

*Ernest Bevin, Labour's Churchill*. Andrew Adonis. Biteback, 2020. 352 pp, 16 pp of photographs, numerous b/w ill. Hardback £20.00. [ISBN 978-1-78590-598-8].

In 2014 Avon Local History and Archaeology, the umbrella organisation for local history in the four counties that used to be Avon, organised a local history day on what was going on hereabouts as the nineteenth turned into the twentieth century. The day ended with a debate on who had had most influence in the shaping of modern Bristol: George White (corporate finance, trams, buses, aircraft, cars, Bristol Royal Infirmary)? Or Ernest Bevin (Bristol and Avonmouth docks, Transport and General Workers Union, local politics)? Attenders voted two to one for White. Did the voting turn on the information presented, the speakers' persuasiveness, or voters' political inclinations or personal experiences? Did some see Bevin more as a wartime leader whose work, impact and legacy were national rather than local? That is the line taken by the author in this absorbing and readable biography of the (fairly) local lad who became minister of labour in the 1940 wartime coalition, and foreign secretary in the 1945 post-war Labour government.

The book is mostly narrative. Bevin's mother, deserted by her husband, returned from South Wales to Winsford on Exmoor, where Bevin was born in 1881. The *Bristol Mercury* was read in the household. She died when Bevin was eight. He was taken in by his half-sister in a Devon village, left school at eleven, and became a farm boy. After an altercation with his employer, Bevin moved to Bristol, lodged with a brother, and got casual jobs, first at a butcher's in Clifton. For eleven years he drove horse-drawn wagons delivering mineral waters for John Macy's. Bevin attended a Baptist chapel in Easton, and classes run by the Baptist minister James Moffat Logan, who introduced him to socialism. Bevin was appointed secretary of the Bristol Right to Work Committee, in which capacity he persuaded the city council to form the lake in Eastville Park as an unemployment relief measure. In 1909 he stood as a socialist for the city council. He lost the election, and Macy's lost customers. During the Avonmouth dock strike of 1910 Bevin was put in charge of the strikers' relief fund. He urged the dockers to join the existing Dock, Wharf, Riverside and General Workers' Union, of whose Bristol branch he was elected chairman and then full-time organiser. In 1913 he became an assistant national organiser of the dockers' union, and in 1914 one of its three national organisers. The author identifies this as the moment when Bevin got the opportunity to create the post and the institution that gave him his power base and led to him becoming a national, as distinct from a Bristol, trade union and political leader.

Successful in negotiating workers' rights and pay, Bevin was appointed by Lloyd George as a member of the Ports and Transport Executive Committee to speed up traffic through the docks. In 1916 Bevin went to the USA to the American Federation of Labour conference, when he learned how trade unions were organised and operated there. The author identifies that as seminal to Bevin's subsequent achievements, both as trade union leader and negotiator and as foreign secretary. In 1918 Bevin became famous as 'the dockers' KC' after representing them at a court of inquiry which awarded the dockers their claim in full. In 1920 Bevin moved house from Bristol to London. By 1922 he had amalgamated the dockers and many transport workers (not the seamen or railway workers) into one union, and was elected general secretary of the Transport and General Workers Union.

The author then narrates Bevin's national career. Highlights included the building of Transport House (also the Labour party's HQ until 1980); his membership of the Samuel committee on the coal industry, and of the Macmillan committee on finance and industry (where Bevin met John Maynard Keynes); his advocacy of public works to relieve unemployment, including a Severn barrage and (not mentioned by the author) a Severn road bridge; election as MP for Gateshead in 1931; the ousting of Lansbury as Labour party leader and the promotion of Attlee; his thwarting of Herbert Morrison; appointment in 1940 aged 59 as Minister of Labour in Churchill's coalition (and mobilising the Bevin

boys into the coal mines first to replace miners extracted for military service, mining not initially being a reserved occupation, and later to meet the nation's increased demand for coal); and from 1945 foreign secretary, in which capacity he saw through, opposed and thwarted Stalin, helped form the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, did much to implement the Marshall Plan and the Berlin airlift, and influenced the reconstituting of Germany.

In Britain socialism has long been divided between those inclined towards equality through Communism (albeit achieved by democratic means) - exemplified by Aneurin Bevan, Michael Foot and Jeremy Corbyn - and those who seek social justice and fair distribution of wealth within a capitalist system - exemplified by prime ministers Attlee, Blair and Brown. Lord Adonis places Bevin firmly in the latter camp, which made him acceptable to Churchill – hence the book's subtitle, which refers both to Bevin's politics and to his personality and character. The author sees Bevin as striving for power and achieving it partly by ability and force of character, and partly by tactical outmanoeuvring of competitors and opponents such as Morrison (whom Bevin disliked and did not trust) and Bevan (whom Bevin saw as near-communist and too sympathetic towards Stalin and Russia). To keep Morrison and Bevan out of power, Bevin promoted and supported Attlee. That may also explain Bevin's lack of involvement with the National Health Service, with which Bevan is identified. Bevin did not concern himself with the Beveridge reforms either: he hated the man.

Bevin's patriotism appealed to Churchill. His organising and negotiating ability made him an apt choice for employment minister in wartime. His knowledge and understanding of foreign countries, obtained from many overseas trade union visits and conferences, and his patriotism made him an informed choice for foreign secretary under Attlee. As the book's title implies, the author portrays Bevin as having many of Churchill's characteristics: fervent patriotism, determination, negotiating and rhetorical skills, leadership and sheer strength of character. The author discerns Bevin's legacy in the UK economy, to which labour relations have been crucial, and in the post-war settlement of Europe, in particular Bevin's standing up to Stalin's bullying and thwarting his ambition to put under soviet control the whole of Germany and much else.

The author acknowledges Alan Bullock's *The life and times of Ernest Bevin* (3 volumes, Heinemann 1960-1983). Bullock's book is longer, more detailed, analytically deeper, and more critical. Bullock portrays Bevin with all his faults, which were many and serious; Adonis's narrative has more pace, tends towards hero-worship, and is full of references to and comparisons with later British politics and the problems of the Labour party, not least under Jeremy Corbyn. The reader half expects quotation of Wordsworth's invocation of Milton. Many of the differences between the books may be the result of compression. In Bevin's time in Bristol, for example, Adonis's account of Bevin's Baptist church membership and introduction to socialism is elided and allusive: Bullock unpicks the detail. Whereas Adonis suggests that Bevin got himself appointed to administer the dockers' strike relief fund in 1910, Bullock explains that Bevin was asked to take it on, and why. Adonis hints that Bevin's leading a procession of unemployed men into a Bristol cathedral service was an improper disruption; Bullock explains that Bevin had got the dean's prior agreement. Bullock details Bevin's lifelong regard for and friendship with Alderman Frank Sheppard (Bristol's first Labour lord mayor; died 1956); Adonis does not mention him. Adonis presents Bevin as hard-working; Bullock shows his work-rate and hours to have been utterly phenomenal. Adonis praises Bevin's oratory; Bullock shows just how persuasive a speaker he was. Bullock explains why Bevin concerned himself so much with foreign affairs and international trade: Bevin grasped that the jobs of the dockers and other transport workers he represented depended on maintaining and expanding the movement of goods. Bullock also explains Bevin's early aloofness from party politics: he drew a distinction between trade unions, concerned with the rights and welfare of workers and negotiating with employers, and the

Labour party, which he saw as concerned only with action in parliament. Not until the 1931 crisis did Bevin realise that political as well as industrial action were needed if socialist programmes were to be advanced.

Adonis's concentration on Bevin as a national and international player may lead some readers to ask whether the book does justice to Bevin's legacy in Bristol. The author does not deal with that: understandably, as once Bevin moved to London in 1920 he ceased to be Bristol-based, and all the more so once he became MP for Gateshead and a minister of the crown, and it is Bevin's national importance that is the author's theme. So the book does not examine Bevin's legacy locally, which must include the unionising and mobilising of labour in the city's docks; the establishment locally of the Transport and General Workers Union; that organisation's domination of the local Labour party and its politics and policies; and its influence on Bristol's municipal government for decades. That is not a criticism of the book: for another author, perhaps, another day.

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