

Labour Inside the Gate: a History of the British Labour Party Between the Wars

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In his review of David Howell's *MacDonald's Party* Matthew Worley praised Howell for his exposition of Labour's 'high' politics and excused him for not including 'an analysis of local Labour identities'; doing so would, Worley noted, 'have added years to the book's construction and probably have broken OUP's paper budget ... the social-political development of Labour at a local level is something that future studies of the party in the 1920s and 1930s will necessarily have to uncover'.⁽¹⁾ Doubtless Worley knows a lot about the time and paper needed to carry out such a project since this book, *Labour Inside the Gate*, is precisely that: a detailed survey of Labour's local social-political development in the inter-war period. It is this local emphasis that is the first and most important defining feature of this work. Whereas most other works on the party have in common an approach that views the party 'from above', Matthew Worley is determined to bring to the fore the complex matrix of organisations, alliances, personalities and regional/local variations that really made up the party and which have hitherto been largely overlooked. Worley's source materials make plain his commitment to the local study of the Labour party. Whereas Ross McKibbin's *The Evolution of the Labour Party 1910–1924* (Oxford, 1974), another work that has examined the creation and building of local party branches, utilised the minutes of two local party branches, Worley has examined 36 sets of records of party branches and local or district organisations.

The second defining feature of *Labour Inside the Gate* is its periodisation. Worley has identified a surprising absence of any general history of the party concentrating specifically on the inter-war period. Synthesising the two aims this book is thus a bold attempt to produce a general history of the party between 1918 and 1939 which emphasises the grassroots, a history of the Labour *party* rather than, for example, Labour's

national leaders. The title of the book is that of a Labour Representation Committee cartoon of 1906. It shows Labour as a diminutive figure who, with the aid of an axe, has smashed his way through the doors of parliament, breaking through a barrier labelled 'landlordism, low wages, prejudice' and so on. He finds himself confronted by three much larger men, stereotypical representations of vested political interest and economic power, at whose feet is a cat's cradle of red tape labelled 'promises, speechifying' and so forth. Gesturing to it, they say 'just wait and see how we tie you up'. The Labour figure stands defiant, saying 'I still have my axe'.

The years after the First World War saw this vision of a breakthrough to power become reality. This is the point at which Worley begins his study, and thus the debate around the rise of Labour and the decline of the Liberals is also the first of the major debates on the party with which he needs to engage. He agrees that the decline of the liberals was a product of the war years and their immediate aftermath, but stresses that Labour drove itself into the political space thus vacated, rather than simply sliding into it as a result of social shifts or franchise reform. Here he emphasises the importance of the reforms to the party machine made by Arthur Henderson. Worley is at his best on this terrain. He has a detailed understanding of the structures of the party. He appreciates the significance of such developments as regional party structures and explains the role of those such as the party's national agent, Egerton Wake, who operated its levers of power. Moreover he is ever alert to how these factors interacted with local/regional political developments and personalities to produce the different Labour milieux that he goes to great lengths to portray.

Within this presentation of local colour there are several things that particularly stand out as worthy of comment. The first of these is Worley's examination of the local cultural, recreational and educational activities of the party. Unlike the earlier Clarion movement, the Labour party was an organisation designed to capture political power, but Worley's description of local parties' wide range of cultural activities both heightens awareness of the continuities of practice between the party and its predecessor, and brings to life the experience of local activism. Yes, envelopes were stuffed and canvasses were taken, but songs were sung, trips were made, plays were performed and games were played. Worley is right to point out that the precise connections between this type of 'club' activity and the growth of a Labour identity is something that needs exploring further, but he has made a useful start, particularly so since he is alive to the points of tension generated within the party by this type of activity. Here he focuses on the differences of opinion between imbibers and teetotallers in the party and the problems generated by the party's youth organisations.

Similarly welcome are Worley's frequent discussions on the role of women in the party. This is a topic that is more usually the preserve of more specialised works, so the fact that the issue has been examined in detail in a more general book such as this is to be welcomed. Again Worley indicates where further research is necessary but works to draw out the differences in women's experience of the Labour party, presenting an impressive array of examples from local parties.

During the inter-war period the Labour party faced very significant challenges. Worley covers all of the essential events and issues: the first Labour government, the General Strike, the catastrophe of the second MacDonald government, and the rise of fascism, both domestic and foreign. He also examines relations with the unions, the International Labour Party (ILP), and the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB). All readers – and students in particular – will be very grateful for Worley's useful and concise summaries of the political and economic background to events, and for his pithy thumbnail sketches of many of the leading players in labour politics.

Worley's focus is the party at local level, but many of these events, the defections of MacDonald and Mosley for example, occurred in the realm of 'high' politics. All of Worley's primary research has been done on the local rather than the national arena of Labour politics. This means he is perfectly placed to describe and analyse the reaction across the grassroots of the party to these seismic events. For example, he gives interesting and detailed accounts of the ways in which traditions of loyalty helped to sustain the party at grassroots after the events of the summer of 1931. However, he is less well placed to offer original insights into the national sector. Nevertheless, two additional points must be noted: first, as Worley noted about Howell's book, no one author can cover everything, and were Worley to attempt to analyse the

national in the same zealous manner as his analysis of the local then it would take years – and consume vast amounts of paper. Second, despite his lack of primary research on the national level he can, and does, draw useful conclusions about events and personalities. On the subject of 1931, for example, his conclusion that by August the government was already in deep trouble does seem to be much more realistic than simply talking of ‘betrayal’. For Worley, this lack of decisive action in August 1931 was a product of the party’s intellectual flabbiness.

Worley writes of the government’s ‘prevarication’ in the year up to August 1931, and elsewhere in the book of the ‘vagaries’ of MacDonald’ (p. 122), and of the party having ‘objectives rather than a programme of practical policies’ (p. 119). While I have no wish to begin a revisionist approach to MacDonald, there is a useful and necessary point to be made here, namely that after MacDonald’s desertion the party began a major shift in its policy towards that of economic planning using the nationalised industrial corporation as a model of public administration and that this contrasts greatly with what came before it. But even with this important caveat in mind it does seem to be overstating the case a bit to talk of ‘the flowery phrases of MacDonald’ (p. 154).

One hugely significant occasion when the grassroots of the party leapt to centre stage was, of course, during the General Strike of 1926. After a characteristically concise and efficient synopsis of the economic and political background to this piece of Labour folklore, Worley deals with the strike in about five tightly argued pages. His focus is somewhat surprising. He looks at the effects of the strike on Labour’s standing in the country, its electoral chances and its relations with other groups (the CPGB, the National Minority Movement (NMM) and the unions, for example). His conclusions on this subject are that the strike weakened not only the conservatives, but also the left critique of Labour’s parliamentarianism. Moreover, it strengthened union support for the return of a Labour government and galvanised the party’s supporters.

However, throughout this discussion, Worley keeps the membership offstage. The only mention of Labour’s grassroots here is a presentation of by-election result statistics from the aftermath of the strike. Given the focus of the book, this is somewhat anomalous. A detailed local Labour party perspective on the strike could have added a lot to the understanding of both the nine days and the party. The party’s people are similarly given a subsidiary role in Worley’s examination of the Labour party’s response to domestic fascism. The reader learns a lot about the party’s national posture towards the British Union of Fascists (BUF) and some local detail is given to supplement this, but intriguingly Worley also says that Labour League of Youth members ‘reputedly’ engaged fascists on the streets of Leeds and Huddersfield, while ‘elsewhere, such as Manchester and Liverpool, Labour members undoubtedly took part in more concerted protests’ (p.205). This leaves the reader with two questions. First, what actually happened in Leeds, Huddersfield, Manchester and Liverpool? And second, given that these four examples are drawn from other surveys of Labour’s history (which Worley thoroughly acknowledges), what happened in the areas he studied? Given that the express purpose of the work is to provide detailed coverage of party activities and structures at a local level it seems strange to downplay any discussion of the strike and local anti-fascist activity in the localities he has studied in such detail.

The absence of answers to these questions may be a product of the nature of Worley’s sources. Worley’s local insights come mainly from the minutes of a great number of local party organisations. However, comparatively few local Labour party newspapers are listed in the bibliography. In at least one case, namely Gateshead, a paper (the *Gateshead Herald*, published by the local party and trades council between 1937 and 1947) was published in an area where Worley has studied the party. A wider trawl through the party’s local press would have been welcome and may have strengthened the book’s local coverage even further. In this way, there is a real sense in which Worley is the victim of his own success. The fact is that it is only possible to point out that, on some points, the book does not contain enough local information precisely because on so many other points it is evident in abundance.

Worley is an authority on the CPGB and is able to use this to particularly good effect when discussing the relations between the communists and Labour over the issue of the Spanish Civil War. Once again he is able to give the background to the events in a comprehensive yet concise manner, but it is this knowledge of the

politics of Labour-CPGB relations at a myriad of locations that gives his account real bite. He is able to show how Labour's national party line of non-co-operation with the CPGB was implemented, but he is equally alive to the popularity of the united front with the grassroots in certain areas. In this way his study of CPGB-Labour relations is a microcosm of what is best about this book. If the Labour party is often compared to a broad church, what Worley has done is to introduce us to the congregation.

Notes

1. Matthew Worley, 'Review of David Howell, *MacDonald's Party: Labour Identities and Crises, 1922–1931*', *Labour History Review*, 69.1 (2004), 120–1.[Back to \(1\)](#)

The author is happy with this review and does not wish to comment further.

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