

H-Net Reviews

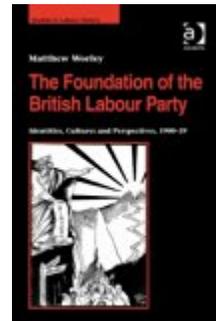
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Matthew Worley. *The Foundations of the British Labour Party*. Farnham: Ashgate, 2009. xiv + 260 pp. \$124.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7546-6731-5.

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Wandering within the British Labour Party—Walking through a Vibrant English Garden

The identities, cultures, and perspectives during the formation of the British Labour Party were not static as if within a mosaic, but as in an English garden, they were varied, ever-changing, and generally complementary. More untidy and ragged than in an ideal garden, the various components nevertheless coalesced into a strong, successful political force in the interwar period. This volume of essays explores many diverse facets and their somewhat intertwining contributions to the foundations of the British Labour Party as a whole, not specifically to the party in parliament.

The book is well structured. Matthew Worley's fine introduction surveys the party's history and its historiography and outlines each contributor's essay. Approximately twenty pages in length, each chapter includes its own introduction and conclusion, puts its contribution in historiographical perspective, and analyzes its subject's impact or contribution to the party's foundation. The twelve contributors range from junior academicians to renowned scholars and authors. Footnotes (not endnotes) greatly aid the reader, especially in the historiographical sections.

Accenting the importance of trade unions to the party, three pertinent essays begin the book. Robert Taylor's clear, well-written opening essay explores J. R. Clynes's early career in which he, as both a trade union leader and a party leader, viewed the movement's two wings as mutually supportive. He was an advocate of all workers, unionized or not, and of all Britons, not

just the working classes. Gerald Crompton effectively summarizes the diversity and importance of the different railway unions and their increasing strength during and following the Great War. His nuanced essay concludes that those railway unions perceived the Labour Party as their political tool. Andrew Taylor's clear treatment of the mineworkers accents their general belief that reforms beneficial to miners and the union would best come through the parliamentary system and that the union recognized the party's primacy in electoral policy and political plans.

Chris Wrigley's exploration of British Labour and continental socialism before 1920 describes how the party benefited from continental contacts through literature, the Second International, trips and conferences, continental speakers at May Day celebrations, and so forth. The British generally refrained from Marxist and class-warfare theories and concentrated more on practical, moderate approaches. Perhaps understandably, Wrigley comments little on British Labour's meager contribution to the continental socialist experience. Laura Beers, studying the subsequent years 1918-39, examines the party's response to the Conservative Party's "anti-socialist" propaganda. Its intensive, vitriolic, and partially successful attempts to paint Labour in extremist terms—"socialist" (linking it to bolshevism), anti-family, and anti-private property—helped influence but did not cause the Labour Party to drop unpopular proposals such as the capital levy and to emphasize its own policies of parliamentary democracy, gradualism, practical-

ity, respectability, and nationalization. Labour asserted that it was a party for the whole nation and not just of trade unionists. Both essays demonstrate how essentially British was the Labour Party.

Three essays are on the Independent Labour Party (ILP) and the Co-operative Party. Gidon Cohen essentially provides a fine historiographical essay about the early ILP—its myths, institution, personalities, and ideas. Warning against a wholesale rejection of early interpretations or myths about the ILP, Cohen finds that all those segments responded to varying circumstances and challenges affecting the ILP and the Labour Party, but fundamentally the ILP provided Labour with a structural model, key early leaders, and an openness to explore visions and policies which were well-grounded in ethical socialism. In his essay on Labour and its intellectuals, David Stack endorses Nye Bevan's advocacy of practical, useful ideas, "a distinctive terrain—between the purely practical man and the mere intellectual" (p. 129). Most of Stack's essay, though, deals with the specific neglected topic of two ILP book series. The earliest, the Socialist Library, produced twelve books (1905-19) of new British writings and of translations of continental socialists' works to allow individual reflection by their readers. After the Great War, the ILP shifted to educational study guides, in which the participants were expected to learn the "party line" on specific practical social or political issues, thus encouraging unity of policy. Nicole Robertson's contribution on the relationship between the Co-operative and Labour parties, 1918-39, focuses on four Midland areas through four issues: local arrangements, subsequent problems of the arrangements, attempts at mutual social activities, and convergent or conflicting policies. Of course, varying circumstances in different localities influenced how each responded in electoral alliances or arrangements; the 1927 Cheltenham Arrangement by both national parties allowed agreements to be made at the local level. With one party supporting consumers and the other party accenting producers (workers) and the national economy as well dealing with external affairs, one major contentious point was the Co-operative Party's reluctance for its MPs to accept the parliamentary Labour Party's whip on all issues. Another was selection and financial control of the constituency party agent, for Labour did not want to weaken its party structure were a Co-operative candidate was selected. A short article cannot cover everything, but Robertson's reliance on wide-ranging Co-operative sources and only on the Labour Party's published sources does not allow her to study the national Labour Party's behind-the-scenes,

unsuccessful efforts for an electoral and parliamentary arrangement favorable to Labour on the eve of the 1935 election. Still, this is a fine essay explicitly concerned with an issue affecting the foundation of the Labour Party.

Peter Catterall argues that religion's influence on the rise of Labour made it distinctive from continental socialism. In a nuanced and sometimes confusing treatment, he agrees that chapel experiences did propel some early Labour leaders into the movement, although he concludes that no clear evidence exists that religion more than socioeconomic status influenced the majority of Labour voters. However, he points out that working-class nonconformists were open-minded and believed personal salvation and social improvements were common goals, that Catholics viewed Labour as a safeguard against bolshevism, and that those who were non-religious saw no need to be anti-clerical—thus Britain's religious environment helped produce a British ethical (non-Marxist) socialism rather than the anti-clericalism of continental socialism. Jacqueline Turner re-examines the Labour Church, begun by John Trevor in 1891 and expanding into many autonomous and mostly short-lived local churches during its two decades of existence. Turner stresses that it originally explicitly accented Christianity's advocacy for social justice although soon the religious component faded. Labour churches followed the normal nonconformist service pattern and most people attended in their "Sunday best," but increasingly local churches read less from the Bible and more from secular writings, sang more secular "hymns," and heard messages from more secular Labour speakers. Even though not continuing into the postwar period, the Christian emphasis of the early Labour churches helped develop British Labour's ethical socialism.

Two other essays overlap almost all the other chapters' topics: June Hannam's on women and Labour politics and Matthew Worley's on Labour's constituency parties between the wars. Hannam's fine synopsis and historiographical essay demonstrates that women made distinct contributions on wide-ranging Labour issues: trade unions, suffrage, war, religion, and so forth. Women were influenced by personal experiences and various contemporary political and social issues, and emotions as well as intellect were naturally important. Not satisfied with many current assumptions and generalizations, Hannam advocates further academic study into almost every aspect of the complex question of women's role in early Labour politics. Worley provides a very clear summation of the constituency parties, concluding that

second only to trade unions, they became the key component to the party's success. Trade unions, women, intellectuals, social activities, and many more features were important during their development. With electioneering its *raison d'être*, the constituency party became increasingly important throughout the period as the ILP's influence declined, as increasingly more MPs were not union-sponsored, as the constituency parties' allotment of National Executive Committee members increased, and as the national party grew more professionalized and centralized.

Reviewers of volumes of edited collections know that our few sentences on each essay fail to encapsulate the strength of each contribution. The volume needs to be evaluated as a whole. As such, this is a fine contribu-

tion summarizing and exploring several of the interconnected segments within the foundations of the British Labour Party. As do editors of contributed essays, producers of music albums determine which selections to include and in which sequence to place them. This reviewer believes the sequence as presented in this review provides a better flow than does the book's arrangement, for other than the first three contributions on the relationship of trade unions and politics, the remaining chapters appear as if the tracks were put on "shuffle." Still, the intertwining and complexities of these components engage the reader to better understand the foundations of the Labour Party. This collection of essays complement Worley's own fine monograph, *Labour Inside the Gate: A History of the British Labour Party between the Wars* (2005).

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