

## NOTES

### MAURICE CORNFORTH

*Greg McLennan writes:* Maurice Cornforth, the British Communist philosopher, died on the last day of 1980 after a long illness. He was 71. As a Communist intellectual, Cornforth throughout his life and work strove to combine very different qualities: those of the theorist, but also those of the political activist. At Cambridge, Cornforth attended to Wittgenstein, Moore, and Braithwaite, but also formed a Communist Party group, addressed meetings of workers, and helped conduct the fight against unemployment in the town. As a full-time party secretary in East Anglia in the 1930s, then as director of Lawrence and Wishart, he still managed to wrestle with and criticise the dominant non-Marxist philosophical traditions.

One measure of Cornforth's success as both specialist and populariser is that his introductory 'trilogy' to Marxism, *Dialectical Materialism*, has sold in great numbers since its publication in 1951. For many party activists, that book provided a first opportunity to seriously reflect upon the general principles underlying Marxist analysis and



political strategy. But it is important to add that success and failure cannot be measured simply in terms of copies sold or read. As Cornforth allowed on several later occasions, some of his work was too reverential, not to

say apologetic, for the theories and politics associated with Stalin's brand of Soviet Communism. Here, the ability to popularise cannot be praised independently of what it is that is being transmitted, and in this sense *Dialectical Materialism* has been a mixed achievement.

Whilst the faults of *Dialectical Materialism* are very much bound up with the beliefs and experience of a whole generation of Communists, rather than being simply the oversights of an individual, Cornforth became increasingly aware of the difficulties in being a 'party philosopher'. As an individual, one of his distinctive characteristics was the willingness and ability to reappraise his own work and beliefs in the search for a consistent and honest philosophical position. Cornforth was, in fact, a ceaseless 'revisionist'. By this term no necessary political direction is implied, though he came to adopt a 'Eurocommunist' stance, notably in his last book, *Communism and Philosophy*. But his first, and impressive work, *Science v Idealism*, was severely re-done in 1950 as *In Defence of Philosophy* — a