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## Left Book Club Anthology

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Matt Perry

In 1936, the world seemed precariously poised between peace and war, fascism and communism, democracy and dictatorship, hope and despair. Each international event – Spanish and French Popular Front election victories, the continued Italian campaign in Abyssinia, the factory occupations in France, civil war and foreign intervention in Spain – confirmed this instability. In Britain, mass unemployment and Mosley brought home this uncertainty. Domestic official politics consisted of three-cornered contest between a Conservative (nominally National) government, an agonising faction-riven Liberal Party and a Labour Party still reeling from the ‘great betrayal’ of 1931. Into this political situation, Victor Gollancz, the left-wing publisher with his allies the Marxist writer John Strachey and the Labour left Stafford Cripps, struck on the idea of the Left Book Club. Their goal was to revive the left and inject a greater popular awareness of world events. Club membership would oblige each participant to buy a monthly book from the Club’s list of publications. This method guaranteed demand and subsidised sales to members who were committed to remaining with the Club for at least six months. The Left Book Club also lay a considerable network of discussion groups and within months had a mass membership. The editors selected books on a range of subjects: the Spanish civil war, unemployment, the Soviet Union, nazism and international events and relations. The Club brought together some of the most important authors and political figures of the day: George Orwell, John Strachey, Arthur Koestler, Stephen Spender, Ellen Wilkinson, Clement Attlee, André Malraux, R.H. Tawney, Leon Blum and J.B.S. Haldane.

*The Left Book Anthology* brings together a number of extracts from Left Book Club titles. Paul Laity’s introductory essay (he is the senior editor of *The London Review of Books*) sets the Left Book Club in context. He outlines the personalities of the principal characters, especially the editorial triumvirate. Victor Gollancz’s energy and tremendous editorial skills are balanced against his intellectual crankiness and elitism. Harold Laski is presented as a highly respected the Christian socialist Professor from the LSE and John Strachey as a snobbish upper-class Marxist with an undoubted gift for popular writing. Laity also charts the startling success of the Club: by the end of 1936 it had 40,000 members, three years later it peaked at 57,000 members, organised in 1,200 groups. Millions of LBC books were disseminated. But there was much more to the fortunes of the Club than the mesh of personalities.

The selection of extracts must have been extraordinarily difficult but Laity has done an admirable job. The opening extracts from *The Road to Wigan Pier* summed up the paradox of the LBC with a subtle economy. Laity purposely includes both Gollancz's foreword to alongside the extract from *The Road to Wigan Pier* that Gollancz tried with some discomfort to explain away. *The Road to Wigan Pier* was one of the early titles of the LBC. George Orwell toured the depressed north to make the case against unemployment and the means test (and to explain the situation of the miners who were likely to take national strike action). *The Road to Wigan Pier* is a classic literary portrayal of the slump and the very best exemplar of a genre at which the LBC excelled with such titles as Ellen Wilkinson's elegy to Jarrow *The Town That Was Murdered*, Wal Hannington's angry hard-hitting polemic *The Problems of the Distressed Areas*, Max Cohen's personal memoir *I Was One of the Unemployed* and G.D.H. Cole scholarly investigation, *The Condition of Britain*. More revealing is the way that Orwell's piece identified the dilemma at the very centre of the LBC project. The second part of the book was a treatise on socialism in Britain. It was one of the most controversial and self-critical pieces of left-wing writing. He famously described middle-class socialists as 'all that dreary tribe of high-minded women and sandal-wearers and bearded fruit-juice drinkers who come flocking towards the "smell" of progress like bluebottles to a dead cat.' Orwell stressed (and caricatured) the lamentable gap in British socialism between the cranky middle-class 'intellectual, book-trained' socialist and 'the warm-hearted unthinking Socialist, the typical working-class Socialist'. Given this (somewhat exaggerated) situation, the LBC could in principle either entrench or bridge the divide. In practice, the Club did both. In the introduction, Laity celebrates the penetration of LBC ideas into working-class circles in South Wales and Glasgow. On the whole, however, the LBC membership was largely middle class as its geographical preponderance in the South confirms. Elsewhere Gary McCulloch viewed Gollancz's educational approach as preaching to and forging an educated elite and has even described the domination of middle-class intellectuals over the network as 'an agency of social control over the aspirations of the working class through middle class cultural hegemony'.<sup>(1)</sup>

Two further extracts exemplify the large number of LBC volumes that sought to comment on aspects of British society. *The Walls Have Mouths* was an insider's sensationalist account of life inside Pankhurst prison. The author, Wilfred Macartney, had been imprisoned for spying for the Soviet Union. The selections reveal two aspects of prisoners' world: homosexuality and the escape legend. Opening the prison-doors to the scrutiny of the reading public was intended to be a powerful spur to prison reform, and indeed the editor attributed the permission of tobacco in British jails as resulting from the book. L.B. Coombes's *These Poor Hands* was an account of life in the South Wales coalfield. The extracts paint scenes of everyday life: the night shift, the silicosis sufferer, pay day and the lack of privacy bathing in lodgings. The book was one of the most popular monthly choices and sold 80,000 copies. It stands alongside other important working-class novels relating the 1930s experience such as Walter Greenwood's *Love on the Dole* and Walter Brierley's *Means Test Man*. It was one of a few examples that lived up to Gollancz's hope to cultivate working-class novelists and writers through the Club.

The choice of extracts from novels, plays and the *Left Song Book* illustrate that the LBC was not confined to political manifestos, social commentary and international reportage. The Club also generated a range of cultural activities: travel, rambling, choirs, theatre groups and discussion circles. Clifford Odets's *Waiting for Lefty* a play about a New York cab strike had been a considerable box office hit capturing the mood of the America of the depression and the sit-down strikes. As Paul Laity's words of introduction indicate, the later political trajectory of some American left intellectuals strongly contrasts the play's strong sense of solidarity. For Odets along with Elia Kazan named names during the McCarthy witch-hunt. Herman Muller's *Out of the Night* is an interesting reminder of popular science writing of the 1930s. The LBC produced volumes on the atom, evolution, public health and chemistry. It also recalls the fact that eugenics had a general acceptance across the political spectrum and were not the exclusive property of the right. He proposed selective breeding through the use of clinical techniques. Muller's views are an unpleasant blend of Stalinism, social engineering and eugenics.

International affairs were the largest single category of LBC publications. Laity selects titles on Spain, China, Nazi Germany and appeasement. Arthur Koestler's *Spanish Testament* is perhaps as important and

poignant a selection as that of Orwell. Again its subject, Spain, like unemployment, was a *cause célèbre* of the Club. It also offers us another piece of the LBC puzzle given Koestler's eventual odyssey from CP membership (1931-38) to author of the anti-Stalinist novel about the show trials *Darkness at Noon* (1940) and contributor to the Cold War renunciation of communism, *The God That Failed* (1950). A generation of intellectuals trod Koestler's path from communist infatuation to disillusioned anti-Stalinism. This was the principle reason that posterity was so hard a judge on the LBC. Edgar Snow's *Red Star over China* was one of the LBC's most popular titles; Gollancz commenting that it was finest recruiter to the Club. It detailed the Red Army's long march and the social character of the 'liberated' territory. The book became the launch pad for a campaign against Japanese intervention in China. The extract tells of his journey into the communist held north west with the goal of interviewing Mao. Central to the vivid narrative were the stories and attitudes of the young communist soldiers that he encountered. Jan Petersen's *Our Street* is a partly fictional memoir of a communist resistor to the Nazis about the first years of their rule. It is a remarkable and moving testament about the effects of that take-over on a single working-class street and implicitly makes a compelling case to oppose the rise of fascism elsewhere in Europe. It examines the difficulties of maintaining morale and clandestine organisations in the face of arrests, deaths in custody, and surveillance of comrades and loved ones as well as the impact of this on the family, neighbourhood and political networks of class. G.E.R. Gedye's *Fallen Bastions* is an account of the fascist conquest of democracy in Austria and Czechoslovakia. As such it addresses one of the principal themes of the LBC – the appeasement of the fascist powers. Gedye was the *New York Times* and *Daily Telegraph* correspondent for Eastern Europe stationed first in Austria and then Prague. His work revealed the corrosive effects on Austrian independence and Czech democracy of Nazi intrigues and the false friendship of Anglo-French diplomats, which sapped the will to fight and made the unacceptable seem inevitable. Gedye was not a leftwinger but a liberal who could see the treachery and disingenuity of appeasement. He related the claustrophobic atmosphere in Austria at the time of the *Anschluss* and Czechoslovakia in the summer whilst Hitler sought to dismember the country with the sanction of Britain and France.

The editor also includes extracts from two treatises on political theory. John Strachey's *Theory and Practice of Socialism* was a centrepiece of the LBC project, an attempt to write the case for communism in popular idiom in the pressing historical circumstance of approaching world war. The extract describes the contradictions and disordered priorities faced by all under capitalism: 'For why should we build targets for bombs, prevent the tubercle bacillus from destroying the lungs destined for poison gas, or administer with sterling probity the affairs of a city which may soon be uninhabited?' It appealed to 'the best men and women of every class' to embrace communism. This marked a sharp contrast with the Comintern's 'class against class' approach of the early 1930s when specifically soliciting 'architects, scientists, doctors and civil servants' would have been unthinkable. The search for intellectuals, professionals, experts, artists was intrinsic to the Popular Front project and the LBC experience. Stephen Spender, who at the time was a fashionable young poet, epitomises the 'Auden generation' of intellectuals who were temporarily infatuated with Soviet Russia and its brand of communism. *Forward from Liberalism* was aimed at converting young left-leaning liberals to this cause. It sought to delineate the limitations of liberal democracy. For Spender, world crisis and approaching war demonstrated that the age of parliamentary democracy was drawing to a close. Communism, he argued, did not reject the idealistic goals of liberalism of equality, democracy and freedom but would realise them.

The final extract comes from *The Betrayal of the Left*, which was a collection of essays written in 1940 signalling Gollancz's break with his former friends in the Communist Party. The Hitler-Stalin pact of August 1939 reversed the Soviet Union's stated foreign policy. It was too much for many of the fellow-travellers like Gollancz who had put their faith in a strategy of construction Popular Front governments and the peace bloc between Russia, Britain and France. *The Betrayal of the Left* once again teamed up Gollancz and Orwell, whose essay 'Patriots and revolutionaries' is selected for the anthology. This piece is a remarkable witness to the metamorphosis on popular consciousness that followed the fall of France and the evacuation of Dunkirk. This was one of the most acute crises faced by a British government. Orwell believed that there would be a revolutionary conclusion to the crisis and called on the left to embrace patriotism to effectively capture this mood of popular defiance in the face of threatened invasion and ruling-class

treachery. Though there was no British revolution, the implication is that the conditions that Orwell described underpinned Labour victory in 1945.

Two connected controversies have dogged the memory of the Left Book Club: its relationship to Stalinism and the Left's romanticisation of the LBC and the 1930s in general. The Club has been the subject of long-running criticism of being a communist front. Laity describes the evolving relationship between the Communist Party and the LBC. His frank admission of communist influence left little room for the accusation that he glossed over the uncomfortable truths. Many key figures in the network of clubs were party members as well. The Communist Party sought to recruit via these discussion groups and assumed that the LBC would inculcate communist perspectives amongst a wider audience. Although none of the editors (the 'Holy Trinity') were card-carrying members of the Communist Party, they shared an admiration for the Soviet Union and the two administrators in the LBC's Henrietta Street HQ were party members. Their Stalinism is reflected in the fact that the editors rejected manuscripts that criticised the Soviet Union, such as Orwell's work on Spain. Much of the left subscribed to these illusions about the Soviet Union and a commitment to the strategy of the Popular Front against fascism. Even the ageing Fabians Sidney and Beatrice Webb eulogised Stalin's Russia in *Soviet Communism: a New Civilisation*. Many of the Club's books engaged in apologetics on behalf of world communism. Leon Feuchtwanger's *Moscow 1937* whitewashed the show trials and the many books on Spain conveyed a guilty silence over communist repression of Spanish revolutionaries. But the relationship was not a simple transmission belt of communist directives. Although Gollancz's foreword clumsily 'corrected' parts of Orwell's *The Road to Wigan Pier*, the publisher ignored communist party objections to its publication.

The LBC conformed to the Popular Front vision of the Comintern, which proposed an alliance between liberals, social democrats and communists. Like the gap between the propaganda and reality of the Popular Front, the decision-making in the Club was much narrower. Hugh Dalton had asked for two Labour Party representatives on the editorial team but Gollancz turned this down. Many titles, like those of Maurice Thorez, the leader of the French Communist Party, and G.D.H. Cole, made the case for the Popular Front, which was a strategy for centre-left electoral victory, a domestic bulwark against fascism and the means to draw together a diplomatic alliance against the fascist powers and war. In reality, Stalin cynically used this policy as an instrument of his foreign policy interests and its value on other counts is highly questionable.

On the whole, the anthology ably demonstrates the range of LBC work whilst still choosing some of the most popular and enduring titles. The pedantic temptation to suggest alternative selections is great. My quibble would be that with the inclusion of a play, novel and songbook the impression of the Club is skewed towards cultural works. Of the 250 or so titles only a handful of titles were of this character. As a result, there is no room, for instance, for any of the historical works of the LBC. A number of these 'A.L. Morton's *A People's History of England*, the Hammonds' *The Town Labourer* and Petergorsky's *Left-wing Democracy in the English Civil War* - anticipated themes and changes in the writing of social history after the war. Whilst the editor does make great efforts to make these seven decades-old texts accessible to the reading public, the drawback of interspersing the extracts with introductory editorial comment breaks up the flow of the anthology. The sequence of these extracts, which is neither chronological nor thematic, adds to this sense of fragmentation. Nevertheless, the anthology presents a fascinating insight into the ideas of the time for the general reader and an important undergraduate text for those studying the 1930s.

Some critics will no doubt charge that the book resurrects the red fable of the 1930s: the legend of a devil's decade that was concocted in part in the comfortable offices and studies of Gollancz and his co-conspirators. The revisionist account of the 1930s has, I believe, been considerably overstated though it is not the place to tackle this issue here. Others will liken that the LBC to a grimy and uninteresting back alley of intellectual and cultural history, rather like the ones Orwell happened upon in Wigan and Sheffield, and one that is entirely overtaken by the corrupting stench of Stalinism. This criticism is not entirely fair, as it is easy to see through the illusions of an age with hindsight. Despite the Stalinist errors, there is much of interest and even contemporary relevance that can be salvaged. Casual allusions to appeasement of the present, for example, might be better informed by a second look at some of the LBC volumes.

This anthology collects together a well-selected sample of a complex and highly charged intellectual climate. The life of the LBC coincided with one of the British left's most notable periods beginning in Spain culminating in the first majority Labour government. Crucial to that period was an intellectual zeal ? though they certainly got things wrong ? that tried to measure up to big events and big ideas. It is easy to be wise after the fact. The careful selection of authors and the introductions to each of the extracts acts as a kind of collective biography to explain the subsequent decline of the left. Laity also believes that some of these ideas bear a contemporary relevance ?perhaps the following extracts will spark a few more?. The anthology acts also a gentle reminder of how an energetic and left-wing Labour Party with a broad consensus of welfarism and full employment made its most significant historical inroads into ?middle England?.

## Notes

1. Gary McCulloch, ?Teachers and missionaries: the Left Book Club as an educational agency?, *History of Education*, vol.14, no.2, 1985, p.150.[Back to \(1\)](#)

### Other reviews:

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