“Intriguingly (pun?), some of the most rigid authoritarians, the most bitter opponents of Mr. Duane were Communists. Roughly speaking, within the district, English Communists tended to oppose Mr. Duane, while foreign Communists (by which I do not mean Russian or Chinese; I never saw a Russian or Chinese in Islington) warmly supported him. But those Communists who opposed him did so in a much more organised way than any other of his opponents bar the L.C.C.”

There is no question of citing dates or places here, just a blanket accusation which Leila Berg's needs seem to demand.

Risinghill school was closed. Education suffered, the community suffered, W. M. Duane suffered and the children suffered, but what could have been a needed indictment and a handbook to prevent its recurrence is marred by authorial intrusion. Unlike Jonathan Kozol's Death at an Early Age (an objective yet human analysis of the segregated schools in Boston) Mrs. Berg's book fails because her polemics dominate the analysis.

Grant McGregor.


The period between 1780 and 1832 seemed to have been saturated with studies some years before the first publication of Thompson's book in 1963. So much takes place that it is reasonable to see this epoch as more influential than any other in the shaping of modern English history: the Industrial Revolution, the French wars, Romanticism, the French Revolution, Utilitarianism, the organisation of an independent America and the years leading up to the Reform Bill, Marx, Toynbee, the Webbs, the Hammonds, Dr. Dorothy George, Clapham, Bryant, Hobsbawn, Rogers, Ashton, Hayek and many more have been fatally attracted and in many cases equally fatally betrayed.

Being a period in which the modern class struggle was becoming clearly defined — the rise of the working classes, the consolidation of middle class power — it is especially open to biased interpretation. On one hand, the early historians who were also social reformers, Thorold Rogers, Toynbee and the Hammonds for instance, allowed their sympathy for the oppressed elements of the working classes to distort their historical perspective. On the other hand, there are historians like Professor Ashton whose more recent works read suspiciously like special pleading, who suggest that a certain amount of oppression is inevitable and justifiable and who go out of their way to defend the virtues of middle class capitalism. Somewhere off on a limb of his own is Arthur Bryant. His three books on the years between 1792 and 1822 are impressionistic, occasionally brilliant works, with a distinct propagandist intention. Patriotism, gentlemanship, sterling British soldiery, beef and John Bull; he does not evade the problem of working class suffering but he minimises it. His belief in British character, which in some ways is reminiscent of Thomas Arnold, leads him into suggesting that the legacy of the past has been well fulfilled in the future, that everything turned out for the best.

This is not Thompson's view, and while asking for complete objectivity from a historian is asking too much, it is necessary to point out the limitation of his bias. There is a slight but persistent undertone of anger. The working classes, Thompson maintains rightly, have been betrayed. In dealing with the early history of Radicalism he is necessarily dealing with oppres-
sion, persecution, political sabotage, exploitation, deprivation, and with the progress of a large part of the population whose political talents and aspirations were never allowed to fulfil their potential.

Establishment repressive measures were the equivalent of modern totalitarian oppression: emotionalism seems inevitable in surveying them. Fortunately the laws were always harsher than the way they were applied, as Thompson points out. The traditional civil right to be tried by jury often meant acquittal when twelve good men and true preferred this course to the ludicrous extremity of sending a minor pamphleteer to the gallows. And the trials also offered the kind of direct confrontation with the Establishment that working class politics at this time required. But Thompson's bias is evident when he is dealing with the agents of betrayal.

"Unless he had the knowledge of humanity of Dickens or Mayhew, the middle class man saw in every open palm the evidence of idleness and deceit."

Not quite true, one must say — or misleadingly put. Suggesting that any man had Dickens' knowledge of humanity is something of a rhetorical trick. Not all Victorians were willing to fill open palms but many were, in the name of a quite sincere humanitarian paternalism.

Two great new influences were making themselves felt at this time, Methodism and Utilitarianism. Methodism, with its authoritarian God and its belief that true virtue is rewarded in the afterlife, with its anti-revolutionary social doctrine, undoubtedly siphoned off a huge amount of political energy and Thompson is quite right in exposing the reactionary and algolagniac neuroses of many of its followers. But his attack on "apologists" and "fair-minded secularists trying to make allowances for a movement which they cannot understand" is pure polemic. In compensating for the usual fairy-tale attitude to Wesley's work he has moved so far the other way that he is unable to get back. That Methodism achieved a series of desperately needed social reforms at a time when reform seemed most impossible escapes him. Wesley's concern was with "the common people" and the difficulty is that Thompson resents this concern because it did not take the form that he himself would have liked. After the one-sidedness of Thompson's treatment it is ironical to reflect on the perfectly logical union that developed between secular socialism and non-conformist Christianity, which is represented today by Donald Soper and which was effected because both movements found their social aims were held in common.

A similar difficulty arises with his treatment of Utilitarianism, especially of Chadwick. As soon as he starts discussing him he slips into the use of emotionally loaded prose. Chadwick's English, he says, "may one day be as quaint as the thumbscrew and the stocks". He talks of "Chadwick's insane Instructional Circulars", of his attempted reforms as "perhaps the most sustained attempt to impose an ideological dogma, in defiance of the evidence of human need, in English history". This is all very well, but it suggests that G. M. Young's wry opinion is not only wrong, but blind.

"Born in 1800, in a Lancashire farm-house where the children were washed all over, every day, the mainspring of Chadwick's career seems to have been a desire to wash the people of England all over, every day, by administrative order. In practical capacity Chadwick was the greatest, in the character of his mind, in the machine-like simplicity of his ideas and the inexhaustible fertility of his applications, the most typical of the Bentha-
mite... He found England stinking. If he did not leave it sweet, the fault was certainly not his.”

(G. M. Young: *Victorian England*)

These two views are not incompatible. Young is humorous about Chadwick’s often repellant, theoretical, but highly organised mind, where Thompson sees it as an inhumane obsession. What Thompson does not say is that Chadwick and his associates alleviated the sufferings of a vast number of men and women at a point of time when it seemed unlikely that anyone was going to do anything. It was Utilitarian thinking and practice that set up administration at the level of competence at which reform becomes possible, the services, the committees and the invaluable Blue Books that were the first indication to a major part of the nineteenth century population of the true nature of industrial conditions. That this organisation virtually ensured middle-class domination for the remainder of the century is something that apparently concerns Thompson more than the very real achievements. Both Methodism and Utilitarianism are historical alternatives which might be called the lesser of two possible virtues. That they were relatively unsatisfactory alternatives leads Thompson into proclaiming that they were no good at all, and this is just not true.

But even Thompson’s limitations are healthy. The Methodist-Utilitarian myth badly needs puncturing and his work at least places the issue in an atmosphere of debate. When we come to consider his successes, criticism of even his most severe limitations becomes almost petty. Simply as a piece of documentation his work is astonishing. He has let the working classes speak for themselves and his use of previously unplumbed sources like the minutes of the corresponding Societies has rescued from an unjustified oblivion men like Thelwall, Gerrald, Gale Jones, Thomas Hardy, Richard Carlile, Maurice Margarot, Binns, Place, and many more.

Because Thompson never forgets the dynamics of class relationships, the demands of social, political, economic and traditional ties, his book has a still greater relevance. No class exists in a vacuum although the work of some historians would suggest that they sometimes do. Thompson’s examination of the working classes is a study of a period seen from one contemporary social position but handled with such fair judgement and with such painstaking care that it becomes a study of an entire age. Going further, it can be said that any study of the nineteenth century, in politics, literature, philosophy or social history, which pretends to any depth at all, must make use of this book. It is not so much useful as invaluable. It is essential in placing the Romantics, specifically Wordsworth and Blake, in their political contexts. His treatment of Paine seems to me to be the best work done on the subject, and his work on Cobbett, Burdett and Owen is nearly as good. It is not just an examination of Radicalism but of a whole complex of political and intellectual traditions, of Deism, free-thought, Shelleyan intellectualism, trade-unionism and ‘Chiliasm’, of “sober, constitutionally minded tradesmen and artisans”, and of the entrenched techniques of middle-class domination and oppression which have persisted right through into our own day.

What will probably stand as one of his finest successes is contained in the chapter on ‘Exploitation’ where he surveys all the major work that has been done on the period. Informed, cool, fair, he reveals his own and others’ prejudices.

“It is because alternative and irreconcilable views of human order — one based on mutuality, the other on competition — confronted each other be-
tween 1815 and 1850 that the historian today still feels the need to take sides.”

What is refreshing is that Thompson is honest enough to admit it, and one must say that it is wiser to err his way than to go the other. But as I have said, his limitations pale beside the quality of his successes. It is a magnificent book, organised in a logical and lucid way which is remarkable in a book of such size. The Penguin blurb describes it as “probably the greatest and most imaginative post-war work of English social history.” In this case, there is no reason to demur.

H. W. Browning

THE FIRST CIRCLE, by A. Solzhenitsyn. Collins and Harvill, 582pp, $5.35.

THE BRONZE STATUES of Stalin were melted down. He was daubed out of paintings, chipped out of mosaics, and picked out of tapestries following the revelation of the ‘personality cult’ at the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1956.

But despite the bewildering denunciations and removals of the outward trappings of the ‘Stalin era’, a full analysis of the phenomenon of mass repressions taking place in a socialist country was not really entered upon. The result was that the thaw was not complete, and the climate remained such that despite improvements, icy winds could still return to chill some area of Soviet society.

Literature was one such area, and Solzhenitsyn’s book The First Circle — itself an attempt to reveal and analyse some of the problems of Soviet society during the Stalin period — is one of the many works remaining unpublished in the USSR. (Such expressions as ‘Stalin era’ are inadequate to describe the period, but are used here for convenience.)

The First Circle introduces us to one of the extraordinary institutions of Stalinist repression. It is a prison de luxe — a walled and wired mansion at Mavrino, near Moscow, where political prisoners with scientific or technical qualifications work on special research projects on special orders from ‘The Boss’. At Mavrino the soup is thick and meaty, the blankets are woolly and the prison heated. But the memory of the frozen camps, the hunger, the unbearably hard labor and the physical brutality is strong. The threat of returning is ever-present.

But this is not the main point. It is the deprivation of human dignity, the inhuman relationships between people, and between prisoners and their work, which freeze the soul more than the Siberian frost. Although the action described in the book spans only three days, the reader is introduced to a wide range of characters. For the most part, the prisoners owe their scientific and technical qualifications to Soviet power, and they serve their country and people well. Their sentences have been incurred because of foolish outspokenness, indiscretion, mistakes, or for no reason at all. With an insight that seems remarkably authentic, Solzhenitsyn reveals their attitudes to the society which has used them in this tragic way.

Most tragic of all are the prisoners who maintain an aloof attitude because they believe Soviet society to be completely healthy. Traitors, saboteurs, slanderers and enemies of the people deserve what they got, but a mistake has been made in their own cases.

Barbed wire, brick walls, and elaborate security measures cannot insulate Mavrino from the society ‘outside’. The whole apparatus of investigation, prosecution, punishment, and forced labor pervades society through links visible and invisible. One is reminded of the words of Dostoyevsky in his Notes from a Dead House, based on ten years in