

## **REVIEW: COSSING BORDERS**

*Christopher Harvie*

Bernard Crick, **Crossing Borders: Political Essays**, London: Continuum, 2001, 216pp. Hardback, £25, ISBN 0-8264-5474-7.

One of those lines one will remember until death comes from Stendahl, writing about crossing into Italy as a teenager with the French army, not actually seeing much of the place because of the maize-plantations of the Po basin, but rejoicing that he was now at last there. 'Two days later I lost my virginity, in circumstances which I have entirely forgotten about.'

Given the balance of Italy, sex and politics in **The Charterhouse of Parma**, you can see what he was getting at, what James Kennaway once called that long, low compulsion. In my early Edinburgh student years, the vibes came from reading Richard Crossman's appropriately-titled **The Charm of Politics**, not long before Tam Dalyell schlepped the great man to address the Labour Club. This was the discursive, not the Bevanite Crossman: essays on the Cold War, on Ignazio Silone, H. A. L. Fisher, Adlai Stevenson: mostly from a **New Statesman** far different from today's Groucho Club twaddler. Crossman was pimping for politics as enchantress, all right, but he was also usefully précising long and demanding books, in good WEA style, throwing in critical appraisals, jokes which made an editorial point, and dispensing with any of the social science references – 'Orwell (1948) owed much to Koestler (1940) and Burnham (1940)' - which constipate academic texts.

Bernard Crick's collection is as useful and as compulsive. Though from a political academic rather than an academic politician (I don't think he's ever done tabloids: incredible to think that Crossman once had a regular column in the long-lobotomised **People**) there are few dull pages, lots of nifty argument-

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teasing-out-and-packaging (yes, it is possible), and enough *stimmung* to goad reasoned dissent.

That will come later. I appear somewhere as 'my Scottish friend' – Sir Bernard's usage being the same as Hugh MacDiarmid's: someone who's in for a whack – and in due course I'll get in my retaliation. But what we have here are pieces which challenge the theorist to prescribe for on-the-ground problems, chiefly concerning the infernal machine of Northern Ireland, and useful introductions to some of Crick's predecessors in the big beast of public philosophy line: from Hannah Arendt to Bernard Shaw.

Crick, like Orwell, is a 'politics of identity' man – seeking out the 'customary' (rather than Bagehot's 'dignified' parts) of political society which bind people into the messy business. He is not an élitist, but he is not a 'machinery of government' man either, and not in the least a technocrat. Which is, up to a point, good. But it also means that he rather casually throws the whole wealth-generating process over to the market – as long as it is a European market – and sees politics as essentially to do with solidarity, promoted through socialisation, redistribution and participation. Hence his current, important work on citizenship education, his Orwellian egalitarianism, and notable sympathy for the folk on the periphery.

So his essays on British identity and Scottish nationalism are important, but worth a quarrel on a fairly fundamental issue. On p.47 I am diagnosed with

a kind of social historian's disease; everything is related to everything else, and everything he writes goes round in huge swirling circles, vortices and corkscrews.

This was written of **Cultural Weapons** in 1992. A fair cop, maybe, but that was an apprentice work. In 1994 I did write **Fool's Gold**, the only history so far of North Sea oil and its political and social consequences. Before then, three very large biographies of Harold Wilson had come out, by Ben Pimlott, Austen Morgan and Philip Ziegler (Pimlott and Morgan being political scientists) which managed to ignore it – the central economic issue of 1970s Britain – completely. Even Ingsoc's determined amnesia did not work on such a scale!

This was not I think deliberate, but a cock-up arising from the compartmentalised academia of which Crick elsewhere rightly complains: interdisciplinarity is messy but often necessary. A homeopathic dose of 'social

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historian's disease' would however be useful to him, particularly when dealing with those ticking packages in Ulster and (I fear) perhaps also in Scotland. Identity politics can be knocked sideways by 'imperfect markets' and the various other euphemisms for industrial collapse. The fact that the workforce of Belfast's Queens Island has gone from 20,000 to 200 since 1970 has had something to do with the high testosterone/low tolerance of the city's male youth, and their development of a toxic 'fourth sector' of drug-dealing career criminality which has proved alarmingly exportable since Good Friday 1998, as well as menacing to the peace process. Some of this breakdown is the responsibility of *ci-devant* lefties whom Sir Bernard welcomed into mainstream Labour, our anti-industry Chancellor most of all. Trotskyism and neo-liberalism have the charm of going with the flow, not the challenge of managing compromise – 'O voter, spare an honest curse:/Support the bad against the worse!': the latter being the lesson I derived, thirty years back, from **In Defence of Politics**.

It is this quality of high-level contestation that marks the five biographical essays that end the book: on Arendt, Gellner, Berlin, Laski and Shaw. The subjects are mostly Jewish: which makes one see as the hinge of the volume Crick's lucid critique of Daniel Goldhagen's **Hitler's Willing Executioners**, in which the writer's undoubted expertise in specific areas was married, by somewhat dubious means, to an imputation of racially-programmed genocidal tendencies to the whole German people. The result of this is something we are having to live with:

So passionate remembering achieves a kind of transference into the defence of the State, making criticism of Israel's Palestinian policy untouchable.

This brings to a head other doubts that Crick has about contemporary public debate, chiefly its deformation by politicians wholly obsessed with their own popularity, and newspapers and publishers equally preoccupied with 'the bottom line'. Crossman's **The Charm of Politics** was from Gollancz – not one of Orwell's heroes but someone concerned with political education – while **Crossing Borders** comes from a small London firm, which, like most small firms, has made a good fist of design and layout. But to revisit his pieces on John Smith and New Labour, is to get the sense of a battle being lost. Orwell's great stage for debate is empty, a new 'inner party' in conditions of formal democracy, being allowed to manipulate a drugged, alienated, half-educated populace. All power to Crick the Civic Dominie, in his attempt to

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remedy this, but he will have to take the tawse to our rulers as well as our soap-booze-and-dance befuddled bairns.

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