

REVIEW: ROOTS OF RED CLYDESIDE

Ian S. Wood

William Kenefick and Arthur McIvor (eds) (1996), **Roots of Red Clydeside, 1910-1914?**, Edinburgh: John Donald, pb, £10, ISBN 0859764346, 270pp.

Edwin Muir became a Socialist in Glasgow in the years before 1914, as big an emotional turning point, he tells us in his superb autobiography, as his religious conversion during his adolescence in Orkney. He recalls it almost as a healing experience which brought him to terms with an urban environment alien to him and made him feel better about his humdrum jobs and his own personal anxieties:

Having discovered a future, in which everything, including myself, was transfigured, I flung myself into it, lived in it, though every day I still worked in the office of the beer-bottling factory, settling the accounts of the lorry men and answering the jokes of the slum boys. My sense of human potentiality was so strong that even the lorry men and the slum boys were transformed by it; I no longer saw them as they were, but as they would be when the society of which I dreamed of was realised.

Muir's vision of Socialism as an attainable earthly paradise was widely shared, and sustained many activists who took part in the struggles that created the heroic legend of Red Clydeside. Political action, in council chambers and Parliamentary contests contributed to the legend, as well as the workplace militancy which is the prime concern of this important collection of essays edited by William Kenefick and Arthur McIvor. Figures like James Maxton and John Wheatley were not directly involved in the disputes and strikes in the period covered by this book, though Wheatley's years at the coalface made him no stranger to collective action against employers, a point perhaps missed in this book.

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Review: Roots of Red Clydeside

The editors' concern is in fact to re-situate the origins of Red Clydeside in the period preceding the war, thus shifting the emphasis away from the Clyde Workers Committee and the 1919 forty-hours strike by engineering workers to years in which employers went on the offensive in many industries to break workplace union organisation. Company paternalism which has featured in much recent work on Clydeside labour history was breaking down well before the war.

One of the editors, Arthur McIvor, in a stimulating contribution, shows clearly that its supposed benefits, in terms of preferential pay and company housing, were largely confined to office staff, salaried employees and skilled men and were never available to women or to labourers. Erosion of such benefits as these were emerges in his chapter as one half of what he calls a pincer movement against organised labour, the other being the application of 'Taylorism', American inspired management theory based on production speed-ups and relentless surveillance of the individual employee's work rate.

Skilled workers were better placed to resist this employers' offensive, but Jim Hinton makes the case that sectionalism, not solidarity, is what drove much of the pre-1914 activism in Clydeside workplaces. In the steel industry, for example, skilled men sharing with their labourers appalling conditions and acute dangers were paid by tonnage. Labourers were paid by the hour and had their wages paid them by skilled men and smelters who acted in fact as sub-contractors for companies whose profits they hoped to share through sliding-scale pay systems.

Only during the war, Alan McKinlay shows us in his contribution, were shipyard labourers on the Clyde organised into unions, but before 1914 the boilermakers' union had cooperated with employers to prevent this happening. Platers and riveters, in his account of their role, emerge as 'economic militants', tenacious in defence of their own special workplace status and above all of free movement among the different yards. This was central to the work culture of the shipyard artisan, and company attempts to use the war as a reason for limiting it proved explosive, especially when the state supported them.

Shop stewards played a part in some of these pre-war workplace struggles but Dr McKinlay's chapter and those of others in this excellent collection drive home the point that they had in fact built up little in the way of a permanent organisation anywhere on the Clyde before 1914 outside one or two engineering plants.

Scottish Affairs

When they did organise with any success they could also be easily targeted by a determined multinational employer like Singer at Clydebank in 1911. This is the subject of a most illuminating piece of research by the Glasgow Labour History Workshop, a vivid demonstration of what a group-based investigation can yield. Women workers at this enormous sewing machine works emerge as the key players throughout this strike, possibly the most important of all in Clydeside before 1914, precisely because so many activists were victimised and dismissed, taking elsewhere their experience of workplace organisation. Here, the workshop group argue, we have 'both tangible and organic links between the pre-war labour unrest and the classic era of "Red Clydeside" during the First World War and immediate post-war years'.

Every chapter in this book is interesting, and several are of conspicuous value in enlarging our concept of 'Red Clydeside', but they also pose some useful questions for a reviewer who has moved away from direct involvement in labour history. Virtually all the contributors are schooled in the disciplines of a social and economic history that sees Scottish history as a mere variant of larger English themes. Workplace activism and employer's responses to it have perhaps to be looked at in such comparative terms but it is an approach that allows little for what is distinctive and even unique to Scotland.

Michael Fry has argued this view forcefully in his contribution to **The Manufacture of Scottish History**, a stimulating volume of essays edited in 1992 by Ian Donnachie and Chris Whatley (Polygon). It is not essential to share Fry's Tory views to accept much of his case, especially if you believe Scotland's political and industrial history to be of importance in its own right. The contributors to the Kenefick and McIvor book may not individually deny this, but the collective effect of their work can seem to. For a Scotland where political nationhood could be within reach, this is to be lamented because history has a vital part to play in such a process.

Finally, a reviewer can be left wondering whether books of this type and the micro-history of workplace confrontations, important though they are, give us a full picture of working class culture in pre-1914 Clydeside. Thousands of Clydeside workers were patriots in a British cause for which they volunteered in 1914 and 1915. Schooling, popular literature and the associational network of churches, Boys Brigade and Orange Lodges predetermined the decisions that many made when Kitchener's call came, and a Glasgow Socialist like John Wheatley, while opposing war in 1914, recognised the potency of working class patriotism. He resented its exploitation but he never mocked it either.

Review: Roots of Red Clydeside

Books like this are important but give us only a partial picture of the values and beliefs of Clydeside workers at the opposite end to us of a century now slipping away.

November 1996