

Trade unionism and political power in Margot Heinemann's *The Adventurers* [1960]

Introduction

The Adventurers [1960] was Margot Heinemann's first and only published work of fiction. The novel addresses itself to a period of political history – 1943 to 1956 – which tracks the critical developmental paths of two organisations that had been at the heart of Heinemann's public, educational and literary life : the Communist Party of Great Britain [CPGB] and the Trade Union movement.

Heinemann's membership of the CPGB is described by Andy Croft [1995] as the defining aspect of her career as a creative writer :

“And while other writers and intellectuals began to group around the dissenting positions from which they left the Party in 1956, Heinemann was increasingly identified with the hardening cultural orthodoxies of King Street.”
[p197]

Her previous non-fiction output had developed on from her role as an economist and propagandist in the Labour Research Department [LRD] - which had been characterised by the production of pamphlets and booklets on the state of British workers health, wages and the potential impact of nationalisation on the coal industry. It was, therefore, not surprising that she was asked to take up the role of editor for the CP's cultural magazine, *Daylight*, which had set itself the goal of 'purging' so-called decadent self-indulgent or modernist writing in favour of a rigidly interpreted, Soviet-inspired, social realism.

1943 and 1944 turned out to be the key years of success and influence for the CPGB. In the wake of Soviet heroism at Stalingrad and the extraordinary sacrifices of the Red Army in the fight against Nazism, the Party had recruited extensively amongst influential intellectuals and, in turn, their presence was in good part responsible for overall Party membership exceeding 60,000 paid members for the first and only time. The CP also came close to formally affiliating to the Labour Party during the last years of World War Two and its influence on the rapidly evolving, politically aspirant trade union movement was also at its peak.

However, for the CPGB, this was as good as it ever got. In the following ten years the Party failed to develop a credible and supportable response to the steady flow of damaging revelations about the repressive regime of Stalin and his inflexible Soviet domestic and foreign policy. By 1956 the increasingly dictatorial approach to political, cultural and literary self-expression within the Party had resulted in swathes of resignations and culminated in 1956 with wholesale defections following the crushing of the uprising in Hungary.

The trade union movement, for Heinemann the other key pillar of the revolutionary labour movement, the trajectory was quite different. The close links between the trade unions and the Labour Party were being further cemented at the national political level despite the often vigorous work of CP members or sympathisers working at

local and branch levels. The future for this part of the labour movement was being interpreted by those organising and running the individual unions as not simply an industrial one but a political one. But this would not be the politics of revolution and worker power but that of partnership, management and bureaucracy – with confrontation kept as the ultimate lever for political change. 1943 – 1956 may have seen the rapid rise and fall of the CPGB as a serious political player in the country but it marked a period of transformation and influence for the trade unions that would peak in the Sixties and Seventies.

It is Heinemann's ability to engage with this huge set of external, political influences and still produce a novel that convinces and goes beyond the simple propaganda of most social realism that lifts the book out of the ordinary.

Portraying the trade unions

It has been argued that the biggest weakness of *The Adventurers* is its large cast of characters who fail, for the most part, to emerge as individuals. Marilyn Evans [1961] writing in the *New Left Review* identifies the issue in this way:

“Any weakness in conception isn't in the relationship between background and character, but between one character and another. The central characters aren't bought forward from the others and rounded out so they don't always feel like fully created human beings, at once subjective and objective.” [p63]

However, this criticism fails to acknowledge that possibly the most fully realised and believable 'character' that Heinemann presents us with the British Labour Movement itself. In many ways plot and characterisation in the book is at the service of the presentation of political ideas and ideology and the action described allows the author to comment upon key issues about the nature and behaviour of trade unions as organisations and the strengths and weaknesses of their active membership. This desire to explore some of the contemporary debates, both political and sociological, about the nature and behaviour of trade unions, may also explain the rather 'episodic' nature of the writing that Croft [1995 p.203] identifies.

The first half of the book is largely written in an optimistic vein. The book opens in the South Wales mining village of Abergoch in 1943 with the 18 year old Dan Owens facing imprisonment for refusing to become a 'Bevin Boy' and take his place down the pit as part of the war effort. The close knit mining community, structured around the trade union, recognise Dan's desire to leave his mining heritage behind ['escape' from punishing traditional employment was a common theme of much working class literature of the time – c.f. Raymond Williams *Border Country*] and use threats of unofficial strike action to try and gain Dan his freedom. With the help of the Regional official, Lewis Connor, seen by the local miners as something of a local hero, they are successful.

The central importance of the trade union to Abergoch as a community is convincingly portrayed but so too are the compromises and real-politic that Connor has to work with to bring about the desired result. Connor is aware that he not only has loyalties to the miners at the local level, he also has responsibilities in relation to his trade union at a national level. He recognises that coal needs to be dug as an

essential part of the war effort and that conscription to the mines is not opposed by the union at the national level but he also understands the local sensitivities of the members in Abergoch. His solution is to create a special case without creating a precedent and Dan is released because of his [trumped-up] medical condition – claustrophobia – which would in any case prevent him from working down the pit.

From here we follow Dan's progress out of the mining community and his pursuit of his dream of becoming a journalist – but a journalist who will fearlessly put the case of the miners and their trade unions before the British people. He attends a union sponsored college in Cambridge called 'Keir Hardie' [clearly modelled on institutions such as Ruskin College or Northern College] where he mixes with a range of fellow students with a diverse set of socialist and radical ideas. Despite initially feeling out of his depth and still fiercely loyal to the mining community he came out of, Dan is evidently gradually moving into another world.

The trade union movement's commitment to workers education was a key feature of this phase of its development. Whilst it was presented as a key way of developing the next generation of union leaders and working class political thinkers, it also contributed to fears over the 'embourgeoisement' of individuals and the resulting loss this might represent for the labour movement. Put in simple terms, 'embourgeoisement' represented the loss of class identity – as workers were introduced to an increasingly affluent and well educated life-style they would adopt the characteristic of the middle classes and reject their working class heritage. The work of the sociologists, Goldthorpe and Lockwood, *The Affluent Worker in the Class Structure* [1969] was the culmination of this strand of thinking.

Through Dan's journey Heinemann demonstrates a clear concern over this issue – it is at once a conundrum. The trade union and Labour Movement must stand for educational opportunity but in doing so run the risk of producing very dangerous opponents – individuals that are 'of' your world and understand its drivers but who side, in class terms, with the opposition. In the second half of the novel when optimism has turned to disappointment and frustration for most of the characters in the book, Dan's journey towards what Marx called 'false consciousness', continues. As his career in the newspaper industry gathers pace he is both literally and figuratively seduced by the corrupting power of money and influence. His privileged access to the miners of Abergoch is exploited by the newspaper proprietors he works for and Dan is shown as willingly colluding in the increasingly vituperative discourses against the trade union movement and participating in 'red scares' about the infiltration of communist influence in the upper ranks of the miners. Heinemann also hints at another treachery implicit in this battle. It is not a straight-forward case of the power and influence of the status quo versus the growing power of trade unions. This is also the status quo in collusion with increasingly powerful Labour Party supporting trade union leaders seeking to destroy the influence of the Communist Party and in so doing prefiguring the era of influence the unions would have in the 1960s and early 1970s characterised, or symbolised, by the 'beer and sandwiches' negotiations at Downing Street.

The ultimate symbol of Dan's journey to the dark side is the part he plays in the defeat and humiliation of Lewis Connor when he seeks election as a national union representative. It is clear, given Connor's close affiliation with the miners of

Abergoch, that his defeat in the election, brought about by revelations from Dan about Connor's past affiliations, is also a defeat for the community. This is something that Dan can't escape when he tries to return home and finds himself permanently outside the community he once belonged to.

However, if Dan's journey is full of bitter reality, so too is that of Lewis Connor as he discovers that the skilled negotiator he proved himself to be at the beginning of the book has a more difficult and demanding other side to it. Connor's concern is that the nationalisation of the pits he so wanted has turned him from being a popular leader into a 'fire-fighter' – someone there to mediate and to deal with rogue troubles. In Connor's story Heinemann is turning her attention to the issue of 'bureaucratisation' and the way in which the trade union activist can be neutralised by incorporation. Richard Hyman [1971] explores differing versions of the way in which this process works – from Lenin's view that it is an inevitable function of trade unionism within a capitalist system to that of Trotsky who saw it as a deliberate ploy of capitalism to offer activists responsibility and thereby disarm them. However, Heinemann's position on this seems closer to that expressed by the U.S. sociologist C. Wright Mills [1948] who said:

'Business-labor co-operation within the place of work...means the partial integration of company and union bureaucracies.... The union takes over much of the company's personnel work, becoming the disciplining agent for the rank and file... Company and union...are disciplining agents for each other, and both discipline the malcontented elements among the unionized employees.'

The conflicts inherent in this situation come to a head for Connor when it becomes clear that a rationalisation of the pits is likely to lead to closures and that Abergoch's record for militancy puts them somewhere near the top of the list. He finds himself in the uncomfortable position in talks with the national Coal Board of opposing the pit closure on the basis of taking a long term view of Abergoch's viability and yet having to use exactly the opposite tactic with the men at the pit – arguing the short term need to go back to work [in this case to strengthen his negotiating hand]. Having won the argument he gets a reprieve for the pit only to see it snatched away from him when the pit is subject of another unofficial strike. A warning perhaps from Heinemann that the trade union at the local level can always confound both industry and union efforts to silence the 'malcontented elements'.

For the miners of Abergoch, who had put such faith in the concept of nationalisation, to now see this process and its agents as the enemy shatters the sense of tight-knit well-being that pervaded the first half of the novel. Tommy Evans, a young union activist, who at the start of the novel is Dan Owen's best friend, symbolises the disillusionment of this entry into the new world of nationalisation. He becomes the union chair of the joint Abergoch lodges and goes as its delegate to the 1954 TUC conference. Tommy's simple, even touching, belief that the TUC would show him the best of the trade union movement, is confounded when he finds that the Congress is deeply split over the issue of German rearmament. He discovers that the block vote works in a way that seems to deny him and the miners he represents a real say in issues and he agonises over his own split loyalties on this issue.

This sense of fragmentation, split and division, rolls its way through the remainder of the novel and culminates in a showdown between Dan and Tommy over Dan's betrayal of Connor. Tommy, unable to accept the betrayal of loyalty and fidelity, punches Dan to the ground and the two part never to be friends again.

Conclusion

All of the characters end the novel in various states of disappointment or despair. Heinemann demonstrates the way in which the growing influence of the media – the 4th estate – would become the defining context in which the battles between the Labour Movement and the representatives of commerce and industry would be played out. The experience of Dan would come to stand as symbolic of the way in which the owners and controllers of various media outlets would exploit the aspirations of individuals to create division within the trade union movement. In turn the unions, in seeking to become key players in the national political debate, would continue the drift towards bureaucratisation and all of the tensions that this would reveal. For those members of the CPGB there would be no recovery from the haemorrhage of membership experienced in 1956 and the sense of desolation Heinemann felt over this is expressed in the novel through Richard and Kate, communist activists who come to Abergoch to campaign and agitate alongside the miners for the pit to stay open. Tellingly, Heinemann paints these characters as permanent 'outsiders' who desperately want entry to the pit community but share none of the cultural capital that would give them access.

Heinemann calls her novel *The Adventurers* and for the first half of the book it seems to be an adventure worth taking part in. By the end the adventure has either changed its course or, for some, it has abruptly ended. For the CP the adventure is over whilst for the British Labour Movement it is only just beginning – but it will be an adventure that has within it the seeds of its own downfall. For Dan Owen, who has cut himself free of his past, the adventure will be of a different kind and on a different side.

References

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