BOOK REVIEWS


A sense of historic root, knowledge of the struggles of the past, successes and failures, is important for the revolutionary movement today. It was this belief that led Al Richmond to write “A Long View from the Left: Memoirs of an American Revolutionary,” for without that sense, “a movement cannot comprehend itself, cannot understand its development, cannot see itself in historical perspective. Its self-critical faculty is diminished, it is more prone to inertia, more easily buffeted and swayed by any wayward new wave or current.” (1) Richmond’s experience as a communist in the United States spans the period from the late ’20s to the present day and it has been rich and varied.

He writes of his life as a revolutionary, in the youth movement, the trade unions and then as a journalist on the party press. For a couple of years he was on the “Daily Worker” staff, then he moved across to San Francisco to become founding editor and later editor-in-chief of the “People’s World.” For more than 30 years his life was bound up with the “People’s World” until in 1969 he resigned when the growing differences he had with the leadership of his party made it impossible for him to continue.

Richmond has not attempted to write a history of the CPUSA or of the general revolutionary movement, but his lively account of his personal experience provides the reader with a picture of the broader actions. He wrote his memoirs, as he says in the preface, “to make the American Communist experience comprehensible and credible to those not directly involved in it.” I think he has succeeded.

Born in London in 1913, of Russian parents, both of whom had spent some time in tsarist prisons and in exile in Siberia, at the age of five young Al was taken to Russia by his mother after the February revolution of 1917. His recollections of this time, particularly of his mother, a revolutionary returning from exile, provide some poignant sidelights on this period. In 1922, they returned to America; a little later his parents separated finally and his mother was left to fend for herself and her young son. The next years spent first in the slums of Chicago and then New York were dismal ones, but the courage and spirit of his mother are clear as she struggled to make a living as a semi-skilled worker in the garment industry.

Richmond was 16 when he joined the Young Communist League and he cut his revolutionary teeth in the struggles of the unemployed that were to come very soon. In 1928 the Communist Party was in the throes of a factional struggle about which he understood nothing. “I succumbed to a common failing: attributing profundity to something simply because you cannot understand it,” and “... I yielded to another common failing: when you don’t really know what an argument is about, side with the majority.” But he soon began to know what things were about, working as an organiser for the League in New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore and Washington and then back to Philadelphia as port secretary of the Marine Workers’ Industrial Union. This was the background to his vocation as a journalist.

In 1951, Richmond, with 11 other communists on the west coast, was arrested on a “conspiracy” charge under the Smith Act, at the height of McCarthy’s witch-hunts. He was sentenced to five years imprisonment, and for the next six he was either in jail, in court or underground. On the west coast the leadership of the Communist Party was in the throes of a factious struggle about which he understood nothing. “I succumbed to a common failing: attributing profundity to something simply because you cannot understand it,” and “... I yielded to another common failing: when you don’t really know what an argument is about, side with the majority.” But he soon began to know what things were about, working as an organiser for the League in New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore and Washington and then back to Philadelphia as port secretary of the Marine Workers’ Industrial Union. This was the background to his vocation as a journal

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Interspersed among the chapters of the book are three essays in which Richmond, drawing on his long experience, relates the experiences of the past to the struggles of the Left today. “Notes on the Revolution and the 1930s” contains much interesting historical material as well as some pertinent references to the Russian, Chinese and Cuban revolutionary struggles. Discussing the struggle for a united front
in the pre-war period he stresses that this was a revolutionary strategy in the conditions that existed at that time, and emphasises that the party’s call to bring together all who could be joined to fight against the rise of fascism in Spain, Italy and Germany drew to it the support of millions. He shows that it was not the strategy which was at fault, as some of the New Left claim today, but rather it was the failure to develop the full potential of the united front that led to the decline and virtual devastation of the Communist Party later. He acknowledges that mistakes and opportunistic compromises were made but describes as nonsense an “historical hallucination in which the working classes of the advanced capitalist countries (including the United States) were straining to make a socialist revolution but were inhibited and diverted by People’s Front projection of fascism, not capitalism, as the immediate target.” He continues: “Only two things are missing from this vision: 1) any serious conception of what makes revolution and 2) any serious comprehension of the relevant realities in the United States.” He concludes this chapter thus: “... As the contemporary Left attempts to engage in a politics of the millions, it will encounter opportunities and difficulties comparable to those of the 1930s. If this is true, what was and was not done then has relevance.”

In the chapter, “The Generations,” Richmond, in projecting his theory of the continuing ebb and flow of the revolutionary movement in America, relates the struggles of the New Left to those of the Old. He takes issue with those older revolutionaries who have been swift to unconditionally condemn the violence of some sections of the New Left. He underlines the links between groups like the Black Panthers and earlier Left leaders such as Debs, Hayward and Foster, claiming that what they have in common is that all, when violence erupts in response to the naked violence of the ruling class, affirm their class solidarity.

Evident throughout the book is Richmond’s concern for the “relevant realities.” For most of its history the “People’s World” had attempted to keep these realities in mind, and it is clear that even before the Khrushchov report in 1956, Richmond was welcoming the projected opportunity to get down to the nitty-gritty of why and how the influence and the membership of the United States Communist Party had declined since the ’30s. In April, 1956, Eugene Dennis, the general secretary of the party, at the first full meeting of the national committee for five years - he himself was just out of jail - had made “a devastating critique of party estimates and policy.” Dennis referred to “basic, deep-seated and long-standing weaknesses” which, he said, included “the strong and persistent tendency in the party to apply the experiences of other parties and the science of Marxism in a mechanical and doctrinaire fashion...” Already Richmond had been questioning the “only one model” theory, but before there could be any real discussion and analysis, the world communist movement was confronted with Khrushchov’s devastating revelations in his report to the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

When the Soviet invasion of Hungary took place a few months later, the Communist Party in the United States reeled. A sharp crisis occurred in the course of which a considerable number of experienced cadres left the party. Richmond remained to continue the struggle of ideas inside the party. He was motivated, he writes, to achieve three aims: “a sharp break with bureaucratic patterns, an effective exercise of autonomy in a fraternal relationship with the world movement and the Socialist camp, and an independent confrontation with American reality in the spirit of Marx and Lenin, without borrowed spectacles or dogmatic preconceptions.” Although elected a member of the national committee of the party in 1957 -- and he remained one until February, 1972 -- Richmond’s pursuit of these aims led to growing alienation from the party leadership and this culminated in 1968 when Czechoslovakia was invaded. His outspoken criticism of this invasion led to deeper conflict, and he resigned as editor of the “People’s World,” but still remained in the party. Richmond had spent some time in Czechoslovakia in 1966 and visited it again in late August, 1968. His observations then confirmed his criticisms of the intervention. For such a keen observer, Richmond does, however, show a rather strange blind spot on this issue. He writes that except for Communist parties in Western Europe, the rest of the world parties lined up with the Soviet Union. Are many of the Communist parties of Asia, including the parties of Vietnam, China and Japan or the Communist Party of Australia non-parties or non-countries to this American?

Richmond’s memoirs are written with style humanity and wit and it is easy to become absorbed in his account of the “communist experience.” For Australian readers, there is an added interest, because so much of what he writes about has had its parallel here.

POSTSCRIPT: Just before going to press news came of Richmond’s resignation from the US Communist Party after that party’s leadership dubbed “A Long View from the Left” “anti-party” and refused Richmond a right of reply.
Having just re-read this book for the fifth time in the past six months, I am filled with enough enthusiasm to attempt the impossible and review it.

David Cooper, who, with R. D. Laing, is one of the leading anti-psychiatrists -- the school that has thrown the psychiatric world into a total re-examination of its premises and methods -- has in this book attempted to extend and deepen the conclusions of anti-psychiatry to the "normal" majority who have in one way or another "adapted" to a crazy world.

It is a book which is densely written, in almost a poetic prose, which tricks words to draw out deeper meanings. It is therefore a "difficult" book to read, but one which is well worth the effort.

It is essentially a study of the impact of the internalised family on personal relationships. The external family -- the impact of the nuclear family on its individual members and particularly on the mother and as a basic conservative force in society as a whole -- has been analysed at some depth by the theorists of women's liberation.

But the nuclear family is clearly not simply an external force on women, men and children. It is also internalised deeply into their whole being, until it becomes their being. This internalisation pervades all spheres of the internal and external life of human beings, including their personal relationships with those far removed from the immediate family.

It is within this framework that Cooper examines marriage, divorce, love, jealousy, greed, community living, death and madness, and the totality of human relationships.

These questions have been the subject of so many trite, romanticised books over the ages, that the reader might be excused for thinking that the real effort needed in understanding Cooper won't be worth the time.

Cooper however strips the romantic sentimentalism away and opens up the sores of non-comprehension and mysticism that fester beneath the surface in personal relationships. He opens the way to a real understanding of the dialectic of interpersonal communication, the politics of personal humanisation.

To try to summarise what he says is nearly impossible. But to attempt the impossible -- the first thing and the last thing is to find and form one's own self, freed from the self that has been formed in the family through childhood and adolescence, in marriage, and finally in the total work and social environment. That is difficult, hard work in self-analysis, for it is destructive of the self-image that you have adopted from others' images of yourself.

Crucial, for Cooper, in establishing one's own new self-identity is the ability to love oneself: "One can never love another person, until one can love oneself enough." (Page 38)*

From that emerges the possibility of a new type of human relationships in which one has no marriage, either formalised or informalised, but a series of relationships, including a well-worked out central two-person relationship, over time-spans, within a communal living arrangement.

Marriage is defined by Cooper in the following terms: "One of the worst fates of a two-person relationship -- and this is above all true of many marital relationships during most of their history -- is that the two people enter into a symbiotic relationship with each other so that each becomes the other's parasite, each becomes hidden inside the other's mind... In this way both... become invisible with the imperturbability and security of social invisibility. This is really happy marriage, the price being simply the disappearance of one's human being So that persons A and B disappear into a composite personal entity A-B." (pp. 49-50).

Such marriages for Cooper also apply within the family, between parents and child, between each parent and each child, between the child and the parents' marriage and among all members of the family as an entity. The loss of one's human being, if one ever had it to lose, is the essence of the family and marriage relationships throughout one's life, well after the other members of the family may be dead, thousands of miles away or never seen. The family remains internalised, and is oneself.

If after ridding oneself of the family and all the others one has glued pieces together to make oneself, we find we are left with an internal desert in which one must wander "alone in the wasteland, finding sustenance in the stone he sucks and the ash ingested by the pores of his skin. Then if he wants an oasis, he will form one between the mounds of his sand and the tears he secretes. Then he might invite another to come to him for sustenance and to sustain him. But he will always remain in his desert because this is his freedom. If one day he no longer needs his freedom..."
then this is his freedom also. But in any case the desert remains.” (p. 41.) That may not seem a “happy” prospect, but it is Cooper’s poetic prose at its best, and as his argument develops we see beyond “happiness.”

Happiness is not joy, and it is joy (“the ‘most liberating thing’ is always the most joyful”) that Cooper is talking about: “Joy comprehends despair running through an end-point of pain into joy again ... joy at one end, despair in the middle, and then again joy at the other.” (pp. 54-55). Happiness “always devolves on to security in some form, that is to say a deceptively comfortable restriction of one’s possibilities.’

So much for the attempt to do the impossible: summarise in a few lines the central thesis of Cooper’s book.

For those who find Cooper obscure, let them rest assured that the obscurity is within themselves.

The impression may arise from the above that Cooper is simply advocating a personal liberation, while ignoring the total revolution necessary if any person is to be really liberated.

His communes, based on such therapeutic work, would be Revolutionary Centres of Consciousness which “would take the form of anti-institutional spontaneous groupings of people who operate outside the formal bureaucratic structures of their factory, school, university ... and so on.” (p. 66).

“But things cannot rest at the level of rapidly spreading subversion from the micro-political base of personal liberation. The fulfilment of liberation comes only with effective macro-political action. So the Centres of Revolutionary Consciousness have also to become Red Bases... In other words, if bosses or university authorities make concessions, one demands and exacts more and more ‘concessions’ until they realise they have nothing to give in the first place. Then, having abolished that false family structure, all one has to do is to make sure it is not set up again... Or, again, one may show that bourgeois power structures are powerless, apart from the power we obediently invest them with, by arranging their disorganisation... Beyond this there are the more conventional tactics of strike and sit-in, but work on the micro-political level can rid these tactics of their economism, that is to say that in the first-world context it can never be simply a matter of more bread but more bread and much more reality.” (pp. 66-67).

That concept, although perhaps too schematised, fits into some living experience of the value of communal organisation as a base for political organisation.

Understanding the dialectical links between personal liberation and the more general and, on a mass level, more important, struggle for a total revolution, beginning with the overthrow of capitalism, has bedevilled marxist and revolutionary politics in recent times.

Women’s Liberation and Gay Liberation have their two extremes: those who see the solution solely in terms of personal liberation - defined often as their own individual liberation, and those who see these movements as simply having the potential of being mass movements around specified objectives such as abortion on request or homosexual law reform. For the latter, “personal liberation” is a petty-bourgeois luxury that “real” revolutionaries cannot afford.

More generally within the working class and Left movement, any suggestion of consciousness-raising in terms of personal liberation is almost an affront. “One’s personal life is one’s own business” -- which of course it is, but then personal liberation, to the extent it is possible, is also one’s own business, and involves a lot of hard work on yourself, with a little help from friends.

But in fact personal troubles do greatly, one way or another, affect more general revolutionary work. For one thing, intense political work makes a “normal,” “happy” family life almost impossible, and often imposes an extra oppression on women who find themselves willy-nilly in a support role of an even more extreme type than in a “normal” relationship.

The other extreme, of personal liberation as the be-all-and-end-all, is self-negating. Lacking a more general revolutionary and humanist framework in which to operate, it becomes circular, totally introverted, and solves nothing in terms of personal liberation.

Moreover, the pressures of external reality, of a capitalist and sexist society, on individuals is such that only by understanding the nature of that oppression in its totality and in its personalised form on oneself, and then fighting against it, can any form of personal liberation occur.

Communes have been quite a common phenomenon in recent years. But too often they have been an escape, a necessary escape from the nuclear family situation, into an attempt at “alternative life styles,” but have neglected the fact that it is not
much use simply dropping the trappings of the nuclear family, while each person carries it around in his or her head. It is not much use adopting the outward trappings of comradeship, of love for brothers and sisters in the commune, if there is no real contact of inner lives and if there is no knowledge of the other person, nor any help offered which is not in fact a demand for help.

Political communes, although much more effective as centres of revolutionary activity than the sum total of nuclear family units, fail unless the individuals in them love themselves enough to love others, unless the individuals in them open up and help each other to know each other, unless there is a lot of hard work on oneself and helping others to work on themselves. They must otherwise collapse through the sheer dynamics of non-communication in personal relations.

Externalised political groups, without communal living, of course have a longer life, because the personality of each is sunk in an external aim. But they are far less effective, and the human wastage in terms of individuals dropping out and in disruption to “normal” life is heavy.

It is in these terms that Cooper’s book offers a real alternative, which, if translated into concrete situations, can both aid one to be full of joy and at the same time a far more effective revolutionary.

Personal liberation in this sense must first of all be one’s work on one’s self. Then it must be within a group, preferably of friends who have done some work on themselves and with one who has done a great deal of such work on himself or herself. There must be some elemental mutual trust, which can be built on as time goes by, into tenderness then even love.

This presupposes a real study of the literature of women’s liberation, gay liberation and anti-psychiatry. But it is not a question of depersonalised, “theoretical” knowledge, but of its very personalised, concrete application to oneself. Then, one might take the liberty of working it out in terms of someone else.

It means women’s consciousness-raising work, men’s consciousness-raising work, gays’ consciousness-raising work, in their exclusive groups, then once that is done, getting together in mixed groups to test the results and take it even further.

It also supposes some mutual general revolutionary and marxist understanding of the total oppression we all face.

It means above all recognising, if at first not understanding, that we are oppressing ourselves and that we are oppressed by external forces and capitalist and sexist institutions.

On another level, much theoretical work, after a lot of practical experience, remains to be done on developing a synthesis of the theoretical work of women’s liberationists, gay liberationists (sadly lacking), anti-psychiatrists such as Laing and Cooper, the early work of Reich, and the rich body of marxist doctrine and its development in theories of workers’ control and self-management.

But because we, in the first world at least, are living in a period of total revolution, which includes all the multi-facet struggles against oppression covered by the theorists above, that synthesis is not only an interesting intellectual exercise, but one of urgent practical importance.

The attempt to develop such a synthesis may appear, and in fact in its early stages, eclectic. But we should not be frightened of the word, but be conscious of it. For any real synthesis will modify, deepen and sometimes invalidate much of the body of theory already developed, and give it all a further dimension.

Finally, while Cooper’s central thesis, contained mainly in the first three chapters in his book, is extremely important, there are still concepts and statements which I must disagree with, although with the caution that Cooper deserves such respect that that disagreement must only be tentative.

Cooper goes in for some Freudian elaboration on pre-natal influences, which he sometimes promotes to the main or major factor. I can’t agree with that.

Cooper’s analysis of gayness is incomplete, sometimes even derogatory, and although he speaks of the need for men and women to explore their homosexuality and love another of the same sex “enough,” he does not look at the question through the prism of gay experience. That is a big gap.

Politically, too often he has Guevarist overtones, a too ready identification, even if in metaphor, of the methods of struggle in the third world with those in the first world.

But to develop a critique of these aspects is a task that would have to be accomplished in another article. The point is to read Cooper critically (and that should be done with everyone) and to try to reach for the synthesis I’ve mentioned earlier.
The first thing is to read Cooper a few times however before rejecting anything. Then the job is to begin to apply what he writes.

* "To love oneself" does not mean for Cooper what it generally means in common parlance. The person who is generally described as "loving himself" hates himself. He loves what others think of him, or what he thinks they think of him. But perhaps it is really a question of him wanting others to think he is what he knows or thinks he is not, so that he can love what others think they know he is...

For Cooper, "to love oneself enough" means first to really love one's body for what it is, not what others see it as, and then to love oneself enough to love others, as described above.


This book, recommended by the financial press as a "Book for Businessmen," has little to offer workers.

It is an economic history of Australia of the most empirical sort, and when it does indulge in theory it is only in a hand-waving sort of way. Waterman is strong on statistics rather than theory, and the version of Keynesianism he gives in his second chapter is largely unrelated to the rest of the book. Waterman's method is to take a collection of 36 monthly time-series of data relating to the Australian economy and to investigate fluctuations in these indicators between 1948 and 1964. Eleven of these series relate to employment and unemployment, twelve to output and activity in the economy, and two other groups deal with banking and finance, and with international activity (imports, exports, emigration, etc.).

Not surprisingly, Waterman discovers that many of these indicators rise and fall together, and that their rates of change also exhibit regular fluctuations about different "trend-levels." Not content with simply talking about "peaks" and "troughs," he assigns eight different reference points to each cycle. The data shows four cycles or "episodes" for most of the indicators, and Waterman dates each of these episodes using these eight measures, carefully giving more weight to examples where the particular point (for example, a peak) is represented in a number of different series, and is definite when it does appear.

The first cycle, the "Korean War Episode," ran from November 1949 till December 1952, with a peak in June '51 and a trough in November '52. The second episode started in April 1954, went through a peak in June 1955, followed by a trough in June 1956 and ended in August of the same year. The third period, which is not as well defined as the other three, began in early 1957, reached a peak about October and fell away to a trough in July 1958. The last episode began in August 1959 and was associated with the land and stock market speculation of 1959 and 1960, reaching a peak in July of that year; the crash quickly followed as a "credit squeeze" accompanied by unemployment -- the trough was in July 1961.

Having dated these four cycles quite precisely, Waterman goes on to describe the sequence of events that occurred during each. From this, he makes the following conclusions:

"1. Each episode is unique.

"2. The behavior of the world economy was highly influential upon that of Australia throughout the whole of this period.

"3. Government policy of a disinflationary nature was nearly always directed not to the internal situation but to the balance of payments; and was therefore put into effect at times when the forces of contraction had already begun their work.

"4. Government policy directed to expansion was generally successful and well timed.

"5. The average rate of growth would not have been faster, but possibly slower, had fluctuations not occurred." (p. 204.)

We can recognise, interestingly enough, in two of his most "unorthodox" conclusions (2 and 5) familiar consequences of capitalist accumulation. The conventional bourgeois view is that the Australian capitalist class, in becoming less dependent on a few primary commodities that it must sell on the world market for its economic well-being, has gained some independence from world-wide capitalist fluctuations. The Marxian view, and the evidence, stresses the integration of world capitalism, not only through the commodity market, but also through the incessant profit-hungry wanderings of industrial and finance capital. Australia is very much subject to this process.

It is Waterman’s last conclusion, however, that is most provocative to bourgeois economists. In case it is thought that he is intentionally restating the Marxist thesis of recurrent crises of capitalism, we should note the reasons he gives for putting forward (tentatively) this "controversial" view; for example, in talking about the first episode, he says:

"Both boom and slump of the First Episode
were clearly to the advantage of the Australian economy. During the inflation, Australian costs finally returned to a pre-war relation with those of other major trading nations, and the upward pressure on prices from the cost ratio was at last relieved. Windfall profits in the farm sector were an important source of agricultural improvements in the 1950s. During the recession excess demand was banished, bottlenecks opened, redeployment of resources achieved, and labor discipline and industrial relations improved. From 1952/3 there was a noticeable acceleration in the rate of growth of productivity, much of which can be traced to the events of the previous two years.” (p. 212.)

And if the anti-working class thrust of these remarks is not obvious, he finishes up by saying “The alternation of expansion and contraction has probably afforded more opportunity to enterprise than would a long period of steady growth.” (p. 213.)

Thus Waterman concludes that capitalism in Australia has been, and of necessity has been, in a state of constant crisis. His “inflation” and “deflation” or “excess” and “insufficient” demand do not explain this process, and in the end recourse must be had to “business confidence” or more or less “sobriety in the business community.” While workers may ponder with amusement the call being made for us all to work (and to spend) so that the capitalists have confidence in their own ability to capitalistically employ their capital, we can go much further than Waterman in comprehending this process. Capitalism is in a state of constant crisis; it oscillates between expansion, which drives investments to a point where the profits demanded of them are no longer forthcoming (overproduction of capital and decline in the rate of profit), and contraction, (overproduction of commodities and scarcity of liquid funds). The crisis of overproduction, which is of course a crisis of realisation of surplus value (since there is no “overproduction” in terms of society’s real needs), leads to the ruin of some capitalists, but the consolidation of others. Labor costs are cut by dismissing less productive workers (hence unemployment in the slump) and by investment in labor-saving technology; the first process consolidates the slump by denying these workers the means to buy Department II commodities, the second begins the recovery by making possible the realisation of surplus in Department I commodities. New investment builds up, but the average rate of productivity of labor declines as the less productive workers are brought back into the factories again; expansion continues for a short time in the face of declining profits but ultimately confronts this barrier to continued capital utilisation. Falling profits point to an overproduction of capital; the cycle starts again but at a higher level of investment and a lower rate of expected profit.

This cycle of boom and bust is not an aberration of capitalist development, but its very nature. Waterman recognises this, and calls for fewer government attempts to regulate or “smooth” the fluctuations. Other sections of the capitalist class feel, on the other hand, that the cost—both political and economic of such non-intervention is too high. In the dispute over “capitalist planning” that is presently taking place, Waterman’s views fall on the “less planning” side, while for example the O.E.C.D.* report on Australia supports the other side. It seems clear that the Labor Government and the Liberal Opposition are both at the moment susceptible to this latter view, and so we expect to see attempts at maintaining a sort of continuous boom, and to hell with the inflation. How long this will be tolerated by the capitalist class depends on how much they fear the alternative, and on how successful integration of the working class into capitalist planning is. The first question will determine whether the capitalist will be satisfied with unspectacular but steady growth; the second question will determine whether this alternative is even open to them. The active participation of the working class and its organisations is necessary for capitalis planning; it is up to the working class then to question the very irrationality of having to make these sorts of decisions, and having to suffer the consequences of both boom and bust.

— Terry O’Shaughnessy