

Down And Out

The End Of The Street
Linda Melvern
Methuen, £9.95hbk

Did 'Wapping' have to happen? In other words, was the pressure of new technology unutilised, markets unserved, profits unmade so great that sooner or later it had to burst, violently, the dam of two centuries' old printers' strength?

The antiquity of printers' resistance to technical change which would rob them of their jobs is attested to in Linda Melvern's carefully crafted study. In 1814, John Walter II, son of the founder and editor of *The Times* had a steam press smuggled piece by piece into Printing House Square.

If management was accustomed to seeing print unions as obstructive brutes and unions to see management as devious bastards 172 years ago, there has been little in the intervening years to prove either wrong. On the management / ownership side, the lure of owning a mouthpiece which could sway opinion and act as a platform from which honours could be grasped and social status enhanced, has proved to be a drug powerful enough to withstand the most shocking losses.

On the unions' side, the nightly perishability of the product has bequeathed a benign gift of industrial muscle. Result: a boozy, cynical, well-heeled, comic, creative, exclusive, absorbing underworld, most alive when most people were going to bed.

Once inside it, it was formidably seductive. It was a man's world, dominated by the East End of London working class who never ceased to be so no matter what their wages or, for that matter, their politics - and who never let either of these dilute their distrust of the management.

A man's world is attractive to most men, at least some of the time: the fact that those outside of it could point with justice to the high wages for little work, to the lack of any

women in high paid jobs, to the finger-on-one-hand number of blacks in warehouses, press rooms, composing rooms, newsrooms and management suites - that all this was and still is a fact cuts little ice with the insiders.

It sometimes even worked. Some of its products are world class: I am partial, but I think the *Financial Times* is in that class; and *The Sun* certainly is. The reasons why the latter is so is that it does what it sets out to do - sell to and organise a mass audience - without a peer in any country in the West. The printing standards are high, very often: and though the place was rightly criticised for its massive inefficiency, it maintained a readership of a higher percentage of the population than similar papers in most other countries.

But it *did* have to change, and though it did not *have* to 'do a Wapping', it was an odds-on chance that it would. Eddie Shah's win over the National Graphical Association at his Stockport Messenger plant late in 1983 and his subsequent launch of *Today* with direct inputting, was a lever which opened up for all newspaper managements a window of opportunity to get progressively deeper staff cuts - Robert Maxwell's Mirror Group had agreed some 2,000 redundancies before 'Wapping' happened, while nearly all other groups had plans on the stocks which would have been thrown out of boardrooms with hollow laughs a year or so before.

But Rupert Murdoch, as Melvern well shows, was in a hurry: he was greatly over-extended in the US, where in 1985 he had laid out \$325m to buy 50% of 20th Century Fox, a month after financing a \$2 billion deal for Metromedia. 'Murdoch', she says, 'was on his way to achieving a global communications empire spanning three continents. But to do it, he had to sort out his problems with his British newspapers. He desperately needed his UK profits. The golden goose could not be allowed to stop laying eggs'.

These eggs were already gold plated: *The Sun* made £26m a year. But, as Mur-

doch told his shareholders in the 1985 News Corporation annual report, profits would grow dramatically without disputes.

Melvorn is at her formidable best when she describes the preparations for the dramatic coup which would bring Wapping to life. In 1984-85, Murdoch saw himself thwarted at every turn by the unions: his papers were plagued by disputes. A plant at Kinning Park in Glasgow, developed to print Scottish and North of England editions of *The Sun* and other News International titles, was not allowed on stream by Sogat, the monopoly print union in Scotland. The pressure was building up.

He lanced the boil by employing, in secret, a team of computer specialists. They successfully set up the Wapping computer systems, trained the journalists and other operators and brought it into service.

Should the print unions have seen the writing on the wall? Of course they should: indeed, they did. Melvern quotes Eric Hammond, general secretary of the electricians' union, using in his own defence a speech by Tony Dubbins, general secretary of the NGA, in 1978.

Dubbins had said that if the NGA did not heave themselves out of the rut of a union in which entry was predicated on a long craft apprenticeship, 'it will not be a case, like King Canute, of getting your feet wet; it will be a case of a massive tidal wave of changing techniques sweeping over this industry, with the creation of an alternative non-union industry or an industry organised by alternative unions'. He was right: but he had done too little to take on his own Fleet Street chapels.

Brenda Dean *might* have done, given more time. Less than a year into her job as Sogat general secretary when the dispute broke, she was a provincial (from Manchester), she was industrially moderate and she was a woman. Her formidable intelligence and talent could carry her over these dis-

advantages in the eyes of her Fleet Street members for a while, and the effectiveness she developed on TV and radio for speaking up for the interests of members, won some respect. But the hard men of her Central London branch knew from the outset she was not one of them. Melvern quotes Tony Isaacs, imperial father of the Sogat *News of the World* machine chapel, as saying 'What she (Dean) was trying to do was to have her executive committee run our dispute. They wanted to make all the decisions then just give us an ultimatum. A London general secretary would have understood the mood... we wanted recognition (at Wapping)'.

Implicit in the book is the view that the chapel leaders at News International have a lot to answer for. The Fleet Street unions were outsmarted, out-spent and outlawed: and though, as Melvern says, they could have done much more to learn what was happening and to act upon that knowledge, it was and is clear that the workforce of Fleet Street has now nowhere to go but down, and that the print culture of Fleet Street has nowhere to go but out.

Wapping *may* have unlocked a door which barred a multiplicity of papers. However, the smart money in the Street (and there is some) is on *this* kind of future: that the big groups will retain their strength, indeed see it increased as others go down the mega-profit road blasted open by Shah and Murdoch. If there are to be new titles, *they* will print them. But the cash released by lower costs will be used by the wiser of the big groups to fund marketing and promotion, and the small companies will find themselves at a continual disadvantage.

It is a compelling but not an attractive vision. It can be proved wrong only by the continuing vitality and talent of papers like this one, which provide something of a political base for more financially ambitious projects like *News on Sunday*. That's hard work, but it's worth it. •

John Lloyd



Beyond the Boundary

Shattering Illusions
Trevor Carter
Lawrence & Wishart,
£3.95 pbk

Unlike most books of this genre, which have tended to look at what happens at the level of government and governmental politics, Trevor Carter's 'diary' is a record of what happens at the level of the street, housing estates, inner city schools, inside the police stations and more importantly, inside the rhetoric of the Left - thereby beginning to uncover the racism of the Left and of the labour movement.

This is a 'once-upon-a-time' tale, but of our lives. In three of the five chapters, Trevor Carter interrogates the political framework of the West Indian presence in Britain in three phases. The first phase covers 1954-62 and deals with the politics of assimilation and integration in terms of the effects on black people and the intentions of the

state. The central tenets of this period were that immigrants were 'aliens' and that they posed a threat to the stability of schools and society-

Cultural diversity was only tolerated as long as it did not impede progress to integration or challenge the dominance of anglo-centric, white society.

The second phase, 1962-72, he describes as the period of cultural diversity. The advocates of cultural pluralism maintain that our society consists of different groups which are culturally distinctive and separate under the political authority of a neutral state.

What is wrong with this view, as Trevor Carter points out, is that it assumes that all groups within the plural society possess roughly equal amounts of power.

In the third phase, 1972-80s, the agenda he says is being set by black people. However the assertion that the agenda of race politics in the 1980s is being set by black people reveals one of the shortcomings of the book. The ideolo-

gies of multi-culturalism, racism awareness training and anti-racism, which have become the mainstay of the race politics of the 80s, have nothing in common with the business of the black struggle, nor are they shaped or formed by the black experience.

I would argue that the race politics of the 80s has been heavily influenced by the growth of and efficient professionalisation of 'race' issues - that have been described elsewhere as the bureaucratic conversion of community struggles into respectable professional occupations. Multi-culturalism, anti-racism and racism awareness training are just a small part of a whole set of strategies which are to do with the management of black people and black struggles via Scarmanite policies. Black experiences and struggles transcend anti-racism and are not reducible to 'a fight against racism'.

A second problem with the book is brought out by its sub-title ('West Indians in British politics'). By opting

to remain within the boundaries of his own historical resources, Trevor Carter fails to recognise that the black tradition and black struggles are also of Africa, India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. The common struggles around blackness in different parts of the world, with a common history of colonialism and underdevelopment have shaped black politics here in Britain. The absence of this dimension could be misread as an affirmation of an ethnicity which accepts racial and ethnic categories as absolutes rather than as historical, and which refutes altogether the idea of a common struggle. This is compounded by the Left's own failure to perceive the ways in which race underpins working class consciousness, this is a failure the book fails to adequately address. That task is all the more essential in the face of the Left's continuing inability to make a distinction between anti-racism and black struggles. •

George Shire

Damaged Goods

Sinclair And The 'Sunrise' Technology
Ian Adamson and Richard Kennedy
Penguin, £3.95 pbk

A few years ago, an opinion poll showed that the British public regarded Clive Sinclair as one of the top ten scientists of all time. This bizarre over-estimate of Sinclair's importance tells us something important about the potential of clever marketing - and something sad about the British educational system. But the full Sinclair saga, told well by Adamson and Kennedy, also has powerful lessons for anyone interested in British economic failure and Britain's feeble position as a world technological power.

For the reason why Sinclair shines out as Britain's best-known high technology entrepreneur has nothing to do

with the two skills which normally make companies succeed in advanced industries - innovation and quality. Over the years Sinclair has produced unoriginal goods which have mostly worked badly if at all, made them in ill-run factories with no proper management or quality control, and sold them at the bottom end of the market. The culmination in 1984 and 1985 was the launch of the QL computer - before it existed - and of the C5 electric carpet slipper, which was useless mainly because it incorporated only highly traditional battery technology.

As Adamson and Kennedy tell it, it is no surprise that Sinclair has finally been bought out this year by Amstrad - another British firm of humble origins, this time run on strict cost control, cheap foreign labour, and ruthless quality and marketing methods. For these are exactly the qualities which Sinclair has always lacked. With his origins in the ham

electronics business, Sinclair is used to dealing with customers who can be used to capitalise the firm by waiting months for goods, and who regard it as all part of the game if what finally arrives fails to work.

This would not matter if information technology itself were a sideshow. But it isn't, of course - it is possibly the leading industry of the coming decade, and one in which the UK had a trade deficit of £1.25 billion in 1985. Labour Party plans for British Telecom and the rest of the British information technology industry have to cope with severe British weakness in all information technology areas. One symptom is the way in which the Japanese have produced Mitsubishi and Sony, and the Americans Apple, while all we can run to is Uncle Clive.

Britain's National Enterprise Board (NEB) backed various information technology businesses including Sinclair (a fiasco), Inmos (a

partial success) and ICL (a reasonable success considering the overwhelming strength of IBM), but its planned successor bodies next time round will be in a world where far more vision and far more money will be needed. Firms not up to global standards of technology are now at a fatal disadvantage in the information technology world.

Oddly enough, Sinclair may just have a role in all this. His newest project, a portable telephone using the latest 'wafer-scale' technology, may for once be a genuine first. If it is, the promise is immense. But if a Labour government backs him again, some care will still be needed. The NEB found Sinclair Radionics giving money to the Conservative Party while it was being funded as part of Labour's industrial policy. Typically enough, Sinclair seems to have passed the episode off as a mild eccentricity. •

Martin Ince



Guarded Optimism

Martin Walker is only the third resident correspondent *The Guardian* has sent to Moscow. To follow in the footsteps of Arthur Ransome and Malcolm Muggeridge must have been a daunting prospect. It is still true, however, that despite better communications and the passage of time, the Soviet Union remains remarkably unknown to the outside world and that despite the restrictions, there is plenty for an enterprising journalist to tell as *Martin Walker* must have found in writing ***The Waking Giant - The Soviet Union under Gorbachev*** (Michael Joseph, £14.95 hbk).

Political Communications

Books about general elections can have a distorting effect on the writing of political history. They tend to make the elections seem more important than the politics. In other words, they put more weight on the three or four weeks of campaigning than on the three, four or even five years of politics in Britain.

Since the general election of 1945 we have had the Nuffield series under the auspices of Dr David Butler. Since the election of 1979 we also have a new series under Professor Ivor Crewe (in this case, ***Political Communications: The General Election Campaign of 1983***, Cambridge University Press, £25), though so inbred is the genre that the first chapter is written by Dr Butler. Most of it is the

There have been some good journalistic accounts (notably Hedrick Smith's now rather dated *The Russians*) which have brought many everyday aspects of Russian and Soviet life before a wider audience, and the TV teams are beginning to give us glimpses of different aspects of Soviet society.

Martin Walker, however, does not attempt to describe everyday life in Moscow or in the far flung republics. His is rather, a political account, an attempt to describe the social and political changes since the second world war and, in particular, those of the past 20

result of a seminar held at the University of Essex as long ago as January 1984, so it has taken a long time to produce.

Quite the best contribution comes from Cecil Parkinson, not because he is more learned but because, as chairman of the Conservative Party, he was a practitioner. He sensed that the Tories could win an early general election when Labour only narrowly won the by-election in Birmingham Northfield in October 1982. But it still took a long time to convince the prime minister and the decision to go on June 9 was taken only on May 8.

For the rest, this is a book about margins; deviations in opinion polls and so on. As such, it is marginally interesting. Politics is about long-term swings and trends. *Malcolm Rutherford*

ists to conservatives. The movement raised unprecedented amounts in cash and kind. The tensions and divisions inevitable in such a broad movement fall into perspective within the impressive constructive results and the degree of practical co-operation achieved.

Although a growing majority of the British public was against Franco, the movement was not strong enough to change government policy or save the Spanish Republic. Yet almost none of the many survivors Fyrth interviewed regretted their efforts for Spain or felt they had been wasted. The deep hatred of fascism engendered and the experience of practical democratic action helped to transform a whole political generation. • *Margot Heinemann*

years. His aim is to outline the political and intellectual environment in which the elite operates, and, specifically, to set the Gorbachev leadership in context.

The problems brought to the fore by the computer revolution, by an ailing economy, and the arms race are all dealt with. Foreign affairs, the social background of the new politicians, and cultural developments, are all described. His is a good, readable account, one which has the great merit of bringing the reader right into the events of the past year yet linking them with their long-term antecedents. It is a mea-

sured, even-handed account - guardedly optimistic that the social revolution will produce a more open-minded political leadership.

A reform-minded intellectual in the Soviet Union might agree with much of this. I am less sure than Martin Walker that the presence of educated politicians in a more modern and stable society warrants any predictions about political developments, but I would recommend the book to anyone who wishes to understand the situation Gorbachev has inherited and his attempts at reform. •

Mary McAuley

A Sailor's Tale

Gabriel Garcia Marquez is renowned in his novels for leading us into a world of apparent fantasy. We struggle with complicated narratives trying at the same time to keep track of numerous characters who bear the same name, following their exploits which are designed to take our imaginations to their absolute limits. Underlying the fantasy, however, there has always been a sharp, humorous and often sad portrayal of the many sides of life in Latin America.

The Story of a Shipwrecked Sailor Jonathan Cape (£8.95 hbk) is a departure from the tradition of the novels of Marquez. To begin with, it is a true tale which is not strictly 'by' him. He gives birth to the story on behalf of one Alejandro Velasco. Moreover, the narrative, because it has to reflect Velasco, is pared down to a bare simplicity.

The tale is one of survival. Velasco was a member of the Colombian navy who fell overboard from his ship into the Caribbean sea and miraculously survived 10 days without food or water on a drifting raft. The book is the reconstructed story of those 10 days.

A departure for Marquez all this may be, but the very best of him is not lost on the way. The skills he employs to allow the peoples of Latin America to speak for themselves are utilised here to recapture the horror of Velasco's existence at sea so that you can feel your own survival instincts emerge, urging the young sailor to keep going.

However, it is not a book to be embarked upon lightly by those of delicate constitution. One glimpse at the passage where Velasco kills by hand an overfriendly seagull will show you what I mean. •

Diane Dixon

Watching Protectors

News Out Of Africa: Biafra to Band Aid by Paul Harrison and Robin Palmer Hilary Shipman (£5.95 pbk/£12.00 hbk), is an extremely interesting and readable account of the TV media machine's approach to covering news out of, you've guessed it, Africa.

No qualms here in recommending this to anyone of any age: to those who want to know how we get to hear and see what we do on our screens about Africa (and most other places in the world); to those who see the Third World as a central part of the domestic political agenda; and even to those actively involved in development work and development education.

The authors hang their discussion on the media's approach to three recent famines - Biafra in 1968-70, Ethiopia in 1973 and Ethiopia again in 1984.

They describe the impact of new technology on patterns of news gathering (did you know that BBC TV and ITN have only nine correspondents resident overseas between them?) and tell a sorry tale of chance and frequent editorial indifference.

The current media interest in matters African is, they suggest, a fragile thing needing continued watchful protection. Criticisms? Some - but the good points of this book far outweigh its weaknesses. • *Andy Mawson*

X

Setting the Record Straight

Fifty years after the Spanish civil war, *Jim Fyrth* has produced the first full account of the Aid Spain movement of 1936-39. ***The Signal Was Spain***, published by Lawrence and Wishart (£6.95 pbk), is a brilliantly readable book which sets the record straight.

The work of the 200 British men and women who served in the medical units, recorded through diaries, letters and scores of interviews with survivors, forms a vivid, heart-breaking story.

The campaigns in Britain to collect money, food and medical supplies, to organise homes for 4000 Basque refugee children and support for the families of International Brigades, brought together in various ways everyone from commun-

