

REVIEW: JOHN SMITH

Neil MacCormick

Mark Stuart, **John Smith: A Life**, London, Politico's/Methuen, 2005 509 + xiii pp, hb, £25, ISBN: 1842751263; pb, 2006, £14.99, ISBN: 1842751565

It is hard to believe that twelve years have elapsed since John Smith's untimely death. So vivid was his personality that it is as though I had seen him and had a talk or a laugh with him just a few weeks ago. Yet twelve years it is – twelve years which have seen what seems nothing less than the betrayal of most of the democratic socialism in which John believed and for which he considered the Labour Party to be the proper vehicle. I do not mean to portray him as dyed-in-the-wool inveterate 'old labour', for he was always a pragmatist and never a doctrinaire 'clause IV' person, and he had principles that could take him to oppose his own party when that seemed right. His vote in favour of UK entry into the EEC (as it then was) is a case in point.

What is impossible to believe is that Smith as Prime Minister would ever have countenanced getting into a posture of open opposition to a substantial part of his own party in Parliament and out of it. He would not have wished to win victories in the teeth of his own party's ethos. He was certainly not someone who would have shirked taking the country to war if an extreme occasion demanded it and all other avenues had been closed off. To have gone to the House of Commons, however, and sought a mandate for military action against the rooted conviction of a majority of his own supporters is something I cannot believe he would ever have done.

Mark Stuart's **John Smith** is an extremely thorough and well-sourced account of John's life. Having been one of them, I am aware how sensitively

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and scrupulously he treated his sources. It is in many places fascinating, as in the discussion of Robin Cook's managing of the campaign to secure Smith the Labour leadership in 1992 after Neil Kinnock's resignation, or in that of the parliamentary guerrilla warfare around the ratification of the Maastricht Treaty, which broke the spirit of the Conservatives and fatally undermined John Major's leadership. The closing part of the book is a fascinating speculation about what a Smith prime ministership would have been like, and how far the Blair years fulfilled the promise of the Smith legacy, how far it became something quite different. Stuart's thesis is commendably cautious. Much of Labour 'modernisation' had got under way under Smith, so any idea of 'Attlee-ism re-born' as the badge of a Smith administration would have been well wide of the mark. Stuart acknowledges that some of the caution for which Smith was criticised would have affected to some extent the speed and to some extent the direction of developments.

There is much in what he says. One must remember, however, that he wrote his book before the current 'cash for peerages' scandal blew up. One can too easily make a plaster saint of deceased human beings whose feet were actually of the same clay as everyone else's, but I refuse to believe that this scandal would have arisen had Smith been at Number 10. Apart from anything else, he (in his 'caution') would have discountenanced the profound alienation of the party as electoral machine from its traditional roots and supporters that made necessary the desperate scramble for cash from other quarters in the run-up to May 2005. The spectacle of organisations whose bankers will not lend further money borrowing cash from private sources 'on commercial terms' to squander on bloated electioneering is in its own way astounding. In any other walk of life it would probably count as fraudulent trading. I cannot picture John Smith as a fraudulent trader.

Since no one knows another human being in all the phases of their life, and especially in politics when one is of an opposed political persuasion, one who reads a well-rounded biography learns much that was not available to direct experience. John and I – and Elizabeth too – were friends from student days, and he put up with my being a member of the SNP despite all. Mark Stuart is an accurate witness to the sides of Smith's life that I did know, and I am entitled to suppose that the same meticulous care attaches to the account of his parliamentary work and his contributions within his own party, finally as its leader. As a biography, this is a commendable performance on account of its accuracy, its thoroughness in tracking and sympathetically using available sources, its empathy with the subject coupled with that degree of detachment

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that is essential to objectivity. For me, however, the very thoroughness of the work gives it a somewhat solid character which does not bring out the element of mischief, the mercurial bonhomie and, on appropriate occasions, the expansive conviviality of the man himself. Perhaps that is the kind of thing that comes out more clearly from a personal memoir than a scholarly biography.

Wendy Alexander's recent collection of essays¹ by many hands about Donald Dewar, published to commemorate the fifth anniversary of his death, illustrates how personal memoirs differ from cool and scholarly biographies, reminding one of the weaknesses as well as the strengths of each genre. Certainly, the essays in Wendy's book show how much Dewar was his own man. There is in some current commentary a tendency for people to assume or even assert that Donald Dewar's dedication to the Scotland Bill and the Parliament it brought into being was a matter of piety towards the memory of his great friend. One is entitled to doubt this – perhaps John Smith would have done what Tony Blair did, and put Dewar into the Scottish Office had he won the election of 1997, thereby entrusting the devolution project to him, perhaps he would have left that business in Tom Clarke's (or, surely more probably, George Robertson's) hands. For Dewar, there is no doubt that the Secretaryship of State was the one prize in UK government that he always really wanted. Yet at one time Smith had seemed poised to deny him it, to his considerable distress.

Mark Stuart accurately accounts for John Smith's late conversion – but then indeed genuine commitment – to supporting a form of Scottish Home Rule. For Dewar, by contrast, the matter was one of an almost hereditary commitment, and certainly went back to his own boyhood. His grandfather had been a member of the Scottish Home Rule Association early in the twentieth century and he himself had been involved, at least through one of his aunts (the formidable Aunt Eleanor Dewar who was also a 'courtesy aunt' of my own), in the Scottish Covenant agitation of the late 1940s and early 1950s. If there was an element of piety in Dewar's commitment to the Scotland Act, it was to roots other and older than those of his friendship with Smith. Knowing as I well do how vituperative he could be about the Scottish

¹ Wendy Alexander (ed.) *Donald Dewar: Scotland's first First Minister* (Edinburgh: Mainstream, 2005); I confess to being one of the memorialists in this volume, and what I say there amplifies the point made in the body of the present text about Dewar's background.

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National Party, I would ascribe this to his similarity of outlook with nationalists rather than his difference. He could not forgive them (us) for portraying his patriotism as less intense or valid than theirs.

Anyway, all is now history, and what is not history is speculation. These were two great Scotsmen whose legacy will long survive them. Robin Cook was another sore loss to Labour Scotland and to Scottish politics and intelligence in public affairs. I expect (and hope) that their collective legacy will develop beyond its authors' intentions and become an evolution toward substantial, more probably actual, Scottish independence within the European Union. Whatever will be the case, Scotland already stands not where she did (no more 'alas poor country'). A subsisting legacy of these men is in the fact that we are again a self-governing polity within a larger union – a three-layered union, for the time being at least – living in peace and amity with our neighbours, most of whom find it difficult to find the West Lothian question exciting. That could change, if after the next UK election two Members from Fife hold the most powerful positions in the governance of the United Kingdom, while power may have shifted in the Scottish Parliament after the Scottish election of 2007. All is there to work and play for. How nice to reflect that Messrs Brown and Campbell were long term friends of Messrs Smith and Dewar, and were not wanting in respect for Cook.

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