

## Book Reviews

**FASCISM IN BRITAIN: A HISTORY, 1918 – 1985** by Richard Thurlow. Oxford, Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1987. pp. xviii, 317. £16.00

This lengthy and detailed book is a major study of fascism in Britain from the aftermath of the First World War until the recent past. It is carefully researched, fully documented, well-organised, very informative and deeply thought-provoking. The subject is not new to Mr Thurlow; he published previously a notable series of articles in the anti-racist periodical *Patterns of Prejudice* and edited, with K. Lunn, the extremely useful collection of essays, *British Fascism* (1980). In the present volume he strives for, and largely attains academic impartiality. *Fascism in Britain*, will, I believe, become essential reading for the general reader who is an honest enquirer as well as for the professional student of politics. Mr Thurlow makes good use of the recently released Intelligence material on the inter-war fascist movements leading up to the implementation of Defence Regulation 18b (1a) in 1940 which resulted in the internment without trial of many members of British Union and related groups. It is a notorious fact that much of this material is still not available, and perhaps never will be, but Mr Thurlow's work is much strengthened by what he has been able to see. Furthermore, he has had access to two important unpublished books by members of British Union, Nellie Driver's *From the Shadows of Exile*, and R. R. Bellamy's *We Marched with Mosley*. It is much to be hoped that these will appear in print before too long.

Mr Thurlow's stated aim is 'to connect in a political tradition the history of inter-war British fascism with the emergence of racial populist and neo-fascist movements in post-1945 society' (p. x). He succeeds well in this, and after reading his book one has a clear picture of the development and variation of the fascist movements in Britain. He traces the British and Italian influences on Sir Oswald Mosley's British Union, and shows clearly how it differed from the more extreme and fundamentally racist Imperial Fascist League led by Arnold Leese, which had close affinities with German National Socialism. Rightly, he stresses that Leese is the main influence behind the post-war National Front and related movements, whereas Mosley's Union Movement favoured a European ideal, having broadened out from the nationalism of British Union. Mr Thurlow writes well on personalities; I found that his 'portraits' of Mosley, Neil Francis-Hawkins, William Joyce and Leese were illuminating and memorable. Of course their lives and careers are complete; it is more difficult to write of those whose careers are still developing, and I felt that the portraits of John Tyndall, Martin Webster and Colin Jordan were less sharp and satisfying. Sometimes Mr Thurlow's style is rather inelegant, and he makes a few mistakes — for example William Joyce did not resign from British Union in 1937 (p. 143); he was expelled. However although his book is not definitive, and it does not supersede but complement the earlier studies by Colin Cross (*The Fascists in Britain* 1961), Robert Skidelsky (*Oswald Mosley* 1975), and R. Griffiths (*Fellow Travellers of the Right* 1983), nevertheless it will become and will long remain a standard work on its subject.

Although Mr Thurlow's book is directed towards the student of history and politics, it is also of great value to the literary critic interested in the artistic achievement of Henry Williamson. Mr Thurlow rightly refers to Williamson, together with A. K. Chesterton, as examples of survivors of the First World War, alienated by the old order of society who turned in due course to fascism in the hope that it would bring about a better and happier system. Hiler, Mussolini and Mosley, were, like Williamson and Chesterton, survivors

of the battlefields, who felt a natural affinity with these fascist leaders. Indeed, Williamson always believed that the members of the war-generation were infinitely wiser and more experienced than older and younger men. Then again, Mr Thurlow is right to stress the importance to Williamson of his presence at the Christmas Truce of 1914, which made him support a policy of 'no more cousins' wars' in the 1930s. Mosley's agricultural policy pleased Williamson who believed in the importance of British farming in sad decline in the 1930s, under the Conservative Government of the day. I believe that a full-length article on Williamson and the Romantic Appeal of Fascism needs to be written (indeed I am engaged on such an attempt at the moment) to sort out truth and error on this prickly topic. Mr Thurlow leaves much to be said on the subject, but what he does say is fair and helpful so far as it goes. His comparison of the careers of Williamson and A. K. Chesterton is admirable; Williamson became a major writer, having surmounted his feelings of alienation; Chesterton, a minor writer, made active politics his major concern, becoming in due course Chairman of the National Front, and editor of *Candour*. Williamson, one might add, realized, like his fictional character Phillip Maddison, that 'no man could be destroyed, once he had discovered poetry, the spirit of life'. The imaginative presentation of political themes in *A Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight* has the persuasive power of *art*, which affects the reader in a deeper way than the most brilliant political analysis can ever do. Furthermore the reader does not need to agree with the 'message' objectively; he can appreciate Shakespeare's history plays even if he is a republican; he can be moved by Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* even if he is a royalist, and he can be spiritually enriched by Williamson's *Chronicle* even if he is a Marxist.

J. W. Blench

**Footnote.** Paul Reed reports that this book has now been remaindered and has been seen (in Brighton) for £3.95.

**GENIUS OF FRIENDSHIP 'T. E. LAWRENCE'.** Henry Williamson. Facsimile Reprint. The Henry Williamson Society, 1988. £5.00; with addition of a photograph of the telegram sent by T. E. Lawrence to Henry Williamson on 13th May 1935 as frontispiece.

John Gregory, our publications manager, is to be congratulated on his foresight in securing for the Society the reprinting of this most interesting and somewhat important work and for his hard work in having it available to mark the centenary anniversary of Lawrence's birth. The National Portrait Gallery are selling copies on the bookstall which accompanies their T. E. Lawrence exhibition, so we are hopefully reaching a wider readership. This is your chance to obtain a fairly rare work, at reasonable cost.

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**HENRY WILLIAMSON 'Some notes on *The Flax of Dream* and other Essays'.** The 'Aylesford Review' essays, Vol. 2. Paupers' Press. 1988. Facsimile reprint.

It is useful to find these pieces within one cover, especially for those who have no access to the original publication. It would have been greatly enhanced, however, by the inclusion of some information about the *Aylesford Review* and HW's connection with it. Perhaps a future publication could be a short history of the Aylesford Press.

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