

Reviews

Hilary Mantel *Thomas Cromwell trilogy* / Mary Smith
 Peter Linebaugh *Red Round Globe Hot Burning* / Paul O'Brien
 Jane McAleevy *A Collective Bargain: Unions, Organizing, and the Fight for Democracy* / Andrew Keegan.
 Caroline Moorehead's *A House in the Mountains* / Andrew Keegan

Hilary Mantel

Thomas Cromwell trilogy: *Wolf Hall, Bring up the Bodies, and The Mirror and the Light.*

reviewed by Mary Smith

The third novel in the trilogy by Hilary Mantel, *The Mirror and the Light*, was recently published, which was great relief for those of us who had developed an obsession with Thomas Cromwell and his 16th Century England.

The previous two novels *Wolf Hall* (2009) and *Bring Up the Bodies* (2012) dealt with Cromwell's rise to power. They had rightly received high awards and great critical acclaim and created a devoted following for the 'House of Cards' that was the court of Henry VIII. Or maybe 'The Sopranos' would be a better TV series analogy. All the thuggery, ruthlessness and ambition of competing 'capi' is there in the court of Henry Tudor (capo di tuticapi). And you follow their fortunes through the eyes of the man who is to become Henry's main concillieri and fixer – the statesman Thomas Cromwell. (Yes, he is a relation, but a distant one and three generations or so earlier than Oliver). *The Mirror and the Light*, (2020) deals with Cromwell's catastrophic fall.

For Marxists, this is getting your historical materialism served up with a richness of detail that is intoxicating, at so many levels. Marx's theory of history holds that we develop, not because of the deeds of individual great men (or women), but because the inbuilt



antagonism between the rulers and the ruled, drives us forward through a series of revolutionary clashes. In this process, individuals can play a pivotal role, but the process moves on with or without them.

Tudor England is a society in that process of change in which the power of the church and the landowning aristocracy (the mafia families of the day) is being gradually undermined by a newly emerging class, the early capitalists, the traders and money men and merchants who don't have hereditary titles, but who are beginning to amass fortunes that can fund armies as well as merchant fleets - the new route to power. It's a slow transition that won't reach its revolutionary apex for another hundred years or so, but the developing class struggles and antagonisms are fascinating to watch. Hilary Mantel is a very interesting woman and writer. She's from a working class background in the North of England and her sensitivity to the contempt of the ruling class for the 'lower orders' is very clear. It permeates Thomas Cromwell's life. The trilogy covers ten years of his life in real time, from his mid-forties on, though flashbacks and memories fill us in about his earlier years. He's low-born, the son of blacksmith – a brutal man. Thomas has worked hard since

childhood, not only in the forge but also in kitchens and shops and back lanes of Putney. He knows poverty and pain, he's tough, and he's also very smart. He picks up languages in the countries he finds himself in as a runaway, and as a mercenary. He also has an eye to the main chance, and with literacy and languages under his belt, and a few lucky breaks he eventually does quite well for himself on the continent, returning to England a relatively wealthy man, a wise one, and progressive – a poster boy for the emerging bourgeoisie. Cardinal Wolsey was a huge influence in his life back in England, as a business associate, friend, mentor and kind of father figure to him. It's also through this relationship with Wolsey that he comes to the attention of the king, eventually becoming Henry's number one 'fixer'. So we are with Cromwell as he rises to dizzying heights in the court of Henry Tudor; we witness the ambitions and the deadly intrigues of the ruling class, internationally as well as at home, and no better man than our Thomas as a player in the game. But Cromwell is also a moral man and is ever mindful of his roots. Indeed, he is frequently reminded of his 'low birth' by his enemies, of which there are many. We are privy to Thomas's reaction to the very powerful and obnoxious Lord Norfolk for instance; the fact that the man is a wife-beater was what first made Norfolk repugnant to him – apart from Norfolk's threats to disembowel him. Cromwell possesses a high level of what would probably be called

'emotional intelligence' nowadays, and he has an ability to manage complex relationships with the women in Henry's life, including Anne Boleyn, with care and kindness, while also being prepared to dispatch them as needs be! And not all the action is among 'the great and the good'. He can still mix it with the lads and lasses back in Putney. It's also a great joy to see Thomas (ie. Mantel) deal with humbug and hypocrisy, particularly in the case of the sainted Thomas More, a nasty, snobbish, self-regarding heretic-hunter who uses torture liberally in his work for God. Organised religion is shown to be the scam that it is - fortunes made by a corrupt clergy, wrung from generations of peasants, hoodwinked by enforced ignorance; the cleric now feeling the chill winds of change.

Cromwell abhors cruelty, and eschews the stomach-churning methods of torture in frequent use, in favor of clever manipulation to achieve his aims, mostly. And boy is he clever! The skill that Mantel brings to her story telling is simply stunning, and all the while remaining faithful to as much as we can know of the actual historical facts. Very few of her characters, and none of the main ones, are invented.

Hillary Mantel describes the vantage point of the reader as 'looking over Cromwell's shoulder'. Sometimes it feels like you're under his skin. In the course of his life Cromwell has developed a bottom-up, and wide-ranging knowledge of good food, good cloth, good craftwork. He can choose the right tiles to decorate the kitchen at home or draw on micro and macro management skills to stage a royal wedding. And with Mantel's brilliance, we are enabled, through Thomas, to experience the sensuous pleasure of the best of those times – the food of the day, its preparation, tastes, smells; the touch and feel and luster of silks and furs, the pearl encrusted sleeves and the gold and the jeweled adornments they wore – and that's just the men!

And all the while the world is changing – the power of the church is crumbling, the foreign allegiances wax and wane, the jostling for power among the top

families to be absolute ruler continues, but now they are having to look to new means of financing their ambitions and they have to learn that "the world is not run...from castle walls, but from counting houses, not by the call of a bugle but by the click of an abacus...". Nevertheless, as Cromwell learns to his cost, the feudal lords still, ultimately, call the shots – at least for now. Word of advice, keep the list of who's who supplied by the author, handy. Their names and titles can confuse, but you'll be so rewarded. All in all it is a stunning achievement; of interest to all but especially to the Marxist who knows that history is 'the history of class struggle'.

Peter Linebaugh

Red Round Globe Hot Burning

reviewed by Paul O'Brien

Very occasionally a book comes along that anyone with an interest in history and politics must read, and this is such a book. The title of the book comes from William Blake's poem *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*. Linebaugh invites us to interpret the poem as of its time and of ours; although he adds a long subtitle to summarise the contents: *A Tale at the Crossroads of Commons & Closure, of Love & Terror, of Race & Class, and of Kate & Ned Despard*.

His timeline covers the period roughly between 1785 and 1805 and draws together a series of connected events in Ireland, England, France, the West Indies and North America that led the resistance to the emerging capitalist world that we live in today. This was the epoch of the republic, of Tom Paine and the 'Rights of Man' (1791), of Thomas Russell and his 'Address to the People of Ireland' (1796), the French Revolution and the slave revolts in the Caribbean. The theme of the book is the republic across the oceans in defence of land and the means of production, formally held in common. Linebaugh highlights the role of racism in the rise of slavery and the virtual genocide of indigenous

peoples, and the way the British state used Ireland as a testing ground for the violence of the capitalist class.

At the centre of the book is the life and political times of Edward and Catherine Despard. Edward was born in County Laois of Anglo-Irish descent and reared in a world of constant tension between landlord and peasant. He joined the British Army and served in Jamaica, Honduras and Nicaragua as a soldier, engineer and administrator. There he met Catherine, a Creole woman and former slave, who became his comrade and wife. He lost his position as administrator in Honduras for defending the land rights of the indigenous people. While it was not unusual for white colonial administrators or soldiers to have a black mistress, the Despards defied convention and lived openly as man and wife after they returned to England.

Cast aside by the establishment in England, they joined the revolutionary underground movement. In 1802, the London radicals had plans for an insurrection in the hope that this would spark of a larger movement in the provinces. At the same time in Ireland, Robert Emmet was planning a revolt, and there is some evidence to suggest that Despard and Emmet tried to coordinate their activities. In 1803, Despard was arrested and sentenced to death on perjured evidence for his part in the planned revolt. The determination to destroy Despard was motivated by the explosive combination of class, race and Irish radicalism that was at the heart of the proposed insurrection. Edward Thompson, the British historian, believed that nineteenth century radicalism in Britain began with the parliamentary reformism of Francis Burdett and the working-class revolutionist Edward Despard.

His wife, Catherine, campaigned for his release, and her letters and speeches on Despard's behalf show her to be a politically informed activist. She wrote a pamphlet containing Edwards Despard's final manifesto and distributed it to the 20,000 who had come to support Despard in his final hour: 'Citizens I hope and trust, notwithstanding my fate, and the fate of those who no doubt

will follow me, that the principles of freedom, of humanity and justice, will finally triumph over falsehood, tyranny and delusion, and every principal inimical to the interests of the human race'.

Linebaugh undermines a traditional reading of Irish exceptionalism in history and politics in the way that he places Despard and the United Irishmen at the centre of a global hub of revolution that stretched from Ireland to Britain and the anti-slavery revolts in the Caribbean. The proclamation of two independent movements, Robert Emmet's, and that of Dessaline and the Black revolutionaries of St. Domingo in 1803



both contained explicit provisions for the protection of common property. And very perceptively, Linebaugh explains the way that Ireland and St. Domingo were linked in the

way that they provided labour. One imported slaves to harvest sugar, and the other exported labour to work in the mechanised factories of the newly industrialised factories of Britain and America.

The loss of the commons and the enclosures that followed transformed agriculture and production, as the traditional way of life that depended on farming common land gave way to private ownership of land and a new class structure. The expropriation of the commons was a precondition of proletarian exploitation and modern work practices. The displaced peasants not only lost their livelihood when they were driven off the land, they were then enclosed in the factories and the slums of the expanding cities. Linebaugh's strength as a historian is his forensic examination of history from below – that of the lives of the peasants and workers who had to bear the brunt of the enclosures and the industrial revolution. The expropriation of the commons in Enfield just north of London is set out in a precise manner. He details the way it disrupted normal life. The anger and small scale revolts, mainly in the form

of criminal acts, that it engendered are set out as an example of what was happening all over Britain and Ireland. This is, in parts, a difficult book, that requires a little effort and some concentration as Linebaugh wanders down many avenues across both sides of the Atlantic to illustrate his point. One such diversion is the chapter 'The Goose and the Commons' where he uses a traditional staple of the people's diet, the goose, to illustrate the savagery and misery that resulted from the loss of common ownership of land and the criminalising of such rights. But this is an immensely rewarding book and worth the effort to accompany Linebaugh on his journey through history. The reader needs to pause at the end of every page to take stock of the many connections and diversions that this wide-ranging analysis of the development of capitalism in the Atlantic world provides. His ability to weave the different strands together throws new light on our understanding of the past.

He explores the role of the spoon in the technology of consumption, and of the way coal not only provided the power to run the factories but instigated a new epoch in the history of the body. The 'cough' or chest infections became the signifier of this new method of production. This was the pandemic of capitalism that continues to this day in factories around the world. Gas lighting from coal increased the working day by three hours, adding to the physical burden of the displaced peasant. The first steam powered factory was known as Beelzebub, and the first factories offered the 'perfect picture of Hell'. Shedding light on another aspect of our history, Linebaugh describes how the Abortion Law of 1802 was not just about Christian morality. What was at stake was not life, but useful life – as factory workers and producers. The loss of the commons destroyed the homeworking system and drove many women into prostitution. In 1802 it was estimated that there were 50,000 prostitutes in London, fully one tenth of its population.

He details how Despard and his co-conspirators appealed to the Irish-speaking

labourers in London who had fled the terror in the aftermath of the failed revolt of 1798, and had brought the tradition of agrarian secret societies with them. This monumental history, packed with information, presents a comprehensive account of the resistance to the demise of communal societies, and the networks of underground resisters, represented by the life of Edward and Catherine Despard fighting against the privatisation of the commons and the rising industrial powers of Great Britain and the United States.

Today, Edward and Catherine Despard are hardly remembered in Ireland, yet the cause, for which he died, liberty and justice, did not go away. It continued in an underground existence in the lives of the cottiers, farm labourers and workers who resisted the disastrous conditions of land tenure and agricultural appropriation that prevailed right through the nineteenth century. Catherine Despard settled in Ireland after the execution of her husband and it is believed that she ended her days on the estate of a relation of Edward's, Lord Cloncurry in County Kildare. The book opens and ends with Linebaugh's unsuccessful search for her grave, but he has provided an epitaph for Edward and Catherine Despard they could never imagine as he faced the hangman over two centuries ago.

Jane McAlevey

A Collective Bargain: Unions, Organizing, and the Fight for Democracy

reviewed by Andrew Keegan

Any worker or activist looking to be informed of workers carrying out successful campaigns for union recognition, and more, can only be inspired on reading this latest book by the American trade union organiser Jane McAlevey.

One of the key elements discussed in the book are key disputes by nurses in private hospitals in Pennsylvania, staff in Silicon Valley and the teachers' strike in America and in particular in LA. Also discussed are the successful

Marriott Hotel workers who won due to massive solidarity and other successes by workers in the gig economy. These disputes are so inspirational, answering the old retort of “what are unions good for”? There is analysis here especially on the millionaire/billionaire class in the US and a decent historical synopsis of why unions are in such a poor state in the US and breaks down the neo-liberal agenda in action in the US.

The book explains, with enough detail to make sense to any worker, how the right wing establishment starting with Reagan in the 80s made a decision to take the long road, and put in play a thirty year plan to slowly erode workers’ rights. In



the UK Thatcher was playing the same game.

Union busting in the America and Europe is big business and interestingly the book details the unregulated union busting sector in

the US and quotes David Weil’s the Fissured Workplace: Why Work Became So Bad, where huge corporations such as Google and Amazon and the like, use agencies and don’t employ workers directly, in order to diffuse workers’ solidarity.

McAlevey quoting her visits to hospitals “I see the ‘fissured workplace’ even there: nurses in the same scrubs inside the same hospital, tending to the same patient, on the same floor, and yet working for different employers! The workers don’t understand they are on different payrolls until they try to form a union”.

Any worker, no matter what sector they work in, will identify with agency work. Immediately you relate to our working environment here in Ireland, whether retail, construction or even our health sector where the HSE is behaving in the same manner as private hospitals in the US, hiring nurses, not directly but through agencies such as CPL and the like.

So are workers North and South, are you being fissured? You bet you are!

What the book makes clear is, it’s very important to know your enemy and to

know you can win and win big. But while getting big wins in disputes is not a given, it is with proper planning workers can win both for their workplace and in their community. But politicians, CEOs and city leaders are to be considered targets in winning recognition using whatever tactic deemed necessary. The topic of tactics and how workers should behave, McAlevey points out that all trade unionist activists should be political and active in their community and as trade union activists they are leaders to all workers. If your sector wins big then other workers will be inspired to win big also.

Tactics in getting your workplace organised, the workers’ Stress Tests, needed to get results, are explained and are logical and give workers a plan to succeed. McAlevey is clear, to win in disputes, you need a plan and a strategy to get organised. This does not happen overnight and requires hard work. The author explains, where a union has become lethargic, a fresh influx of workers into moribund unions can transform them into fighting machines and if linked to our community, unions can win big for workers’ rights and conditions.

In my opinion Jane McAlevey is kryptonite to Corporate America along with the workers she helped organise. Her description of her interaction with American working class women is the highlight of this book. It does seem that all workers can take on corporates and win - the fact that most of the nurses and teachers here are women, makes this all the more entertaining and informative.

Caroline Moorehead

A House in the Mountains

Reviewed by Andrew Keegan

Moorhead has crafted an interesting story of the role played by Piedmontese women resistance fighters – starting in 1943 with Mussolini and his fascist regime becoming puppets to Hitler’s henchmen. Told through the story of four women, we hear the various roles

women played in shaping the character of the Resistance, centred in Turin, the regional capital, and in the Alps to the North West. While fighting the fascists, Nazis and the Allies, this story is also one of women fighting for an end to the suffocating misogyny and inequality they faced. Their disarming contempt for the fascist male is serious but at times humorous and heart-warming.

The scene was set as the geriatric Italian General Bordoglio was handed power after the collapse of Mussolini’s regime. The general made an announcement on radio announcing to the Italian people an armistice with the Allies.

While he had had at least two weeks



to prepare, he had done nothing, except this muddled broadcast. The King had scarpared to Switzerland along with the rest of the Italian establishment. In the confusion of the general’s final com-

ment, ‘the war will continue’ he left the Italian people to their fate of extended war – a war against the occupying Nazis and a civil war against fascism. The Nazis, having anticipated a capitulation, moved quickly to take control of all the major cities, and, taking advantage of the ensuing political vacuum, rushed troops from France and the Russian Front with one task, to protect Germany’s southern flank and pillage the country’s resources.

While the Nazis took control, the Italian Fascists who had slunked away re-emerged from the holes they disappeared into, to betray the Resistance to their German masters.

The Italian view of the Allies and the Germans was equally jaundiced. The eventual political outcome, post war, ended in a disappointing betrayal of the gender equality the women resistance dearly wanted and fought for.

This exciting story, with its historical backdrop, is about the bravery of Italian women in the last days of the Second World War, a story of heroism and inspiration. There are anecdotes of defiance at a time when women were viewed as nothing more than producers of sons

of fascism and little more. When the fascists declared that women should be banned wearing trousers, our protagonist Bianca decides to wear shorts in defiance. Our protagonists recount the endangering tasks they carried out as couriers, guides and spies in defiance of the brutal misogyny of Mussolini's fascism.

In one remarkable episode, and there are many, after the abject stupidity of the Italian Generals, the garrison in Turin was captured by the Germans. The Italian soldiers were disarmed and marched to Porto Nuovo station for

transportation to German factories as slave labourers. But the procession of soldiers was cut in half, by a train crossing. This being spotted by local women, heartbroken that the men were being marched off without any resistance, rescued 'their' men by throwing stones at them to wake them up from their shock and spirit them away. Subsequently at great danger to themselves, acting as their girlfriends, they accompanied the men to train stations to be greeted by other women, who guided them to the resistance in the mountains. Interestingly Ada Gobetti, one of our

protagonists, wrote an Orwellian Animal Farm type allegory which sold well, about the conformity of life under fascism, published in 1940, and called *Story of the Rooster Sebastiano* under the pseudonym of Margutte. What makes this story refreshing is their fight for equality for women, then and after the civil war. These women saw it as their duty to play an equal role in the Resistance in the fight against fascism. The dangers were real. If caught it meant torture, rape and death. This level of bravery by women, rarely gets told, making this a great read.

Our contributors

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