

## **Between the Party and the Ivory Tower: Classics and Communism in 1930s Britain**

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### **1. The Early Years of the CPGB**

The Communist Party of Great Britain was founded at the 'Unity Convention', which took place at the grand Victorian Cannon Street Hotel over the weekend of July 31<sup>st</sup> to August 1<sup>st</sup>, 1920. Inspired by the Russian revolution, and with a generous financial donation from Lenin, the four major political groups which combined to form the new CPGB were the British Socialist Party (BSP), the Socialist Labour Party (SLP), the Prohibition and Reform Party (PRP) and the Workers' Socialist Federation (WSF).<sup>1</sup>

Although the CPGB never became a mass party like its equivalents in France or Italy, it exerted an ideological and cultural influence out of proportion to its size, partly because there were always strong links between its members and those of the mainstream Labour Party. Substantial numbers of prominent workers' representatives, students and intellectuals, moreover, did actually take out membership. By the time of the General Strike in 1926, the party had over ten thousand members. Its first Member of Parliament, William Gallacher, was elected for the mining district of West Fife in Scotland in the 1931 General Election, at which the party won nearly seventy-five thousand votes nationally. Although by 1936 the party's leaders were thoroughly divided over the question of continuing support for Joseph Stalin and his reported purges, the situation in Spain to an extent diverted the membership's attention.

British Communists were crucial in the creation of the International Brigades which went to fight for the Republicans in the Spanish Civil War.

While the Fascists gained power in both Germany and Italy, the membership of the CPGB steadily increased. There was discomfort amongst British Communists after the signing of the Nazi-Soviet non-aggression pact in 1939, but when Germany invaded the Soviet Union in 1941, and Churchill announced that Britons and Russians were now close allies, party membership soared to fifty-six thousand. At the end of the war, two Communists were elected to parliament in the General Election. This was the historic moment at which the CPGB enjoyed its greatest popularity; but, within a decade, lurid anti-Soviet propaganda, alongside very real accounts of Stalin's dreadful crimes, sent the party into terminal decline.

During the party's first two and a half decades, however, when it was expanding and flourishing, and when most of its members were idealistic citizens genuinely committed to building a fairer economic system and supporting the rights of the working class, it was joined by a significant number of leading intellectuals. Some were scientists, notably J.D. Bernal, a prominent physicist and crystallographer.<sup>2</sup> In Arts and Humanities, there were several Communist writers during the first two decades of the party's existence; they were influential amongst their 'fellow-traveller' friends—the substantial number of figures who were sympathetic to some of the aims of the party but who never actually became members, such as W.H. Auden, E.M. Forster and the classical scholar and poet Louis MacNeice.

After the war, in the eleven years before the mass exodus from the party in protest against the crushing of the 1956 revolution in Hungary by the Warsaw Pact, the Communist Party Historians Group boasted a dazzling set of members, including

Eric Hobsbawm, Christopher Hill, E.P. Thompson, A.L. Morton and Raphael Samuel. The contribution to British intellectual life made by these men has been much studied, and some of them had been active party members, developing their theories of history, from well before 1939. Looking back on the 1930s, Christopher Hill himself drew attention to the number of CPGB intellectuals in the 1930s for whom, he argued, it had not been History but English Literature that had been the original primary interest—he was thinking not only of A.L. Morton, but of several other active Communist writers such as Edgell Rickword, Alick West, Douglas Garman, and Jack Lindsay.<sup>3</sup> Without for a minute denying the importance of English literature in the intellectual development and publications of these men, and for other Communists of their generation such as the poet (and translator of Vergil) Cecil Day Lewis, Stephen Spender and the outstanding English Literature specialist Margot Heinemann, we are keen to stress that several, for example Alick West and Jack Lindsay, only came to English literature via traditional and rigorous educations in the Greek and Latin classics. Moreover, part of their Marxist understanding of culture was that separating different linguistic traditions and historical periods—reading ancient poetry in isolation from contemporary poetry, for example—was to impoverish the transformative social potential of art. It therefore needs to be noted that Edgell Rickword, who in 1919 went to Pembroke College, Oxford, to read Modern Languages, had attended Colchester Royal Grammar School, famous for its emphasis on training in classical languages and literature. Douglas Garman attended Caius College, Cambridge, graduating in Medieval and Modern Languages in 1923, but much of his specialist translation work in later life was actually on ancient Greek history.

There were, moreover, several specialist Classical scholars working inside academia who were committed and active party members. In their cases, too, we often find a sensitivity to the continuity of literary history, taking the form of much more developed interest in the 'reception' of ancient literature in the modern world than in most of the classical scholars of the time. It is therefore possible to make a case that British Marxist intellectual tradition as founded in the 1930s was built less on literature in English than on literature in Latin and Greek. This has important implications for the way that literature in that period is configured more generally, since the classicism of this time is always routinely associated with the Modernist poetry of Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, and the other practitioners of the 'radical Right' in literature. Their fame and public prominence has obscured the role of Classics in early British Communism. It is therefore our intention in this article to introduce the reader to the small but highly influential group of scholar-socialists active in Britain at this time, who had a strong interest in the Greek and Roman classics, and represent an important but neglected chapter in the history of Classics and Classical Scholarship in Britain. Between them, they succeeded in hegemonising a cultural space, and establishing a dialogue, *between* the Marxist theory and cultural practices of the Communist Party and academic Classics (the 'Ivory Tower'). This dialogue has never been fully appreciated either by Classicists or by modern cultural and political historians.

## **2. Communist Classical Scholars**

The first and in some ways the most influential of all the Classical scholars who were members of the CPGB was Benjamin Farrington. He was actually an Irishman, born in Cork 1891, when Ireland had not yet achieved independence from the United

Kingdom. He graduated in Classics from University College, Cork, and then moved to Trinity College, Dublin, to take another degree in Middle English. There his political views were shaped by the plight of the working class in Ireland, which came to a head in the Dublin 'lock-out' of 1913, a traumatic industrial dispute between factory owners and thousands of slum-dwelling Dubliners fighting for the right to form trade unions. Farrington was profoundly affected by the crisis, and influenced by the speeches of James Connolly, a Scottish Marxist of Irish descent. Connolly saw the need for Home Rule for Ireland as inseparable from goals of the poor, and in 1912 formed the Irish Labour Party. Farrington later described the impact which Connolly's Marxist analysis of the political situation had affected his own understanding of intellectual history: 'All through my years as a university student I had been studying the history of thought. Nobody before Connolly had brought home to me that the history of thought does not exist in isolation but is part of the history of the society in which the thought is produced . . . I am conscious that it is to a workingman that I owe the conviction that learning need not be pedantic or obscurantist but a guide to action in the present.'<sup>4</sup>

Farrington's growing radicalism received an academic focus when in 1915-1917, including the period of the very height of the Irish turmoil during the 1916 Easter Rising, he was reading for his Master's degree in English from University College, completing his thesis in 1917 on Shelley's translation from the Greek. After lecturing in Classics at Queen's University, Belfast, he moved to the University of Cape Town in South Africa, where he was in a position to study the racist and nationalist legacies of European imperialism at first hand. He was promoted from a lectureship in Greek to

the Chair of Latin, but left in 1935 as the first steps towards institutionalised Apartheid were taken. He then worked at the University of Bristol for a year before taking up a Professorship at University College, Swansea, in the heart of the Welsh industrial and mining region, where he remained for twenty-one years. His major academic contribution was to the history and philosophy of ancient science, expressed in a series of four pioneering if tendentious books, *Science in Antiquity* (1936), *Science and Politics in the Ancient World* (1939), *Greek Science: Its Meaning for Us* (1944), and *Head and Hand in Ancient Greece: Four Studies in the Social Relations of Thought* (1947). His more general, accessible *The Civilization of Greece and Rome* (1938) was an important attempt to make ancient history available to working people beyond the Academy. Farrington's lively, lucid materialist analyses of the relationship between the ancient economy and ancient ideas were often derided by mainstream classical scholars, but they were (and still are) widely read by the more open-minded among them. His commitment to Communist ideals was lifelong, and he often taught on summer schools and to working men's educational societies. His pamphlet *The Challenge of Socialism*, for example, was developed in a series of lectures he delivered at weekend schools in Dublin in August 1946.

In England, some of the younger members of the CPGB in the 1930s only later went on to become prominent academic classicists. One party member at that time was Geoffrey de Ste. Croix (1910-2000). He had been trained in Classics at Clifton College, a fee-paying school private school in Bristol, but did not go straight to university, training instead as a lawyer. During the 1930s he practised in London and was a member of the CPGB; he was one of those who left in 1939 after the Nazi-Soviet

pact. It was not until 1947, after serving in the RAF, that he entered London University to study Classics; he then pursued a brilliant academic career, took up a position at New College, Oxford, and wrote his two 'classics' of Ancient History, from a Marxist analytical perspective, *The Origins of the Peloponnesian War* (1972) and *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World* (1981). His two periods of exposure to Classical education at school and at university therefore preceded and followed his period of intense exposure to Marxist ideas as a lawyer and CPGB member in the 1930s. Unfortunately, he rarely spoke about the degree to which he had been directly involved in the educational and intellectual activities of the party during that crucial decade: on one occasion in the early 1990s Edith persuaded him to reminisce, and he certainly told her that he had attended classes on Marxism run by the CPGB sixty years earlier. But his massive subsequent disillusionment with the party prevented him from further elaborating on these formative experiences.

Robert Browning (not a relation of the famous poet with the same name), born in 1914, was de Ste. Croix's junior by four years. Although he never achieved the same fame (or notoriety), his books were and still are widely read, usually by scholars who have no idea that he was for many years an idealistic Communist Party member. Brought up in Glasgow during the terrible poverty on Clydeside in the 1920s and 1930s, he studied Humanities at Glasgow University, and may have joined the CPGB at that time. He was certainly a member soon after he arrived at Balliol College, Oxford in 1935. There he won almost every available prize and scholarship for his performances in Latin and Greek, even as he immersed himself in CPGB activities and Marxist theories of history. He spent most of his working life at London University, first at

UCL until 1965, and thereafter until 1981 as Professor of Classics and Ancient History at Birkbeck. There he found an ideal home, since Birkbeck College, which had indirectly grown out of the Mechanics Institute movement, was and is an institution dedicated to providing adult education available in the evenings and part-time, this enabling poor and working-class full-time workers to study at London University.

As a Communist, Browning's political interests in the modern Balkans and Black Sea also no doubt informed his shift towards Byzantine Studies—the links between ancient and modern are especially apparent in his *Byzantium and Bulgaria* (1975). As a Marxist, his interest in ancient atheism and resistance to Christianity underlies his study of the Emperor Julian (also 1975). He was to become the most important Classicist in the Communist Party Historians Group, and was still lecturing after his retirement at the CPGB Headquarters in St. John's Street, London, in the mid-1980s; Edith heard him run a public seminar for working people, there on slavery and feudalism, in 1985.

Unlike de Ste. Croix, Browning seems to have remained rather naively committed to the CPGB for most of his life; not even the 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia by the Soviet Union could altogether shake his trust in its political validity. This was partly because his great gift for languages had led him to become fluent in several Slavic tongues, as well as Georgian, and he always maintained strong personal contacts with Classical and Byzantine scholars of the USSR and Yugoslavia. He wrote two articles in Russian, both in the Soviet Byzantine journal *Vizantiiskii Vremennik*, on the topic of slavery in Byzantium. The first of them is widely regarded

as the seminal work in the area. But the Marxist theory and the Eastern bloc contacts all originated in his idealistic youth and the radical 1930s.

The fourth of the CPGB classicists in the 1930s was George Derwent Thomson (1903-1987), who studied Classics at King's College, Cambridge but then moved to the National University of Ireland (Galway), where he was swiftly promoted to the Professorship. In western Ireland in the 1920s he became radicalised by contact with the Gaelic-speaking population, long oppressed and only newly liberated from British imperialism. He learned to speak their ancient language fluently, and translated works by Plato (1929) and both Aeschylus (1933) and Euripides into it (1932). His first scholarly commentary, published in 1932, was on the poet who had been the favourite of radicals since Shelley and Marx, the Aeschylean *Prometheus Bound*. By the time he moved back to a lectureship at King's College, Cambridge, in 1934, he was an ardent socialist, and he joined the CPGB in 1936, when he also accepted the chair of Greek at Birmingham University. An industrial city with a large automobile industry, Birmingham offered him many opportunities to teach working-class men as well as full-time university students.

Thomson was intellectually restless and enjoyed controversy. By the early 1950s he had come into conflict with the leadership and ideological programme of the CPGB. He became increasingly interested in China and Maoism. But in the intervening period, from 1936 onwards, he produced a stream of publications which were informally blacklisted at Oxford, but very widely read outside the Classics establishment in Britain, and indeed were on the syllabus of many departments of Anthropology and Sociology as well as the reading lists circulated by workers'

educational organisations. In 1938 he published his impressive two-volume commentary on Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, which still needs to be consulted by any scholar working on that text. But the work of classical scholarship with which he will always be primarily associated was his 1941 *Aeschylus & Athens*, a Marxist anthropological study of early Greek tragedy, published by the press most closely associated with the CPGB, Lawrence & Wishart. In 1949 he followed this with *The Prehistoric Aegean*, and in 1954 with *The First Philosophers*, making a kind of 'trilogy' of Marxist interpretations of ancient Greek civilisation from the Bronze Age to Periclean Athens. Generally derided in Britain, classical circles, *Aeschylus and Athens* nevertheless became well-known internationally, being translated into Czech, Modern Greek, Polish, Russian, Hungarian, and German; the other volumes also came out in several Eastern and western European languages including Spanish. Indeed, Thomson's 60th birthday Festschrift, *Geras*, was a rare publication precisely because it was such an unusual instance of a work of Classical scholarship that truly transcended the 'Iron Curtain'; it was published by the Univerzita Karlova (Charles University) of Prague in 1963 as *Acta Universitatis Carolinae, Philosophica et historica 1963/1, Graecolatina Pragensia*, 2. It was co-edited by the Czech scholar Ladislav Varcl of the Prague Department of Studies of Classical Antiquity and R.F. Willetts, Thomson's colleague at Birmingham. The international contributors to the volume included Robert Browning and scholars from Russia and East Germany.

### **3. Classical Undercurrents in Communist Cultural Debate**

We shall see later that during the years of his intense activity within the CPGB, Thomson was a key figure in the maintenance of a dialogue between British academic Classics and the radical cultural circles beyond the often narrow and inward-looking world of the universities. Besides the Communist Classics professors we have already encountered, there was a substantial group of CPGB intellectuals who did not operate within the 'Ivory Tower' but in the public world of letters. Classical authors were still an important component of the advanced school curriculum, and so many of the middle-class intellectuals attracted to Communism had read substantial amounts of ancient literature. One of the most brilliant of the young Communists who were killed in Spain, John Cornford, was the son of the distinguished and prolific Cambridge classicist Francis MacDonald Cornford,<sup>5</sup> himself a politically engaged supporter of the working-class movement. John had undoubtedly studied classical authors during his privileged education at Stowe School. An even more promising young Communist intellectual killed in Spain was Christopher Caudwell (1907-1937), the author of a work of literary theory that has exerted a considerable influence in British left-wing circles, *Illusion and Reality*. This was written in the summer of 1935, and first published posthumously in 1937.

The traditional view of Caudwell is that he was to a large extent an autodidact, who taught himself the history and philosophy of the world in the London Library. He had left Ealing Priory School in 1922, before he was fifteen years old. Yet education scarcely begins at university. His real name was Christopher St John Sprigg, and he was a member of the educated Roman Catholic middle class with literary interests. He was only forced to leave school so young because his father, the editor of a popular

illustrated children's series *Louis Wain's Annual*, lost his regular job as literary editor of the *Daily Express* newspaper. The teenaged Christopher then moved with his father to the north of England, and got a job reporting for the *Yorkshire Post*, where he was soon politically radicalised. He moved back to London, joined the CPGB in Putney, and was active on the local branch level. He probably changed his surname because 'St John Sprigg' sounds identifiably (and perhaps in working-class Putney embarrassingly) upper-class.

But Christopher had earlier received a Benedictine schooling during which he will have been taught some Greek and a very great deal of Latin. The Benedictine curriculum goes all the way back to St. Theodore, a Greek convert to Christianity who came to Britain with Benedict in 669 CE and became Archbishop. He brought with him Greek as well as Latin Classics, and a conviction that the great pagan authors had much to offer Christianity; he therefore set up schools for these learned languages in various parts of the country. He also appointed Benedict abbot of the Monastery of St. Peter and St. Paul in Canterbury. Historians of education often claim that the colleges in the older English Universities may be considered the lineal descendants or heirs of the Benedictine schools of Charlemagne. There is certainly no contradiction between the philosophy that underlay Caudwell's schooling and his profound sense of an ancient pagan world of art and culture lying forever just beneath the surface of the modern world, which comes over in his early short poem, 'In the Aegean'.<sup>6</sup> His earlier poems in English also include versions of favourite schoolboy Latin classics, such as Catullus' poem no. 5, '*Vivamus mea Lesbia, atque amemus,*' as well as translations of epigrams from the Greek anthology.<sup>7</sup> These show how far his study of ancient poetry

had extended, even if he did leave school at a young age, and also reveal him wrestling with the problems of converting the effect of metrical form and stress from one language to another. These early experiments must have helped him become the unquestioned pioneer in developing a systematic socio-political approach to the metre of English verse in *Illusion and Reality*.<sup>8</sup>

Caudwell created a fictionalised female version of his younger self in Celia Harrison, the heroine of the first part of his 1936 novel *This My Hand*. Celia is the daughter of a widowed Berkshire vicar, and is so clever that her father teaches her Latin and Greek as well as Geometry, French, History, Geography and Literature.<sup>9</sup> Having moved with her father at the age of fourteen to a parish in Tinford, an industrial town in Yorkshire, she becomes involved in social issues and leaves school. As a lover of poetry, she attends the University Extension Lectures at the Mechanics Institute, and begins to review books for the local paper. She has an intellectually questing nature, and is increasingly dissatisfied with the answers she feels she has been offered to the world's problems, in due course joining the local Spiritualists. All the young people in the novel are struggling with the epistemological and metaphysical crisis that afflicted the young people who had survived the First World War. Another avatar of Caudwell in the novel is perhaps to be found in the enigmatic figure of Charles Firth. He is the rich, awkward youth who seemed very strange to the novel's antihero Ian Venning, when he developed a close friendship with him when they were fighting in the trenches of World War I. Firth 'used always to keep a volume of Greek poetry in his pocket and would at intervals escape into it from externals'.<sup>10</sup>

Yet, despite such noisy clues, the classical *foundations* of Caudwell's major work on aesthetics and society have not been acknowledged. Aristotle and Plato do not feature *at all* in Pawling's study of the development of Caudwell's dialectical theory of literature.<sup>11</sup> Francis Mulhern, who praised the 'fascinating study of Greek and Roman culture' he discovered in Caudwell's *Illusion and Reality*, stresses Caudwell's discussion of religion in the city-state to the neglect of his engagement with Aristotelian aesthetics.<sup>12</sup> But Caudwell's confidence with and competence at handling authors who wrote two thousand years ago in Latin and Greek shine through both his poetry and his critical studies. His late and only overtly Communist poem, 'Heil Baldwin!' of 1936, a satire on the Anglo-German Naval Agreement of 1935, is framed as a *pastiche* of the *Aeneid*, opening 'Arms and the man I sing'.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, once he had encountered Marxist theory, it was to the debate between Plato and Aristotle on the nature and function of art that he intuitively took his quest for a new theory of literature.

The most overlooked section of Caudwell's *Illusion and Reality* is chapter 2, 'The Death of Mythology', which is essentially a study of Aristotle's *Poetics*. E.P. Thompson rides roughshod over the study of the *Poetics* in his otherwise penetrating study of Caudwell's legacy.<sup>14</sup> One of the problems here has actually been that people have read Caudwell through the admiring exposition of George Thomson—perhaps understandably, since he was a staunch *defender* of the dead critic at the time of the earlier attacks led by Maurice Cornforth.<sup>15</sup> But Thomson's own work on ancient Greek literature is much less aesthetically engaged than Caudwell's, and far more centred on anthropological and sociological models of the evolution of poetry from primitive

magic and ritual. This has resulted in the failure of most critics, except perhaps David Margolies,<sup>16</sup> to recognise that Caudwell's fundamental thesis in *Illusion and Reality* is inspired by the argument between Plato and Aristotle on the topic of the relationship between the empirically discernible world (reality) and the worlds conjured up in art (mimesis). This a sophisticated stage in the ancient evolution of literary theory, which has left magic and ritual far behind, and which discusses mimetic art as a category including sculpture, painting, poetry and theatre, all of which, as it proposes, offer imitations, in paint and stone or words and music, of things apprehended through sense in life. For Plato, these imitations, however pleasurable, are bad for humans psychologically; for Aristotle they are pleasurable, and beautiful, and can offer two distinct psychological and social benefits. It does not matter that they are *representations* of things in the real world rather than being real themselves. In a crucial paragraph Caudwell writes that 'Aristotle's theory of mimesis, as our analysis will show, so far from being superficial, is fundamental for an understanding of the function and method of art'.<sup>17</sup>

Margolies is surely correct in commenting here that what Aristotle 'means is that art's function is accomplished, not by a 'pure' emotional reorganization, but by emotional reorganization in regard to the *reality* with which art deals.'<sup>18</sup> Caudwell is here linking Aristotle's theory that all art was fundamentally mimetic of reality with his theory that *tragic* art's aim is the production of a socially beneficial function by somehow *addressing* the painful emotions aroused in tragedy. Caudwell has already demonstrated how attentively he has read the *Poetics* in his insistence that 'the categories of literature are not eternal, any more than the classification of systematic

biology; both must change, as the objects of systematisation evolve and alter in the number and characteristics of their species'.<sup>19</sup> This teleological model of the rise and evolution of genres is profoundly similar to Aristotle's teleological description of the emergence and development of tragedy and comedy in the *Poetics*. But there are other things that have impressed Caudwell about Aristotle: he analyses literature as a social product—a body of cultural data to be analysed for what it can tell us in its own right, rather than as an expression of the individual writer's subjectivity, or even the influence it might have had on an individual subjectivity:

Aristotle, with his extraverted mind turned firmly on the object, was more interested in the created thing, e.g. the play – than in the man who was influenced by it or who produced it. Thus his angle of attack is aesthetically correct; he does not approach literature like a psychologist or a psycho-analyst'.<sup>20</sup>

There were, of course, other important influences on Caudwell, besides the writings of Marx and Engels themselves, including I.A. Richards and Nikolai Bukharin. But Aristotle's *Poetics* shaped the very *form* taken by the questions Caudwell asked himself, as well as the answers that he formulated.

Caudwell was a young Communist activist in the 1930s, working independently on a theory of literature which could marry classical aesthetics to a materialist conception of culture. He seems to have been a retiring personality, who worked in a degree of isolation from other CPGB literary figures and was not involved much in collective activities. Much of his posthumous reputation as an aesthetician was

established by George Thomson. But several other party members did see the maintenance of a debate on the role of the arts in society as a collective enterprise.

### **Classically Educated Communist Literary Figures**

The *Left Review (LR)*, first published in October 1936, was a literary magazine set up as a cultural response to the rise of fascism in Europe and a platform for the development of Marxist literary criticism and socialist literature and art. One of the *LR*'s founders and editors was the writer and activist, Edgell Rickword, who was also instrumental in the formation of the Left Book Club and the British Section of the Writers' International. Before its final issue in May 1938 the *LR* was the chief mouthpiece for the British Left and attracted an impressive roll call of intellectual contributors, all of whom shared a deep commitment to the democratization of culture. The *LR* not only published reviews of literature. They also printed many poems, short stories and songs on communist themes, some even for mass declamation. Satiric cartoons and jocular advertisement campaigns served to lighten the often-weighty ideological burden of the contributors' experimental Marxist readings of literature and current affairs. The democratization of culture was an important goal of the *LR* and therefore one of the key preoccupations of the early contributors was the British education system and the role of the classical education within it.

Cecil Day-Lewis (1904-1972), now known to us mainly by his accessible translations of Virgil, was a regular contributor to the *LR* and a CPGB member from early 1936. He wrote - in an article entitled 'An Expensive Education' - that 'just as

capitalism in its earlier phases was a progressive force... necessary for the higher development of the means of production, so was the classical education... necessary for the development of the human mind.' Now, he explained, both forces had become reactionary, and the teaching of the Latin language, in particular, 'with its emphasis on syntax, its constant appeal to the past, its abstraction from contemporary issues, its combination of intellectual snobbery and imagination-deadening drudgery – may well be the most effective 'mental discipline', but only when by 'mental discipline' was meant: 'the maintenance of the capitalist system'.<sup>21</sup> Not to be outdone, the poet Randal Swingler (1909-1967), editor of the *Daily Worker* (1939-41), regular contributor to the *LR* and a CPGB member since 1934, claimed that 'the present state of classical education is the most efficient method designed for arresting the development of the individual mind.' He argued that 'to boys whose minds have been hammered out on the anvil of grammar' a knowledge of classical literature is nothing more than a knowledge of texts, and that culture, by extension, became a thing divorced of life, the 'possession' of a gentleman and no longer a 'function, or rather the condition of a function' of man.<sup>22</sup> Swingler had been expensively and classically educated at Winchester and then New College, Oxford.

The traditional British method of classical education, which had indeed often functioned to exclude the lower classes from accessing middle-class careers and institutional power,<sup>23</sup> was considered by the British Left an enemy of socialism. Attempts made by writers to engage with the material of classical culture in ways that bypassed the socially corrosive landscape of the classical education were welcomed. One of the most prolific of the writers associated with the *LR* was Jack Lindsay, the

Australian-born British classicist who was awarded the order of Znak Pocheta by the Soviet government in 1968. He wrote a biography of Mark Anthony, about which the scholar George Thomson effused: 'What he has given us is of considerable value, suggestive and stimulating, especially to those who have not yet succeeded in shaking off the stultifying effect produced on their minds by the sort of Roman history they learned at school.' Thomson called the Late Roman Republic 'an excellent field for Marxist research' and explained that the great merit of Lindsay's book was that he 'exposes the real nature of the forces that brought about the fall of the Republic.'<sup>24</sup>

Jack Lindsay, the son of the famous Australian artist Norman Lindsay (1879-1969), was born in Melbourne in 1900, and brought up from the age of five in Sydney. Despite a turbulent childhood which saw his father leave the family in 1905 and his mother succumb to alcoholism and mental illness in his teens, Lindsay – in the care of his Aunt Mary – showed early signs of academic brilliance and won a scholarship to Brisbane Grammar School. From an early age he was fascinated by Greece and Rome and especially the poetry and myths. His autobiography speaks of poetry and the classical world as an imaginative haven, a refuge from reality. Spending his meagre pocket-money mainly on second-hand editions of the inexpensive Everyman's Library (including importantly their edition of Smith's *Classical Dictionary*), he slaked his mounting thirst for all things classical and retreated further and further into the world of his classical imagination. Such a strong autodidactic streak in combination with his sound formal education at Brisbane and access to cheap books, continued to feed his love for poetry, both classical and British.

In 1918 Lindsay won a second scholarship, this time to the newly founded University of Queensland, where he studied Classics under the tutelage of the Scottish Professor John Lundie Michie. There he developed the skills in classical translation he would exploit for the rest of his life. After university, Lindsay continued to read, write and translate poetry, while eking out a living as a WEA (Workers' Educational Association of Australia) lecturer. His literature class consisted of, he tells us, 'various working-class fighters among whom was a sprinkling of revolutionaries. Several of his class he described as well-read, 'but with a slant on their reading which was quite unlike my own. Through them I discovered a confused but genuine working-class tradition of rebellious writing.'<sup>25</sup> It was in his days working for the WEA and his time spent at the educationally progressive University of Queensland that the first seeds of socialism were to be planted in Lindsay. Although their presence may be detected beneath the surface of his early writing (1920s-1936), these seeds, however, took a long time to germinate.

In the mid-1920s, Lindsay, floating among a set of Bohemian artists and radical intellectuals in Brisbane, produced a translation of Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*. His friend John Kirtley, a stockbroker's clerk and owner of a small fine printing press, sent it over to England. On gaining an encouraging response to the book and its production, Kirtley suggested that they both left Australia and set up shop in London. Lindsay liked the idea: 'I felt that I had no alternative but to agree... a project born straight from Aristophanes had for me the stamp of poetic fate.'<sup>26</sup> When they arrived in London in 1926, the year of the General Strike, the highly charged social scene partially revived Lindsay's latent socialistic tendencies. Reuniting with his fellow compatriot,

the Rhodes Scholar and CP member since 1921, Percy Reginald Stephensen (1901-1965), Lindsay was welcomed into a social group that provided fertile ground for his casual acquaintance with Marxism to begin putting down some serious roots.<sup>27</sup> It was at this time that he met Edgell Rickword, Douglas Garman and Alec Brown.

At the beginning of the Thirties, Lindsay left London with Elza de Loche to live in Cornwall. His life with Elza who became more and more dependent upon him and vulnerable to fits of paranoia, isolated him from his former sociable existence even more than his geographical location. In their rural isolation and relative penury – they were living from Lindsay's typewriter – his only access to books came through the local libraries. One year when Lindsay was living in Truro, an Oxford undergraduate (whose name we have unfortunately not been able to discover), who admired Lindsay's, Kirtley's and Stephenson's work of the Fanfrolico Press (1925-29), paid Lindsay an unexpected visit. Since Lindsay was engaged on the research for his first historical novel set in Rome, this young Oxford man borrowed a number of books on the period of Caesar from this college library and sent them to Lindsay. This was extremely fortunate, for among the books was Edmund Spencer Beesley's *Catalina, Clodius and Tiberius* (1878), which book Lindsay explains 'had a decisive effect on my thinking. It somewhat idealized Catalina and Clodius, but it brought out strongly the nature of the popular discontent in their period and the way that Cicero and the other ancient writers had blackguarded it. Slight as the work was, it was just what I needed to fertilize my mind at this moment, to release me into a radically critical attitude to the ancient sources I knew so well.'<sup>28</sup> It is no coincidence that it was through the work of this classical particular scholar, who had held chairs at London University, that

Lindsay received the inspiration for his historical fiction trilogy set at the end of the Roman Republic. Beesley was a socialist classicist, a friend of Karl Marx and chairman of the First International (1864), which had led to the formation of the International Working Men's Association (IWA).<sup>29</sup>

Although exposed to Marx's ideas as mediated in books such as these, and through his absorption of Stephenson's editorials for *The London Aphrodite* (1928-9), which they edited together, Lindsay did not become a convinced socialist until around New Year 1936. This was when he began to read the newspapers and made the personal commitment to study the key works of Marx, Engels and Lenin. This awakening was triggered by the editor of his book *Rome For Sale* (1934), who added a preface in which he compared the Catilinarian revolt with Fascism. Lindsay was perturbed, not because he disagreed but simply because the parallel had not occurred to him: 'Of Hitler and Nazism I as yet knew practically nothing, since I read no newspapers, partly through poverty and partly through obsession with my own problems... I now began a desultory scanning of newspapers, it was not till the end of 1935 I realized anything of the significance of the international events going on. For one thing, I had a profound Australian distrust of anything whatever in newsprint.'<sup>30</sup>

In the process of conquering his distrust of newsprint and reconfiguring his extremely difficult home life (living secluded and penniless with a possessive partner whose mental health problems steadily deepened), Lindsay was - along with a great many British intellectuals - stung into political activism by the start of the Spanish Civil War. This inspired him to begin studying the writings of Marx, Engels and Lenin. Through his direct engagement with Marxist literature he felt he had finally reached

an ideological bedrock: 'I found the missing links in my dialectical system.' Lindsay's moment of socialist epiphany set him off on what was to become a lifelong and somewhat gruelling struggle with Marxism and the increasingly dogmatic representatives of the Communist Party. 'I have found the problem of developing Marxism adequately to be incomparably more difficult than I had imagined, I have never wavered in my conviction that Marxism does lay the basis for a world of unity (of equality, brotherhood, justice) and for a unitary consciousness in which the old contradictions and limitations of thought and feeling are overcome.'<sup>31</sup>

In the mid-1930s Lindsay's writing certainly changed ideological gear. There is, for example, a clear Marxist line running through his book for a broad popular audience *The Romans* (1935), part of the 'How-and-Why Series', edited by Gerald Bullett. In it Lindsay explicitly did not 'seek to tell the story of her [Rome's] wars and all the romance of her long adventurous career...' but instead preferred, 'to unravel some of the main qualities that made a small Italian hill-town the most important factor in the building of modern Europe.'<sup>32</sup> In a chapter entitled *The End of Farmer-Aristocracy* he writes, for example, 'As always when a landed aristocracy is broken up by the advent of a commercial class to power, there was great misery and uncertainty. All the old ideas of duty and social service were gone, and nothing seemed to take their place.'<sup>33</sup>

In February 1936 the classicist Ronald Syme reviewed *The Romans* from Trinity College Oxford. Aside from a couple of points of detail, the review is entirely positive: 'Mr Jack Lindsay has won repute for his translations from the Latin poets and his novels of Roman life and politics. He has not set himself a more difficult task - to

delineate in this brief compass of a hundred pages the spirit and character of the Roman people. This little book may be called a success: it is written with knowledge, with sympathy and with passion.<sup>34</sup>

Subscribing to the *Daily Worker* and plunging headlong into the politics he had so assiduously avoided, Lindsay began to realise that his old London friends (from before he had moved to the Westcountry with Elza) were following the same path: 'It was with much satisfaction I realized that Edgell [Rickword], [Douglas] Garman, Alec Brown and others had reached the same conclusions as myself, though by less devious byroads; and that in *Left Review* there was a rallying-point of the movement.'<sup>35</sup>

Lindsay's first piece for the *LR* was a long declamatory poem called 'Who are the English?' It was so warmly received that it was reprinted and circulated as a pamphlet. The poem was performed by the recently formed Unity Theatre, the dramatic limb of the CPGB. On the back of its success, Rickword asked him to write a similar poem on the Spanish Civil War, which produced the famous song *On Guard for Spain*. This poem was also quickly developed into a text designed mass declamation and performed all over England by theatre groups connected with the CPGB.

Lindsay's books, however, before Thomson's review of *Mark Anthony* (quoted above), were relatively poorly received by his comrades at the *LR*. The somewhat frosty reception from the likes of Caldwell et al. cast him once more as the 'odd-man-out', whose work did not seem to fit anywhere in British letters. Much of this disjuncture must be put down exactly to the 'devious' nature of those 'byroads' by which Lindsay came to his socialist dawn. His classicism, which Thomson seemed to find refreshing in *Mark Anthony*, would have been quite alien to those products of the

British classical system. The heightened interest in the expression of sexual freedom, learned as much from his artist father's classicizing erotica as it was from Catullus and the second generation Romantics, must have seemed a stylistic bolt from the blue in 30s Britain – and not a bolt that could be so very easily identified with class-struggle (notwithstanding that freedom of erotic expression and the expression of socio-political dissent have often made good bed-fellows in times of cultural crisis).

Lindsay's foreign academic and countercultural artistic background in Australia provided him with an otherworldly literary palate; his tastes included Existential philosophy, Freudian psychoanalytical theory, and the kinds of Apollonian mysticism that takes Robert Graves's writing to its most magical and least congruous peaks. His work was roundly rejected, he tells us, 'by the conservative or liberal as crudely committed to the proletarian cause, and was not much welcomed on the Left, which complained steadily over the years about all sorts of unorthodox elements, over-complex and subtle, overpsychological, mystical, overlyrical, lewd, overnaturalistic or psychopathological, overconcerned with sex, et cetera.'<sup>36</sup> He was for a time *persona non grata* on both sides of the ideological divide. It even became CPGB policy to omit his name from performances of his poem *On Guard for Spain*. He did not, however, let these setbacks deter him; with his new socialist Muse at his elbow, he continued to churn out remarkably lucid books at a frightening rate.

In his autobiography he explains in a note that if he were asked to summarise what his work since 1933 was about, he would answer: 'The Alienating Process (in Marx's sense) and the struggle against it.'<sup>37</sup> Such words from the mouth of a committed Marxist are no surprise in themselves, but it is surprising that his own

output—the 'work' he was describing—is predominantly classical. His phenomenal productivity yielded ten books of historical fiction based in the Greco-Roman world (the majority of which were set in Late Republican Rome -- eleven if we count *To Arms* (1938)), a novel for young people set in ancient Gaul; seven book-length translations from Greek and Roman literature, mainly poetry – some anthologies, including the accessible and cheaply printed collections *Ribaldry of Rome* and its twin *Ribaldry of Greece* (1961); some poetical monographs, e.g. *Catullus* (1948) and Longus' *Daphnis and Chloe* (1948); and six books of historical non-fiction, including his biography of Mark Anthony (1936), *The Romans were here* (1956), about Roman Britain, and *Leisure and Pleasure in Roman Egypt* (1965). *Song of a Falling World* (1948), probably his most well received contribution to scholarship, is a Marxist history of the declining Roman Empire based on discussion of the period's literature.

Lindsay produced over 150 books in his lifetime and no complete bibliography currently exists. Yet it is possible to be sure that (even if we disregard the reprinted editions) his classical output, in terms of books of which he was principal author, amounts to over forty titles between 1925 and 1974. Right from the beginning of his writing career his inclination was away from those ancient authors who had, through the nineteenth and earlier twentieth centuries, gained the 'classical' stamp of academic authority (namely Virgil and Cicero). He preferred to work with what he regarded as ancient 'popular literature'. He was drawn to the poetry and prose of the spoken word, not the 'deadening side of the tradition', which he considered to have been fetishized by traditional 'academic criticism'. His ragbag of favourite classical authors included the demotic mimes of Herondas (which he first translated in 1930),

Petronius (whose *Satyricon* and poems he translated in 1927), Apuleius (whose *Golden Ass* he translated first in 1931), and Aristophanes (whose *Lysistrata* and *Ecclesiazusai* he translated in 1925 and 1929 respectively). An array of lesser but nevertheless sparkling ancient literary lights can be found collected in his various translation anthologies. He was especially fond of Theocritus, whose poetry he first translated in 1929 and saw as being beautifully alive 'because it is tissue in a poetry derived in large part from popular Mimes'.<sup>38</sup>

His lifelong passion, however, was for the poetry of Catullus, which produced not only two different full translations of his works, the first in 1929 and the second in 1948, but also his first trilogy of historical fiction, i.e. *Rome for Sale* (1934), *Caesar is Dead* (1934) and *Last Days of Cleopatra* (1935), *Despoiling Venus* (1935), which is a narrative delivered in the first-person voice of Caelius Rufus, and finally *Brief Light* (1939), a fictionally embellished biographical account of Catullus. About his initial selection of period for this historical fiction, Lindsay wrote in 'In choosing the Caesarian revolution as my theme I had in a sense been exploiting the poems of Catullus, which had always meant a great deal to me'.<sup>39</sup> That he identified closely with Catullus is shown in *Brief Light* (1939) when Caesar tells Catullus that his poetry is 'superb; but it is too abstract, too idealistic, to meet the urgent needs of the time'.<sup>40</sup>

Lindsay saw in the decline of the Roman Republic a shift of power away from the aristocracy to professional or mercantile classes, which he thought closely paralleled the rise of capitalism in Europe. When 'the net of commercialism was thrown wider over the ancient world' (i.e. the end of the Republic), Lindsay detected that poetic expression was threatened by 'a loss of an homogeneous audience'. Lindsay

seems to have identified this disintegrating ancient audience, with the audience of the orally conceived, or at least aurally received, poetry of, among others, Homer and the ancient dramatists. Catullus was among the few poets, according to Lindsay, who managed to 'solve' the problem by 'finding a new relation between 'literary' form and emotional speech intonation'.<sup>41</sup> Such simultaneously sweeping and acute observations are plentiful in Lindsay's lucid and staggeringly broad classical scholarship. It often makes for a somewhat disconcerting reading experience because it is difficult to tell how far we should believe his often unqualified but highly attractive and poetically sensitive observations.

Lindsay's Marxism gave him an ideological bedrock from which he could spring into the ancient world and an intellectual structure of socio-economic analysis into which he could pour his substantial literary experience and his powerful imagination. The hopeful and creative Marxism of the Thirties and the new angle it offered on the ancient world simultaneously repelled the traditional Ivory Tower classicists from Jack Lindsay's work, and attracted others, like Thomson, who were wise enough to see that through such pioneering work the traditional 'stultifying' realm of Classics could be re-energised. His skill as a translator of Greek brought him right to the foot of the Ivory towers, if never through the door, when he contributed a number of translations to the Oxford University Press's *The Oxford Book of Greek Verse in Translation* (1938), edited by T. F. Higham and C. M. Bowra, which accompanied *The Oxford Book of Greek Verse* (1930).

## Conclusion

The impact on British Classics of the Russian revolution and the foundation of the Communist Party of Great Britain was complicated and much greater than traditional histories of either Classics or Communism in Britain have allowed. The main reason is the traumatic divorce of the two constituencies in the 1930s and 1940s, leading to the almost complete estrangement of intellectual life in Britain from Marxism, except amongst the exceptional group of experts in Modern History who clustered around Christopher Hill and Eric Hobsbawm. The doomed romance between Classics and communism in the 1920s to 1940s had several interesting characteristics. The classical communists were almost exclusively male, since so few women could access traditional classical education at that time. For similar reasons they were mostly at least lower-middle-class, and had received traditional education to university level (Caudwell is the obvious exception here). There is a strong connection between the early classical communists and the struggle until 1921 for the independence of Ireland, Britain's earliest and geographically closest colony.

Within academia, the classical communists were far more interested in ancient Greece than Rome, and tended to specialise in historical, anthropological, philosophical and scientific subjects rather than philology or literature; George Thomson was something of an exception here, since even his works on tragedy are written from a dominantly anthropological perspective. But Thomson was also a key figure in reaching out to the communist classicists who worked in the public literary sphere rather than seeking university appointments—the men who were attempting to create a new, progressive literature and literary theory based on Marxist ideas but open-minded and aesthetically avant-garde.

The literary figures who joined the CPGB in the 1920s and 1930s, and who clustered around the *Left Review*, conducting their lively debate on the progressive possibilities of literary art in the struggle for social change, were often classically educated: Rickword, Day-Lewis, and Swingler. They used their negative experiences of traditional classical education (as well as the powers of analysis, expression and persuasion which they had undoubtedly gained from it) to debate the future of mass education both in the fight for greater socioeconomic equality and in a potential socialist utopia of the future. Christopher Caudwell, an active party member, blended ancient Aesthetics with Bolshevik and Marxist theory to produce his influential *Illusion and Reality*. One of the striking characteristics of the work of these men is their willingness to participate in multiple genres of literary discourse—there was a reluctance to specialise too narrowly. Journalism, translation and poetry were all part of a day's work for Rickword, while Caudwell translated and wrote poetry as well as authoring several novels and his major works of literary criticism.

But the towering figure amongst the communist classicists in Britain was undoubtedly the man from the British colony of Australia, which was still ruled directly as a monarchy from Britain until 1927. Whether it was his avant-garde, free-thinking father, his upbringing in the roughest, most proletarian part of Australia, his delight in the 'popular' literature of the ancient world (the mime and the novel, still in the 1920s and 1930s scarcely considered acceptable texts for serious study in conventional British Classics), his first-hand experience of poverty as a young writer in Britain, or his restless, questing intellect, Lindsay brought a fresh approach and an incredible energy to the task he set himself of making the Greeks and Romans speak to

the modern world. Some of his work (especially on Theocritus, Herondas and the novelists) has been recognised since the 1970s, by some famous western European scholars, as a serious contribution. Yet few of them are aware of the committed political position from which this avalanche of work emerged, any more than they are aware of the romance between Communism and Classics which took place in the 1930s and which had far-reaching if (in mainstream British cultural life) now almost forgotten effects. The classically educated men who were attracted to communism created a real space, between the Party and the Ivory Tower, where scholarship, literature, and cultural practice could meet both the legacy of the ancient Mediterranean world and the struggle for social progress. We hope that this article constitutes a first small step in making their efforts better understood.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See Arnot (1967) 185-6 and Klugmann (1968) 13-74.

<sup>2</sup> Swann and Aphranian (1999, eds.); Brown (2005).

<sup>3</sup> Hill (1990) 11. See also the heavy emphasis on authors of literature in English in Kettle (1973) 2. There are useful biographies and bibliographies of most of these figures in Paananen (2000).

<sup>4</sup> Quoted at <http://www.comunistpartyofireland.ie/s-farrington.html>

<sup>5</sup> Cornford Senior had been lecturer in Classics at Cambridge from 1904, and was appointed Laurence Professor of Ancient Philosophy in 1931. Amongst his most important works were *Thucydides Mythistoricus* (1907), *The Athenian Philosophical Schools* (1927), *From Religion to Philosophy* (1912) and *Greek Religious Thought* (1923). But see also e.g. his *Poems of George Meredith: A lecture delivered at the Working Men's College, London, on March 21st, 1903*.

<sup>6</sup> Caudwell (1986) 33.

<sup>7</sup> Caudwell (1986) 32 and 36.

<sup>8</sup> Caudwell (1946), 117-22; see Fowler (1977).

<sup>9</sup> Caudwell (1936) 9.

<sup>10</sup> Caudwell (1936) 32.

<sup>11</sup> Pawling (1989).

<sup>12</sup> Mulhern (1974) 51.

<sup>13</sup> Caudwell (1986) 99.

<sup>14</sup> Thompson (1995) 313-14

<sup>15</sup> Thomson (1951), responding to Cornforth (1950-1). See further Klaus (1989).

<sup>16</sup> Margolies (1969), especially 61-2.

<sup>17</sup> Caudwell (1986) 58.

<sup>18</sup> Margolies (1969) 61.

<sup>19</sup> Caudwell (1968) 58.

<sup>20</sup> Caudwell (1946) 58. After a digression on Plato, he returns to this theme: Aristotle, he writes, is uninterested in the poet's mind, and does not concern himself with whether or not the creation and appreciation of poetry is a conscious function.

<sup>21</sup> *LR* (1937) 3.3.43.

<sup>22</sup> Swingler (1937) 7.

<sup>23</sup> Stray (1998); Vasunia (2013); Hall (2008a), (2008b) and (2008c) ch. 10; Hall and Stead (2013); Hall and Stead (2014); Stead and Hall (2015).

<sup>24</sup> *LR* (1937) 3.3.185.

<sup>25</sup> Lindsay (1958) 133.

<sup>26</sup> Lindsay (1960) 237.

<sup>27</sup> Stephenson was a member of the university branch of the Communist Party with A. J. P. Taylor, Graham Greene and Tom Driberg. He would later return to Australia and undergo a vertiginous shift in his political position, becoming an active member of far-Right political groups.

<sup>28</sup> Lindsay (1962) 228-9.

<sup>29</sup> See video by Justine McConnell and Henry Stead on the 'Classics and Class' website: <http://www.classicsandclass.info/project/01> or access via YouTube: [http://youtu.be/yyyG\\_wusrik](http://youtu.be/yyyG_wusrik)

<sup>30</sup> Lindsay (1962) 240.

<sup>31</sup> Lindsay (1962) 252-3.

<sup>32</sup> Lindsay (1935) 8.

<sup>33</sup> Lindsay (1935) 28.

<sup>34</sup> Syme (1936) 40.

<sup>35</sup> Lindsay (1962) 252.

<sup>36</sup> Lindsay (1962) 271.

<sup>37</sup> Lindsay (1962) 271 fn.

<sup>38</sup> *LR* (1937) 3.3.511-3.

<sup>39</sup> Lindsay (1982) 752.

<sup>40</sup> Lindsay (1939).

<sup>41</sup> *LR* (1937) 3.3.512.

<sup>42</sup> We are very grateful to Chris Stray for reading this text and providing some excellent suggestions for improving it, at a very difficult time in his life.