

<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article2735>



Book review:

A Bend in the Labyrinth

- Reviews section -

Publication date: Saturday 29 December 2012

Copyright © International Viewpoint - online socialist magazine - All rights reserved

Non-communist radical culture of the anti-fascist years has long been a subject in search of a critic who can boldly embrace the enigmatic. That quest is now ended with the publication of the furiously intelligent *The Century's Midnight*.

In the sure hands of Clive Bush, biography and cultural history combine to create a quietly agonized study of the transatlantic literary and political relationships among “a loosely knit transnational intelligentsia” (8) at the moment when socialist internationalism fell into crisis during World War II.

Bush is a scholar of distinction, previously author of *The Dream of Reason: American Consciousness and Cultural Achievement From Independence to the Civil War* (1977), *Out of Dissent: A Study of Five Contemporary British Poets* (1997), *Halfway to Revolution: Investigation and Crisis in the Work of Henry Adams, William James and Gertrude Stein* (1991), and *Holding the Line: Selected Essays in American Literature and Culture* (2009).

He is also a pianist and creative writer, associated with the modernist British poetry revival of the 1960s and 1970s.

Born into a Welsh family, Bush was raised in a religious home environment in the northern England areas of Yorkshire and Nottingham. After grammar school he taught in Nigeria for a year with Voluntary Services Overseas, during which time his political consciousness awakened.

He spent his academic career mostly at the University of Warwick and King's College London. Six years ago he retired to concentrate on writing this sophisticated study that luminously draws upon archives at the Library of Congress, University of Pennsylvania and Yale University. The result is a 600-page volume of small print that is a genre unto itself, an inspired montage gracefully sweeping away earlier, one-dimensional versions of the anti-fascist era.

The political connection between time and memory is the point of this book; to recollect how an inimitable group of writers “responded to a terrible moment in human history” may remind us of “the best of human strength and imaginative possibilities of cooperation in the worst of times.” (2)

Far from an effort to take a “correct position” on all the entangled fronts of anti-capitalism and anti-Stalinism of the 1940s, which no one has or ever had, Bush presents a haunting meditation on the paradoxes one finds in “the messiness of human history.” (317)

Dissenters from the Consensus

The first of the five writers and editors who prompt Bush's intricate narrative is Victor Serge (born Victor Lvovich Kibalchich, 1890-1947), an anarchist turned Bolshevik who published seven novels and the unforgettable *Memoirs of a Revolutionist* (1951).

The others are Dwight McDonald (1906-82), a cultural critic with a Trotskyist past; Dorothy Norman (1905-97), a left-wing photographer and editor; Lewis Mumford (1895-1990), a world-famous specialist on cities and architecture; and Muriel Rukeyser (1913-80), an astounding radical poet who also identified herself as a lesbian.

These individuals consciously positioned themselves outside the reigning common sense that idealized the war effort of the Allies, West and East. While not uncritical of their limitations and contradictions, Bush holds them up as examples of “how to live without disillusionment, neurotic apathy and cynical fatalism, of how to remain active, creative, politically responsible and unself-pitying in the scarcity of any believable organized official politics.” (10)

The Century's Midnight is obviously a work about memory and time replete with allusions to the political present. These are implicit on every page, as when Bush discusses how the journal *TWICE A YEAR* “chose its past” (253), or considers what progressive-era essayist Randolph Bourne called “the corrupt nationalism latent in the American dream” (257), or mulls over the troubling reflection of Simone Weil that “there are no ethical beliefs, there are only ethical actions.” (281)

He has a genius for quotations and writes with a taste for emphatic assertion, unearthing a heritage for “our best and most courageous journalists and the few remaining intellectuals who speak directly and politically in the service of the oppressed.” (481) Some of the contemporary people he has in mind are the murdered Russian reporter Anna Politkovskaya, and western journalists and critics John Pilger, Noam Chomsky, Mike Davis, Naomi Klein and Robert Fisk.

Behind “The Worst War”

At the root of *The Century's Midnight* is the standpoint that World War II was the product of an ugly history in which many countries were to blame: “The shocking politics around the Great War [World War I], the less than pragmatic punishment of Germany, dying European colonialism, and rising American and Stalinist Soviet power were all in varying degrees to blame for the worst war in history.” (480)

The complex causes of the killing of 60 million people is difficult to discern today due to “carefully-massaged memories of the period’s visible politics and events put out by heritage television series and blockbuster movies.” (480)

In opposition to the popular writing of Paul Fussell, whose depictions of World War I and II privilege success and survival over cause and responsibility, Bush raises his tension-riddled point of view. He uses new primary materials to explore the ordeal of cultural workers who lived through the 1940s with heightened consciousness.

The story he tells is also different from the “progressive” myth of the Left as a gathering of tributaries into one powerful river rising against fascism in the late 1930s, then climaxing in the wartime Popular Front. Bush recognizes that there was from the outset an underside of complicity and naiveté of this Front regarding its liberal and Communist components.

The Century's Midnight pursues a bend in the river of the labyrinth of Left history that few dare to investigate with candor.

Bush’s premise is two-sided: “Unless one takes a pacifist position, distinctions on relative moral grounds...had to be made. Nazism, fascism and a crazed imperialist Japan would have to be fought outright.”

Yet this was far from the whole story, which involved wartime atrocities of the Allies, the continuation of colonialism and other forms of white supremacy, and the bigger picture of the consequences of the war when the United States “would dominate the ensuing ‘peace’ to a large extent in its own economic interests...”

Bush reminds us that “the current disaster in Iraq...is merely the latest in a long line of what seem to be inevitable state military-economic adventures since 1945.” (480)

Commitments and Contradictions

Such a compound of anti-imperialism and anti-Stalinism leads to exquisite discussions of many other writers and intellectuals: Hannah Arendt, Simone de Beauvoir, Walter Benjamin, John Dos Passos, Andre Gide, Henry Miller, Anais Nin, George Orwell, Boris Pilnyak, Albert Camus, Jean-Paul Sartre, Ignazio Silone, and Richard Wright. Bush connects cultural and political dots with an encyclopedic command of the arts, including painting, photography and film.

Some of the flavor of this book can be communicated through Bush’s list of the “incompatible and contradictory positions of ethical commitment and praxis” that Victor Serge addressed in his writings: “direct action versus cooperation and organization; revolutionary spontaneity versus revolutionary discipline; freedom to criticize versus party loyalty; obedience to the cause versus distrust of all authority; anti-bourgeois thinking and behavior versus respect for the lives of others with different values and cultural practices; commitment to the absolutely contemporary direct action versus a passionate concern for historical culture, art and literature.” (37) Bush holds that such preoccupations produced new narrative modes in Serge’s fiction and autobiography.

For the two magazines under scrutiny, McDonald’s Politics and Norman’s TWICE A YEAR, Bush makes the case that these were practical demonstrations of a fearless openness and unprejudiced inclusiveness that went against the current of the time.

Mumford, he holds, is egregiously misunderstood; his work today is imperative for understanding the requirement “of a renewable past as a vital guide to the present and future.” (13) Rukeyser must be read for the resonating historical dimensions in the lived texture of her poetry, her sense of the past in relation to personal and public spheres.

This is a demanding book about the anguish of absence, defeat and exile in an international setting. Its cover is spot on, featuring a reproduction of abstract expressionist Jackson Pollock’s “War” (1947), originally drawn in ink and colored pencils on paper.

Writers almost “speak through” Bush, and his style is one of frequent citations to theorists such as philosopher Paul Ricoeur. The upshot, while involved, is far from a mere shuffling of terminology; *The Century’s Midnight* genuinely enlarges critical understanding.

With stunning originality and intellectual excitement, Clive Bush never lets us stop thinking about the countless and complex ways in which memory is political.

From *Against the Current*