Review:

MAKING SENSE
OF OUR PAST

Audrey Blake


Peggy Dennis is a remarkable woman and she has written a remarkable book which spans fifty crucial years of the international communist movement. The book’s dedication to her husband Gene, the General Secretary of the CP USA 1946-1959 who died in 1961, says a lot to the communists of the period. It is from Charles Dickens:

'It was the best of times,
It was the worst of times,
It was the age of wisdom,
It was the age of foolishness,
It was the epoch of belief....'

The author’s earliest years were in the socialist Sunday school (her parents were Jewish revolutionaries, exiles from Tsarist Russia), the Young Communist League, and then from 1929 together with Gene, Party organising in various American cities, the America where ‘Politicians talked about prosperity around the corner, but meanwhile there was no social security, no unemployment insurance, no welfare department, no government responsibility to feed, clothe or house the millions thrown on the scrap heap of capitalism’.

Her first visit to Moscow was in the winter of ’31. She went there with Tim, their baby, to join Gene who had begun work for the Comintern. Soviet life was tough and elemental but to those who cannot understand the enthusiasm and belief we had then for Soviet Russia her record will help, especially if it is remembered that, ‘Back in the States twenty million were out of work, millions more were hungry and homeless, social security was a revolutionary demand being fought for in the streets’.

Gene left after a few months. He was to be away for three years working as Comintern representative to the communist parties in South Africa, the Philippines and China. In those years Peggy worked as a teacher in the Anglo-American school for the children of foreign workers, as a researcher in the Profintern (the Red International of Labour Unions), studied in the Lenin School and finally became a courier for the Comintern taking money and messages and expediting the movement of cadres into the illegal anti-colonial movements and the anti-fascist movements. This work was difficult, dangerous and involved a gruelling routine of isolation. Of this work which is so often dismissed as sinister Peggy writes: ‘Only the Comintern placed its international resources of organisation, finances, personnel and know-how at the disposal of these democratic and independence struggles. Whatever its own internal weaknesses and rigidities, this support was the Comintern’s greatest
achievement. Less than ten years later, the war alliance of Britain, the US and the Soviet Union leaned heavily upon these organised resistance movements in Europe, Africa and Asia'.

In 1935 Peggy and Gene returned to the USA but without the five year old Tim. Their Soviet stay was to remain secret, the recent American recognition of the Soviet Union could not be jeopardised by right-wing versions of their four year stint of Comintern work. So a five year old Russian speaker was an impossibility. 'And it was only for a short time. They had promised.' But Tim never did come home except as a translator for Kruschev on his American visit, and to stand guard of honour at the coffin of his dead father in '61.

Their work '35-'37 was in Wisconsin and it was a creative, wonderful time of communist activity - there as everywhere. The Comintern had left behind its childish (1931) view of fascism and its maturer position of 1935 meant that the American communists would 'defend every inch of the democratic gains made by the working class', would struggle against fascism in defence of democracy, would move into the mainstream of political life. Peggy estimates: 'Not before or since has our Party successfully carried through such a complex and valid policy and activity as it did in the years 1935, 1936 and 1937...we developed, not in articles and reports but in action, the broadest, most flexible coalition relations within the mainstream. At the same time we delineated clearly our own independent Communist identification'.

In '37 Gene and Peggy were in Moscow again - Gene as the American rep. to the Comintern. And that's where and when we - Jack Blake and I - met them and became close friends. Jack, representing the CPA in the Anglo-American Section, and I was the rep. of the Australian YCL to the KIM - the Young Communist International.

These were terrible years for Soviet communists but in the Luxe, the old building on Gorky Street where we all lived, and in the Comintern building, we were insulated against most of the terror. Gene and Peggy knew more because a number of friends from their earlier years had vanished and queries were curtly choked off. But they didn't talk about it - they were vigilant - as we all were. "Vigilance" meant no questions unless you needed to know the answers for your work; anything else was "petty bourgeois liberalism". But though they knew more than we did they were just as uncomprehending. Belief can open one's eyes - it can also be the great blinder. Before starting work in the KIM I was interviewed by Brigadirov, a Russian from the Comintern cadres department, who warned me to be vigilant and not to mix with Russians. Within a few days Brigadirov himself was "taken".

Occasionally, a room in our corridor of the Luxe would have a lead seal on the door; our neighbour had been taken. If they were Russians we didn't know them. If they were other non-English speaking people we didn't know them either - 'the English speaking comrades became an insulated group'. Peggy comments:

'In 1961 and again in 1965 when for a short time Soviet people talked to me freely of those years, I found that our reactions in the Luxe had been not too different to those of the Soviet citizens. Many told me the same story. When the security police came for one's neighbour, one shrugged uneasily. "The evidence must be there, the Party would not act otherwise." When the police came for you or your wife or husband or brother or sister or mother or father or uncle or aunt or close friend, "you knew it was a horrible mistake; you believed it would be rectified in a few days". And they waited in silence for almost twenty years for the Party to correct its "mistake".

Peggy is revealing on the long factional struggles of Browder and Foster (who were both in Moscow that year) which resulted in the return of the Dennises in order that Gene should be the 'balance' between Browder's reformism and Foster's sectarianism. Again Tim had to be left. I remember the night they departed. Tim was to return to the International Children's Home the next day. Molly, a mutual friend, saw him to bed and then our 'phone rang; it was Tim wanting Jack. Much later Jack returned - young Tim, he said, had wanted a man-to-man talk about life. The children of communist functionaries did not have it easy.

This book is useful on the German-Soviet Pact, Molotov's defence of the pact, the phoney war, the early and later policy of the communists. 1941 saw the Dennises in
Moscow again but only for a brief period - Gene to return home three days after the Nazis invaded, Peggy three months later. Again Tim had to remain. Peggy made a decision to have another child: 'Not as a substitute for Tim, who was now lost to us in the cauldron of war; not even as any reaffirmation of my love for Gene. This was for me and my need alone'. Gene Junior was born December 7, 1942.

The post-war years - Browderism, the deep-rooted, long-standing animosity between Browder and Foster, and Browder's expulsion led to the election of Gene as General Secretary of the Party. The cold war, the long McCarthy operation which aimed to break the back of the whole democratic movement made this an incredibly tense period. I. F. Stone wrote, 'Washington is living under the shadow of terror'.

In 1950 Gene went to gaol for six years and Peggy and her seven year old son faced the long years with a pact 'to live each day as though Gene were coming home tomorrow'. With most of the Party leaders in gaol, anti-communism of a truly terrible virulence put the prisoners' lives in danger and their position was not helped by the almost fatal blow self-inflicted when the 'outside' Party leadership took almost the whole organisation underground. The 'expendables', those left above ground, included the 160 Smith Act defendants, their wives and families. They became 'a Party unto ourselves, the only visible Party activists fighting for the constitutional and civil liberties of communists as part of the fight against McCarthyism'. Peggy became the chairwoman of the national committee called Families of the Smith Act Victims and the mass work of this organisation was effective and courageous - a beautiful example of communist mass work. But, 'As to personal problems each of us had, none of us was equipped by our Party experience to respond to each other on a simple human level'. Here and elsewhere the author reveals her understanding of the lessons she has learned from the rise of the new movements of the sixties, in particular the movement for women's liberation.

1955 was the year of Gene's release. He had learned much: all the experience of his life reached out to a new development. He urged 'a most positive approach to all honest Socialist and Marxist oriented groups and individuals'. He projected 'friendly debate and co-operation' combined with 'sharp political and ideological struggle' that could lead eventually to the unification of all socialist-minded persons into a 'new and broader mass party of socialism'. He rejected the established use of democratic centralism, which, he said, in practice stifled democracy and perpetuated bureaucracy. Foster and his supporters were horrified at this 'revisionist' line. There was wide support for Gene but the 20th Congress report of Krushchev, revealing the horrors of Stalinism burst with a shattering impact which the Party leadership was unable to cope with. A four year destructive battle began and Gene retreated from some of his innovations.

Many comrades left the Party. Foster merely shrugged 'Good riddance' and demanded punitive organisational action against those who remained and didn't agree with him '...many were our most effective workers in the mass movements'. Revisionism was declared to be the main danger by the 1958 conference of the twelve Parties of the socialist countries. Gus Hall, the present leader of the CP USA began the campaign to oust Gene and to take his position. Two days before the convention opened Gene suffered a stroke and the next year he died of lung cancer.

For anyone who has not yet felt the need for new thinking on the question of inner-party struggle I would refer them to this book and especially to the pages which describe Gene's funeral and the organising of it by the Party.

Peggy visited the USSR three more times, in '61, '65 and '72. In between she worked on the San Francisco paper People's World and welcomed the movements which developed in the sixties. Not so the Party leadership which felt these to be 'outside' the Party: only Left movements led by the Party were valid.

The author's analysis of the post-Stalin USSR are of great interest. Her commitment to the land and people of the October Revolution and the herculean struggle against the Nazis remains but it now entails a deeply felt critique. She writes of the lessons learned in the Eastern European socialist countries from the '56 Hungarian rebellion and the Warsaw strikes and demonstrations of the same year. But the
Soviet invasion of Czecho-slovakia showed where the real difficulty was still located.

The US Party learned the wrong lessons and launched a renewed era of "ideological purity".

Peggy's last visit to Moscow was for three months, six weeks of which she lived with her son Tim, his wife and child. She was impressed with the improved living standards, bothered by the lack of 'a socialist quality' to everyday life, aghast that no one would discuss Czecho-slovakia except to say, 'We should have shot them all as Stalin would have done'. And one other matter - the Jews:

'In casual exchanges of non-political subjects among these circles of upward-moving Party activists, I heard strange phrases, all the more disturbing because they were said so nonchalantly. Referring to a mutual acquaintance of those present one says and the others agree, "For a Jew, he's quite a good fellow". At another time I am told, "You can appreciate how capable he is, he holds such a responsible position even though he is a Jew". Among these bright, political career-minded persons, none can give me an answer to the question why blatantly anti-Semitic articles appear repeatedly in popular Soviet magazines, in the form of book reviews, when a glavlit - an official government censor - has to approve everything that appears in print.'

Back in America Peggy found that her life was culminating in a struggle with the Gus Hall leadership, ending with her resignation from the Party in '76, fifty years after she'd joined. The resignation letter (printed as an appendix) is one more step in her fight for what she believes. She looks to the future: 'Surely, the real champions of the best interests of our people are myriad and still need to combine forces in that struggle for that new and better society we call socialism.'