WORLD not the SHOUTERS' (pp. 114, 157–158).

Tanner argues activists in very different parts of Wales had much in common and (as in his contribution on 'Labour and its membership' to *Labour's First Century*) had more in common with party leaders than has often been allowed. The gist of Tanner's case is that activists (and leaders) could make or break the party. Thus, whilst 'by 1939 Labour had proven its worth' and 'was no longer strong because others were weak', Tanner argues there was nothing inevitable to Labour's advance in the inter-war years. Rather that it was contingent upon the efforts of activists and leaders alike. He stresses that whilst 'the social bases of solidarity were much weaker outside the coalfield', they 'were not wholly dominant within it'. Structural forces did not ensure a Labour Wales. The party itself often struggled to make ends meet, clubs meet or newspapers survive away from the firm trade-union links crafted at the pit. Impressive as Labour's electoral advance was (especially 1918–1923), it remained uneven. Ur-

²⁹ The introduction also quotes (14) Duncan Tanner's *Political Change and the Labour Party, 1900–1918* (Cambridge, 1990), 11, which argues historians have 'to recognize the difficulties of making connections between "social" experiences and "political" responses'. How the social translates into the political is questioned, but not that it does, nor that politics is essentially a response to it.

ban centres like Swansea were not won until 1927 and then lost in 1930. Crucial was Labour's ability to be 'verbally radical but vehemently practical in its policies'. That social change did not have automatic political effects is also stressed in Tanner's discussion of Labour after 1970. The decline of industries and occupations 'which once supported Labour in vast numbers' and the rise of nationalism in the form of Plaid Cymru challenged Labour. Yet 'adapting to this new world was not necessarily a problem'. Just as past triumphs had not been made rather than delivered up by class allegiances, so Labour's successes in representing a 'new type of Welsh electorate' had to be 're-made'. And this, with some difficulty through the 1970s and 1980s, was achieved. (pp. 115, 122, 135, 264, 268, 290)

Other contributors strike up similar themes. Williams' survey of Labour and local government to 1939 emphasises the pragmatic interventionism and delivery of services by local councils, though also a certain corruption stemming from Labour's dominance. Although Andrew Walling's survey of the 1950s and 1960s argues Labour remained a genuinely 'popular' party delivering practical reforms in a rhetoric of modernisation and its support earned not habitual, the frailty of its seeming political and electoral hegemony also emerges. It was sustained by a small number of dedicated activists (far more interested in local issues than national left/right divisions) and as society changed (in rural Wales especially), Labour 'did not necessarily speak in a voice which was appreciated or on concerns which matched the voters' preconceptions and values.' (p. 213) Walling contrasts electoral dominance with declining membership and union participation, decrepit organisation and apathy. This tallies with Kenneth Morgan's case that Labour's victory in 1945 was one for 'old values' of "traditional" industrial working-class culture – communal solidarity, the pit, co-op and choir. This echoes in many ways Ross McKibbin's conclusions about England in *Classes and Cultures* that the effect of the Second World War was to 'renew the "traditional" working class'.³⁰ The period (because of the 1945 victory and achievements under Attlee) cast a spell over Labour – in many ways storing up trouble for the future. Labour, in short, became too beholden to this moment, too Welsh.

Many of these resources and culture are outlined in the four chapters dealing with the pre-1918 period. Like Morgan, Hopkin stresses common territory in the progress of the Fabians, SDF and ILP between Wales and the other parts of Britain. Other contributors differentiate between Wales and the 'national political culture', stress the variegated ideologies and means of establishing Labour – from Lib-Labism to the chapel and varieties of Marxism – and the unevenness of Labour's electoral and organisational growth to 1918. This tends to stress variations within Wales, although it remains less clear whether it was Welsh or the left's culture that was more separatist?

The question of how Wales and Labour have become so closely associated, rather than (as is the book's propensity) whether this was largely mythic or stereotyped, might have been considered. How Wales and Labour were imagined – both pejoratively in press assaults on Neil

30 Ross McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures: England 1918–1951* (Oxford, 1998), 531.

Kinnock's rhetoric or more romantically in coalfield militancy and radical figures like Aneurin Bevan or Noah Ablett – were of consequence. Given the emphasis on the provisional relations between social structure and politics, such imagery was important, as part of the cultural and discursive terrain of popular politics. The perception that Labour and Wales were innate partners endures, notwithstanding the more contingent (if strong) relationship evinced in this study. As Lawrence argues in *Labour First Century*, the stories and myths through which a party understands its own past are vital to its identity. Labour's internal culture (and many a Labour historian to boot) celebrated radical, oppositional figures and sustained these associations.³¹ This apart (a victim of a rigorous but orthodox methodology), *The Labour Party in Wales* makes for absorbing history.

The Labour Party in Wales goes far in affirming Mike Savage's suggestion that if party politics can not be reduced simply to social and economic causes, but themselves play a large role in making political identities and fortunes, then local resources and contexts must figure large in patterning political allegiances.³² The *Manchester Region History Review* of Labour in the north west similarly bears this out.³³ Unlike Wales, the region, especially at the turn of the century and in its cotton towns, was characterised by a flourishing popular Conservatism. Particularly well-observed are Labour's origins and faltering, uneven advance against Liberalism and Conservatism before 1914.

Tony Adams' survey of Manchester finds Labour to have made limited headway against popular Conservatism and (as elsewhere in Britain) to have been strongest in areas of more respectable and unionised workers rather than the unemployed or poor. The Lib-Lab 'progressive alliance' functioned well up to 1914, though more so in parliamentary than municipal terms. Wartime state intervention, Adams holds, by linking the everyday life of workers and poor alike more closely to the state, expanded Labour's relevance and audience. This complements Declan McHugh's account of the unequal development of Labour in Manchester and Salford to 1914. This draws attention to the relative strength of an SDF-BSP tradition in Salford to explain the comparatively slower development of Labour organisation in that city. In Oldham, Andrzej Olechnowicz contends, Labour struggled because of the cotton unions' reluctance to throw its weight behind not only Labour, but party *per se* – it was a case of 'union first, politics after'. Divisions between cotton occupations were not permissive to Labour, although the secretary of the Oldham party also ascribed the party's difficulties to the good pay of many workers that meant they were amenable to anti-socialist propaganda.

The impression of Labour's highly contingent development to 1918 is reiterated for the inter-war period in Sam Davies and Bob Morley's study of Bolton, Blackburn, Burnley and Bury. Employer-worker relations, occupational differences between weavers and spinners,

31 For something akin to this see Dai Smith, *Aneurin Bevan and the World of South Wales* (Cardiff, 1993).

32 Mike Savage, 'The Rise of the Labour Party in Local Perspective', *Journal of Local and Regional Studies* 10:1 (1990).

33 Tony Adams, Melanie Tebbutt, John Wilson (eds.), *Manchester Region History Review 2000* Volume XIV – 'Special Issue: 100 Years of Labour, 1900–2000'. See also *The Origins and Development of the Labour Party at a Local Level*, Series II (Wakefield, 1999).

religion, but also political agency (how for instance industrial decline was articulated), meant the four ostensibly similar towns exhibited different political characters. Other contributors usefully introduce the Irish and Catholic dimensions to the region's make-up.

The post-1945 period is more thinly covered. Michael Pateman reports the Second World War did not automatically involve a shift to Labour, but that this was only evident in Mancunians from around 1942. Stephen Catterall charts Labour and NUM hegemony in the Lancashire coalfields to 1972. Relations were not always good (famously, the NUM challenged the St. Helens party's preference for Tom Driberg as a candidate in 1958) and industrial decline from the later 1960s tested electoral certainties. It might indeed have been interesting to plot Labour's attempts to negotiate the latter.

Conclusions

Labour history at its centenary can then be declared to be in good health. If these titles do not explicitly champion Labour as in the past, they remain (all the more useful as) critical friends. If also (like its subject) labour history has tended to be methodologically conservative, attached to tradition and sceptical of novelty, it has also been pragmatic and shows signs of moving on. New methodologies, subject areas and local and comparative perspectives would seem to call time on the familiar tale narrated by Laybourn in *A Century of Labour* – growth on the back of trade union origins and class politics to the 'high point' of the Attlee years and decline and mutation thereafter – in favour of a more multifarious analysis.

Labour historiography remains then a broad church, but must say more on the post-1945 period – on the suburbs besides industrial cities, on post-war social change and cultural diversity and the break-up of traditional values and authority – and Labour's relationship to this. It deserves the sort of sustained analysis at local and thematic levels earlier periods have received. It also requires Labour to be situated in the context of the wider society – not studied in isolation. Labour's absence from office has meant the historians it has attracted have always searched beyond the Public Record Office, but in the post-war a more cultural, integrated approach seems imperative. We know more about Communist and Conservative members' identities and 'cultural' activities in post-war society. That this is a function of Labour's ideological indifference or political unwillingness to overhaul institutions and attitudes in 'civil society', or that other parties were more determined or successful at mixing politics and other activities, merits testing rather than assuming.³⁴ How opponents have portrayed Labour too remains relatively untouched and, if image and how parties communicate were (and are) fac-

³⁴ For example, the Young Conservative movement in the 1950s – which awaits a more detailed treatment than John Holroyd-Doveton's, *Young Conservatives: A History of the Young Conservative Movement* (Bishop Auckland, 1996) or Raphael Samuel's series on Communism in *New Left Review* (1985–1987). On Conservative influence in local organisations, Margaret Stacey, *Tradition and Change: A Study of Banbury* (Oxford, 1960). Andy Croft (ed.), *A Weapon in the Struggle: A Cultural History of the Communist Party in Britain* (London, 1998). McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures*, pp. 534–535.

tors in explaining party fortunes in the absence of mass, “popular” support, would reward study. A party’s image is conferred by others and contested by opponents as much as projected by itself. Fuller engagement with political science, which has been concerned with many of the same issues as the newer political history (notably the relative roles of social change and party agency) might also result from looking at the most recent period.³⁵ Whatever – the titles reviewed here suggest Labour history can face the future with confidence.

*Thanks to Stefan Berger for comments and to
Mary Hilson and Mark Wickham-Jones for sources.*

35 See, for instance, Anthony Heath, Roger Jowell, John Curtice, *How Britain Votes* (Oxford, 1985).

