

## Chris Williams – Historian of the Welsh Working Class

*An appreciation by David Morgan.*

It is with great sadness that we learnt of the death of Professor Chris Williams (1963-2024) on 5 April at the age of sixty one.

Chris was a leading labour historian from Wales with a long association with the Welsh Labour History Society, Llafur and its journal of the same name.

### **Llafur**

For decades from its foundation in 1970, Llafur was known as the Society for the Study of Welsh Labour History but recently changed its name in an effort to widen its popular appeal. Williams participated in all aspects of Llafur's work, including editing the journal. In these activities, Williams worked with fellow historians like Angela John, Dai Smith and Hywel Francis.

In his distinguished academic career, Chris was based variously at the universities of Cardiff, Swansea, Glamorgan and latterly the University of Cork. He was a graduate of Balliol College, Oxford.

### **Democratic Rhondda**

Chris Williams's best known work will be *Democratic Rhondda: Politics and Society, 1855-1951*, published in 1996, which traces the growth of the area's labour movement, the rise of the Labour Party and the emergence of a strong Communist Party.

This book was followed by *Capitalism, Community and Conflict: The South Wales Coalfield, 1898-1947*, which came out in 1998.

Chris Williams had varied interests, but his chief preoccupation was undoubtedly the politics and culture of the South Wales miners, their trade union and its integral relationship with the wider community, to the understanding of which he made a lasting contribution.

Chris also researched and wrote about Robert Owen and the cooperative movement, political cartoons, the miner turned writer B L Coombes, and the great Welsh actor Richard Burton, who came from a mining family.

### **Political cartoons**

In recent years, Chris Williams had turned his attentions to the history of political cartoons and caricature in Britain covering a period from the French Revolution to the Second World War. Up to the time of his death, he was also at work on the social and political history of Newport, a town notable for the Chartist uprising of 1839.

While not a member of the SHS, Chris Williams delivered a talk to the society at Marx House in the late '90s on Welsh nationalism and the labour movement.

### **Welsh working class**

His contribution to the study of Welsh working class history was immense and his influential scholarship will remain as a guide for future researchers for many years to come.

On a personal note, Professor Williams was my supervisor when I embarked on my PHD thesis on the Communist Party in Rural Wales and England, which sadly was never completed. I found Chris to be a very engaging, approachable and empathetic individual.

He always displayed enthusiasm for history and its place in people's lives. Away from the archives and lecture halls, Chris was also a keen mountaineer.

His premature death robs us of an exceptional historian at the peak of his powers and is an immeasurable loss to the study of working class history in this country.

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Book Review

## **Backbone of the Nation:**

Mining Communities and the Great Strike of 1984-85  
by *Robert Gildea* Yale University Press, 2024

At last, a book about the miners' strike of 1984 from the 'bottom up', which gives voice to the miners and those close to them, region by region, bringing out how far the strike against the government was a class issue. It is based on 148 interviews. Over half a million miners, their families and supporters were, in some fashion, involved in the strike.<sup>1</sup> This book has its limitations but successfully reminds us of how the Thatcher Government succeeded in shattering the strength of the miners: the 'Backbone of the nation' and weakened the whole trade union movement.

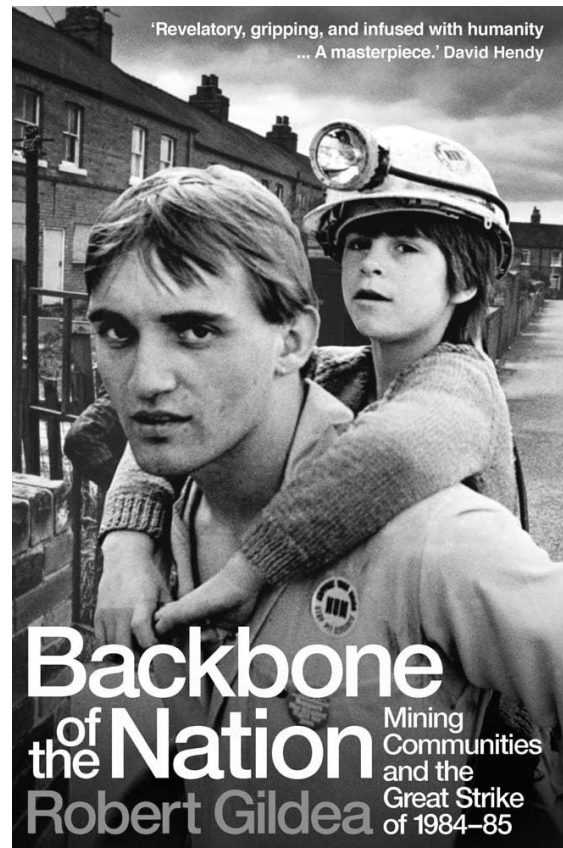
Gildea interviews miners and their families about why they went on strike, how it was organized locally, Orgreave and the brutal role of the police. This is a story about how easily the state resorts to repression. Gildea gives a detailed description of early picketing, how the camaraderie was found in some regions and not others, such as Nottinghamshire (Gildea cogently explains the role of a bonus scheme introduced in 1977) and how miners' families and their local histories affected their attitude to the strike.

### **Broad Left**

But I do have a quibble. Though Gildea presents a vivid picture of some of the leading activists and the role of the 'Broad Left', he puts insufficient emphasis on the politically committed, from left Labourites (in the heyday of Bennism), Communists to Trotskyists, in building rank and file organisations, especially in Yorkshire, in building strike centres that carried the strike.

I have another, more methodological, quibble. Gildea gets caught between presenting the material from his interviews in a 'neutral' manner, including from men who scabbed, and presenting a case for the striking miners. I'd have preferred him to have let his evident sympathy for the striking miners show throughout.

Gildea makes sure to record women's voices and makes very clear how important the women, the miners' wives, were to the



organization and continuation of the strike, even the miners' survival. What also emerges is how costly the strike was in personal relationships as campaigning took men away from their homes. Women who had largely accepted their domestic roles became more confident. Gildea discusses the Women Against Pit Closures groups and tensions between 'socialism and feminism' and how far the groups were 'taken over' by non-miners' wives. Gildea quotes Betty Cook, a miner's wife and an USDAW shop steward, as saying their working-class feminism was a push-back against middle-class feminism. These issues still create heat today.

### **Repression and Division**

The book reminds us of how wide the support for the strike was. The 'Lesbians and Gays support the miners', now widely accepted, took much political courage at a time when being LGBT was still regularly seen as a deviant sexuality.

The strike opened many political connections: union branches sent support and delegations, connections re-emerged with the Grunwick strikers and there were tours to gain support abroad, usually organized by local unions.

But the strike was beaten largely because the Tory Government resorted to extreme

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repression, and partly because of the sharp differences between the regions which were never resolved. County Durham, for example, like South Wales, was unwilling to push the fight beyond 'the possible'. In Leicestershire, the 'Dirty Dozen', the handful of men who had stood out for the strike, even found themselves persecuted by the Area NUM, who had never supported the strike. Strikers were victimized and blacklisted.

But Gildea also brings out the positives like the enhanced political awareness in the mining communities, such as the later support for anti-apartheid and for the Wapping printworkers. A few of the miners and family members became active in party politics.

### **Pit closures.**

Defeat was quickly followed by pit closures. The number of NUM members in 1945 was 733,000, in 1984 it was down to 180,000 and in 2007 a mere 1,200, while the number of deep mines in 1984 was 180, in 2002 it was only 12.

By the time the coal industry was privatised in 1993, only 16 mines remained out of 219 operating in 1980. Nottinghamshire did not escape despite the government's earlier promises. No government schemes were introduced to help redundant miners retrain or relocate. Gildea suggests that the defeat caused serious physical and mental illness, including early death, as mining communities collapsed. Gildea also observes that links with the Labour Party were broken, which was increasingly regarded as middle class. This sense of disempowerment fed into the Brexit vote.

The onslaught against the miners was a result of Tory neo-liberal ideology, privatisation and the undermining of rights at work. We see the consequences all too clearly as this Tory Government ruthlessly destroys the last vestiges of an internal fabric of existence, built up by struggles over the last hundred plus years. This book reminds us of how important it is to fight.

*Merilyn Moos*

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## **City of Stolen Magic**

By *Nazneen Ahmed Pathak*, Puffin Books, London, 2023, £7.99

This is a novel for children and Pathak suggests 10 is the perfect age to read this book. I propose that over tens should read it too and learn an imaginative way to engage children and educate them about British colonialism in India. For this is "India, 1855. The British rule, and all-across the land Indian magic is being stamped out."

The 'sinister Company' of Pathak's story that is doing the ruling and stealing is deliberately based on the East India Company. The real Company, prior to the 1857 'rebellion', gradually took over the government of India, controlled the taxes, rents and crop growth of the country and caused famines through this economic and political colonisation. The story's imaginary Company is shown also doing this, but central is its appropriation and control of Indian magic.

The book's central figure is a girl called Chompra. She needs to rescue her magic trained kidnapped mother. To do this she has to allow herself to be taken to London by the head of the 'Eastern Merchant Company', Sir Clive Devaynes. He wants Chompra because he believes that by manipulating and using her special magical powers, he can greatly increase his profiteering and political control.

The story takes place in India, on a ship on the high seas, and in London. Chompra becomes involved with numerous and very varied peoples (magical and non-magical), and we learn of the links between the ordinary people of India and London. The plot moves fast and is full of surprises and drama. Indeed, it is only on reflection that the reader realises that so many real historical characters, such as the Lascars, have been introduced. The decolonising of education requires deliberate re-examination, and, in many cases, redrafting of Colonial/ British history. But, as this book shows, creative and imaginative children's stories have a place too.

This is the first of two novels. I anxiously await the second.

*Danny Reilly*

## The Battle of Bossenden Wood



The University of Kent has proposed building a new development of 2,000 houses, shops and offices on a 100 acre greenfield site in the heart of The Blean, an area of ancient woodlands, farmland and heritage sites, to the north of Canterbury. It is adjacent to the Blean Woods Nature Reserve, an ancient, semi-natural woodland recognised as a site of international importance for wildlife. West Blean is home to a project to show how European bison can provide a sustainable solution to woodland management in southeast England. The proposed development is a threat to these important sites.

Management of the University of Kent argue that there is “*an unignorable economic need for the Sites to be delivered, to ensure the future success of the University*” – using the University’s finances as a justification for this development.

*While this may be deplorable, what has it got to do with Socialist History, you may ask?*

### **Last Rising of the Agricultural Labourers**

Blean Woods contain the site of the Battle of Bossenden Wood, which historian Barry Reay calls “The Last Rising of the Agricultural Labourers”. The event took place on 31 May 1838, when a grossly outnumbered band of agricultural labourers were confronted by an armed detachment of the 45th Infantry Regiment, reinforced by the local gentry and a group of constables. The labourers were led by John Nicholls Tom, who was using the alias ‘Sir William Courtenay’. The trouble had started when Courtenay began agitating against rural poverty and the New Poor Law in the area, using as his text the biblical quotation from the Epistle of St James “*Go to now, ye rich men, weep and howl for your miseries that shall come upon you*”. He organised a series of protest and recruitment marches around the local villages, which attracted numbers of agricultural labourers and their allies, armed with cudgels.

This seriously worried the local magistrates who remembered the Captain Swing revolt of 1830. They sent a constable and his assistant to arrest Courtenay and, while he was resisting arrest, Courtenay killed the constable’s assistant. The magistrates sent for the army, who cornered the largely unarmed labourers in the wood and opened fire. The confrontation left about twenty men dead, dying or wounded, so perhaps the Massacre of Bossenden Wood would be a better expression. Eleven of the survivors were eventually brought to trial and sentenced to death, although the judge immediately reprieved them and nine were sentenced to one year in prison, while the other two were transported to Australia.

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## The Battle of Bossenden Wood continued

### Housing shortage

*But surely, in the current housing shortage, new homes are more important than a few rare birds and frogs, some old trees or the site of an obscure incident in the class struggle from two centuries ago?*

Nick Bano, in his new book "*Against Landlords: How to Solve the Housing Crisis*", argues that there is enough housing stock, the problem is the landlords and the law that is so heavily weighted in their favour. It is not the amount of housing available, but its cost, which, in turn, has a great deal to do with the landlordism that is at the heart of the present crisis. The Supreme Court noted, in a tenant's 2016 human rights challenge, that the present system was designed to ensure that "*the letting of private property will again become an economic proposition*". This not only drives up prices for would-be homeowners, but it stands in direct opposition to a programme of municipalising and decommodifying the homes that already exist. It also inflates land values, making new state-led building projects unfeasible.

### Environmental Vandalism

Solving the housing crisis does not need to involve an ecologically unforgivable project of mass-scale housebuilding. Nor need it involve asphaltting green belts or destroying ancient woodlands. It just requires the recognition that the private landlord is the enemy of affordability and ensuring that the housing economy is not defined by maximising the rental yields produced by an unregulated market.

Not only is the proposed destruction of The Blean environmental vandalism, but it is also unnecessary for any purpose other than enriching the landlords and property speculators, in whose numbers, unfortunately, we must count the management of the University of Kent. Let us hope that this new Battle of Bossenden Wood has a happier ending for the people of the area.

Save The Blean Campaign - <https://www.savetheblean.org/>

Barry Reay, "The Last Rising of the Agricultural Labourers: The Battle in Bossenden Wood, 1838", *History Workshop Journal*, Volume 26, Issue 1, Autumn 1988.

Nick Bano, *Against Landlords: How to Solve the Housing Crisis* (Verso, 2024)

Steve Cushion



Revolutionary Intellectual

## Larisa Reisner

by Cathy Porter, Haymarket £30

**Larisa Reisner was a Bolshevik poet, writer, journalist, naval commissar, Comintern agent and Soviet diplomat.**

Cathy Porter published a short biography of Reisner for Virago in 1988. This is a completely new book, the result of decades of research. Porter has written numerous other books on Russia, including a classic biography of Alexandra Kollontai, as well as translating works by Kollontai, Maxim Gorky and Sofia Tolstoy and a book on Moscow in World War II. Her new book is a staggering feat of scholarship and deserves a place with the best revolutionary biographies.

Porter has mined a vast range of primary sources, published and unpublished memoirs and writings of Reisner's contemporaries, mostly only available in Russian. The book has extracts and detailed analysis of Reisner's writings – her poetry, journalism and studies of workers' lives, some of which will be published by Haymarket later this year, edited by Porter.

### A Picture of Russian Intellectual Life

Reisner was born in 1895 in Lublin in Russian Poland, growing up in Berlin, where her family was in exile (her father was a socialist university lecturer who was later to draft the first Soviet constitution), returning to Russia in 1907, when still a teenager and then a student at the Psychoneurology Institute (Freud being very much in fashion), she participated in the liberal and socialist intellectual elite of St Petersburg.

The book is fascinating and I had difficulty putting it down. Porter paints a brilliant picture of Russian intellectual life in the pre-revolutionary and revolutionary years. Reisner seems to have known everybody that mattered – the playwright and novelist Leonid Andreev, poets Alexander Blok, Osip Mandelstam, Anna Akhmatova and Nikolai Gumilov (Reisner's first lover), Boris

Pasternak (who based Lara, heroine of *Dr Zhivago* on Larissa), theatre director Vsevolod Meyerhold and Vladimir Mayakovsky, among other lesser known intellectuals. Not surprisingly, Reisner was widely seen as the epitome of the 'new woman'.

In the early years of the war Larisa wrote for anti-war journals, including Gorky's *Chronicle* and *New Life*, and in the Spring of 1917 joined the education programme of the Petrograd Soviet. Teaching in Kronstadt, she meets the naval commander and Soviet chair, Fyodor Raskolonikov, who becomes her lover and then after the October Revolution, her husband. Though not previously politically active, she then joins the Bolshevik party and becomes a journalist, writing for Soviet journal, *Izvestiya*. Joining her husband who was commander of the Volga naval flotilla, Reisner becomes a naval political commissar, fighting in the battle for Tsaritsyn, (later Volgograd and Stalingrad) before following the flotilla to Astrakhan on the Caspian Sea and helping to drive the British out of northern Persia, her writing later published as *The Front*.

### Afghanistan

In the summer of 1920, Larisa is teaching at workers college in Kronstadt, before joining her husband in Kabul where he had been appointed as Soviet ambassador. Larisa's brother Igor is already in the Soviet mission. Larisa writes about her life in the local diplomatic circle, which is dominated by the Soviet Union's British rivals. Larisa gains access to Emir Amanullah's harem, where she seeks to persuade the women to support the Bolsheviks, her journalism is later published in book form as *Afghanistan*. In 1923, Reisner returns to Moscow, having divorced Raskolinikov, and is then sent by the Comintern as an agent to Berlin and Hamburg, in the aftermath of the failed communist uprising, leading to articles later published as *Hamburg at the Barricades* and *Berlin October 1923*. Reisner is joined in Germany by the Comintern secretary, the Pol-



Лариса Рейснер

**Larisa Reisner** continued

ish-German communist Karl Radek, with whom she has an affair. Radek was later to be blamed for the failure of the German revolution, and becomes a member of the Left Opposition and dies (probably murdered) in a labour camp in 1939.

### **Coal Iron and Living People**

In 1924 and 1925, Larisa is sent by *Izvestiya* to report on the lives on miners in the Urals (published as *Coal Iron and Living People*), and then to the Ruhr valley (published as *In Hindenburg's Country*). Returning to Moscow, she starts researching the history of the Decembrist uprising of 1825, before dying of typhoid fever in the Kremlin hospital in February 1926, at the age of 30.

Reisner was a commentator rather than a political activist. She was not involved in the factions fighting within the Russian socialist movement. She was not a feminist in the sense of being active in the movement for women's liberation led by Kollontai, but through her activity, shared the experience of her male colleagues. Her books describe the lives of working men and women and the reality of the revolutionary years. In the past Reisner has appeared only as a footnote in the writings of or on the men with whom she worked and lived – Raskolnikov was to publish two volumes of memoirs, though without mentioning his violent treatment of Larisa or her three miscarriages. Radek published a memoir of Larisa in his *Portraits and Pamphlets* published in 1934, without acknowledging their relationship. Unlike some of her contemporaries, Larisa never wrote about herself. Porter's book is not just a brilliant biography of an important individual, but also an evocative study of both the intellectual life of pre- and post- revolutionary Russia, and of the realities of life in those dramatic times.

Duncan Bowie

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### **Recent SHS Talks (online)**

The society is pleased to be able to attract leading historians to deliver talks at our regular events, mostly now held online. Many of these speakers are also members of the society. We aim to strike a balance between male and female speakers, and want to attract more women historians to share their research and perspectives with our international audience. What follows are our most recent talks held over the past 18 months or so.

2023

- **Riding Two Horses: Labour in Europe** with Glyn Ford (January)
- **Zionism During the Holocaust** with Tony Greenstein (January)
- **Louise Cripps Samoiloff** with Christian Høgsbjerg (April)
- **Utopianism for a Dying Planet: Life After Consumerism** with Prof Gregory Claeys (February)
- **James Aldridge: the greatest post-war novelist you have never heard of** with Helen Mercer (April)
- **Unfinished business? The ongoing break-up of the USSR** held in person after last year's AGM, (Francis King)
  - **Socialism in the English-speaking Caribbean** with contributors to the journal issue of the same title
  - **Labour Revolt in Britain 1910-14** with Prof Ralph Darlington (June)
  - **“Uncomradely and un-communist”- the CPGB and CPA Debate, 1947-1948** with Gregory Billam (September)
  - **The Silence of Oppression** with Marilyn Moos – (September)
  - **The “New” Lukács** with Prof Andrew Feenberg – (October)
  - **Decadent Women: Yellow Book Lives** with Jad Adams (December)

2024

- **Larisa Reisner. A Biography** with Cathy Porter – (February)
- **Perfidious Albion: Britain & The Spanish Civil War** with Prof Paul Preston (March)
- **A Devilish Kind of Courage Anarchists, Aliens and the Siege of Sidney Street** with Andrew Whitehead (April)
  - **Raphael Samuel and People's History**, with Anna Davin and John Merrick, held in person at Marx House following this year's AGM (June).

Most of these talks were recorded and can be found on YouTube or the SHS website.

Book review

## **‘Metaphysical Animals: How Four Women Brought Philosophy Back to Life’**

by *Clare Mac Cumhaill & Rachel Wiseman* Vintage, 2023 (Chatto & Windus, 2022)

The historical circumstances leading to four women studying reviving philosophy at Oxford university were unique. The Second World War needed men. Although Neville Chamberlain had declared ‘peace in our time’ trenches were already being dug in London parks. Many men left their studies to serve providing an opportunity for women to step forward. Until 1925, Oxford university women had to be chaperoned around to go anywhere including lectures. When Virginia Woolf wanted to visit one of the famous libraries in Oxford in 1929, she was quickly ushered out by a friendly, but insistent, older gentleman. Luckily times had changed. Mary Scrutton (later Midgley) and Iris Murdoch both met at Somerville College and soon became friends. Elisabeth Anscombe won a scholarship to St Hughes’ College in 1937. The fourth woman, Phillipa Bosanquet (later Foot) joined Murdoch and Scrutton in Somerville. Her background was upper class and an education in her home. She managed to escape and was coached for the university entrance examination.

### **Political Work**

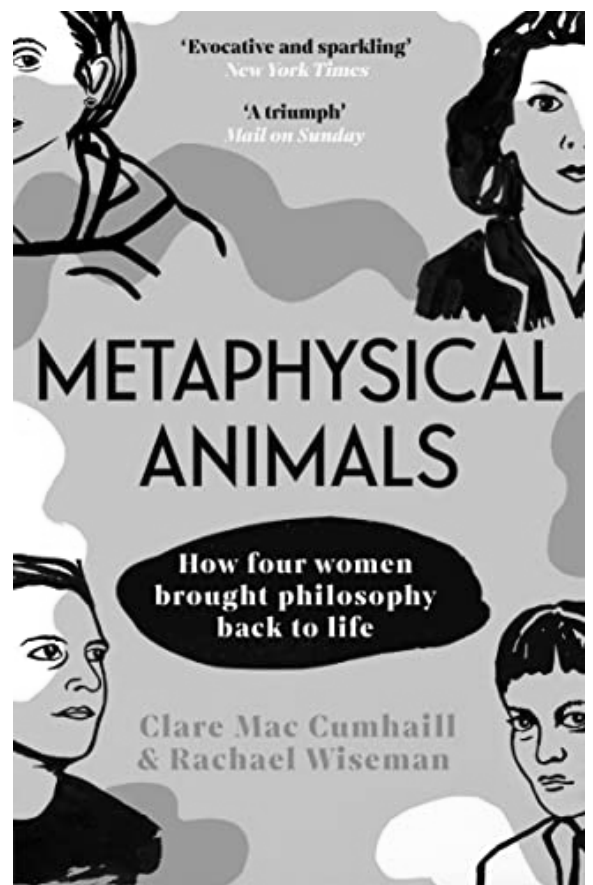
Mary and Iris joined the Labour Club and began political work. ‘*The very first thing I did when I arrived in Oxford was to join the Communist Party,*’ Iris said. Boars Hill became one of the haunts where the metaphysical animals gathered. All four women graduated with a first. Murdoch, Foot, and Midgley joined the war effort by entering the Civil Service. Murdoch thought they would not want her, but she gained a post at the Treasury and duly copied documents which were relayed to the Soviet Union.

The book covers the period 1939 to 1956. During the war years, the authors paint vivid pictures of the cold, the darkness due to blackouts and the difficulty of buying food. One of the women’s favourite haunts during those years was the Lyons’ Teashop where they spent many hours in deliberations on how to take philosophy forward. The friendship among the four women developed during these talks in a situation when the war came very close to home and bombs hit London and Birmingham, while London evacuees filled the streets of Oxford. Friedrich Waismann, Fritz Heinemann, Richard Walzer and Heinz Cassirer were some of the many European scholars who were arrested at the time and sent to the Isle of Man.

Before WW1 German Idealist philosophy based on the works of Emmanuel Kant and Hegel had come under attack by the ‘Vienna Circle’ who chose to engage in a philosophy guided by new ideas in science which led to the development of ‘logical positivism’. Bertrand Russell adopted these ideas together with G E Moore, author of ‘The Refutation of Idealism’. It proposed that ‘there is no interconnection between mind and world’. The task of philosophy was considered similar to science ‘to discover and describe a wholly independent reality.’ Thus, the real world was shut out of philosophy.

### **Power Struggle**

There followed a power struggle in Oxford. In 1933 at a public philosophy meeting a young man, Freddie Ayer, shouted out: ‘You are all facing extinction, you Realists and Idealists.’





## Metaphysical Animals continued

Years after the war, as A J Ayer, became a prominent broadcaster on the BBC. Noisy attacks from the Ayer's team continued to disrupt lectures with calls of 'What on earth do you mean by that?' Ayer declared that 'since talk of good and bad, right and wrong, justice and virtue, cannot be translated into the language of empirical sciences, this talk is nonsense: 'So-called moral judgments are merely expressions of personal preferences.' What comes next, he said, is that 'philosophy has come to an end.' The transcendent and mysterious world that inspires doubt, despair, poetry and art, was annihilated. The connection with making sense of the real world with its moral dilemmas was shattered.

### Fear, Happiness, Loneliness and Hunger

Iris, Mary, Elisabeth and Philippa thus encountered a world of a philosophy that had abdicated any affiliation with the real world of fear, happiness, loneliness and hunger. The four women, each in their own way considered this development in philosophy unacceptable. After all, they saw death and destruction, hunger, and poverty all around them. When knowledge of the Nazi death camps became known they argued 'it must be possible to say, 'fighting the Nazis is good' and 'being a Nazi is bad'. Based on their own visceral experiences each moved along a path to find the answers to respond to Ayer's calls of 'What do you mean by that'. They read Plato 'out of darkness into light, towards Knowledge, Goodness and Beauty.' They learnt from Donald MacKinnon that 'allegory need not be a fairy tale; that paradox and poetry can help to catch the sense of the world'.

Mary found that Marxism allowed an intelligible unity between nature and humanity. Moral freedom is not something you can chose: 'True moral freedom is the ability to look steadily at reality and to see things justly'.

In the 1980s, when the Tory government was closing down one philosophy department after another, Mary commented:

'Philosophy is not a luxury. It is something we humans need in order for our lives to go well. We cannot entrust our future to technology and artificial intelligence. They are comforting sedatives. When it comes to figuring out what to do next – about the climate, war, education, the environment – it is ultimately suicidal'.

*Greta Sykes*

Elizabeth  
Anscombe



Philippa Foot  
(née Bosanquet)



Mary Midgley  
(née Scrutton)



Iris  
Murdoch



### AL MORTON MEMORIAL LECTURE 2024

#### The World of the Ranters Revisited

Speaker *Dr Ariel Hessayon*

7pm, 24th September 2024 online

Dr Ariel Hessayon is Head of the Department of History, Goldsmiths, University of London  
Registration details coming soon on the SHS website

# The Shoulders We Stand On:

## How Black and Brown people fought for change in the United Kingdom

By *Pretti Dhillon* Dialogue Books, London, 2023

*“This book tells the stories of ten remarkable movements, campaigns and organisations led by Black and Brown people in the 1960s to 1980, that fought against racism and capitalism, and impacted the way we live in the UK.”*

This book covers, in just twelve chapters, the complexity of UK based organisations that arose to fight racism from the late 1950s to the early 1980s, and briefly outlines the wider societies and struggles of which they were a key part. Many readers will know very little about these struggles. Others will know of some of them, and yet others will have heard much more. Whatever category you fall into, I encourage you to read this book. This book, unlike earlier pamphlets, articles and books that dealt with these issues, can be found in regional public libraries like mine. All those interested in decolonisation in education need to be aware of this book, which is a vital learning tool.

### Anti-Racist Resistance

In a short review there is too little room to discuss the importance of the many events mentioned in the book. For instance, the responses to the Nottingham and Notting Hill racist riots of 1958 are arguably a crucial turning point in the story of anti-racist resistance and the leadership that Black working class people developed. Is this brought out as fully as it might have been in Dhillon’s book? Such positive discussions are prompted by this book as part of learning.

This sense of learning persists as the ‘movements, campaigns and organisations’ are outlined in the successive chapters. The reader is led through the early struggles of the Indian Workers Association(s) [IWA(s)], then back to the Bristol Bus Boycott, and onwards through the development of the UK Black Power movement and the struggles against racist education practices, such as labelling Black children ESN. Having reached the 1970s the author briefly outlines the growth of the Black and Asian women’s groups, e.g. Brixton Black Women’s Group (BWG) and Organisation of Women of Asian and African Descent (OWAAD).

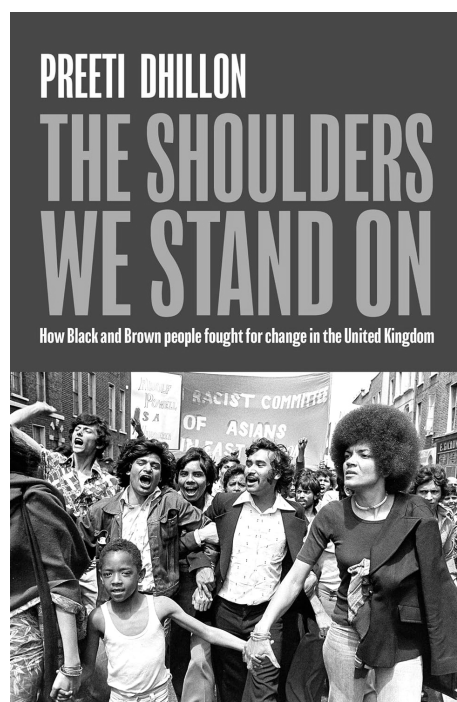
As some of the struggles are better known today, the last four chapters cover events likely to be more familiar. For instance, the Grunwick Strike of 1976-78 remains well known. Less well known is the resistance to racist violence in Brick Lane and elsewhere, with the growth of Asian youth movements. Though resistance to racist violence from Asian youth groups had started earlier in the 1970s, it is Brick Lane in the late 70s that the author focuses on. This enables her to give a local historical context of both housing and poverty and wider regional organisation against violence (including racist murder).

### Decolonising Education

She ends the book in 1981 because “it was a defining moment in the UK’s history of race and racism”. The ‘New Cross Fire’ of that year was followed by ‘uprisings’ in the area along with marches and campaigns. Other uprisings followed across England in 1981, all of which led to both a brief ban on marches and an official enquiry under Lord Scarman. The Scarman Report in November 1981 dismissed allegations of police racism as a factor in causing or aggravating the events. This left racist policing untouched and tougher policing methods free to develop.

The book is a welcome contribution towards decolonising education.

*Danny Reilly*



## An East End Shootout

# A Devilish Kind of Courage

By *Andrew Whitehead*, Reaktion Books £15.99

The story of the Houndsditch murders and the Sydney Street siege of 1910 have been told before. Whitehead, a leading historian of British anarchism, not only retells the story in a comprehensible and readable narrative, but has found new sources in the London Metropolitan and national Archives including newspaper reports, Home Office, police and fire brigade records. The anarchists involved were of Latvian and Russian origin, whose contacts with the indigenous anarchist movement were limited. They were members of the Jubilee Street anarchist club and knew Rudolph Rocker and the Jewish anarchists in the *Arbayter Fraynd* group. They also knew the Italian anarchist Enrico Malatesta who ran an engineering workshop in Islington at the time and (unwittingly) provided equipment used in the raid on the Houndsditch jeweller's shop, which led to the death of three policemen and one of the raiders, George Gardstein, who had shot the policemen. One of the more curious aspects of the story is that Malatesta, though interviewed by the police, avoided arrest, conviction and deportation. As the two surviving raiders, Fritz Svars and Josef Sokoloff were killed in the Sydney Street siege, dying in the fire, which was probably instigated by the police to smoke out the raiders who fought of the police and army for several hours, there was no one left to convict of an actual crime and the police failed to pursue any of the raiders associates, with the exception of Nina Vassileva, Svars' girlfriend, who had tended the dying Gardstein, was convicted of being an associate of the gang, before being released on appeal.

### **Peter the Painter**

The Houndsditch raid and the Sidney Street siege are always associated with 'Peter the Painter' though there is no evidence that he was either directly involved in the raid or the Siege. Identified by the police at the time as Peter Piatkov, his real name, only recently revealed, was actually Janis Zaklis. Zaklis had a long history of socialist and anarchist activism in Latvia then under Russian Tsarist control), being a leading figure in the Latvian insurrection in 1905 before being expelled from the socialist party for unauthorised activity, taking several colleagues with him, and then active in Latvian exile circles in London, Marseilles and the US. While the East End events of 1910 were unprecedented as far as British politics were concerned, and attracted massive media attention, the Latvian revolutionaries had an extensive record of expropriations and armed conflict with the authorities in Latvia and in the US. In the UK, the group had been involved in unsuccessful attempts at robberies in Tottenham and Motherwell in Scotland. While Whitehead traces the activities of the Latvian group before and after Sidney Street, reference should be made to the earlier extraordinary study by Phillip Ruff, *A Towering Flame*, published in 2019, which provided a detailed chronological narrative of the group's activities from Latvian sources.

### **Latvian Exiles**

Few of the Latvian and Russian anarchists spoke English, and it is unsurprising that they had little contact with the British labour movement. However two of the Latvian exiles in London who remained socialists did – Jakob Peters, who was in fact Svars' cousin, who was a member of the British Socialist Party, who returning to Russia, became deputy head of the Bolshevik Cheka after 1917, and Alexandr Zernis, who was to translate a study of the Revolution in the Baltic Provinces of Russia, published by the Independent Labour Party in its Socialist Library series in 1907 (with a forward by none other than Ramsay Macdonald), which was published anonymously but actually written by the Latvian socialist Hermanis Punga (who went on to become foreign minister of independent Latvia). Zernis joined the Tolstoyan colony at Tuckton house near Bournemouth ran by Vladimir Chertkov. Incidentally, Zernis was the father of Melita Norwood, revealed in 1999 as having been a long-term Russian agent (and inspiration for the 2018 film *Red Joan*).

*Duncan Bowie*

# **The Creole Archipelago: Race and Borders in the Colonial Caribbean**

By **Tessa Murphy**, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021

This book, in great detail, recounts the history of the Kalinago people of the Caribbean. Barbados may have been uninhabited when the British started to colonise the Caribbean region, but the other small islands of the Lesser Antilles certainly were not. The native inhabitants of the islands stretching from Guadeloupe to Tobago were known as the "Kalinago" and their maritime civilisation resisted European colonisation, slowly retreating to their heartland in St Vincent and Dominica but, a combination of diplomacy and military action, they were able to seriously delay the development of the plantation economy on the islands.

## **Saint Kitts Massacre**

British and French settlers, who were normally hostile to each other, nevertheless allied in 1626 to massacre the Kalinago inhabitants of St Kitts, thereafter dividing the island between them. Having driven the Kalinago from Martinique in 1658, the French colonists were unable to advance further and, in 1660, a treaty between French, British, and Kalinago representatives formally recognised Kalinago control of the islands of Dominica and St Vincent. Grenada was not covered by the treaty and constant skirmishing severely restricted French development of a plantation economy there. Using the prevailing winds, enslaved Africans frequently escaped from Barbados in stolen boats and arrived in St Vincent. Initially, the Kalinago frequently handed such escapees back to the British authorities or sold them to French settlers on Martinique, but, as relations deteriorated with the colonists, many of these Africans were integrated into Kalinago communities. This enabled the colonisers to change the narrative and started calling these new communities "Black Caribs", using the story of a shipwrecked slave ship to justify taking the lands guaranteed to the Kalinago by treaty.

## **Seven Years War**

Over the next century, and despite treaties, the constant expansion of the plantation system increasingly encroached on the remaining Kalinago territory, however, by skilfully playing on the rivalry in the region between the British and French empires, they were able to maintain a measure of independence. The turning point was the Seven Years War between Britain and France. The 1763 Treaty of Paris gave Dominica, St. Vincent, Grenada, and Tobago to Britain, while France gained St. Lucia and maintained control of Guadeloupe and Martinique. This apparently definitive division of the Lesser Antilles encouraged both empires to expand sugar production on their islands, a process that encroached on Kalinago land and led to the Carib War of 1772-73. Using the Africans who had joined the Kalinagos to recast them as a Maroon community of escaped slaves rather than the Indigenous population, the settlers sought to remove them from St Vincent and seize their lands. Despite the overwhelming military force of the British Army, Kalinago guerillas, who managed to obtain supplies of firearms from neighbouring French islands, fought the British to a standstill. A treaty in 1773 granted the Kalinago the eastern side of the island.

## **Garifuna**

Hostilities broke out again in 1795 in the context of the war between Britain and Revolutionary France, when Kalinago forces, aided by French irregulars, managed to seize most of St Vincent except the capital. A major British military expedition by General Ralph Abercromby eventually suppressed the Kalinago/French opposition in 1797. The surviving Kalinago were rounded up and deported from Saint Vincent to the island of Roatán off the coast of present-day Honduras, where they became known as the Garifuna people. The main centres of Garifuna population today are Honduras, Belize, Guatemala and New York. The Garifuna language was declared a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity in 2008 along with Garifuna music and dance, which received widespread recognition through the work of musicians Andy Palacio, Aurelio Martinez and The Garifuna Collective, examples of whose work are freely available on YouTube, making a beautiful soundtrack to accompany this fascinating book.

*Steve Cushion*