

OUR HISTORY

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T. A. JACKSON . a centenary appreciation



by Vivien Morton
and Stuart Macintyre

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The next issue will be a historical examination of the national question in Cornwall by Royston Green.

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**T. A. JACKSON - REVOLUTIONARY AND WORKING CLASS
INTELLECTUAL: Centenary Appreciation 1879-1979**

by Vivien Morton and Stuart Madntyre

This year is the centenary of the birth of Thomas Alfred Jackson - TAJ as he liked to be called, but Tommy to a wider circle of friends and acquaintances — who was a founder-member of the Communist Party and one of its outstanding writers, orators and leaders. He is known and loved by those Communists whose memory goes back thirty years, as well as by a great many others in contact with the labour colleges and the wider working class movement. His autobiography, **Solo Trumpet**, which was published in 1953 and deals with his first forty years, is recognised as a classic working-class memoir. And there is a long entry in the **Dictionary of Labour Biography** written by his daughter, Vivien Morton, and John Saville which provides a wide-ranging account of his activities.

Yet **Solo Trumpet** has long been out of print and second-hand copies are snapped up as soon as they are offered; and the **Dictionary of Labour Biography** is difficult of access to many who cannot afford such a work of reference. We think there is a place for a short biography. Certainly, the existing accounts do not nearly exhaust the available material. His second volume of memoirs, a sequel to **Solo Trumpet**, remains unpublished and contains much that is of immense value to anyone seeking to understand the history of the Communist Party, as well as personal vignettes written with all his powers of observation and pungent expression. Then there are many former comrades of Tommy Jackson up and down the country who remember him and can recount their own story of his idiosyncratic behaviour on the platform, in discussion and within the home of his host and hostess. Furthermore, an account of his life and times is significant because he represents a generation of self-taught Communist workers who educated themselves against the odds and united their personal experience of working-class life with a deep commitment to an intellectual understanding guided by Marxism. This was the generation that created the Communist Party of Great Britain. We do not think that they should be recalled uncritically, for they themselves would consider it a disservice to gloss over their misjudgements and errors. Tommy Jackson's life deserves to be commemorated not just in homage to a great fighter and a man of outstanding talents, but because it also illustrates some of the currents in our socialist heritage.

A MEMOIR
by Vivien Morton

"I shall die an old bum, loved but unrespected."

A favourite with my father, this was a prophecy only half fulfilled. Thomas Alfred Jackson, born on August 21st, 1879, died on August 18th 1955 very much loved, but unrespected by very few. Among the hundreds of tributes, sent with often tiny donations but amassing a total of £200 to the **Daily Worker**, were repeated couplings of "affection and esteem" and references to the "honour" of having had him as an overnight guest.

Another chuckled-over "quote" was Browning's

Oh, if we draw a circle premature
Heedless of far gain
Anxious for quick return of profit, sure
Bad is our bargain!

The circle that Tommy drew to encompass his life's activity was almost limitless: to have life and to have that abundantly, from his first sight of a picture-book to his death with **Westward Ho!** in one hand and a "fag" in the other, **Areopagitica** propping up the District Nurse's basin and the complete works of Scott, Thackeray and Dickens re-read for the last time. His last broadcast hearing, the commentary of the Boat Race and the Grand National and his last delight, listening to recordings of Irish folk songs.

In August 1975, twenty years after Tommy's death, a Dorset comrade wrote: "I can honestly say that it was due to Tommy that at the age of thirty I really placed my feet on this earth A Marxist intellectual, a master of the dialectical method in both speech and writings and utter wonderful simplicity, he did more to gain converts to the Party than other authors and speakers to try, so simple, a wonderful Marxist-Leninist dialectician, that never went above the proletariat."

The number of comrades who remember what he looked like must be dwindling fast. Of medium height and slight build, his most striking feature was the high and broad forehead crowned with a luxuriant growth of tousled black hair, a very mobile mouth and long tapering fingers, used to the full when speaking in public. (I have a clipping of an advert for some kind of tonic which used a photograph of Tommy in full spate with pointing forefinger in Trafalgar Square.) Having been born in a particularly white skin but with defective eyesight and an aversion to "excessive cleanliness" (his mother had tended to burn all printed paper in the interest of making things "clean and tidy") his hands and outer garments were generally grubby, sometimes, after making a good fire by picking up coals with those slender fingers, he would run them through his coal-black curls, being a firm believer in the cleansing properties of the "body's natural oils".

The legend of Tommy's non-washing has been exaggerated: but his eagerness from earliest youth to spend money on books rather than on food and clothing was bound to lead to the image of the unkempt scholar.

Apart from the rag-books which were given to little boys, perhaps Tommy's first initiation as a bibliophile came when he was allowed to squat in front of the fire and pore over the pictures in the Family Bible. "They were fine pictures, especially those in the Old Testament. And there is this about it, they certainly laid a foundation in me for a sound historical sense, by making me familiar with sights and scenes, costumes, appliances and weapons other than those of my ordinary everyday life." From the pictures in the Bible, little Tommy passed on to the pictures in Cassell's Illustrated History of England, one of the few books in the house. He says his mother must have bought them in twopenny parts out of pure charity to the book-peddler, and his compositor father had had the parts bound up together. By the time he was four Tommy could read.

"My very earliest recollection" wrote TAJ in 1952, "is of standing in a corner by the parlour door while somebody from an immense height handed down to me a stick of candy I was about two years old. That I have a clear visual image of the candy but none of my father who was handing it to me, is explained by the fact that I was short-sighted from birth. This physical limitation has conditioned my whole life." Born with severe astigmatism, the little boy was prevented from indulging in rough-and-tumble games for fear of accidents, and this even when, before starting school, he acquired "proper" glasses. These were expensive and his parents were anxious lest they get broken in playground or street. The presence of sisters, one older and two younger, also made for a climate of over-protection. As the astigmatism did not seriously affect his close vision, his first friends were books, not people. Only later the vast treasure amassed from his omnivorous reading **had** to be shared with other people, and his was a very generous nature. But a physical disability which keeps one reading instead of playing will make a child shy as well as erudite. Overcoming this shyness was the major triumph, and achieved when he had scarcely left adolescence.

Close by the bombed site of the house in Tysoe Street, Clerkenwell, where Tommy was born and had his earliest recollections, the London Borough of Finsbury set up in the 1960's a library intended especially for children. If it had been there in the 1880's little Tommy would have said he was living on the edge of paradise.

Clerkenwell was also the birthplace of his parents: "There is no doubt that I am a Cockney." TAJ's father, Thomas Blackwell Jackson, was a compositor with radical views. In politics he was unusually pro-Irish. This had a link with Clerkenwell. One day towards the end of 1867 Thomas Blackwell rushed home when news reached his printing-works that a bomb had exploded by Clerkenwell Gaol. The Jackson house had withstood the impact, but others nearby had not, and much anti-Irish feeling was aroused locally. T.B.J., however was not to be swayed, having learned something of Ireland's history from his father (Tommy's grandfather) who had staunchly supported from Clerkenwell, Daniel O'Connell's fight for the repeal of the Act of Union. Thomas Blackwell refuted the suggestion that the organised Fenian movement had any part in the Gaol bombing, and this he explained years later to his son Tommy, as well as the true facts about the Manchester Martyrs, gleaned from a fellow-comp. who had taken part in the Rescue.

From politics relating to his birthplace, sowing the seed of TAJ's lifelong devotion to the cause of Irish freedom, his father had other political stories, true tales even more gripping than those of Bible and history book. How, for instance, during the great Reform Demo of 1867 the railings of Hyde Park were wrenched out by the crowd. The leading political figures of the 1880's were made vivid to Tommy by the

colour-supplement his father used to bring home from the print-works: in later years it was hard not to believe he had actually known Gladstone, Parnell, Bradlaugh and Randolph Churchill in the flesh. His father was a staunch Gladstonian, even using the infant Tommy as a poster-bearer for the 1885 elections: vote for so-and-so and Home Rule for Ireland! Admiring Bradlaugh's Radicalism, Tommy's father could not accept his atheism; and young Tommy was packed off to Sunday School, which he enjoyed less than highjinks as a choir-boy and less than the political stories he had on Saturday afternoons while his Dad was "snobbing" the children's boots. When political topics ran out, family reminiscences, backed up with contemporary songs, remembered from a great-uncle who had served under Nelson and from other great-uncles, soldiers of the Peninsular War who survived Waterloo. The great-grandfather had been an armourer-sergeant in those Napoleonic wars: where Cassell's History left off little Tommy's family carried on the tale of English History. His paternal grandmother was known sardonically as "the Countess" because of her aristocratic bearing and her allegation that her mother's father had been a Viscount emigre from the French Revolution. She was an enthusiastic reader and encouraged her grandson to enjoy the great novels of the century. She also showed him London's historic buildings, like the home of the Duke of Wellington whom she used to see riding in the Park or walking down Piccadilly.

Love for the London of Dickens was fostered by Tommy's father, who had read the novels as they appeared in penny and twopenny instalments. When Dickens died in June 1870 he and his workmates joined many thousands of others to file past the grave in Westminster Abbey; and when Tommy was old enough he delighted in showing him this other London and in describing the changes that even then had already taken place. With all this practical education and entertainment, Tommy's father had one basic tenet to preach: the foundation, the root and branch of all virtue was loyal trade unionism. His own membership card of the Society of Compositors was stamped for forty-nine consecutive years. (His forbears were watchmakers, locksmiths, blacksmiths, armourers, and he married into a family of highly-skilled gun- and tool-makers and die-sinkers, metal-workers for as far back as could be remembered.)

Tommy's schooling lasted from the age of seven to thirteen-and-a-half. It was the Duncombe Road School in Upper Holloway, named after a Radical, pro-Chartist M.P.. The staff were keen Trade Unionists contending with the hopeless inadequacies of all Board Schools. Yet despite the size of the class and its lack of equipment, Tommy gained from an intelligent teacher and good general grounding which included some chemistry and even Darwinism, a daring subject as late as 1890-3. "The same teacher who fascinated me by his demonstration lessons in mechanics, physics and chemistry, also gave me an added appetite for Greek mythology. He had started a school library and this reinforcing of my reading gave me a bent which in time brought me to Frazer and the immensities and infinitudes of the Golden Bough. It was the same teacher, too, who introduced me to Malory's Morte D'Arthur.... I am happy in the remembrance that, little pest though I must have been in general, I was once able to do him a good turn..." This was that young Tommy, by remembering a long and complicated chemical formula and, despite his shyness and nervousness, bravely going up to the blackboard in full view of a formidable Inspector, and managing to write it all out correctly, succeeded in ensuring for his teacher an increased salary and grant for extra equipment in those pernicious days of "payment by results".

He was a very shy child, unable to comply with his mother's constant pleading to "be like other people". His poor eyesight, his phenomenal memory, his devotion to books and to serious reading, all set him apart. Throughout his life he was an enthusiast for games and athletics — in his forties he was an ardent boxing fan — but a always an outcast from any possibility of taking part in them. The ideas of the universe which were racing through his lively mind were seldom if ever communicated, so that he may well have appeared to be an idle, dreamy good-for-nothing. While still a young child "words were already revealing themselves to me as magic symbols denoting a whole unexplored territory of shifting meanings. I would puzzle over a word until its conventional significance had evaporated, leaving only a empty sound-form. And that form would take on a fascination terrifying by its very arbitrariness. Who first adopted this sound as a symbol for that notion? I did not know. I could only guess, vaguely. The blessed word 'evolution' was not a familiar one in my schooldays."

These schooldays were soon over. "I left school when I was 13 and half. It was no hardship to leave ... I was glad to adventure out into a new world." Being six months short of the minimum age for starting an indentured apprenticeship he began as a reading-boy at the printing works where his father was a foreman. His workmates were some 3040 apprentices and about 120 compositors. His work-room was one of four "reading closets" - little cubby-holes just big enough for the proof-reader, his desk and his reading-boy. It was lit by naked gas burners and by this light the boy had to read aloud from handwritten scripts. He boggled not at the deciphering but at the nauseous atmosphere: "The smell of gas, of lubricating oil and the hot air rising from the steam engine rose upwards carrying all these vapours and fumes; gathering additions of heat and odour as it ascended through floor after floor. By the time it reached me it was enough to bring home to me all I had read in Marryat and Smollett of the stench of the cockpit in the midshipman's berth in an old-time man-of-war... By the end of the week I was acclimatised."

The printing apprentices were fostered from the start in the traditions of craft-solidarity at which compositors excel. Most of the seniors were socialist supporters of George Lansbury; one of them lent the child a copy of Merrie England, but it was too soon and he, very healthily, preferred to join his young mates in devilry - almost a moral obligation for a foreman's son. Politics had no appeal, despite the bright posters with which the older lads decorated the works. His one obsession was to collect books and to read them. The job was ideal for the purpose. Sent on errands delivering proofs all over London, he was free to stop at any second-hand bookstall, especially the "Golconda of priceless riches" in Booksellers' Row, the quondam Holywell Street, Aldwych. Here the classics could be bought for ha'pence or little more. Given this opportunity, his "orgy of bookworming" soon became systematic. Sir John Lubbock (later Lord Avebury) having published his list of "A Hundred Best Books", Tommy set out to read these books one after another; of course many of them started fresh trains of methodical reading, so that a conscious direction was given to his search among the dusty piles. "One Christmas Eve I filled a gap in my 'Hundred' by picking up for sixpence a copy of George Henry Lewes's Biographical History of Philosophy. I devoured it like a novel, thrilled again and again by the greatest adventure story ever written - the adventure of the mind of man. I realised with the crushing force of an instant conviction that I had never known before what it was to think. I had remembered, I had wondered, and I had guessed. But like a navigator without a compass, on a night when the stars are veiled, I had been helplessly at the mercy of the winds and the waves. Thereafter I wallowed in philosophy as I had previously in poetry, in translations from the classics, in English

literature. As I worked through Lewes's **History** I gathered in my book-hunts all the works he named which came within reach ... They were, I confess without shame, stiff going ... I was ... acquiring a grasp of the Universe, objective and subjective, as a unity in multiplicity in perpetual process of self-transformation. I was, though I would not have known what you meant if you had told me so, preparing myself for Marx!"

Coming of age with the new century, a fully-trained compositor, it was no light matter to commit himself to the cause of Socialism. For me, his daughter, whose first breath was taken in an atmosphere of socialism and freethinking, it was self-evident that we should be struggling to end the class-divided social system with the ultimate goal of happiness shared in a classless society. By the time I was six years old, the Russian Revolution had confirmed the theories of Marx, Engels and Lenin and justified my father's faith in them. There was never really any major question: it was clearly obvious that the cause to which my dear parents had dedicated their lives was the only true and just one, and it would merely be a waste of time to look for others. But for the children who were growing to maturity at the turn of the twentieth century it was no such matter. Inevitably, practice guides our theory, and it was at the end of an exciting day in which he had seen a mob of jingoistic hooligans, who had tried to wreck a Radical meeting, driven off by united-front action provided by young S.D.F. members who had rallied to the Radicals' support, that Tommy picked up again the copy of **Merrie England** given to him years before when he was too young to cope with it. This time he read, understood, and opted for Socialism.

"Nothing is harder to make than a beginning... and none more baffling to me than this one of conveying to the reader of today the awful emotional crisis involved in suddenly becoming aware, in 1900, that the Socialists were fundamentally right, and that if one had a conscience at all, one could do none other than throw in one's lot with them. In 1900 we got **converted** to Socialism, that is the difference. And we used that term just as the Methodists did, to express a keen sense of moral and spiritual rebirth. It was an all but literal gulf one had to cross in 1900: to find oneself by one's own act placed outside the pale of all permissible orthodoxy and classified irredeemably with the goats, the outcasts, the pariahs, the infidels and the irretrievably damned. Harry Pollitt in his **Serving My Time** tells how he was schooled in Socialism almost from the cradle by a splendidly revolutionary mother. It was not so with me, nor with most of my generation. The adoption of Socialism meant for us a cruel wrench, a breaking of all personal ties, an alienation of friends and relations, the setting up of a barrier of division between oneself and one's parents and all that they had hoped we would become. In my case, though the wrench was excruciating, I was by birth, by temperament and by upbringing as foredoomed to make the plunge as ever a man was." Conviction strengthened as he joined the Social Democratic Federation and read what literature they had available. It was not easy to get books, but as he enriched his library one by one with the works of Marx and Engels, the spark burst into a flame. Of his first reading of the **Communist Manifesto**, Tommy wrote:

"I all but wept with delight: it gave me just what I had been groping towards for years ... Here, in essence, was a sound working concept of that becoming-process of human society which would in its further development make possible and ensure the coming of Socialism and Communism." As his daughter I can tell you without quoting his manuscripts, with what enthusiasm he has so often described to me the exaltation of that day when he first read the Manifesto of 1848. How often I have been present at meetings when he quoted with joyful gusto: "its downfall and the victory of the proletariat are equally inevitable." We used to go home with the message ringing in our ears.

He has written in Solo **Trumpet** of the S.D.F. and his early work in the movement. The most important personal development in his early twenties was when this shy, withdrawn lad was pushed by his comrades into mastering the art of public speaking. Phenomenal as his self-education was, and brilliant as his writings proved later to be, it was as an orator that Tommy excelled and gained his highest repute. By the end of his life he had spoken, indoors and out, in every county in England save the two smallest, and in a great number of places in Ireland, Scotland and Wales. In his seventieth year he completed five years of intensive lecture tours, visiting every C.P. District, many of them several times, being away from home for eight or nine months of every year. The substance of many of these lectures was published in his booklet **Socialism: What? Why? How?** but there were innumerable variants on demand, such as the celebrated "The Spiritual Significance of Fried Fish" to suit the different localities, for TAJ had a great flair for knowing his audience and wanted to wrap the goods up in a way best pleasing to those who would take the trouble to come and listen to him.

Those who are hesitant to voice an opinion at public meetings can take heart from Tommy's experience: when obliged to take the chair at an open-air meetings, he was "literally ill — a nervous wreck — for a fortnight" after speaking for less than five minutes. "My second attempt, some time later, was made from a light waggonette. I swear it was no exaggeration that, so much did my knees knock together, you couldn't hear what I said for the creaking of the springs. At my third attempt I drove away eight hundred people as quick as if a hose-pipe had been turned on them. They did not hesitate, they heard about five words and then each and every man turned, as though all were pulled by a single spring, and walked off."

A bare ten years later the case was altered, Harry Pollitt wrote to me after Tommy's death: "I first met Tommy in Leeds in 1912 when he stole from me every single member of my audience in Town Hall Square."

That early failure seemed to be decisive, but the poor lad went on attending the regular open-air meetings addressed by his S.D.F. comrades. At last one of them, Con Lehane, an Irishman with persuasive charm, succeeded in getting Tommy to take the chair for him. History was changed when the well-named Con deliberately walked away, leaving Tommy to cope for the sake of the cause. He struggled on somehow, fighting back the panic and concentrating manfully on his subject, learning that his initial shyness could wane if he forgot himself and thought only of his audience and the reaction he wanted them to have. Always after that he addressed himself, as it were, to individual people, never to a crowd in the mass. As his confidence grew, he began to look forward to opposition, and revelled in routing hecklers. I remember when I was a student in the University of London we had arranged for my father to address a college society on Communism. Shortly before the date of Tommy's talk, a lecture on a far less controversial subject was to have been given by Hannen Swaffer, a well-known Fleet Street journalist, avant-garde only in the sense that he used to wear a broad-brimmed hat and flowing tie. He was prevented from speaking and almost de-bagged by a group of rugger-playing medicos out for a rag. I knew my father to have great courage, but physically he was by no means strong, and by destroying or even removing his glasses anyone could render him helpless. These rugger-tacklers were young men of mighty physique, and I felt sick with nervous apprehension as our meeting opened and I saw a compact knot of them take up their position at the back of the lecture hall. I need not have worried: each interruption they started was parried by my Dad in his most sparkling form, and the rest of his student audience being more and more with Mm, won

over by his witty repartee and by now mature unflappability, the gang soon lost heart (being strong in arm and weak in head) and started to drift away. I can still hear Tommy calling after them, to the delight of those left seated: "Don't go, gentlemen! I have still a few more pearls to cast!"

Countless other examples of greater importance could have been given by witnesses all over Britain, as for instance his celebrated anti-Carson meeting in 1914, in Leeds, described by Tommy in **Solo Trumpet**. In Volume II, never published, Tommy gives advice to those who would learn to speak. The hardest way, as we have seen, was by being put straight on to a platform and left to hold one's own somehow. It may ultimately have been the best way, for having to force down his terrors and so allowing his innate talent to break through the barriers of self-consciousness, he became one of the most remarkable speakers our movement has ever known. His grasp of the fundamentals of Marxism, his working-class background, his experience of hardship and privations combined with his vast enthusiasm for life, his sparkling wit and bubbling sense of humour; yet overlying all the deepest dedication and highest aspiration to the cause. To attend one of his lectures or classes was never just an entertainment though he never failed to raise a laugh to put his audience at their ease or to clarify a point: always one came away inspired, determined on personal action or further study.

During these early years of the century Tommy met a socialist-suffragette from a middle-class background. She was Katharine (Katie) Sarah Hawkins, a cousin of Anthony Hope (Hawkins) the successful novelist. The author of the **Prisoner of Zenda** had however no connection with her branch of the family, who were merchant seamen, tracing ancestry back to the original Sir John Hawkins the merchant adventurer and one of the originators of the slave trade. Her father, William Horatio (there had to be Horatios since Trafalgar) and many forebears did reach captain's rank, continuing the adventurous tradition in the tea-clippers' races made famous by the Cutty Sark. Katie and her sister Mary Stuart (who firmly believed she was a reincarnation of the Queen of Scots) were the two girls in a big family of boys. They were orphaned when both parents died in the 1880's, and Katie at fourteen had to help out by continuing her schooling as a pupil-teacher. Having to earn her living at such an early age, she soon became interested in social questions with a bias towards women's rights. She had an excessively generous nature combined with a passion for freedom in all its forms, including what was in those days called Free Thought. A true romantic, she and Tommy complemented each other's enthusiasms and when Tommy was about twenty-four and Katie a little older they decided to live together. As freethinkers and revolutionaries they spurned the idea of the bourgeois marriage ceremony with its ignoble property implications. Only later, for the sake of the children did they agree to such a concession. The birth certificate of the first child, Eleanor (named after Eleanor Marx) has the mother proudly registered as Katie Sarah Hawkins, School Teacher in the column reserved for mother's surname and maiden surname. This baby Eleanor Michel (after Commune heroine Louise Michel, but the registrar would not accept this) soon became known to the Sunday-meeting crowds in Battersea Park and on Wandsworth Common. But before her second birthday she died from a stomach condition caused by the drinking of contaminated milk. There was an inquest; many similar cases are recorded in the local papers of the time, and criminal proceedings against milk retailers were common until stricter health regulations came into force. In 1908 another beautiful daughter was born. She soon showed an exceptional intellect, and they named her after Swift's Stella. Finally, when Katie

was over forty years old, a puny infant in whom they hoped to endow the gifts of life and joy. They never had a son, but I think Tommy always enjoyed the company of the Jackson Jades as they were later called, and he proved an admirably enlightened father, full of enthusiasm and co-operation. Katie was a devoted mother, but did not live to take any part in their adolescence.

Poverty and homelessness dogged their family life. When he had emerged from his apprenticeship on the dramatic date January 1st, 1900, Tommy was not offered the customary opportunity to stay on as a journeyman at the same printing-works. He had already been marked down as a hob-nobber with socialists and the leader of any organised demonstration among the apprentices. As his reputation as a street-corner orator and seller of subversive literature soon underline the warning that had already grape-vined among employers "I found myself, after a succession of miserable years of very intermittent employment, completely black-listed and barred from the craft for which I had been trained I tasted bitter poverty and extremes of destitution, and all this concurrently with the feverish excitements and exaltations of incessant propaganda. I have more than once spoken at six meetings on a Sunday. We used to stage all-day meetings in one or other of the London parks. They were run on the relay system and if, as happened, one's "relief failed to turn up, there was nothing for it but to keep straight on until the next relay arrived: one day I was speaking for four hours before I was relieved."

In the summer of 1909 he left London with Katie and the baby Stella, resolved never to return until he had found a permanent job. The Bristol I.L.P. had engaged him for a month's lecturing, successfully extended to three months. Then on to Newport, Mon., where he was able to keep the family while he toured the South Wales valleys until the summer of 1911. During this heat-wave they returned to London, where Katie stayed on at his parents' house in Highbury, where in October she gave birth to her third daughter. Tommy left her there to try his luck in the North country. He hoped to find a permanent home with some sort of security, and this he did in Leeds. They were soon established in a back-to-back house in Stockdale Terrace, Institution Row - a house to themselves and with a garden. They had a settled home for the next seven years, until 1919. As for work to provide food as well as shelter, his first job was as "special lecturer" for the National Secular Society. He threw himself into the fight then raging in Leeds around the question of free speech and the anti-blasphemy laws. "I knew enough of the history of blasphemy prosecutions to be convinced that they heralded, as in the days of Tom Paine, of Owenite Socialism and Chartism, a malignant resolve to repress a rising tide of proletarian militancy." He saw the way to tackle this struggle "was simply to force them to prosecute and imprison, prosecute and imprison, until they got sick and tired of doing it, and even more alarmed by the scandal and indignation their policy of repression aroused. I was ready to risk the consequences of pursuing this line... The policy proved successful: after two convictions we stopped blasphemy prosecutions in Leeds."

Despite this success "as usual, I ran into trouble. With the I.L.P. in South Wales there had been acrimonious complaints that I habitually paraded my atheism on the Socialist platform. Now I found some of the old Bradlaughites complaining that I habitually waved the Red Flag over the Freethought platform. I accepted the inevitable and took over the conduct of the agitation in Leeds as a freelance enterprise in which I was responsible to nobody but myself and my audience."

Until the outbreak of war in August 1914 Tommy spoke in Leeds Town Hall Square every night in the week and twice on Sundays. His faithful and devoted audiences were rewarded with the fruits of his conscientious study, preparing new Marxist ground for every speech he made, and they reciprocated by throwing pennies into his trilby hat. These pennies fed and housed us until weekday meetings were banned and Tommy had to take a wartime job. Some special occasions stood out as oratorical landmarks during this period: the 1912 meeting against Anti-Semitism and the 1913 crescendo in favour of Irish Nationalism. Later that year Tommy was introduced as "a man who had struck a great blow for Ireland" to James Connolly. A cherished memory for my father was that Connolly had said to him: "When we get through this trouble, I must try to get you to Dublin to give the boys a few lectures on Marxism". Shortly before the Easter Rising three years later, Tommy's old comrade, Con Lehane, wrote to him "Our friend James in Dublin has some work we might do together." Tommy could not help speculating afterwards "... but for a mere chance, I might have finished in the G.P.O. Dublin in Easter Week 1916." When Connolly was executed, Tommy mounted an emergency platform and denounced the murder: "I was as good as insane with grief and rage... all the same, a really good political leader will never let himself get worked up into a state like that." On this occasion he was saved from at least three years in gaol by the local police (one of them an Irishman) putting their shorthand notebooks into their pockets and walking out of earshot.

The outbreak of war had come as a bewildering shock. "Partly it was that we socialists had come to believe in a sort of magical mana we called 'rationality' or 'civilisation' which would, at a pinch, hold the nations back from anything so irrationally wasteful as mutual slaughter. Partly we believed in the power and the readiness of the continental socialists, especially the massed battalions of the great German Social Democracy, to thwart the Kaiser. Not really believing war to be possible, we had made no preparations to meet the emergency when it came. We had read how Gustave Herve had declared, at an international socialist congress, that if the Kaiser invaded France he would find raised to defy him 'the scarlet banners of our revolutionary communes', and we had duly applauded. We were not to know that, when war came, this same Herve would join the Government and change the name of his journal overnight from *The Social War* to just *The War*; that the hundred and more socialist deputies in the German Reichstag would vote the War Budget with only one man - Karl Liebknecht - protesting. It was as though the bottom had been knocked out of everything we had believed and hoped. That Jules Guesde, who had figured as a Marxist of the Left, should go the way of Herve did not, after the mass desertion of the German social-democratic, seem to matter any longer; that Hyndman should take the same jingo road caused no surprise to those who knew him. But Marxists and Anarchists were alike shocked when George Plekhanov and Peter Kropotkin both raised their voices to howl with the jingo pack, it seemed that our time-honoured slogan 'Workers of the World, Unite!' had been changed overnight to 'Workers of the World! Rally to your kings and kaisers and prepare to slaughter each other!' I have lived through many periods of acute personal suffering and deprivation; but never before or since did I endure such spiritual agony as in the days that followed the declaration of war in 1914."

All that was clear to Tommy was that he must speak out against jingoistic war and for the international solidarity of the working class. In Leeds he attacked the war-mongering of the local leader of the Tory Party, whom he assured in person that the workers of Leeds, when they had disposed of the German Kaiser, would return home to deal no less faithfully with the "imitation Kaisers" of Leeds. Within a couple of

months he was arrested and charged with sedition under the Defence of the Realm Act, under which John Maclean was already serving three years' imprisonment, and Tommy warned his wife and friends to expect a similar sentence. A fair-minded magistrate, sensing a trumped-up indictment, dismissed the case after a protracted hearing (described in more detail in *Solo Trumpet*), under the Probationers' Act. One of the lawyers for the prosecution was heard to exclaim in disgust: "Him! A probationer?"

Being a potentially dangerous recruit to H.M.Forces, Tommy was pronounced medically unfit on the grounds of bad eyesight, and he was soon offered a job by the free-thinking owner of a small engineering works, the Kingfisher. Tommy remained here as storekeeper until well into 1919. Having successfully avoided conscription into the Army, he allowed himself to be conscripted into the S.L.P., the Socialist Labour Party which had been formed in 1903 by Scottish socialists who had broken away from the Social-Democratic Federation, to the left, or "impossibilist" wing of which Tommy had belonged. Their monthly journal *The Socialist* had had its first issues printed by James Connolly on his press in Dublin. At public meetings Tommy and the S.L.P. had often supported each other. The time came when the S.L.P. was staging an important debate with a well-known renegade socialist and were out to get the best speaker in Leeds. Tommy responded to their appeal, the debate proved a notable manifestation of socialist unity and Tommy remained a member of the S.L.P. until the foundation of the Communist Party in 1920.

Throughout 1917, despite intense excitement at the news from Russia, this was so heavily censored that, beyond defending the general principle of revolution, the propaganda was in general still on the basic anti-war issue. How whole-heartedly to welcome the thunderclap of the Bolshevik Revolution? The answer came for Tommy when he read, as part of a Manifesto quoted with rage in a jingoistic newspaper, the historic slogans of the Communist Manifesto of 1848. "Then I knew where the Bolsheviks stood, and proclaimed my solidarity with them accordingly." Week-end after week-end, in the absence of any reliable news, while maintaining that Lenin and his comrades had brightened the tarnished honour of revolutionary socialism in Europe, at the back of his mind were the memories of 1905 and of the Paris Commune of 1871. "Week after week the Bolsheviks held on, despite the scare-stories pouring from the press of imminent collapse, of chaos, of internecine strife, of Lenin executed by Trotsky, Trotsky by Lenin or each by others; and when the new-born Soviet Republic had equalled the length of life of the Paris Commune, "I and my old supporters were wild with delight. I was happy to learn, years later, that Lenin himself was rejoiced by the same fact." As it became clearer that the Russian Revolution was an accomplished fact we turned from our rearguard action and began joyfully to go over to the counter-attack."

In the autumn of 1919 Tommy was able to say goodbye to the Kingfisher factory: employment more in keeping with his talents had been offered to him on Tyneside. Leaving his home and comrades in Leeds with many regrets, he took his family with him to live in Northumberland. The North-East Labour College Committee had asked him to become a full-time lecturer for their District.

We arrived at our new home, a lonely wooden shack on an expanse of waste land exposed to the full blast arriving from Siberia across the North Sea. We four clung together for fear of being blown over the rocky cliffs. Stella and I, reviving a spark of our nautical ancestry, climbed with delight into our bunk beds, amazed that every few minutes the room was filled with light from the Monkseaton lighthouse, and squirming with cosy satisfaction as the wild fog-horns wailed. It was the eve of my eighth birthday.

For Katie the situation was less glamorous. The change from her relatively sheltered brick house in Leeds (a surviving photograph portrays it as quite a slum) to such a harsh climate was a severe shock to her delicate constitution, a setback from which she was never to recover. For Tommy also the physical exposure was far more taxing than his open-air meetings in all weathers under the lee of the Town Hall in Leeds. Travelling without a car to mining villages meant long, tedious journeys by rail and bus, battling against north-easterly gales along coastal roads, many a time in driving rain or snow. But for him all this was more than compensated for, by the response of the miners and their families. Tommy never tired of quoting Patrick Pearse: "the great, splendid, faithful common people" and of these Northumbrian and Geordie mineworker students Tommy wrote in his autobiography: "To say that I came to love them is to be guilty of a gross under-statement."

His work consisted of giving series of Marxist lectures to classes set up in these coal-mining districts. "The war had given a great impetus to the study-class movement. It had set workers thinking about the causes of things political as they had never thought before. And it was, in practice, far easier to propagate the concept of class-struggle and revolution to such classes than it was by the traditional methods of political agitation."

In July 1920, while Tommy was engaged in this Labour College work, the Communist Party was founded. He was to have been present at the inaugural meeting, but could not get away. Of course he was a foundation member, and he soon started a branch in Newcastle which did a great deal of useful work at once. As delegate from this branch Tommy attended in January 1921 a Communist Unity Conference. Here in London he was invited to help edit the Party's first newspaper: the **Communist**. Party headquarters soon reinforced the appeal made to Tommy in the first instance by Frances Meynell and Raymond Postgate. The three of them formed an editorial triumvirate, and following an urgent call to King Street "I packed my family and my few belongings on to a train ... with pangs of regret... but with excited zest..." He had been called to a post of some danger: police raids were frequent, the Party secretary had just been arrested. In fact he was only once arrested and imprisoned, and that was in 1926 during the operation of the Emergency Powers Act.

In the early twenties Tommy was able to visit Ireland and Russia. First, to Dublin in the autumn of 1921 to gather material for an article in the **Communist** - a Dublin bristling with armoured cars and swaggering soldiery. He saw the hollow shell of the G.P.O., smoke-blackened and bullet-pitted, with a tangle of half-burned roof-timbers and shattered masonry piled within its derelict walls. On a Sunday morning he was taken to see a parade of the Irish Citizen Army whose Colonel Commandant was Constance Markiewicz, the first woman to be elected to the British Parliament. As well as "Madame", he met the two veterans Charlotte Despard and Maud Gonne MacBride, dramatic and very beautiful still. Later in the same year he returned to a Dublin tense with suspicion, anger and disappointment as Griffiths

and Collins presented for ratification by the Dail a Treaty which involved in practice the partition of Ireland. On his return he described in the **Communist** the inauguration of the Irish Free State as "The Royal Irish Republic".

His visit to Moscow with Harry Pollitt in 1923 was a far happier journey. Only six years after the Revolution Moscow was still a huge overgrown village. Standing on cobblestones in the Red Square Tommy looked at the Red Flag flying over the Kremlin.

"The sun was declining towards its setting ... the flag glowed like a ruby afire. Spontaneously and without any sense of impropriety or shame I wept as I stood: tears of pure joy."

At an enlarged Plenum of the C.I. Tommy and his comrades were introduced to Stalin, to Trotsky (who snubbed the British delegation), to the aged Sen Katayama and to a number of Soviet leaders. He was impressed by "that splendid veteran Klara Zetkin", then in her 80's. All his life, under my mother's influence, my father was proud to honour the pioneers of women's emancipation. Lenin was still alive, but although he had expressed an eagerness to meet the British delegation, his doctors feared that the excitement would lead to a relapse and to their vast appointment the visit was cancelled. Seven months later Tommy had to write Lenin's obituary: "If I had actually seen him I might perhaps have written with more authority. I could not have written with more feeling Lenin was like Marx; one did not need actually to know him in the flesh to be able to realise his tremendous force and significance for mankind."

Between 1923 and 1926 Tommy went through a period of scarcely imaginable anxiety both political and personal. He was able to survive it, Katie was not; partly through reasons of physical stamina, mostly perhaps because the morale may be better sustained in the front line than in what appears to be a hopeless rearguard action. After two years of homelessness, having a relatively palatial home at last, an Islington council flat, the Jacksons were able to provide a clandestine meeting-place and temporary refuge for Reds on the run or, like Borodin ("Mr. Brown", who brought Vivien fondants when he learned that only Stella liked chocolates), Soviet emissaries. A glamorous twenty-two-year-old escapee from Mussolini's castor-oil tortures, a romantic but despairing Irishman, a really tough Wobbly from Chicago, there was never a dull moment. Outside, Tommy has described in his Famous Trials the police raids of 1924 and 1925 and the unsuccessful attempt to suppress the C.P. in a situation of growing mass militancy. But nobody had any money, and the arrears of rent accumulated. The girls went off to school one morning and returned to find there was no home and no possessions — the bailiffs had taken every book, every childish treasure. In desperation for a roof that night the Jacksons accepted thankfully the tiny back-parlour of a comrade's barber's shop behind Pentonville. There was not room in it to sleep four, there was nothing for it but to overflow into the barbers, which was used for Party meetings. Sanitary conditions in these ancient structures (now replaced by high rise flats) were appalling and no slum barber could defeat the lice. Her daughters in early adolescence, with vital scholarship examinations to take, herself going through a most difficult menopause, Katharine Jackson, who had fought so hard and long for forty years, could no longer stand up to renewed hardships and horrors as yet unknown. Tommy was seldom there, virtually on the run and increasingly so with the approach of the General Strike. It was already too late when a Party doctor came from south

London to north to see what he could do to help. All he could do was to get Katharine into Claybury Mental Hospital. The girls were found a furnished room in Albany Street and a few months later Tommy was in Wormwood Scrubs learning to savour the delights of Jane Austen. Thanks to this rescue by Sandy and Kath Duncan, the girls were able to act as couriers during the Strike and had great fun teasing the Special Branch men who called several times with the classic "When did you last see your father?" Only Katharine had no more joy; she died, no longer knowing us, in January 1927.

But she had been virtually dead for the past two years, and Tommy re-married in the same year. Lydia Packman, in her early thirties, had many positive qualities. She was eager to rehabilitate Tommy, in great need of care and attention. And she grasped that, without supervision he might never discipline himself to write more than immediately necessary ephemera. By his fiftieth birthday she had him settled in a bungalow with a garden, and while she commuted to London each day, Tommy was left to grow fruit and vegetables and to write books. He named the new home Pomona (goddess of fruitfulness) sought out an affectionate goose to keep the grass down, established fraternal relations with the Crawley & Three Bridges Co-operative and Trade Union movement, and wrote **Dialectics**.

Space prevents me from going into details about T.A. Jackson's books. Readers are referred to the books themselves, to the Dictionary of Labour Biography, Volume IV, and, I hope, to his autobiography if this can be published. (**Solo Trumpet** ends before the books were written.) I wish also, that I had space to go into Tommy's part in the General Strike, involving clandestine journalism, editing the **Workers' Daily**, the entire first issue of which was captured by the police except a few that got away in London. Following the T.U.C. ban on printing, even of pro-strike bulletins, which played into the hands of the police, our comrades decided on a typewritten bulletin run off on secret duplicators set up in as many places as possible. Tommy wrote the copy in the office of the **Workers' Weekly** (which had succeeded the much-lamented **Communist**). Stencils were prepared and taken to the secret hiding-places and supplies were distributed as widely as possible. It was as the result of a raid on the W.W. office that two duplicators were seized and Tommy arrested. Taken first to Wandsworth, he had a happy reunion there with Gallacher, Hannington, Inkpin, Pollitt and Rust who burst into roars as Tommy's too-tight prison suit began to rip under the strain of the mail-sacks he had to carry. The prison library was later embellished by a superb copy of Gibbon's **Decline and Fall** sent in at Tommy's request. Thankful for the long June days "I read while there was a gleam of light... and by early morning, in unbroken quiet... Gibbon's **Roman Empire** epitomises the classic passion for the true, the perfectly proportioned ...just as ... Wren's masterpiece.. When I read Gibbon I feel the presence of Wren, when I see St. Paul's I remember again how I read Gibbon in that summer of 1926."

During the period of disillusionment after the Strike, some eighty per cent of Party members were unemployed, and any remaining on the Party's payroll had to manage with the barest minimum. After part-time editing of several periodicals such as the **Workers' Pictorial** and the **Worker** (Minority Movement journal), then **Workers' Life** and **Sunday Worker**, Tommy was able to go over full-time to the latter, under the editorship of Walter Holmes. This excellent newspaper soon acquired a fine reputation. But by 1929 the need for a daily newspaper run by our party had become imperative; but it meant abandoning both the **Workers' Weekly** and the **Sunday Worker**. As Tommy saw it, it would also mean sacrificing at a stroke all the goodwill they had built up around these journals by cultural methods for which there would for many years be no room in a daily newspaper launched with a specifically militant-aggressive

policy. Knowing better than most the monetary cost involved in running a daily newspaper and doubting the ability of the membership to support this, Tommy could not bring himself to cast his vote in favour of the project. He lost his seat on the Party Executive and his job on the abandoned **Sunday Worker**. Later, of course, he became a faithful and valued contributor to the **Daily Worker**.

A brilliant interim effort in collaboration with Walter Holmes was to launch an illustrated magazine which, if successful, would have boosted Party finances, and indeed the first issue of W.I.N. (Workers' Illustrated News) sold a quarter of a million copies. But the printers refused to print the second issue until all bills had been paid, and the wholesalers refused to pay until the end of the quarter. This deadlock meant that Walter and Tommy had to abandon what might well have succeeded in being a successful revolutionary break-through into modern journalism - the Party might have pipped it at the **Picture Post**. Walter Holmes devoted a complete Workers Notebook to this sad story, in 1955. I quote from it: "Among the tributes which Tommy Jackson's death has evoked there is no mention of this WIN episode because few know the story. The editing, largely the writing and the whole make-up were done by **T.A.J.** and myself. While his chief roles were those of agitator and author, Jackson had definite qualities as a journalist. The breadth and variety of his interests, his command of the common language of the people — even if he did not always write it — were assets for our journalism."

When the **Sunday Worker** closed down, Tommy had passed his fiftieth birthday, and Lydia, who was earning enough to keep them both, was able to persuade him to retire to Sussex and settle down to writing of a more permanent character. The books had for very long been maturing in his mind. **Dialectics** (1936) had started life as a review article and ended as a volume of 630 pages. After a Russian critic had described it as a "weighty and valuable work", Tommy put the book on the scales at the local Co-op, where it weighed two pounds; and the book's value was demonstrated by an International Brigader who swore it had stopped a bullet going through his knapsack into his spine. "The bullet couldn't get through the book any better than he could!"

Tommy's autobiography gives a detailed criticism of his **Dialectics**, which he says was written after the fashion of his favourite **Tristram Shandy**. "My experience on the soap-box at the street-corner taught me that a thousand people would gather for a dog-fight who would be scattered by a sermon. And I had a lively horror of solid slabs of 'cold thesis'." His next book was published in the following year, 1937, **Charles Dickens: the Progress of a Radical** also began as an article. His central thesis was distorted in a review by George Orwell, who attacked the book, into a suggestion that T.A.J. had actually presented Dickens as a Marxist; and many bourgeois critics took their cue from Orwell.

Later in 1937 Lawrence & Wishart published **Trials of British Freedom**, a series of articles originally drafted for the **Sunday Worker** which proved very popular.

For most of the next decade Tommy was working and re-working at his history of Ireland, as well as taking an active part in local education and Anglo-Soviet activity during the war. But in the early part of 1943 came another shock to his personal life: Lydia died quite unexpectedly after what had been proposed as a minor operation in Crawley Hospital. When her will was read Tommy was rendered homeless. The bungalow and all its contents except his own books were left to her sister, who asked for vacant possession. At 64, with no job and a library, his

daughters with insufficient space to house them both, it was a crisis. To the rescue came a near neighbour, Anne Day (as Anne Verner-Jeffreys at the Slade a con- temporary of Coldstream and Rogers and Clive Branson). She put her largest and best room at Tommy's disposal until he could find something better. He stayed there for the next ten years, Anne caring for him like the most attentive of daughters. The job was provided by Party Headquarters and it saved him psychologically as well as financially. As lecturer on Communist theory for the Education Department he visited every district, being away from home for eight or nine months each year from the age of 64 until he was over 70. By this method the smaller places could have the benefit of a really experienced speaker without being involved in the heavy expense of railway fares. His visits included Belfast and Dublin as well as the High- lands of Scotland the mining villages of South Wales. Every English county was covered except Huntingdon and Rutland.

The lectures he used on these tours were in substance reproduced and published under the title **Socialism: What? Why? How?** - a booklet which reveals his devotion to Engels and his admiration for Engels expository technique. After fourteen years of semi-isolation, it was a great joy to return to places and people he had known in earlier days. Often he was greeted by young people who told him that their parents had urged them not to miss T.A.J. if ever they got the chance. Once he was hailed by a young serving soldier — a long-lost nephew! Veteran Socialists in their extreme old age turned out to remind him of long-forgotten struggles. And he found he could speak as well as ever he could, and better — the spark of oratory and the exuberant metaphor were still ready to flame and enliven.

Before this booklet appeared, T.A.J. had at last completed the Marxist history of Ireland that he had projected and in part attempted forty years before. In 1904 an Irish comrade asked him For a brief survey of the history of England. They decided that they would leave to another man the task of writing a Marxist history of England, but that it was up to T.A.J. to undertake Ireland. (His future son-in-law, then a six-month-old baby, got the message and in 1938 obliged with **A People's History of England**, hailed by T.A.J. as a not-so-little masterpiece, which predated by eight years Tommy's **Ireland Her Own**.)

From the original 1904 draft "I worked at the job of building a living body around the skeleton we had evolved; but as work progressed, so difficulties multiplied. I found that my grasp of Marxist theory was insufficient for the task of fitting the facts together to form a functioning whole ... When later I returned to the task, the opposite difficulty arose: I found that my knowledge of the history of Ireland was far too superficial and far too little based upon original sources... To cut a long story short, this process of bound and rebound went on and on. When at last in 1943¹ completed the first draft of the book which at least appeared, it was my twelfth attempt. And, incidentally, it would not be far wrong to say that my **Dialectics** was a by-product of my struggles to write a Marxist history of Ireland."

Fate was to deal Tommy a number of shattering blows, and one of them was dealt then, in his moment of triumph. "When at length I took to the publishers the manu- script complete in 240,000 words — as had been agreed upon - they broke to me the cruel news that, it being wartime, they could only find the paper for a book of half that length. It was all the more of a blow because I had already excluded from my manuscript everything that did not seem essential to the outline I was drawing. There was no easy way out... line by line, sentence by sentence, I rewrote it, shrinking it by the elimination of every word, qualifying clause or comment that could possibly

be squeezed out... Can you, in decency, expect me to be self-critical about a book thus written in my very heart's blood? Which had been, in a sense, a part of my life for forty years?"

Ireland Her Own was welcomed with high praise in Ireland. Of individual tributes perhaps the most touching to T.A.J. was a letter from an old Fenian of ninety-three, a former close associate of O'Donovan-Rossa, who wrote that he "had never expected to see the reading of his lifetime packed into a single volume". Yet here, he said, T.A.J. had done it, with nothing forgotten and nothing mis-stated.

Old Friends to Keep, a collection of articles on English classics reprinted mostly from the **Daily Worker**, followed in 1950. Two years later, at phenomenal speed, Tommy wrote his life-story and submitted it for publication. But Party discipline at this time was so tight that the autobiography in this form was vetoed as being "unedifying" - frolics with Harry Pollitt savoured too much of cakes and ale, however innocently indulged in between arduous conferences. So Tommy went sadly home and re-wrote the autobiography in a new more sober form. Only Part I was published, but as Stuart Macintyre has indicated, Part II is full of meat and who knows, it may yet appear, or even the original may yet see the light of day?

Tommy had plans and drafts for other works, notably his **John Brown's Body** and another magnum opus on **God** which alas seems to have sunk without trace. But despite his courageous will to live, cancer defeated him after six bedridden months of re-reading his Scott and his Thackeray and many other favourites, tailing off into **Brer Rabbit** and **Westward Ho!** His last piece of shaky handwriting is a memo on Defoe.



T.A. JACKSON - WORKING CLASS INTELLECTUAL

by Stuart Macintyre

When Tommy Jackson became a Marxist he joined the S.D.F. The Social Democratic Federation was then the only Marxist organisation in this country. It had been founded in the early 1880s by Henry Mayers Hyndman, a gentleman of independent means, who neither understood Marx completely nor was prepared to acknowledge him as the source of his ideas. Hyndman's was a vulgar misrepresentation of Marxism in many respects, a reading of history so rigid and mechanical that it allowed little if any space for working-class struggle. Subscribing to the 'iron law of wages', he thought that factory struggles were worse than useless for, as he put it, 'the most successful strikes under existing conditions do but serve to rivet the chains of economic slavery, possibly a trifle gilded, more firmly on their (the workers') limbs !'.¹ The main task of the S.D.F. was therefore evangelical. As Jackson himself put it, its members thought their duty done when they had told the workers with reiterated emphasis that they had been and were being robbed systematically, and given them an explanation of how the trick had been worked. From this the workers were invited to draw a moral deduction that the robbers ought to be stopped - and to reach a practical decision to wage a class war upon the robbers. When their audience failed to reach this decision S.D.F. members were wont to conclude that 'the bastards aren't worth saving' and gravitate to other fields of the labour movement.²

Given this insight into the limitations of the S.D.F., it is hardly surprising that Jackson should have associated himself with a younger generation of Marxists critical of Hyndman who finally formed two new organisations just after the turn of the century. The critics, who were dubbed the 'Impossibilists' by one S.D.F. leader, took their stand against Hyndman's personal autocracy and what they perceived as his increasing opportunism (hence his failure to oppose the Boer war was especially significant). Most of all, however, they believed that the Marxism of the S.D.F. was defective. Rather than seeking to foment the class war from the orange box, the 'Impossibilists' saw the class war all about them as an immanent and permanent feature of social life. The real task of socialists, they believed, was to instruct the workers in the science of Marxism which alone could show them how to act at the historically ordained moment. The first group of dissidents split away in 1903 to form the Socialist Labour Party under the influence of the American Daniel De Leon. Partly through their pique at not having been consulted and partly because they stayed on to fight out the issue in the S.D.F. conference in 1904, the London 'Impossibilists' did not join the Scottish-based S.L.P. but instead set up their own Socialist Party of Great Britain. Tommy Jackson was a founding member and elected onto the S.P.C.B.'s first executive. And he would have been the first to admit that he was as sternly 'Impossibilist' as any in denouncing all forms of reformism and compromise: beside the standard terms of 'fakir' and 'Labour lieutenant of capital' which were flung at trade union officers and those associated with the fledgling Labour Party, Tommy Jackson coined the additional epithet of 'Labour bleeders'.

Yet within a few years he had left the S.P.G.B.. Robert Barltrop, the historian of that party, explains his departure as dictated by the sheer necessity of desperate

poverty. By now he found it impossible to find work in his trade, and was forced to accept an opportunity to become a paid speaker for the Independent Labour Party. Barltrop quotes a letter from Jackson to an S.P.G.B. member explaining, 'I will join the S.D.F., I.L.P. and Clarion mobs and peg away - bleed the swines - till I am expelled.'³ There is no reason to doubt this account but Jackson's transition to full-time and usually free-lance socialist speaking reflects more fundamental concerns. For the formation of the S.L.P. and S.P.G.B. did not alleviate, but in some respects actually intensified, the isolation of Marxists from the mainstream of the British labour movement. Admittedly, the 'Impossibilists' placed much greater emphasis on the publication, dissemination and study of Marxist texts, but this was generally done in a hopelessly purist and exegetical spirit - we may recall Tom Bell's account of how a prospective member of the S.L.P. was expected to demonstrate a full understanding of the principles of Marxist economics and the materialist conception of history before being admitted into membership. And since members were forbidden to hold official positions in the mainstream labour movement, the S.L.P. and S.P.G.B. necessarily continued the habit of preaching to the working class from the sidelines. This may seem a harsh judgement, and many members of both organisations did in fact become involved in local struggles, but from a national and doctrinal standpoint it was all too true. Such involvement could only be perceived as intrinsically reformist betrayal of Marxist principles for, as Daniel De Leon himself put it while touring Scotland, 'A genuine socialist movement must be narrow and intolerant as science, for there could be no compromise in the class war.'⁴

In his own socialist agitation prior to the First World War, Jackson was as vitriolic as any in denouncing all forms of reformism and compromise. But because of his willingness to spread the message of Marxism before any available audience, he largely overcame the isolation that attended such sectarian attitudes. He was prepared to speak or work full-time for any local society that could pay his expenses and contribute to the maintenance of his young family. He respected the anathemas of no party. In addition, his sense of solidarity with the underdog and his sheer ability to speak led him to build bridges into unlikely camps: hence his defence of the Irish community in Leeds against sectarian attacks strengthened a life-long interest in Irish history and politics and the wider themes of imperialism; while he enjoyed the unusual honour of being asked to speak on behalf of the S.L.P. Nor did his readiness to cross these barriers lead him to water down his opinions and beliefs. He suffered the unusual misfortune of losing a full-time post with the I.L.P. because of his atheism, and a similar position with a secular society because of his socialism.

The section of Jackson's memoirs published as *Solo Trumpet* concludes at the point when he joined the Communist Party in 1920. By then he was working within the S.L.P. and played a crucial role in drafting the Unity Manifesto which urged its members to come into the Party. Better than any secondary account could, *Solo Trumpet* explains why he considered the creation of the Communist Party to crystallise the experience of his generation. He was to carry an extraordinarily heavy burden over the next few years. For the Party was formed on the ebb tide of a wave of militancy that had made considerable inroads on British capitalism, and 1920 there was a general optimism about the immediate prospects of a revolutionary party. Within a year that optimism was gone: with the defeat of the miners in the summer of 1921 the entire trade union movement was fighting desperately to defend existing living standards; and various rank-and-file militant groups ebbed away. An initial Communist membership of four thousand declined to little more than two thousand a year later and did not reach five thousand until 1925.

Furthermore, along with leading S.L.P. theoreticians like William Paul, Tom Bell and J.T. Murphy, Tommy played a crucial role in the reorientation of British Marxism during this testing period. It is difficult to exaggerate the extent of this change. As a result both of domestic events in the labour movement and the reverberating influence of the Russian Revolution, Marxists discovered a new range of tasks among the trade unions, trades councils, co-ops, Labour Party branches and other sections of the mainstream movement. The theoretical implications of this realignment are best expressed by Jackson himself: 'We had to do the best we could ... given our all-too-insufficient preparation for so stupendous a task I pulled my own Marxism to pieces, examined every piece closely and critically in the light of objective practice ... helped by the works of Lenin as they appeared in English' The significance of Lenin in this process was explained thus:

I have a vivid memory of walking out of the optician's shop wearing my first pair of spectacles, a little before my first birthday It had all the effect of a miraculous revelation: I could see things for the first time.... All that had been before a blurred, rather muddled vagueness, now took on a specific shape and perspective, and became therefore gloriously available for confident practice. It was a world made new. And thus likewise it was with me when I was first made able to see Marx and Engels through the spectacles provided by Lenin and Leninism.⁵

The optical analogy is acute, and a similar transformation of outlook could be traced among other Marxists of the period. Yet this sense of revelation is only part of the story. The new Marxism was a doctrine not of personal comprehension but of collective action. In place of the pre-war study circles, British revolutionaries now sought to implant Marxism within the practice of the labour movement. A pre-war generation of working-class intellectuals fused with the organised sections of their class, and consequently were central to the arguments and events that shaped the labour movement from the end of the war down to the major defeat of 1926. If the ex-S.L.P. theorists were more influential within the Communist Party itself, Jackson's efforts within the wider circles of the labour college movement were equally significant. Each year the Plebs League, the Central Labour College in London and regional labour colleges all over the country trained some twenty thousand activists in the principles of historical materialism, economics, geography and Marxist philosophy. And even after the Communist Party fell out with the leadership of the labour college movement, Jackson continued to teach and argue within its ranks right up to the Second World War.

The transformation of Marxism in the new Communist Party was necessarily a lengthy and uneven process. Key Leninist texts remained untranslated for many years so that the working-class intellectuals, of whom Tommy Jackson was an outstanding representative, had to make their own way forward during a period of rapidly changing political circumstances. And since the Labour leadership rebuffed all Communist overtures, it is hardly surprising that many of the old sectarian habits lingered on in a small and beleaguered party. Tommy Jackson's celebrated remark at an early Party congress that Communists should take the Labour Party leaders by the hand as a preliminary to taking them by the throat was an over-enthusiastic paraphrase of Lenin which failed to take account of the new political circumstances. We may observe a subsequent revision of his political practice. Like other Marxists of his generation, he had developed a platform manner and set of rhetorical devices for dealing with hostile audiences. Before the war, when an individual put down his box on a street corner, he attracted an audience that contained at best a sprinkling of

sympathisers and at worst a hostile and potentially violent crowd. The dominant socialist image of the working class during these years was that presented in **The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists** of an unregenerate body of wage slaves, too cowed or too stupefied to see the road to salvation. Hence we find an S.D.F. speaker in Walworth Road, London, calling on the people to come out of their bug-hutches and slums and fight for socialism' - and taken aback when a man rushed up to knock him off his perch, shouting 'You lying—, call my——home a slum and a bug-hutch!'⁶ This air of gloomy antagonism to the bone-headed working man was extremely prevalent among pre-war Marxists. Furthermore, the policy of the S.L.P. was that 'should any fakir, freak or fool dare to cast ridicule on our Party or our principles, then the speaker should wade in and annihilate him, as a street crowd always likes to see a smart chap get taken down.'⁷

Tommy Jackson, as an outstanding orator, was famous for his sallies and thrived on such hecklers. A chapter entitled 'The Art of Open-Air Propaganda' in the unpublished section of his memoirs, relates how he taught himself to speak and recounts with some relish some of his experiences. Yet the hostile tone of many of these rejoinders was clearly inconsistent with the aspirations of the new Communist Party. Len Jeffreys, a leading South Wales Communist, was initially attracted into the Party early in the 1920s at a meeting at Newport when Jackson turned on an interrupter and annihilated him. The incident deserves to be recounted at length for it illuminates the general question:

I suppose the biggest influence that convinced me I ought to join the Party was a speech I heard in 1921 by Tommy Jackson ... outside the Lyceum Theatre, and there were about two hundred people gathered around, and he was going at it hot and strong. And he looked a queer character then, Tommy even in the twenties when everybody was short-haired and he had hair longer than the fellows that've got long hair now.

Jackson leaned over the rostrum and he said, he pointed to a fellow and said, 'Come down here to have a good time from the valleys?' 'Aye, what about it?' So he said, 'How much did you earn last week?' 'Well, if you want to know the truth, I picked up thirty bob for my wages this week.' 'Oh aye, thirty bob. Do you work every day?' 'No', he said, 'lost a turn.' 'Oh, so you work five days for thirty bob?' And the fellow said 'Aye'. 'Well, I've just come from a place' Jackson said, 'where a fellow never worked in his life and do you know what he got? He gets, and has got for a number of years, thirty bob a minute. Eating or drinking, thirty bob a minute; laughing or crying, thirty bob a minute; walking or talking, thirty bob a minute; loving or hating, thirty bob a minute.' And he goes on for about a quarter of an hour like that, and Tommy was a fairly good linguist. He coupled things up, by Christ, he mentioned everything that anybody could do. And a fellow chipped in and he said 'What are you going to do to alter it?' And Tommy still goes on, 'Thirty bob a minute, running or walking; jumping or' -doing something else — and he goes on and this fellow said, 'I asked you a question; when are you going to answer it?' And Tommy still goes on and stretches this quarter of an hour into half an hour, just rattling off this contrast, thirty bob a minute for doing nothing when this fellow is thirty bob a week slaving his guts out, and finally he finished. Well, I listened with a sort of — the emphasis that Tommy had been putting on this contrast, it couldn't fail to make a mark. And I thought 'Christ,

that's the party to join that produces fellows like that, that can tell a story like that.

And this fellow said, 'I asked you a question.' And Jackson said, 'I heard you. You asked your question three times, now I'll tell you the answer to your question. And this applies to you only because you asked the question. I want you,' he said, 'to listen carefully. For you the answer is to keep your mouth shut and your ears open in the hope you might get something into your paralysed mentality.' And I thought, oh, the hell, it's clever that.

Many years later Jeffreys remembered the occasion with Tommy and remarked how his scintillating performance was in fact politically at fault. Tommy readily agreed and explained that this habit had a practical basis — 'you had to have methods for defending yourself — but was one that he had taught himself to overcome.'⁸ He explored the issue further in 1927 in a review of a new edition of *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* which Jackson used a springboard for self-critical and highly perceptive reflections on the general theme of 'abusing the workers'.⁹

Throughout the 1920s Jackson worked in a variety of full-time posts, editing Party newspapers and later the *Sunday Worker*, and serving stints in the Agitation and Propaganda Department. He was a member of the national executive and attended conferences in the Soviet Union and elsewhere. Yet he often took up a position critical of the leadership and was finally removed from the executive during the Party's adoption of the Class Against Class policy at the end of the decade. It is not possible to unravel the complicated story of this process, but by 1929 the Party had come to accept the proposition that the Labour Party was the third capitalist party (subsequently described as 'social fascist'), whose role it was to prepare new attacks on the working class. Jackson was out of sympathy with this policy, which cut the ground from beneath the National Left Wing Movement and *Sunday Worker*, and gave vent to his feelings in an article in the *Communist Review* in February 1932. The article concentrated on the increasing use of a vocabulary of left and right deviations which cloaked the new policy, 'technical Party jargon which bears only traces of an English origin, and is to the uninitiated an unintelligible "Babylon dialect" used sacramentally as evidence of righteousness'. This was not just a quibble over words for Jackson felt that the increasingly vacuous terminology was used as a pretext for perpetual heresy hunting. 'All possibility of thinking dies in such an atmosphere.' He concluded that the next task 'is to "liquidate" this process of "Inprecorisation" and thereby restore plain English and commonsense to their rightful place in the Party's esteem'.

The President of the Communist International drew particular attention to this 'philistine twaddle about self criticism' when it instructed British Communists to set their house in order, and this was done at a special congress at the end of 1929. Jackson dropped out of full-time Party activity, though his loyalty was never in question and he directed the League of Militant Atheists which flourished briefly in the period of Class Against Class.

During the 1930s he was therefore able to write books. The first and most important of these was *Dialectics. The Logic of Marxism and its Critics: an Essay in Exploration*.

It began life as a review of a book called *Method in Thinking* (1933), the latest of a stream of books and pamphlets written by Fred Casey. Casey, a watchmaker who lived in Bury, was one of those eccentrics thrown up by the movement who became

fixated by an all-encompassing intellectual system which is taken to extreme lengths. His starting-point was the German Josef Dietzgen's monist philosophy, which became the key to all knowledge and with which he set out to explain whole areas of philosophy, epistemology and economics, as well as to provide answers to questions such as 'Are strikes unreasonable?' and 'Are majorities always right?'¹⁰ Jackson was in bed with neuralgia when he began to read *Method in Thinking* but it plunged him into such a 'frenzy of disgust and indignation' that he threw off the bedclothes, pulled down book after book from his shelves, and began drafting a reply. Three years and many drafts later, a volume of 648 pages emerged.

Other books followed but *Dialectics* was, perhaps, the most considerable literary achievement of Jackson's generation of working-class intellectuals, and may be compared with such earlier efforts as Willie Paul's *The State: Its Origin and Functions* or Noah Ablett's *Easy Outlines of Economics*. Such autodidacts exhibit a characteristic intellectual tone: they were great respecters of fact and intellectual authority; earnest, even reverential, in their treatment of the text; and they brooked no short cuts in the search for knowledge. Alongside this deference to literary authority one must put the fact that it remained their education for they defined both the purpose and boundaries of their intellectual exploration, and the books they read assumed significance in this light. Thus an original interest in the doctrine of the creation could lead from the Freethinker to Darwin or Huxley, and thence to Haeckel's *Riddle of the Universe*, Morgan's *Ancient Society* and Engels' *Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*.

An outstanding feature is the sheer energy and determination with which these self-taught worker-intellectuals pursued their knowledge and their insatiable hunger for reading. Books were a drug for which they would sacrifice almost anything. Imprisoned in 1926, Jackson reread his beloved Dickens and Gibbons, then renewed his familiarity with Smollett and Macaulay. Finally, for want of anything else, he picked up a volume of Jane Austen. He read with 'mounting ecstasy', pressing the book up against the fading light coming from the barred window until it was impossible to make out the words, then woke at dawn and went without breakfast in order to finish the book. (Similarly, J.T. Murphy used his spell in prison to read Macaulay and Conrad, and continue his study of German and Russian; and the same could be said for the others.)

It is undeniable that this working-class Marxism could be oversimplified and dogmatic. The very project of founding a distinct and all-encompassing 'proletarian science', as it was often called, lent itself to such tendencies. A common medium was the wall-chart which was much more than a mere pedagogic device. In history, economics, philosophy and politics knowledge was represented by means of such charts whose geometrical complexity does not disguise their essentially uniform methodology — in each case reality was reduced to direct causality and simple equivalence. Thus historical wall-charts such as those prepared for Communist education by Willie Paul recorded advances in technology, presented in chronological order down one column, and the corresponding changes in social relations, politics, and so on in parallel columns. Alternatively, the prevailing mode of production of a particular epoch was represented as the base and all other phenomena arranged as the superstructure. Yet even in its most dogmatic moments this Marxist intellectual culture possessed a sense of wonder and intellectual curiosity. Men and women like Tommy Jackson always retained their interest in a wide range of subjects and displayed a genuine humility. This sense of continuing wonderment can be illustrated by the

following declaration by a student at the Central Labour College: 'Having set out upon an educational mission we are given an insight into the abstract conception "Knowledge". What appeared before to be something small and limited, and which could be easily overcome, now appears as something which has no limits. Indeed it is the contrary. It is man's power to understand the understandable that is limited.'¹¹

Tommy Jackson observed retrospectively that the canon of nineteenth century classics through which he and so many other autodidacts gained their knowledge encouraged an uncritical veneration for the acknowledged authority and a view of Culture as something standing in its own right beyond the range of Marxist criticism. He said how this 'caused a student to slip into regarding culture as a fixed mind-world into which one either ascended with the geniuses to supreme heights or sank with the dullards and dunces to the uncivilised slime'.¹² It is also true that he was an impetuous polemicist and sometimes guilty of verbal overkill — Tommy's adventures were seldom merely mistaken and frequently dunderheaded knaves or worse. Yet there were compensating advantages. His writings possess a freshness and vigour that clearly reflect his prowess as a lecturer and teacher of working-class audiences. His strong sense of the identity of his readership, and practical appreciation of how best to present his material in a way they would understand, enabled him to win and keep their attention by the use of metaphor and example. Most of all, he always retained a belief in the fundamental intelligence of the reader. In all these respects his writings compare favourably with much contemporary Marxist theory.

It is of profound significance to our Party and the movement generally that this tradition of separate self-education has declined. The provision of greater educational opportunity to brighter working-class boys and girls, and the efforts of the W.E.A. and other forms of civic education — while they have both had undeniably progressive effects - have transformed the cultural climate. In essence the mission of Tawney, Lindsay and other W.E.A. figures was to break down the isolation of working-class students and integrate them in a national culture: in political terms the proletarian intellectual was attracted to widen his narrow class horizons for a broader progressive policy; in intellectual terms, the old autodidact knowledge was discredited in the light of university studies. A W.E.A. course on economics, for example, was usually based on Henry Clay's Economics. An Introduction for the General Reader (1916), which is descriptive rather than analytical; and insofar as such classes touched on economic theory, they would not teach Marxism but rather compare it with other doctrines. The same conflict between a pre-existing proletarian intellectual culture and the new apolitical relativism was precipitated by the growth of state education too. Witness the conversation between a South Wales miner who had studied in a labour college and his daughter home from teaching college:

I told her she ought to teach history according to the materialist conception.

'Oh, so you don't think I can teach you anything.'

'About coal mining, yes dad, but not about history. I learned all about that at college. I don't think there's anything I can learn from you about that.'¹³

As Marxists we have to be especially careful not to romanticise the past. We need to search for the actual historical circumstances which supported old forms of activity.

and to try to understand how altered circumstances do not simply sweep away existing forms of political struggle but rather modify those forms and foster new ones. So it was with the working-class theoreticians of whom Jackson was a leading representative. They did not simply disappear. Marxism continues to attract workers who seek to understand the world. Our Party contains men and women whose education continues long after they leave school. And the very extension of the national educational system, the opening up of its tertiary institutions to working-class children who fifty years ago would have left school at fourteen, is itself a development that cuts both ways. While there are strong forces moulding the educational system to the needs of capitalism, there are countervailing forces making schools, colleges and universities receptive to radical and Marxist currents.

There is, however, one final aspect of this change in the position of working-class intellectuals like Tommy Jackson that ought to be mentioned since it bears on his eclipse from the Party leadership in 1929. Before that Marxism in this country was an essentially working-class phenomenon. The Russian Revolution had brought an influx of young university-educated radicals like Robin Page Arnot, Maurice Dobb, the Dutt brothers, Ralph Fox and Allen Hutt into the Communist Party, but it failed to attract established intellectuals so that Marxism was effectively isolated from the academic and cultural mainstream. This ceased to be the case in the 1930s, when an increasing number of scientists, poets, playwrights, musicians, historians and teachers all discovered Marxism and began to explore its ramifications in their various fields. And even though these Marxists of the 1930s wrote in a more accessible manner than that which is encountered too often among today's Marxist academics, there was an increasing division between these specialists and the working class members of their audience. It became something to be learned and understood where once there had been working-class activists with the confidence to practice and develop it themselves. In the field of dialectics, for example, one finds writings by Hyman Levy, Edward Conze, John Lewis and Maurice Cornforth, while Tommy Jackson was the only representative of the older tradition of the labour colleges. There was a related change at the political level. The first generation of Communist leaders - men like Tom Bell, Johnny Campbell, J.T. Murphy and Willie Paul, who all combined practical experience with a thorough grounding in this theoretical tradition - were relegated to positions of secondary importance by the end of the 1920s. Johnny Campbell, it is true, contributed a fertile influence within the national executive and wrote significant statements of Party policy, but after leading the opposition to Class Against Class he never again exercised public leadership. In the new leadership politics and theory no longer possessed the same unity, for intellectuals like Palme Dutt held a theoretical authority to which the working-class militants in leading political posts tended to defer.

This is not to say that men like Harry Pollitt and Willie Gallacher - who had undergone the painstaking process of self-education we have described — lacked a thorough grounding in Marxism; and it is also true that the younger leaders received a thorough training either in Party classes or at the Lenin school in Moscow. In fact it could be argued that Harry Pollitt's instinctive feel for the class struggle gave him an advantage over the principal theoreticians. Yet in practice this division operated and Pollitt backed his instincts against the theoreticians only in major conflicts such as occurred at the outbreak of the Second World War. The division has never been absolute and John Gollan is perhaps the most important of many exceptions that will occur to

readers, of Party members who have fused direct experience of working-class leadership with an ability to analyse their experience and present their analysis to a general audience. My point is that John Gollan is an exception while the first generation of the Party leadership all possessed this invaluable ability.

Meanwhile Tommy Jackson, along with Willie Paul and Tom Bell, was relegated to subsidiary tasks of education and educational writing for the *Daily Worker* - it being understood that their activities were no longer directly associated with guiding the Party's activities. If there is today a tendency for activists in the movement to feel a certain diffidence about their grasp of theory (as was described perceptively by Pete Carter in his tribute to James Klugmann in *Marxism Today* recently), the frequent isolation of Marxist theoretical work from actual experience is a problem of at least equal importance. We can surely learn from the achievements of the Party's founders, and particularly from the efforts of Tommy Jackson.

NOTES

1. H. Hyndman, **Further Reminiscences** (London 1921), p.459.
2. Unpublished memoirs.
3. R. Barltrop, **The Movement: the story of the Socialist Party of Great Britain** (London 1975). Tommy Jackson's own version is elaborated in a letter to Peter Kearney, 14 March 1950 (Vivien Morton has a copy).
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7. **Socialist**, October 1904 quoted in Raymond Challinor, **The Origins of British Bolshevism** (London 1977) p. 37.
8. Len Jeffreys, interviewed by David Egan and Hywel Francis, 20 September 1972 (transcript in the South Wales Miners Library, Swansea).
9. **Sunday Worker**, 18 September 1927.
10. Further discussion of Dietzgen and Casey is to be found on Stuart Macintyre, 'Joseph Dietzgen and British working class education'. **Bulletin of the Society for the Study of Labour History**, 29 (Autumn 1974) pp. 50-4.
11. **Anvil**, vol.2 no.2 (March 1926), editorial.
12. Solo Trumpet, pp. 121-2.
13. Related by Harold Watkins, **Unusual Students** (Liverpool 1947) p.26.

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