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# The Left Book Club: An Historical Record

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ment, 15 pages, devoted to any country is that on the United States; the Scandinavian countries and the Eastern European ones outside of the USSR receive 3 and 2 pages, respectively. These sections, then, are only bare-bones summary sketches, and, while they would be useful as introductory material for the uninformed, they are less valuable and successful than the two other main sections of the work. Two misconceptions in the section on the United States may be pointed out. It is not true that the New York Public Library (Reference Department) has no subject departments (*Fachabteilungen*, p. 279); there are, in fact, a dozen such divisions for American history, art and architecture, economics, Orientalia, science and technology, and Slavonica, among others. And, as far as I know, no American university having an undergraduate library prohibits undergraduates from using the main or "research library" (p. 283).

Kluth has produced an exceedingly solid, sound work of a very difficult kind, and the publisher, Harrassowitz, has given us a well-printed, typographically almost error-free volume on good paper and with ample margins. In summary, plaudits all around.

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*The Left Book Club: An Historical Record.*

By JOHN LEWIS. Foreword by Dame MARGARET COLE. London: Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1970. Pp. 163. 36s.

One approaches John Lewis's *The Left Book Club* with high expectations. A history of the club has been needed, and John Lewis, as the only surviving member of the club's day-to-day leadership, is well qualified to write it. The book, however, is a disappointment. Lewis has written a pedestrian and uncritical account which neither tells the full story of the Left Book Club nor analyzes its real significance.

The Left Book Club was founded in 1936 by the English publisher Victor Gollancz. It began as a book club and developed into the leading left-wing movement of the 1930s in Britain. Gollancz hoped that if enough people could be awakened to the danger of fascism, the British government would be forced to abandon its complacency and take strong

measures against Hitler in time to prevent World War II. At its peak there were 1,200 local Left Book Club discussion groups, specialist groups for poets, actors, scientists, and many other professions, and Left Book Club organizations overseas. The club sponsored mass rallies, summer schools, political education classes, speaking tours by Left Book Club authors, and amateur left-wing theatrical productions. It attempted to reach an even wider audience through pamphlets and leaflets.

Lewis was national organizer of the Left Book Club groups from December 1936 to 1940. Lewis describes in great detail the activities of the club up to the outbreak of war. He sets the club in the context of Gollancz's approach to political education. He describes the club's organization and notes many of its selections and the galaxy of well-known names associated with the club as authors and speakers. But his account leaves much to be desired.

The details of the club's history are presented accurately but uncritically. The immediate success of the Left Book Club indicated the existence of a large audience ready to be enlisted in Gollancz's crusade, but there is no analysis of the factors that made the club such a perfect response to this need. There is no attempt to analyze the soundness of Gollancz's program of a Popular Front of anti-Fascists at home and a collective security alliance abroad. There is little discussion of how the club was regarded outside its own ranks, except for its unfriendly reception by some of the leaders of the Labour party. Lewis is more apologist than historian. He ignores the occasional complaints about Gollancz's strict personal control of the club. There is no reference to the uncomplimentary accounts of group meetings in Arthur Koestler's autobiography *The Invisible Writing* or George Orwell's novel *Coming Up for Air*. The only shortcomings Lewis admits are the obvious—that the selections on the Moscow purge trials were "frankly misleading" and that the club ended a failure.

There are a few serious omissions. Orwell's *The Road to Wigan Pier* was one of the best books issued by the club, and also one of the most controversial. The first half, which described the life of miners in northern England, was ideal for the club's purposes, but in the second half Orwell was strongly critical of the characteristics of many socialists. Gollancz tried to reassure club members in a long Foreword. Later the club issued the book in a special edition for propaganda purposes which

omitted part 2 altogether. Lewis mentions none of this. He merely passes over the book with a comment about Orwell's excellent treatment of social problems.

The Left Book Club has sometimes been unfairly criticized as the captive of the Communist party. Communists were welcomed in the club and their influence was considerable, but they never controlled it. Lewis devotes a chapter to the club and communism, and on the whole his conclusions are fair and balanced. But to some extent he underestimates the Communist contribution to the club. The Communists played a larger role in the groups than Lewis indicates. And he states, "There were in fact very few communists among the authors of the Monthly Choice." Nearly a third of the monthly choices before the war were written by Communist authors. Some of these were crudely propagandistic, but several, such as Allen Hutt's *Post-War History of the British Working Class*, remain useful studies today. And it must be admitted that the communism of Stephen Spender, whose autobiographical *Forward from Liberalism* was the January 1937 choice, was short-lived and extremely superficial. Lewis fails to note the reservations some Communists had about the club. After actively opposing other parties of the Left in the late 1920s and early 1930s, some local Communist party branches had not yet fully accepted the party's new policy of cooperation and thought it a waste of time to work in an organization that welcomed all shades of opinion. The Communist intellectual Alick West, although he played an active role in the club's Readers and Writers group, has revealed in his recently published autobiography that he held a low opinion of the club and considered Gollancz's efforts as sentimentality.

Lewis ends his detailed account of the Left Book Club with the outbreak of war and Gollancz's split with the Communists. The club survived until 1948, and Lewis devotes just twelve pages to its last nine years. The club's most significant era was over, the causes it had struggled for had been lost, and its strength was much reduced. Nevertheless, the club's last years deserve fuller treatment than Lewis has given them. The British Left did not disappear after the heady days of the 1930s, and a study of these years of the Left Book Club could increase our understanding of what happened to it. Certainly the *International Socialist Forum*, the wartime supplement to the

club's monthly journal *Left News*, deserves attention. Under the direction of the distinguished Austrian socialist Julius Braunthal, it provided a platform for exiled Continental socialists, and its contributors included such leading figures as Louis de Brouckère and Pietro Nenni. Lewis does provide, however, an interesting discussion of the residual influence of the Left Book Club in the armed forces, particularly through the lecturers of the Army Bureau of Current Affairs, which may have contributed to the left-wing consciousness among British servicemen that helped bring the Labour government to power in 1945.

Lewis has written the history of the Left Book Club as seen from its headquarters. There is no bibliography, but he seems to have relied mainly on the detailed records of the club's activities in *Left News*, on Gollancz's autobiographical writings, and on his own recollections. He might have achieved a broader perspective by tapping sources ranging from the *Daily Worker* to *Scrutiny*, and various histories and memoirs.

The author and printer have conspired to convey an impression of carelessness. Minor errors, misprints, and inconsistencies are scattered throughout the book. Documentation is skimpy and not always accurate. On page 19, for instance, the statement about provocative typography attributed to Gollancz is in fact by Stanley Morison, the creator of Gollancz's remarkable house style; and on the same page the quotation about Gollancz's genius as a publisher is by Margaret Cole, not John Carter, from her 1938 pamphlet *Books and the People*.

The book contains a complete chronological Bibliography of the Left Book Club's 257 selections. It is a great contribution to have the full list of these books, which involved considerable effort to compile, finally in print. The monthly choices, which were automatically received by the club's entire membership, are indicated, and the optional books are identified in their several series. The authors represent the entire range of the British Left of the late 1930s except for the Trotskyites. The Labour party authors, except for Clement Attlee, mainly represent its left wing, and include such names as Stafford Cripps, Harold Laski, Ellen Wilkinson, Konni Zilliacus, and Philip Noel-Baker. The titles indicate the surprisingly wide range of the club's interests. Besides books on fascism, the Spanish civil war, the Soviet Union, foreign policy, and the con-

dition of Britain, there are books on Christian socialism and even birth control. The chronological arrangement allows one to follow the steady descent toward war, the split with the Communists, and the interests of the non-Communist Left during World War II.

There are two minor errors in the list of Left Book Club selections. The author of *The Civil War in Spain* is Frank Jellinek, not Franz. And Sidney and Beatrice Webb's *Soviet Communism* is wrongly identified with the club's Reprints of Classics series; it was in the series of Additional Books. Curiously, both of these misprints first appeared in the list of Left Book Club selections included in my Master's thesis at the University of Chicago in 1969, which Lewis's list, except for the welcome addition of the identity I had not discovered of one anonymous author, mirrors in every point of organization and detail. It is unfortunate that these errors should here be repeated.

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*The Study of Subject Bibliography with Special Reference to the Social Sciences.* Edited with an introduction by CHRISTOPHER D. NEEDHAM, assisted by ESTHER HERMAN. Student Contribution Series no. 3. College Park, Md.: School of Library and Information Services, 1970. Pp. 221. \$5.00 (paper).

Since the advent of the "new curriculum" in the late 1940s, most American library schools have introduced courses in the literature of the major divisions of subject fields, usually a tripartite group of courses concerned with the humanities, the social sciences, and the natural sciences. All of us who have taught such courses have been troubled with problems of goals, content, and method. Some have emphasized a sociological approach that considered the structure of the literature, the nature of communication systems, the behavioral characteristics of researchers, and similar topics. Others have concentrated upon bibliographical matters such as the major works and writers in the field and, in particular, the literature of reference and bibliographical control. Some of those who have chosen the bibliographical approach have developed what are essentially advanced reference courses. The

choices are difficult, and few who are candid will claim to be fully satisfied with the results, whatever the choice.

This volume is a report of the experience of one instructor and his students during one semester of 1968 at the University of Maryland. Needham, regularly a member of the faculty of North-Western Polytechnic in London, provides in part 1 an extended discussion of the dilemmas and choices facing him and his class and outlines the course as it was offered. Parts 2 and 3 consist of six sample term papers on individual disciplines, such as sociology, and seven sample bibliographies on specific topics, such as "Therapeutic Methods with the Autistic Child."

In the event, the course became an amalgam of the sociological and the bibliographical aspects of social science literature. Needham provided in his initial lectures an introduction to problems of organization, communication, and information flow. The students' papers dealt, in relation to a particular subject, with the five aspects that Needham outlined for them: the nature of the subject matter, the social organization that produces and distributes information in the discipline, the means of communication of information, documentary channels of communication, and the bibliographic organization and major reference works in the field.

The resulting volume is a very fine discussion of issues and an excellent illustration of applications and outcomes. Needham is candid about his failures and his successes. Most of his readers will be likely to disagree with some of his approaches and opinions. Those who argue dogmatically for either the sociological or the bibliographical approach will probably believe that the effort to accomplish both in a single course dooms it to something less than total success, but many of us who have been unwilling, as he was, to give up either goal will consider his compromise a reasonable one. American library educators may tend to shy away from his characteristically British emphasis upon the preparation of an extensive bibliography on a subject of limited scope. Authoritarian and dogmatic teachers are likely to reject his open approach, in which, through providing a structure for those students who want considerable direction, he leaves the independent thinker free to study social science literature, or some small aspect of it, in an individual way.