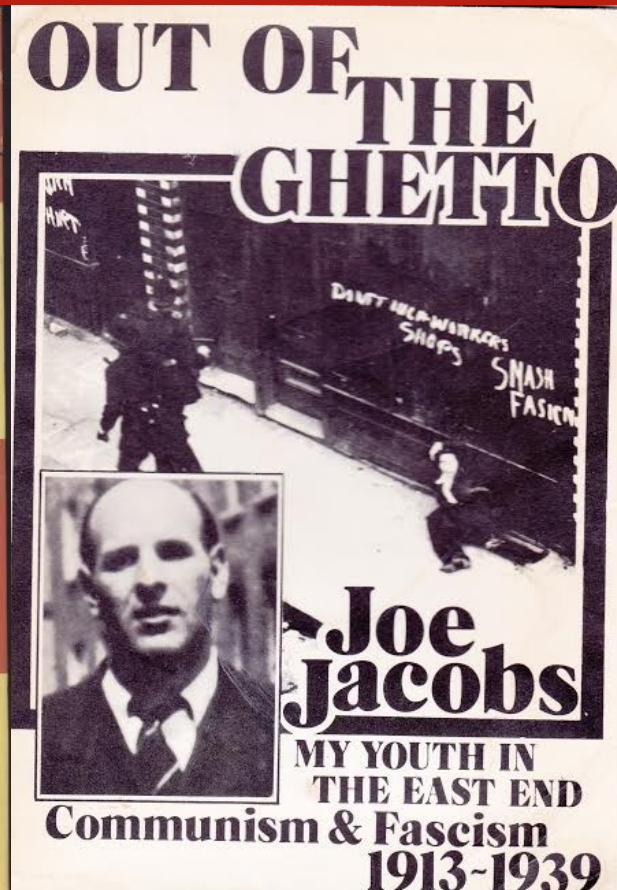
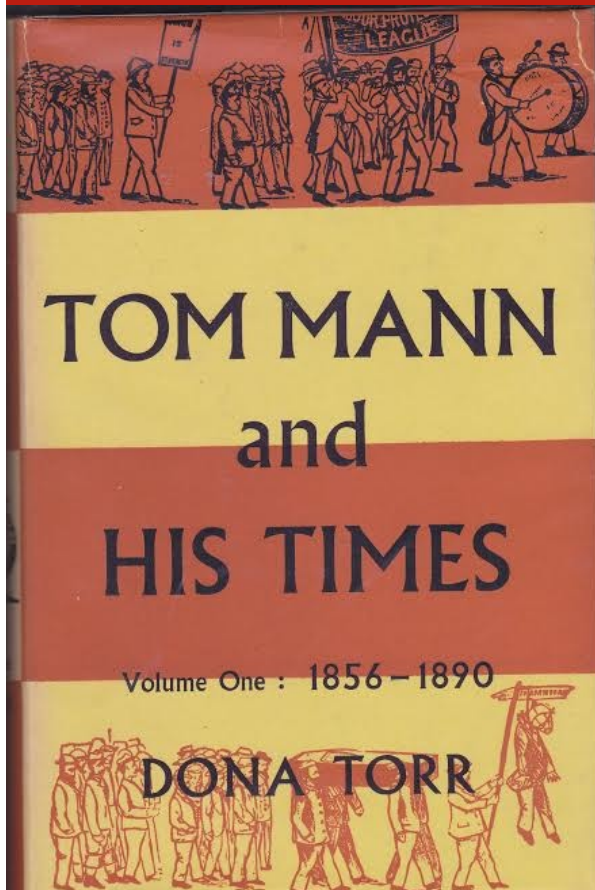


Britain at Work

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CATCHING HISTORY ON THE WING, OR DO WE NEED A NEW SOCIAL HISTORY MOVEMENT?

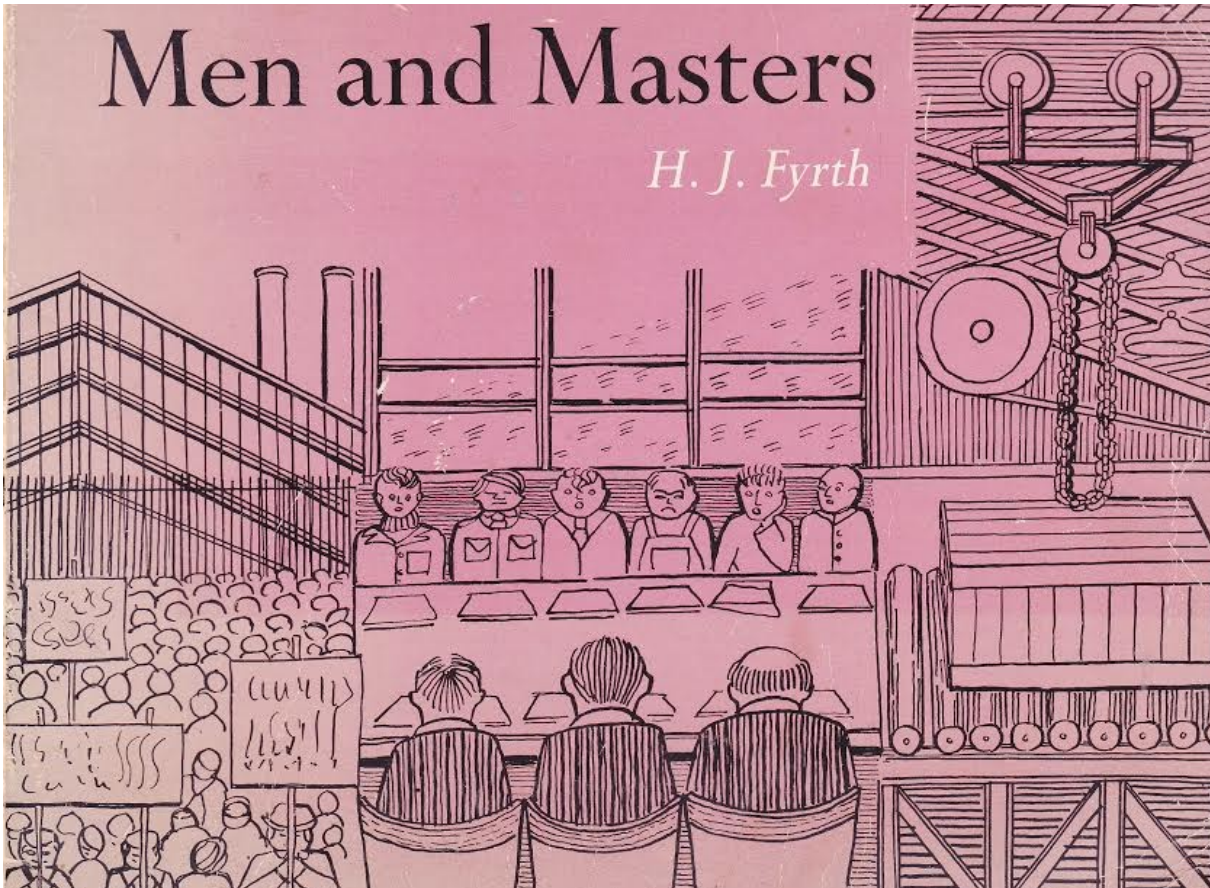
24 years ago, in 1992, the historian Harvey J Kaye called for a 'longer view of the past and present—to begin to fashion a new historical narrative which can speak to contemporary experience and contribute to the making of an alternative vision of the future.' Kaye's call was based on the legacy of a history movement that had emerged in the 1930s, crystallising in the Communist party Historians' Group in the 1950s. What did this new social history achieve and what can we learn from that tradition?

The tradition has four key parts. The first is the development of 'class-struggle analysis', derived from the Communist Manifesto's 'the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggle.' This

meant, for example, that the history of the Industrial Revolution was not to be written simply as a series of economic and social changes but as the formation of the working class determined in large part by the agency of workers themselves. EP Thompson's 'The Making of the English Working Class' (1963) was broadly based on this approach. Secondly, the writing of 'history from the bottom up', initiated by the Annales School in France, and developing the history of peasants, plebians, artisans, workers and rank and file trade unionists. It should be noted that this is not merely history of the bottom, but from the bottom up. Dona Torr's 'Tom Mann and His Times' (1956) probably exemplifies this approach to the writing of trade union history.

Men and Masters

H. J. Fyrth



Thirdly, the recovery of a 'radical-democratic tradition', deriving partly from the Popular Frontism of the 1930s. Movements and groups like the Levellers, Diggers and Ranters (Christopher Hill), the Wilkite struggles in the 18th century (George Rude), the Luddites, Captain Swing and the Chartists (John Saville), had all contributed to a popular ideology of resistance.

Lastly, this history challenged the narratives of both right and left. It confronted the Whig version of British history with its smooth evolutionary path towards democracy and the dogmatic Marxist view that historical development ran along determined, mechanical, unilinear and economic tracks. Eric Hobsbawm's work perhaps reflects this more thoughtful direction.

This rich historical work helped to develop and inform many other kinds and forms of history in later decades: History Workshop, micro-history, working women's history, oral history, the Black Atlantic, LGBT history, the history of disabled people. We might note the work of Sheila Rowbotham, Anna Davin, Peter Linebaugh and Paul Gilroy. But right-wing politics and governments, coupled with the academic attacks of post-modernism—the latter described by Edward Said as 'a deep-seated wish to be rid of history'—slowed and then halted the 'forward march' of this approach. Now there is no such thing as a 'grand narrative' in the academic world despite the fact that history written by self-styled right-wing historians is a grand narrative of monarchs, ministers, etc.

As Eric Hobsbawm has remarked, much insightful history is focused on the character and outlook of small groups or communities with little attempt to relate them to the wider social context; similarly, the problem with the slogan of oral history—'dig where you stand'—is that the historian can end up in a deep hole with no view of the wider world. There are small but significant signs that a more coherent approach to history writing is emerging. Local oral histories, trade union history, a wealth of new research into places and people (eg 'On the Record', the CLR James film 'Every Cook Can Govern') as well as the many socialist history groups (eg Mary Quaille Club) and, of course, Britain at Work based at the TUC Library Collections; the Bishopsgate Institute archive, Warwick TU archive, SHL Collection and WCM Library.

All of this could be about building a new social history perspective which is situated within a much broader socialist education movement. This cannot be done by simply declaring it done or by producing a manifesto for historians to sign up to. The Communist party Historians' Group, as the name implies, was largely made up of Communist party members who were historians but who derived their confidence from their links with working-class struggles and organisations. A new movement will not be dependent on a party (nor should it be). It will be a diverse and many-sided network which will aim, at least initially, to link the projects and organisations in order to share information/ideas and to promote the writing/collecting of social history. **Dave Welsh**

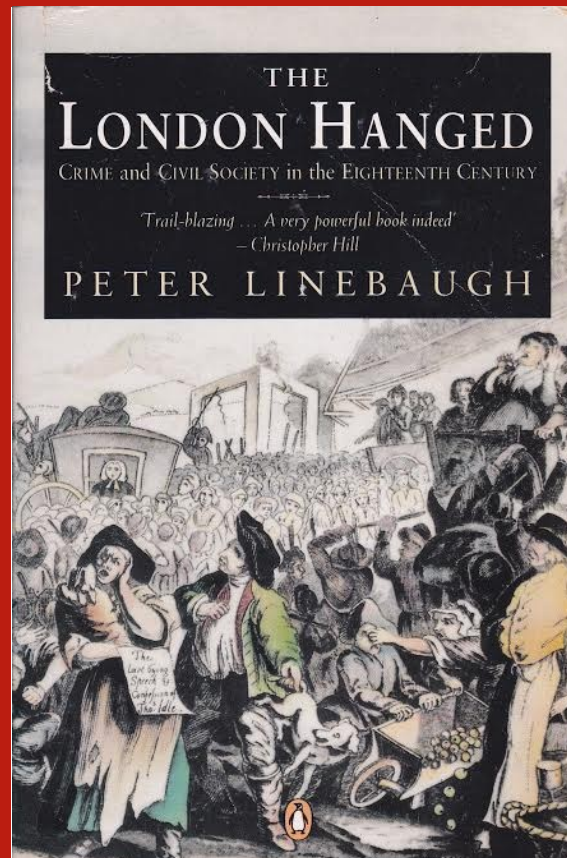
Labourism and 'making socialists' Colin Waugh

The following is an edited version of a talk given by Colin Waugh at a recent IWCE meeting RH Tawney said in 1934: "The Labour Party deceives itself, if it supposes that the mere achievement of a majority will enable it to carry out fundamental measures, unless it has previously created in the country the temper to stand behind it when the real struggle begins... What is needed... is the creation of a body of men and women who, whether trade unionists or intellectuals, put Socialism first, and whose creed carries conviction because they live in accordance with it." I will try to show that this is still a key insight. What, then, was 'Labourism'?

By Labourism is meant the extension of routine-style union activity into the sphere of mainstream electoral and parliamentary politics. On the one hand, you have trade unions, led by officials, bargaining in the sphere of employment, and, on the other, a specialised offshoot of this trying to do the same sort of thing in the sphere of national and local government, with an institutionalised division of labour between the two. There is either no perspective of bringing about a different social order altogether, or else this is put off to the remote future. Let us look at the phrase 'making socialists'. It's associated mainly with the Marxist William Morris, who was politically active between 1880 and 1895, and died in 1896, and with the organiser of the Clarion movement, Robert Blatchford. (People may be familiar with the activities of the Clarion movement, as described for example by Robert Tressell towards the end of 'The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists'.)

I feel that there are two assumptions around this phrase which can lead us in the wrong direction. First, it assumes that at any given moment we know what socialism is, that its nature has already been defined, once for all, in the past, that it is clearcut, cut and dried, requiring only to be spelt out to people, and not to be further developed. This to me is completely wrong. Yes, it is urgent now to make people, for example people who have recently joined the Labour Party aware of the history of socialist ideas, of the actions taken by workers, including working-class socialists, in the past and so on—in other words, to rebuild a spreading culture of knowledge and understanding of these things. But nevertheless the ideas of what socialism has been, is and can be need to be constantly developed. They rapidly lose validity if this doesn't keep on happening.

Further, although research academics and people in similar positions are a necessary part of doing this, in the end it's working-class people themselves (that is, the active minority of them) who must do this developing. Why? Because, firstly, only they have the relevant life experience, and, secondly, only they have agency.



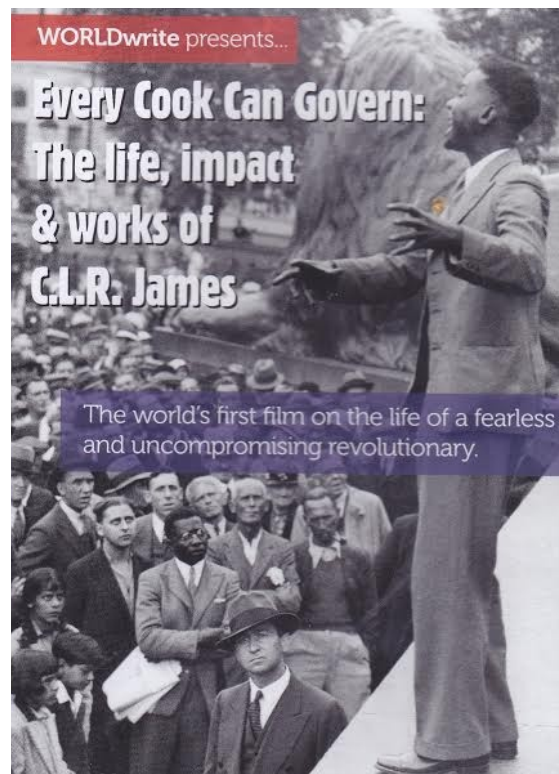
Therefore any process we organise to extend such a culture to new Labour Party activists and the like must include getting them to work out for themselves—and to thrash out with others—their own ideas of what socialism is. And above all, people need to develop the capacity and confidence to go on doing this through repeated changes in their circumstances, through defeats, through thick and thin.

Secondly, the phrase 'making socialists' comes close to implying that they can be 'made' in advance of them being involved in activity. Yes, people do need to learn history, ideas that people have had in the past, and so on. But the sharpest insights most often come from things like standing on a picket line, trying to make a speech, drafting a motion, trying to produce and distribute a leaflet, doing minutes, trying to chair a meeting, and similar things. I would give as an example such experiences as the police battering pickets at Grunwick. In other words, the act of 'making socialists' needs to be integrated with, on the one hand, theorisation, the development of ideas, and also, on the other, to activity, practice. In the Labour Party a situation has developed where—if ideas are accepted as relevant at all—their production is seen as the specialised province of academics, advisers, people working for thinktanks, journalists and the like.

If you've never heard of CLR James, the new film 'Every Cook Can Govern' is an excellent guide to one of the 20th century's key Marxist thinkers. Born in Trinidad in 1901, James's life was global: from the Caribbean to Britain and France, thence to the USA, Africa and back to the Caribbean, finally re-settling in Britain until his death in 1989. The film, made by loads of volunteers, charts these phases of activism in his life through the use of footage of James and interviews with friends and academics but it also focuses on his writing. James read and wrote prolifically: Shakespeare, Macaulay—the whole Western 'canon' and he wrote in every format—from pamphlets to speeches, from books to newspaper columns. And he wrote about everything: politics, literature, what is now called cultural studies, Marxism, history, cricket and the media.

The film shows how James enriched Marxism. 'The Black Jacobins', his account of the Haitian revolution, helped to bring a new dimension to Marxist history; the novel 'Minty Alley' centred on the Caribbean working class; 'World Revolution' attacked Stalinism but placed it in an historical context; 'Facing Reality' and 'The Johnson Forest Tendency' returned to a Marxism that started with the real world and asked American auto workers what was happening in their plants. Of course, his writings on cricket, as shown in 'Beyond a Boundary', are celebrated here. The film deals with James's meeting with Trotsky in Mexico where he disagreed on the future of black struggle in the USA, and James's later advice that the tactic of occupying 'whites only' spaces in diners be adopted—as it was in the civil rights movement. James never suspended his critical faculties even when it made him unpopular.

James was never an orthodox Marxist, his independent attitudes made him an anti-imperialist who supported national liberation struggles from the 1930s to the 1980s, through Trotskyism to Black liberation in the USA and Africa. Special Branch and FBI files show just how closely he was monitored by the state throughout his life. Like every political activist, James was often wrong and he vastly overestimated the chances of an American revolution in the 1950s. There is no such thing as a 'Jamesism' and that's probably a good thing. But, more valuably, he always insisted that we read, analyse, think and write for ourselves—hence 'Every Cook Can Govern'. James was part of that immensely rich Marxist tradition with which EP Thompson identified, and one that every activist should become acquainted with—a tradition that spans all continents and was global before globalisation occurred. 'Every Cook Can Govern' (2016), a film by WORLDwrite is available from Millfields Lodge, Millfields Road, London E5 0AL. 0208 985 5435 world.write@btconnect.com www.worldbytes.org www.clrjames.uk



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 interviewed. The 'All in a Day's Work' book with fore-
 word by John McDonnell is available for £12.85 with
 post & packing. Contact rima@britainatworklondon.com
 or phone 0207 2727649

To commemorate the 40th anniversary of the start of
 the Grunwick strike a series of inspiring, thought-
 provoking events will explore the dispute and its
 legacy, launching with Grunwick Memories on August
 27 at Brent Archive, Willesden Green Library, Willesden
 High Road. The exhibition, We are those lions: The
 story of the Grunwick strike 1976-78, launched on
 October 19, will be at the Willesden Green Library until
 March 26 2017. The exhibition is accompanied by The
 Great Grunwick Mural on Chapter Road NW10.
 Explore Grunwick in more detail at a film screening
 and discussion on 'Race and the Unions' at SOAS on
 November 2 and the Grunwick 40 Conference at
 Willesden Green Library on November 26. Email
 museum.archives@brent.gov.uk or call 0208 937 3600.