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Reviews

Sometimes hesitant, sometimes treacherous

- Reviews section -

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Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn finds himself in the tricky position of being the anti-austerity leader of a party which is rather ambivalent on the subject. To compound his problem he is the anti-imperialist leader of a party which has generally taken the view that British imperialism is, all things considered, not that bad.

In the words of an earlier Labour leader:

“When the expression “British” is used in civil matters it implies something more than a mere description of racial or national origin. “British” justice, “British” honour, “British” administration, carry to our minds certain qualities of justice, honour, and administration, and our Imperial policy has always been commended to our people at home – whenever they troubled their heads about it these moral or qualitative grounds. The Empire must exist not merely for safety, or order, or peace, but for richness of life.”

That’s from Ramsay MacDonald’s 1907 pamphlet *Labour and the Empire*, but it pretty much sums up Tony Blair’s or Gordon Brown’s view on the civilising mission of modern British imperialism.

Geoffrey Bell’s new book *Hesitant Comrades: The Irish Revolution and the British Labour Movement* is full of jaw dropping quotes like that. The author has clearly spent a vast amount of time in archives and libraries trawling through the British left press and trade union minutes of the early 20th century looking for, and more often than not, failing to find, what they were thinking, writing and doing about their nearest and oldest colony. Even readers who thought they were familiar with just how craven the Labour Party and union leaderships were in the face of imperialism will find things that will shock them. For example, the naval power which saw off the Spanish armada, the Dutch fleet, Bonaparte’s ships and the Kaiser’s Imperial Navy was ostensibly terrified at the prospect of an independent Ireland as a naval threat. So, when some form of Irish self-determination became inevitable, there was a queue of Labour politicians insisting that any agreement impose strict limits on how many ships and how many troops it should have. It almost makes the pro-Trident lobby seem rational.

Another recurring motif in British labourism was a concern for the rights of minorities. In most circumstances this is entirely laudable. In the specific circumstances of early 20th century Ireland it meant supporting the right of the Protestant minority in the north of the country to overrule the democratic rights of the majority and enabled the island’s partition. In practice it meant that Labour and the TUC endorsed pogroms which forced Catholic workers out of the Belfast shipyards from 1920 onwards and Bell devotes several useful pages to the carpenters’ dispute, a squalid little episode in which British trade unionists even prevented a collection from being taken up for victims of sectarian violence.

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Some of the far left had a much more principled position. Sylvia Pankhurst, writing in the magnificently named Workers’ Dreadnought had a position much closer to that of the Bolsheviks:

“As Communists we stand for the self-determination of peoples and for the breaking up of empires. In so far as the Irish Sinn Féiners weaken the power of the British Capitalist government, we recognise that they are doing our work.”

This echoes Lenin’s declaration in 1915 that if British socialists didn’t support Ireland’s right of secession “it is solely because they are imperialists, not socialists.” This remains a useful rebuttal to those on the left who argue a century later that partition is justified.

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Geoffrey Bell has written a book that will be of enormous interest to students of labour movement history. It shows that our contemporary debates about military intervention, weapons programmes and Britain's imperial role are not new. More importantly, through the words of the polemicists and activists of a century ago we are reminded that there has always been a red thread of opposition to these things. However he's right in his conclusion that during moments of big revolutionary turmoil in Ireland many British comrades have been hesitant, to which we could add that some were just downright treacherous.