

the 1970s and 1980s to focus attention on the motives and likely impact of American disinvestment. High points out that this was a somewhat erroneous explanation of the forces behind deindustrialization, but the particular myth of nation served workers and their unions well. Their movement against plant shutdowns culminated in a wave of plant occupations during the 1980s, the spread of national anxiety among the general population and political leaders, and significant assistance from the federal government.

High explains, however, that Canadian workers failed to stop the plant closings. They were no more successful in this respect than Americans and this makes his comparison of national unionization rates somewhat puzzling. He suggests that the divergence between the two countries, starting in the 1950s and now reflected in Canada's 41 percent rate of unionization, nearly double the level in the United States, is due to a greater capacity to resist plant closings and concessions. Perhaps this is true in part – following from the continued vibrancy of organized labor, the greater respect it shares among workers and the general public, and more hesitance among employers to attack unions. But there are many other reasons for the pitiful performance of organized labor in the US and much stronger showing in Canada.

High also suggests that Americans would have fared better if they rose “in defence of community based on nation” (166). It is not clear, however, how American workers would have used the same strategy as Canadians to successfully protect their interests, considering that Canadian nationalism seemed to work because it was anti-American. In the end, it seems, neither set of workers had a viable strategy for resisting plant shutdowns which, put in their proper context, are actually part of a new global mobility of capital. But High's book goes a long way in helping us to understand some of the more recent struggles in North America against that phenomenon.

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John Saville, *Memoirs from the Left* (London: The Merlin Press, 2003).

John Saville's accomplishments are many. He was the founder (with E.P. Thompson) of the *Reasoner* and the *New Reasoner*, editor of the *Dictionary of Labour Biography* and the British volumes of the *Dictionnaire biographique du mouvement ouvrier international*, long-time editor (with Ralph Miliband) of the *Socialist Register*, and one of the founders of the Society for the Study of Labour History. As Chair of Economic History at the University of Hull, Saville was instrumental in establishing an impressive labour history archive and he published over 100 books and articles in a prolific career spanning the

second half of the twentieth century. He knew many of the major figures of the postwar British left, as well as a diverse cast of characters ranging from Philip Larkin to Tariq Ali. Such a long and interesting life should produce an engaging book, but Saville's memoirs are a disappointment. More episodic than sustained narrative, they leave the reader with a long list of Saville's activities and acquaintances but little enlightened about his socialist convictions or the wider trajectory of the modern British left.

Saville's story begins in the days of "two sausages and chips for sixpence" (1), when he entered the London School of Economics (LSE) in 1934. Although Saville cannot recall having any strong political views before moving to London, by the end of his first term he had joined LSE's Socialist Society and Marxist Society, and had become a member of the British Communist Party. The reasons for his political commitment are not clear. Saville admits that he had "only a basic understanding of Marxism," but felt he belonged "to a world movement dedicated to an unyielding opposition to injustice and oppression" (11). His earliest and most enduring influence at LSE was Harold Laski; he immersed himself in Marx and Engels, John Strachey and the *Daily Worker*. Saville made friends with "students who were politically on the Left: middle-of-the-road Labour to communists" (3), demonstrated against Oswald Mosley's fascists in the East End of London and dined with R.H. Tawney, who was apparently impressed by the young student's knowledge of revolutionary China.

What we do not learn until halfway into the first chapter is that John Saville started life as Orestes Stamatopoulos. He was the son of a Greek engineer and a working-class woman from Lincolnshire who had met when his father came to England just before the First World War. Saville speculates that their marriage must have been deeply disapproved of by his father's family, upper-class Greek royalists "no doubt with the usual snobbery" (21). His father returned to Greece for military service shortly before Saville's birth in 1916 and was killed a few months later. His mother refused his father's family's offer to take the boy (alone) to Greece, leaving him instead in the care of friends and relatives while she supported herself as a domestic servant. Perhaps the origins of Saville's political commitment lie in this experience, although he does not say so. His stereotypical, but no doubt sincere, description of the working-class "Mammy" who first cared for him reflects his life-long admiration for the character and intelligence of working people: "She was midwife to the street, the support of all the women round her, ... gentle but tough-minded, immensely competent" (22). In 1922, Saville's mother found a position working for a widower named Saville, whom she eventually married. Orestes joined his mother, became a scholarship boy at the local grammar school and enjoyed a comfortable adolescence. It was not until the end of his university studies that he changed his name, adopting his stepfather's surname and choosing a new first

name, John.

Some of Saville's prewar adventures would be amusing were the earnest innocence of their hero not so palpable. He had a summer vacation job with the Workers' Travel Association, escorting British tourists around the Continent. Based in Paris for several months, Saville took the opportunity to attend a Socialist Party rally and hear debates over Léon Blum's non-interventionist policies in Spain. He also accompanied male travellers to Le Sphinx, a well-known brothel. Saville insists that he spent these evenings "sitting with Madame's assistant" and occasionally chatting with the "workers": "I regret now that I was not more sociologically inquisitive about their own lives, but these were the days long before I ever heard of oral history" (15). He later founded the Oral History Society.

Saville's formal education ended with his degree from LSE. He applied unsuccessfully for graduate scholarships but ended up working as a research economist for British Home Stores. Much more significant in the late 1930s was his political work, chiefly with the National Unemployed Workers' Movement (NUWM). Saville observes (inaccurately) that the NUWM's activities have been overshadowed by the Jarrow Marchers and he seeks to fill this lacuna with some stories of his own, such as his role in distracting the police with false information about the location of NUWM demonstrations. Saville also discusses British communists' growing sympathy towards the Soviet Union in the late 1930s, emphasizing the appeal of Stalin as an anti-fascist, anti-appeasement figure while seeking to avoid becoming an apologist for Stalin's abuses, the full scope of which only began to emerge in 1956.

Saville presents himself as nothing if not principled. He was called up for military service in the spring of 1940. Although the Communist Party encouraged its members to accept commissions if they were offered, Saville disagreed with the party line and refused three times, finishing the war as a gunnery instructor in India, where he developed close contacts with Indian Communists. The rejection of a commission enabled Saville to learn more about the lives of ordinary working-class men who thought he was "a snotty bastard" (38). The real victim of his decision was his wife, Constance, who had been a fellow Communist at LSE and was left to live in war-torn London with a young child on a very meagre separation allowance while Saville had, on the whole, a pretty good war. Indeed, Saville had a habit of leaving Constance in less than optimal circumstances – first during the war, when she was bombed out three times and he "was shocked and upset at her appearance" (76) upon his return in 1946, and then when Saville first accepted a lectureship in Hull and decided that it would be best for Constance and their son to remain alone in London for a further year.

Constance remains almost invisible in the rest of the book, "always helpful and wholly supportive" (108), but reappearing only briefly as a dedicated

fundraiser for the *Daily Worker*, an Aldermaston marcher (there is no indication that Saville joined her), and caregiver not only for their four children but also for the various students and hangers-on who used the Savilles' home as a base. The women Saville worked with, particularly Joyce Bellamy with whom he edited the *Dictionary of Labour Biography*, receive perfunctory praise. Saville notes that although Bellamy's own research was "lacking in theoretical understanding," "[s]he never complained and this was among her many virtues" (137). While it would be unfair to castigate Saville for reflecting the customs and attitudes of his upbringing, his account reinforces the tensions surrounding women and feminism in the labour movement and in socialist thought. This is not a topic to which he devotes any comment. Saville's heroes are working-class men: ordinary infantrymen, striking dock workers, and bright (male) adult education students, some of whose careers he traces in detail.

The centrepiece of the book is a chapter devoted to 1956. Khrushchev's revelations about Stalin at the Twentieth Congress placed British Communists in a difficult position. Saville is highly critical of the CPGB's slow response, calling the party's leaders "remarkably obtuse" (102) and recording his growing frustration with their refusal to facilitate open debate. Saville takes credit for realizing the implications of Khrushchev's speech immediately and contacting Harry Pollitt to express his concern. It was around this time that Saville got to know Edward Thompson, a friendship that led to the publication of three issues of *The Reasoner*. Although Thompson and Saville insisted that their goal was to promote discussion, not division, and they had strong supporters such as Doris Lessing, the Communist Party accused them of factionalism and they resigned.

Resignation was politically problematic for Saville, as it was for other British Marxists. He refused to join the Labour Party because he felt it was not sufficiently committed to fighting the "dogged conservatism" (118) that dominated the politics of the left. Saville realized "the achievement of socialism was never going to come about without a seriously organised opposition" with "a tighter discipline than that of the Labour Party" (113), yet he refused to accept the discipline of the Communist Party. Moreover, *The Reasoner* and its successor, *The New Reasoner*, contributed (as he admits) to the very divisiveness that he laments in the British left, encouraging the development of the New Left and the eventual merger with the *Universities and Left Review* to create the *New Left Review*.

Saville is critical of many aspects of modern Britain. He reserves particular disdain for the conservatism of the academic world: students, lecturers and policy-makers. From the outset, he accuses his colleagues of failing to be the kind of intelligentsia that takes any interest in "the wider cultural or political issues in the world beyond their stone or redbrick buildings" (1). In the 1960s,

Saville was disappointed (though unsurprised) by his students' lack of political awareness or radicalism, and by the brevity of student protests. Saville feels that his political views often made him unwelcome on university committees, although he insists that he was always in the right and trumpets his own accomplishments with somewhat dull regularity. He is an inveterate name-dropper and his constant character assessments become wearing, even patronizing: "He was also fairly stupid" (44); "A very agreeable man, much liked" (115); "the most interesting and intellectually lively of any working-class militant I have ever met" (120). To his credit, Saville is not a conspiracy theorist, despite the fact that he later realized his home and family had been watched by an MI5 agent in the early 1960s. Saville makes no reference to Harold Wilson's similar experience.

Since 1956, Saville has not found a political home. He votes Labour, but unhappily. In a rare moment of contemplation, Saville admits that he does not have a prescription to cure the ills of the left:

I have remained a Marxist in my understanding of the world we live in. But the most difficult problem ... is the question of organisation, and the extent to which intellectual leadership can move down to the rank and file of the membership, and remain acceptable. I remain unclear on a number of issues relevant to this central question, but at the same time I am fully aware that only a disciplined organisation can expect to offer the serious challenge to the powerful order of capitalist society that is so urgently needed (165).

It is surely ironic, then, that one of Saville's strongest criticisms of Britain's current government is that its internal discipline is too strong. According to Saville, Tony Blair's victory in 1997 was proof of the recent "decline of the many kinds of socialist thought and activity" (155). Saville argues that Blair lacks any understanding of Britain's labour movement while his "smoothness with words has been continuously used to camouflage his conservative/liberal ideas and policies" (185). Saville is, of course, highly critical of Britain's declaration of war against Iraq. He concludes that Britain is now in an unprecedented political situation, facing popular political discontent without effective opposition parties. Saville remains pessimistic about the future, but he is certain that "Blair will very properly be damned by history" (186). He may be right.

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