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Book review

Ernie Tate's memoirs from the fifties and sixties

- Reviews section -

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The following review, by Ian Birchall, a prominent Marxist scholar and former long time leader of the Socialist Workers Party in Britain will appear in the next issue of Revolutionary History which will be devoted to writings of Clara Zetkin, previously unavailable in English.

Anyone who was active in the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign (VSC) in the late 1960s will remember Ernie Tate, whose energy and enthusiasm made such a contribution. Now, forty-five years later, he has published two volumes of memoirs from the fifties and sixties.

The first volume deals with the period 1955 to 1965. Tate was born in deep poverty in Belfast – he left school at thirteen and tells us he “had never known or met anyone who had been to a secondary school, never mind university”. His only university was the revolutionary movement, and to judge by his later development it gave him a fine education. He emigrated to Canada in search of a better life. Entering a bookshop by chance, he was drawn into the activities of the Canadian Trotskyist organisation, then known simply as “the Club” – a reminder to all socialist bookshop staff that it's worth chatting up the customers.

The Club (which soon became the Socialist Educational League – SEL) was tiny, with just two branches, in Toronto and Vancouver. For those of us for whom “contact visiting” means an hour or two driving round a London suburb, it is chilling to read of the “cross-country tours”, where three comrades spent two months crossing Canada in a van, sleeping in the vehicle to save money and selling their paper at every opportunity. Yet Tate reports that, in the bleak landscape of the 1950s, he expected revolution within five years.

Tate describes the SEL's work in organising a rank-and-file caucus in the teamsters' union, where they played a significant role in a strike of eight thousand truckers in 1962, and also the entry work in the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation, forerunner of the New Democratic Party and the nearest thing to a social democratic party going. As he points out, the organisation was solidly immersed in the working class movement. “If someone had stated then that ‘we needed a working-class orientation’, as sometimes happens today when socialists talk among themselves, we would have been very puzzled because it would have been like telling a fish it should swim in water”.

Later the group became heavily involved in the Fair Play for Cuba Committee. Leaving aside the question of the characterisation of the Castro regime, it is clear that such work was highly important in North America at a time when the Cuban revolution was under immediate threat of invasion. But in retrospect it seems clear that such solidarity work helped to orientate the group away from its proletarian roots.

The second volume deals with the years Tate spent in London, where he was sent to help reorientate and build the Fourth International section. It was hard work, with constant insecurity about money and accommodation. He travelled to Paris frequently by the night boat, although he suffered from acute sea-sickness.

He was involved in three main areas of activity. The first was preparing the Bertrand Russell War Crimes Tribunal. This included the complex and tortuous financial relations between the Tribunal and the Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation. It also meant dealing with various left-wing “celebrities” who had agreed to serve on the Tribunal, and who, like all celebrities, tended to be temperamental. At one point the Yugoslav veteran Vladimir Dedijer grabbed Ralph Schoenman by the throat and bit him on the head. Isaac Deutscher seems to have acted as a mediating force until his sudden death. After years in the “watchtower” he was returning to activism, and formed a friendship with Tate.

In addition there was Ralph Schoenman. Schoenman's drive and imagination were an enormous asset to the movement, and Tate gives a generous account of his role. But it is also true that he could be very difficult to work with and was capable of acting irresponsibly. After being banned from Britain he returned clandestinely with false papers – and insisted on having a photograph of himself taken outside 10 Downing Street. All things considered, it is something of a miracle that the Tribunal ever met, let alone produced some very valuable documentation of American war crimes.

The rebuilding of a Fourth International section in Britain was equally problematic. Since the early fifties the FI had practised "entrism" in whatever mass parties were available. But often entrism was so deep that the International's visible presence had totally disappeared. Thus Ken Coates was, as Tate acknowledges, a well-respected figure on the British left, who had gathered around him the team that produced *The Week*, sponsored by numerous Left intellectuals and Labour Party figures. But there was no open organisation or publication to promote Trotskyist ideas and recruit supporters.

Tate grouped a number of individuals around himself, and persuaded Pat Jordan to move from his Nottingham base to London ; but in the process he clashed irrevocably with Coates, who was expelled from the FI, despite his close links with Ernest Mandel. Yet though the history of the movement all too often seems to have been a history of splits, the IMG was founded and played a positive role in the struggle around Vietnam.

Tate tells one story which was previously unknown to me and is of great interest. In 1968, following the Powell speech, the International Socialists issued a call for unity of the revolutionary left. Tate recalls a visit from Tony Cliff, who was anxious for immediate fusion of IS and the IMG, and was prepared to make considerable political concessions in order to get it. Tate tells us that he personally favoured the unity proposal, and that it was also supported by the FI leadership. However, it was strongly opposed by the other main IMG leader, Pat Jordan. Jordan argued that the IMG "was still in an early stage of its development and was trying to assimilate the new members it had recently recruited and so was not yet ready to confront such a quick turn." Since Tate was due to return to Canada shortly he did not push the point, and Jordan's view prevailed.

We can only speculate what might have happened if the fusion had been carried through. There would undoubtedly have been great tensions, and it is quite probable there would have been a split within a few years. But the fused organisation would have been a powerful pole of attraction, and it is just possible that the weight of members would have been sufficient to stifle centrifugal tendencies. In any case, though there would undoubtedly have been internal disputes, it is fairly certain that the IMG comrades would have behaved in a more fraternal and constructive fashion than the Matgamna group (which did enter IS). As a result the IS/SWP leadership might never have acquired the paranoia about "permanent factions" which has haunted it for several decades.

But Tate's most valuable contribution was in the building of the VSC. Its major demonstrations, culminating on 27 October 1968 with a hundred thousand on the streets of London, made its contribution to solidarising with the US anti-war movement and demoralising the US forces in Vietnam ; hundreds if not thousands of those first radicalised by the VSC remained active in left politics for many years to come. It was a successful and imaginative application of the united front strategy and still has lessons for today.

The VSC managed to draw in an impressive range of support – as a couple of pictures remind us, the young Richard Branson took part in the March 1968 Grosvenor Square demonstration. And all this despite the unhelpful attitude of the Communist Party and the Labour left, who rejected the basic call for immediate withdrawal of US forces. Tate described in detail his various efforts to build the broadest possible unity.

In retrospect it seems amazing that so much was achieved with a fractured British far left, often riddled with sectarianism. The Maoists around Manchanda offered nothing but disruption. The Socialist Labour League attended one meeting, where they staged a provocation and stormed out. What is often forgotten is that the Militant took an

attitude as negative as the SLL's. True they had the good sense not to advertise their abstention with a leaflet explaining why they were not marching, as the SLL did. But the issues of *Militant* for October and November 1968 simply made no reference to the demonstration.

Tate commends the International Socialists for their contribution to the VSC. But then he criticises as "primitive workerism" the IS proposal that the October 1968 demonstration should surround the Bank of England to highlight the role of British capitalism in the war. Yet Britain was on the brink of a very high level of working-class struggle (Saltley pickets, Pentonville Five), and it was very arguable that efforts should be made to orientate those radicalised by Vietnam towards the industrial struggle – something done by the FI, with its rather mechanical "turn to industry" in the late seventies, something of which Tate is very critical.

Tate describes subsequent developments in the FI, notably the support for Latin American rural guerrilla struggles in the 1970s. He examines in some detail the Argentinian experience, concluding : "The PRT-ERP armed struggle campaign, at its core an ultra-left adventure, was a terrible tragedy for the working class of Argentina. It ended up costing the lives of some of its best sons and daughters, among them its most experienced, smartest and most devoted fighters." He also describes the reasons that led him finally to leave the Canadian organisation to which he had made such a contribution. But he insists that he remains a revolutionary and that he does not regret his years of activism, even when they led to a certain degree of burnout.

He did return to Britain a couple of times, once in connection with a rather squalid disciplinary case involving allegations of harassment by a leading member of the IMG. It is interesting to note that the FI would take such trouble with a disciplinary matter, a striking contrast with the casual way other organisations have handled such things, although Tate now thinks the decision may have been mistaken..

Tate has drawn on archives in Britain, Canada, the USA and the Netherlands, and his work will be a valuable source for historians of the far left. Unfortunately there are quite a few small errors of names and dates, which means that those using his work will be well advised to consult primary sources. I will mention just one, of particular relevance to Revolutionary History. Tate says that Al Richardson, the founding editor of this journal, had been president of the National Association of Labour Student Organisations. Anyone who remembers Al's' deep disdain for student politics will find this implausible ; it is clearly a misidentification.

We may regret that Tate has left it so long to write his memoirs ; some of those discussed are now dead and cannot respond to his version of events. Ken Coates and Al Richardson in particular were formidable polemicists, and it would have been good to have their responses. But perhaps the time lapse was necessary to let passions cool. Certainly Tate has given us a model of what such a memoir should be like. This is not a piece of self-justification ; Tate is modest and self-critical about his own role. And while he is clear about political differences, he is generous in his assessment of those he was in disagreement with. He even has some positive things to say about Healy's SLL, though Healy was directly responsible for his being beaten up and kicked while lying on the ground, for selling a critical pamphlet outside an SLL meeting.

In February 2014 I had the great pleasure of meeting Ernie again, after forty-five years, when we spoke together on a platform provided by Socialist Resistance. The world has moved on a long way since Tate was first drawn into revolutionary politics, but his experience and enthusiasm can help to inspire and educate a new generation.

[1] <http://revolutionaryhistory.co.uk/>