

All in a Lifetime

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Sorrows, Passions and Alarms, James Kirkup. Collins & Sons.
All in a Lifetime, Walter Allen. Michael Joseph (15!-).

To review these books side by side is to arouse reflections which are unfair to both authors; especially to Mr. Allen, since neither his subject, method nor intention are in any way similar to Mr. Kirkup's. If we allow, for a moment, this unjust comparison, it may be said that Mr. Allen had much the more difficult problem. He seeks to portray, through the life and character of his narrator Ashted, a retired Midlands craftsman, a complete working class experience. This is set during the years when the modern Labour Movement, in which Ashted takes an active though minor part, is coming first into existence, and gradually to power. To do this successfully in the first person is not only a question of catching the right language and "tone"—these I would say Mr. Allen achieves, for this type of self-educated, articulate working man. Even more important is to show how the attitudes, motives and sympathies which influenced this man's social activities are related to his particular environment. Of Mr. Allen's success in this direction, more needs to be said.

Mr. Kirkup had none of these problems. In this second autobiographical volume, he records a discontinuous yet coherent series of recollections, designed to evoke the quality

of his working-class childhood in South Shields. Within these acceptable limits, he does it well. Unlike those of Ashted's, his memoirs are not meant to have any explicit social or political reference (and indeed have only an occasional implicit one). If his account seems more richly packed with vivid incident than Ashted's, he has the advantage of his self-imposed limitation to the years before eighteen. Moreover, acting as his own direct biographer. Mr. Kirkup, unlike Mr. Allen, needs no artifice of vocabulary and language. He may, and does, employ his native poetic talent without constraint. So much may be said to offset the unfairness of the comparison.

Nevertheless, to read Mr. Kirkup's biography is to realise how far, despite Mr. Allen's achievement, *All in a Lifetime* falls short of being a great working class novel. For it is out of such material as Mr. Kirkup has treasured in his memory, and extended and broadened throughout adult life—out of trie homes and families and schools, quarrels and sacrifices, sights and noises, hardships and celebrations, as well as the factories and oppression—that a working class personality and community is built, and by which working class institutions are shaped. At more than one point, Ashted is emphatic about his dislike of "the boss", a figure whom he sees as depriving him of full freedom and self-respect. This attitude is valid and important, but not exhaustive. Working class aims are not simply revenge or dispossession. To do Mr. Allen more justice, he does not suggest that they are. His novel includes much—for example, his description of Boswell's pie shop, and his visits to his friends', the Thompsons', store—which rings true

The immediate criticism is illustrated, however, by Ashted's awakening to class-consciousness. The Ashted family, out on a country walk, are somewhat theatrically insulted by a "gentleman" on horseback, whom, up to that moment, Billy Ashted has been admiring. The point is not that such an incident could not have happened, with a lasting effect on Billy Ashted; but that the whole scene—shabby family procession of parents and five children, old pram, the father swigging beer, two infants with "comforters", the gentry on horseback—is stiff and lifeless as a tableau. Contrast this with the riotous election procession in which Mr. Kirkup, with "very little idea of what was at stake", joined at about the same age. We remember how, though there may be points of sudden illumination, a thousand influences from such surroundings shape the political consciousness of even an interested youth. Mr. Kirkup is able to revel in a variety of such reminiscences because, entirely without commitment, he is unhampered by the severe discipline of Mr. Allen's purpose. In one sentence he recites the chapter-headings of the great foreign crises of his childhood years: Mussolini, Abyssinia, the Spanish Civil War, France, Hitler, Nazi Germany, and speaks of the "dread of war" that "hung around us all the time and grew greater as the thirties advanced." For the rest, his memories are almost all self-centred. Though he seems to have had an unusually isolated childhood for a working class boy, his book—more than any other recent book except the first part of *The Uses of Literacy*—revives powerfully for me the atmosphere of the northern homes and backstreets of the pre-war decade. I think particularly of the children's guessing game at the lighted shop window, the incredible Joke Shop and Toy Emporium (whose particular version in my own town I was heartened to see on a recent visit still survives under the same proprietor), the festive excitement of the annual Charity Carnival procession, the smell and sounds of washing day.

There is little in Mr. Allen's book with which directly to compare this. Apart from the difference in generations between James Kirkup and Billy Ashted, the author's account is strictly subdued to his larger requirements, and Billy's childhood is centred upon the key features of slum house, drunken father and devoted mother, the weekly trek to the pawnshop, the interlude at the "Snob" High School. Billy's youth is treated more fully, and here Mr. Allen recreates a great deal of genuine experience; to take one example, he understands and communicates finely the half-educated, intelli-

gent young working man's ravenous and indiscriminating search for knowledge, as well as his often unsuspecting reverence for its more dubious vendors.

I think it is fair to observe, however, that, set beside an account of Mr. Kirkup's intentionally more limited work, the above list of "features" of Billy's childhood reads like an assemblance of "properties". Like the "tableau" impression of the scene previously described, this typifies an important deficiency in the entire novel. Ashted's active life corresponds with the whole span of modern Labour movement history. With this history he is closely associated, both by his own socialism and by his life-long friendship with George Thompson, who eventually becomes a leading Labour politician. One by one the great events of the Movement are, as indeed they must be, brought into view—the early street corner struggles, First World War, the growing power of the Party, the General Strike, 1931 and after, Second World War. But despite a fine effort by Mr. Allen, even these events wear something of the appearance of properties deliberately put on stage. The reason is to be found in his failure to establish full contact between the events and the living experience of the people involved in them. For all their drama these events too often read more like the dispassionate record of a dutiful chronicler than the outcome of the lives and struggles of human beings with a whole experience akin to that of, say, Mr. Kirkup. Thus the narrator does not even fully convey the personality of the most substantial figure in his life, George Thompson, and at times one can almost anticipate the clicking of the mechanism: the ambitious, self-confident, talented working-class youth: the trade union career which carries him to Parliament and to the verge of office; the affair with the aristocratic wife of a Tory M.P.; his downfall and unjust persecution by his former comrades. Of the secondary characters, the one who comes nearest to life is Ashted's brother Horace, and he has no decisive influence upon Billy's ideas and career.

Billy's personal situation, that of a retired lonely widower meditating upon his life, is in itself well presented. But even here, this lifelong working-class radical, confronted with the current "social revolution" in the persons of his successful, middle-class, a-political sons, has only the most conventional observations to offer.

I hope I have already said enough to stress how rough an injustice to Mr. Allen much of this comment must seem. No one who has not tried to write, or (much more safely) to review, or most certainly to read a novel of the kind he attempts here can be aware of the extraordinary difficulties he has faced. Somewhere in the two books there lies, in a measure, the materials from which the great modern working class novel will some day be written. If the problems are now clearer than they were, much of the credit is due to the level of Mr. Allen's present achievement.

NO COMMENT

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"On its, by cinematic standards at least, fairly conventional level the piece worked well enough".

—The Times.

(From a Granada TV ad., *New Statesman*, 15th Aug.)