

As John Saville writes in his introduction to the *Memoirs*, there is much in them to fascinate the economic and social historian. To begin with there is his description of his family life and background in Leeds. Lipman's parents were immigrants from Russia who, like many Jewish migrants, stopped in a British city rather than continuing on to the USA. They were also part of a minority who broke with religious orthodoxy and lived apart from the rest of the Jewish community in an anonymous middle class terrace. Rather unusually in such surroundings, portraits of Marx and Bakunin 'glared at each other across the dining table'.

An anecdote from his childhood will serve to introduce Mick Lipman's character. At school he was not content to be an atheist (outlandish enough at the time) — he also took delight in getting top marks for Scripture. This trait of being critical, yet striving to beat the system on its own ground explains a lot about Lipman's life as a socialist business man. After all, why should the supporters of capitalism monopolise initiative and enterprise? But this desire to be an insider and outsider at the same time was not free of tensions, reflected in his writing by a curious combination of trenchant criticisms of capitalism with jolly stories of the good life which accompanied business success. In my view the frankness with which the author tries to reconcile the apparent contradictions of his life adds to the book's interest.

Lipman gives a complete — if contentious — history of Ekco Radio, the firm to which he devoted most of his energy for sixteen years. It is not possible to summarise this here. Suffice it to say that anyone who is keen on business history will find his description of the early years of the radio industry very informative. His technical background allows him to write concisely and authoritatively about the production side of the industry's development, as well as the marketing problems, antics of rival firms and the personalities of those who pioneered mass production of radios and other electrical consumer goods. Within the limitations of a personal viewpoint, this book gives a very accurate flavour of the rough and tumble world of business in the successful part of manufacturing during the inter war period. What adds spice is the highly critical attitude he held about capitalism in general, and some of his business colleagues in particular — though he does occasionally indulge in some nostalgic might-have-beens about Ekco Radio.

The factory which he ran during the Second World War was one of the success stories of war production. Lipman vividly describes the pressures of the war economy,

MEMOIRS OF A SOCIALIST BUSINESS MAN

M J Lipman

Lipman Trust 1980, £10

In an age when socialist writing is dominated by theoretical issues it makes a pleasant change to read one person's reflections on a practical life. Mick Lipman's *Memoirs* cover his experiences from just after the turn of the century until the mid 1970s. His childhood and adolescence were spent in Leeds, and he gives an account of socialist culture there as it was around the time of the First World War. His business career began in the 1920s when he took on various management jobs, after training as an engineer, in the new industry of radio production. During the 1930s and the Second World War he worked for Ekco Radio, then a household name in electrical consumer goods (Ekco was gobbled up by the Phillips multinational in the 1960s). He managed a secret radar factory for the duration of the war, and afterwards started a completely new career in East-West trade. Finally, in true gentlemanly fashion he retired to a farm in Kent, and wrote these memoirs just before his death from leukemia in 1978.

and the incongruities involved in establishing an ultra modern production line in a rural backwater. The speed with which radars had to be developed from rough designs to mass production involved many innovations in management and shopfloor methods. As a boss, Lipman seems to have had much less trouble from the branch of the Communist Party that was active in the factory than from the local middle class, who bitterly resented the fact that their domestic servants were attracted by the higher wages they could earn in factory work!

It is ironic that after being in charge of this top-secret production during the war, Lipman was eased out of Ekco Radio after the war. Apparently his left wing views were no longer acceptable in the top ranks of a firm which was hoping to get cold war rearmament orders. He therefore had to start afresh, making a new career in the untested and uncertain area of commerce with Eastern Europe. He began by selling textile machinery to Yugoslavia, then gradually worked his way round all the socialist bloc countries. Eventually he became skilled enough in the ways of trade with socialist countries to conclude such deals as the sale to the Soviet Union of a complete 'turnkey' plant for the manufacture of TV tubes. Once again, his engineering background enabled him to give a multitude of fascinating insights into the technical as well as the commercial problems of exporting capital goods to the socialist countries.

As an example of his iconoclastic approach to cold war myths about the Soviet Union it is worth quoting his observation on the West's assessment of Soviet industry: 'Any shortcoming, however trivial, is eagerly reported as indicative of their backwardness or inefficiency. On the other hand, when the military establishments want an extra hundred millions to spend . . . they go to the other extreme and exaggerate Russian prowess in the production of armaments'. By contrast with propagandist writings, Lipman's account of the successes and failures of the socialist economies as he found them has an authentic ring of truth. As he was a production engineer and expert in East-West trade his judgements are well worth reading. As he was a socialist it is also interesting to read his views on the political set-up in the socialist countries. His distaste for the repressive treatment of dissent will strike a sympathetic chord in most readers.

In short, this is a very unusual kind of book. Its value lies partly in the author's expertise, and partly in his independent and strongly held personal convictions. The historical events in which he took part have been written about many times, but probably

never from this particular angle. The book will undoubtedly become a source for historians in the future, but right now it provides for any reader an entertaining diversion from the flood of theorising. If we are to recreate the kind of socialist culture described by Lipman, which flourished in Leeds before the First World War, we need a wider range of writing from a socialist viewpoint. For me, this is therefore a very welcome addition to left wing literature.

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