The Red Suffragette

Ruth Cockroft reviews *Sylvia Pankhurst: Portrait of a Radical* **by Patricia W Romero. Yale University Press.**

Sylvia Pankhurst is a neglected figure in the history of the British left. Therefore Romero's book is all the more disappointing for failing to catch the mood of militant labour in Britain in the early years of this century.

Sylvia Pankhurst was a member of the famous family of women's suffrage campaigners. But whereas her mother Emmeline and sister Christobel moved to the right — from the Independent Labour Party to the Tory Party — during their campaign for votes for women, Sylvia stayed on the left. During World War 1 she moved to the revolutionary left.

Her response to the Bolshevik revolution of 1917 was to become involved, like the best activists of the time, in the communist movement. She had been imprisoned and starved to the point of exhaustion. She had been through a bitter personal split in her family in order to fight for votes for *all* women and men over 21 rather than the 'votes for ladies' (votes for some women of property) advocated by her sister and mother. Why did she spend the last three decades of her life as an uncritical supporter of Haile Selassie, the feudal monarch of Ethiopia?

Romero's explanations are far from convincing. To her, Sylvia was simply an intransigent and uncompromising radical throughout her political career. Apparently she was also searching for a father figure. She found her father figure first in Keir Hardie, with whom she had a long love affair, then in Lenin, and finally in Haile Selassie.

Romero reduces Sylvia's remaining a socialist when her family moved rightwards to jealousy of her sister and feelings of rejection by her mother. And she comments: *"Sylvia Pankhurst was self-centred, opinionated, impulsive, obsessive, highly-strung, and single-minded in whatever cause she made her own".*

Sylvia Pankhurst

Romero's lack of understanding of Sylvia Pankhurst is not simply a dislike of Sylvia. Throughout the book there is a distaste for the labour movement, and an impressive ignorance of the issues facing the labour movement at the time.

Romero lays a dead hand on the living characters, the real political issues, and the stark choices as they appeared to socialists then. She does not penetrate Sylvia's world. She is alien and even hostile to it.

Sylvia began to move away from her mother's and sister's WSPU because it was willing to settle for votes for some women on a property qualification rather than votes for all. This position increasingly cut the suffragette movement loose from the mass base of the developing labour movement, which supported votes for all women.

In 1913 Sylvia spoke with the East London Labour MP George Lansbury in favour of strikers, thus defying Christobel's ruling that forbade appearances with men. She was bitter about the WSPU's orientation to *"attracting the support of wealthy Conservatives opposed to labour views".* **But Romero sees the WSPU's break from the labour movement merely as a move to influence individual MPs of a different political coloration.**

Sylvia built women's suffrage organisations in the East End. They agitated for votes for all, and produced a paper, 'The Dreadnought', which had a wide appeal among dockers' wives and women who worked in the sweatshops of the East End. This East London Federation organised the defence of its own meetings, and was seen by its opponents as *"athletic Amazons armed with broomsticks".* **On one occasion when Poplar Council refused meeting facilities to the Federation, it was stoned, and missiles were thrown at police trying to enter the building.**

Sylvia used her fame as a suffragette to gain publicity on other issues. 'The Dreadnought' — renamed 'The Workers' Dreadnought' after World War 1 began — carried articles on the threatened civil war in Ireland. It printed vigorous anti-war propaganda.

Romero comments: *"Sylvia... frequently asked for her poor readership of supporters to deny themselves what meagre rations they had to support her paper and the federation. This custom had been practised by the WSPU and its mainly middle-class supporters, but it was hardly practised in the East End. The fact that Sylvia could and did make such requests shows a comparison between her stated aims to aid the downtrodden and her interest in sustaining her own organisation".* **But the working-class women of East London did sustain the paper and the East London Federation, seeing them as their own.**

The Labour Party in Parliament supported World War 1 (Keir Hardie was a hesitating exception to its general attitude, but he died in 1915). Sylvia continued to call for peace. She tried to prevent anti-semitic attacks on the Jewish community in the East End. She established cut-price restaurants and child-care facilities, while linking this effort to demands for equal pay for women. Romero sees this as a "feminist economic approach", but quite clearly Sylvia was motivated by socialist ideas of nationalisation and democratic planning.

Romero is most bewildered by Sylvia's support for the Bolsheviks. In 1919 Sylvia was arrested on the grounds that articles in 'Workers' Dreadnought' had incited mutiny. At her trial she quoted extensively from Marx and Engels, and was jailed once again.

Romero describes Sylvia as *"a disturbed woman by this stage, filled with utopian dreaming and illusions".*

But Sylvia knew what she was doing. Her boundless enthusiasm for the Soviet (workers' council) system did lead her to believe that socialists should not work within a bourgeois parliament, and that the Communist Party should not try

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tarian ideals of Lenin's 1917 pamphlet 'State and Revolution' to the harsh one-party state of 1922?

Liebman rejects the idea that Leninism led directly into or was loyally continued by Stalinism. Even the harshest measures of 1917-22 were measures of a genuine revolutionary workers' party trying to maintain a bridgehead for the world revolution in terrible conditions, not the tyranny of a bureaucracy alien to the working class.

Undoubtedly Stalinism was able to build on some of the desperate measures of 1917-22. In hindsight some of the Bolshevik leaders of that time, such as Trotsky, argued that some of those measures had been mistakes. But even with hindsight, we cannot say that the Bolsheviks were wrong to do what they could to sustain the revolutionary regime in bad conditions, while they hoped and worked for aid from revolutions in more advanced countries, rather than giving up in graceful and idealistic defeat.

Liebman identifies a marked change of tone in Lenin's writings from the time of the Brest-Litovsky treaty, signed between revolutionary Russia and Germany in March 1918. The joyous libertarianism of the first months of the revolution gave way to a grim determination to hold on in adverse conditions.

The SRs — who were openly counter-revolutionary — and the Mensheviks — who were wavering — were banned in June 1918, as the civil war gathered force. But when Martov, with a policy of critical support for the Soviet government against the counter-revolution, won a secure majority in the Menshevik leadership in October 1918, the Mensheviks were legalised again. They operated as a legal, if harassed, opposition throughout the worst days of the civil war in 1919.

In early 1920, with the civil war apparently more or less won, the Bolsheviks abolished the death penalty and restricted the powers of the Cheka. These measures were soon reversed in a new emergency, the Polish invasion of March 1920.

But it was not until early 1921 that the Mensheviks were banned again. The civil war had been won, but the relaxing of the war effort revealed an economy in ruins. 1921 was a year of famine, when millions starved to death and cannibalism reappeared in parts of the USSR. In February 1921 the hungry workers of Petrograd struck; in March the sailors of Kronstadt rose against the government, and the Bolsheviks banned factions within their own party. Help from workers' revolutions in Western Europe was clearly a more distant prospect than the Bolsheviks had hoped in 1917-20, and Lenin and Trotsky were urging the Western Communist Parties to adopt a more long-term policy of 'winning the masses'.

Those were terrible days. The emergency measures taken then were never to be reversed. But they did not derive from any drive by Lenin to create a police state.

At exactly the same time Lenin was arguing forcefully for the independence of the trade unions from the workers' state. Although many strikes were roughly dealt with, the Bolsheviks never banned strikes. In January 1922 Lenin even pressed for the unions to build up strike funds.

Liebman's concluding chapter is disappointing. He criticises Lenin's ideas on bourgeois democracy, on reformism, and on socialist democracy, but without much effort to probe beneath the apparent contradictions between Lenin's polemical phrases on these questions at different times. The final section, on Lenin and dialectics, verges on mysticism. But the book is well worth reading.

A taste of China in the 1930s

Bryan Edmands reviews *'Thank you Mr Moto'* by John P. Marquand, published by Souvenir Press Ltd., 1987, 287 pages, £8.95 hardback.

Set in Peking in the mid-30s this is an interesting and in places gripping 'Boy's Own' tale of intrigue, espionage and an inevitable romance.

The background is Northern China ostensibly ruled by the brutal bourgeois nationalist party of Chiang Kai-Chek — the 'Kuomintang' — though in many areas torn by conflict between rival gangster warlords and their armies.

Japan — since the turn of the century, a growing capitalist power — had been casting an imperialist empire-building eye over its larger neighbour; securing for itself Manchuria (North Eastern province of China) in the early '30s, and threatening further southwards.

Enter Mr Moto — honourable secret agent of the Japanese Emperor — into the still seemingly untroubled world of the older imperialist robbers: of parties, clubs, and a whole round of stultifying social engagements.

Quickly, he, together with Tom Nelson, an expatriate American lawyer 'gone native', and Eleanor Joyce, a beautiful, clever and mysterious American traveller, get mixed up in an ambitious plot to take control of Peking and facilitate the plans of

Kuomintang murder communists

an aggressive, expansionist faction of the Japanese ruling class.

Mr Moto, serving the more conservative-traditionalist faction behind the Emperor, intervenes...Tom Nelson is thrown together with Eleanor Joyce, staying one step ahead of murder, until...

This is the second of the Mr Moto series written in the 1930s and republished here after 50 years. Suprisingly, I liked the book.

Given the time and conditions in which it was written, and the setting, I would have expected, firstly, that it would have been more overtly racist and sexist — though of course a certain amount of stereotyping is not avoided. Secondly, the story-line is quite sophisticated and well placed — Tom Nelson's fatalistic philosophy is quite cleverly ruptured by the more positive actions of Eleanor Joyce. And finally the inimitable Mr Moto figure, around whom the plot revolves yet never concentrates upon. Here we have an unchauvinistic and fairly positive depiction of an Eastern character, who apparently became one of the author's most popular creations, catching the imagination of the American public of the time.

For a good, exciting, easy going read that transports you to an exotic and suspense filled world of the 1930s, I recommend it.

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to affiliate to the Labour Party. Lenin called this attitude 'infantile ultra-leftism', and tried to educate the world communist movement against being impatient and seeking revolution above the existing consciousness of the workers.

But this was a matter not of Sylvia being 'disturbed', but of her lack of experience and the British labour movement's lack of theoretical tradition. Her political environment had been dominated by the Fabians, who saw the bourgeois state as a means of bringing a more orderly way of life to the working class. Britain's main Marxist group, the Social Democratic Federation (later British Socialist Party), combined a sectarian socialism with nationalism. The BSP split on the question of the war in 1916, with its longstanding leader, Henry Hyndman, supporting the war.

After Eleanor Marx's suicide in 1898, there was almost no-one left in the British labour movement with a real understanding of Marxism, and the Fabians were left to dominate. No wonder that Sylvia's ideas were raw. Romero, however, suggests that Sylvia's communism was merely the moralistic radicalism of one who adopts the most extreme positions on worthy issues.

On her release from prison, Sylvia was on the verge of a nervous breakdown. She lost her battle in the British communist movement against affiliation to the Labour Party. She returned to peace campaigning, created a storm by having an illegitimate child (in her mid-40s!), and became involved in anti-fascist activity.

When the Italian fascists invaded Ethiopia in 1935, she threw herself into building support for Ethiopia. Soon she was an enthralled personal follower of the exiled emperor Haile Selassie. All the rest of her life — she died in Ethiopia in 1961 — she would be a devotee of the authoritarian Ethiopian monarchy.

It is a sad and tragic story. Romero is not equipped to tell it properly, let alone explain the paradoxes of Sylvia's life. The book abounds in ignorant errors, big and small, about the world Sylvia lived and worked in. Because Romero does not understand that world, she relies on a few crude psychological explain-alls — a sort of long-distance psychoanalysis for five year olds.

Sylvia Pankhurst, whose paper was by far the best of the revolutionary socialist papers published in Britain during World War 1, deserves better.