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## SOCIALISTS AND SOCIAL REFORMERS IN LATE VICTORIAN AND EDWARDIAN BRITAIN

*The making of British socialism.* By Mark Bevir. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011. Pp. xvi + 350. ISBN 9780691150833. £24.95.

*After Ruskin: the social and political legacies of a Victorian prophet, 1870–1920.* By Stuart Eagles. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. Pp. xii + 304. ISBN 9780199602414. £66.00.

There is virtually no sustained discussion of Ruskin in *The making of British socialism*, even in the sections where one would naturally expect to find him – on the moralization of the capitalist economy. *After Ruskin* does have a chapter on the labour movement and ethical socialism, but it is entitled ‘“Taken prisoner by his mortal enemies”?’. Despite the potential for overlap, these books are best seen as two pieces of a puzzle, opposite but complementary in their approach to the question of social reform in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Britain. *After Ruskin* is a narrowly focused and tightly integrated case study based on recent archival research; *British socialism* is a wide-ranging survey, composed (introductory and concluding chapters aside) of reprinted articles published over the course of three decades. The former engages primarily with institutional history and personal biography, leaving the wider intellectual context comparatively unelaborated; the latter, though it pays a good deal of attention to institutions and lives, is primarily an intellectual history – a series of evaluations of the ideas expressed in the written remains of significant individuals. Both benefit from an in-depth engagement with primary sources, evident in the richly detailed specificity of the individual chapters; both suffer from a tendency to generalization, which mars the supporting analytical frameworks, and from occasional infelicity or unevenness of structure, at the chapter, paragraph and sentence level, which some more editorial oversight would have remedied.

Bevir’s book comes at an opportune time. It has been more than a generation since Stanley Pierson embarked on a project of comparable breadth, attempting to map the multifarious nature of late nineteenth-century British socialism,<sup>1</sup> and Bevir signals his distance by insisting on the post-New Labour, post-financial crisis relevance of the book, and by dedicating an introductory chapter to a discussion of the ‘old’ and ‘new’ historiographies of socialism, their flaws, and how to transcend them. The ‘old’ historiography, according to Bevir, was deterministic and essentialist; it ‘privileged a teleological narrative of the

<sup>1</sup> Stanley Pierson, *Marxism and the origins of British socialism: the struggle for a new consciousness* (London, 1973), and *British socialists: the journey from fantasy to politics* (Cambridge, MA, 1979).

rise of the working class', focusing on such topics as 'class, production, unions, socialist parties, and the central state' (p. 5). It was undermined by the linguistic turn of the 1980s and 1990s, and the shift in emphasis from production to consumption, from the male working class to other voices, and from the socio-economic to the ideational. The 'new' historiography stresses identity politics and continuities with eighteenth-century republicanism and nineteenth-century radicalism. There is much that Bevir disapproves of in this new approach: it has no way of accounting for discontinuities, for what made British socialism historically distinctive; it is too fragmentary and lacks a 'general narrative' which could encompass, without expunging, the 'diversity and contingency' of socialism (p. 9); it either reifies language or retreats into a 'naïve empiricism' (p. 10), instead of admitting that 'agency is necessarily situated' (p. 11). Yet it is within the new historiography that his own methodology essentially belongs, for he too looks closely at 'written evidence . . . in order to recover people's beliefs' (p. 6).

Bevir chooses to retain the tripartite division of the late Victorian socialist scene into Marxists, Fabians, and ethical socialists that was popularized by Pierson, though he asserts that these categories 'arise from the self-understandings of late nineteenth-century British socialists' themselves (p. 15). Though he sometimes veers dangerously close to creating the impression that the three groups represent succeeding stages of development, the division is a pragmatically useful structuring device. In the first section on the Marxists, Bevir explores the transformation of the traditions of secularism, republican positivism, Tory radicalism, and romantic medievalism in the writings of the leaders of the Social Democratic Federation: E. B. Bax, H. M. Hyndman, and William Morris respectively. He also dedicates a chapter to the membership of the SDF, drawn from the radical London clubs and the European political diaspora. Bevir focuses especially on the role of the O'Brienites in the formation of the SDF, on the purist anti-parliamentarian (Socialist League) and Fabian schisms, and on the exact relation between Marx's economics and the economic thought of the main players in the Federation.

In the second section on the Fabians, Bevir introduces the traditions of liberal radicalism and evolutionary and ethical positivism, as well as neoclassical and marginal economics, and examines their adaptation to new versions of socialism by senior figures in the Fabian Society, most significantly Sidney Webb and G. B. Shaw. He is particularly perceptive on the differences between their economic theories, both abstract and moral and historical, and between their political strategies. Shaw's thinking is analysed in relation to the Marxism of the SDF, as well as anarchism, secularism, and the ideas of Henry George; and using Webb's early unpublished manuscripts, Bevir successfully challenges the stereotype of the Fabians as elitist utilitarian technocrats. He offers a salutary correction by placing Webb firmly among the reformist humanitarians of the late Victorian period, and traces the shift in his beliefs from 'moralization of the capitalist to collectivism', from abstract economics to 'evolutionary sociology'

(p. 183). The section concludes with an examination of the different versions of Fabian permeation and the leaders' varied responses to the fledgling Independent Labour Party.

The third section on ethical socialists is by its nature more diffuse, as it deals with a range of organizations and movements, which, according to Bevir, shared a number of characteristics. These movements' focus on 'the moral development of individuals [rather] than on economic or social reforms' (p. 217) was underpinned by an immanentist faith and an ethic of fellowship, and issued in 'experiments in personal regeneration and communal living' (p. 218). Bevir makes a persuasive case for the persistence of new immanentist forms of religious thinking within ethical socialism, arguing against the secularization theory that explains the various 'religious' manifestations of social reformism by the decline of traditional forms of faith. He begins by considering the similarities between immanentist ethical socialism and the liberal welfarism of the likes of T. H. Green, before going on to examine the influence of the American romanticism of Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman on British socialists, in particular, Thomas Davidson of the Fellowship of the New Life and Edward Carpenter and his followers (who receive a tantalizingly brief treatment). He then turns to the new 'ethical anarchism' (as distinguished from the 'old' Bakuninite anarchism of propaganda by the deed), here identified with the British followers of Kropotkin and Tolstoy. Bevir examines their role in sex reform and in communalist experiments, very briefly sketching the wider bohemian (or 'crank', as contemporaries would have said) milieu of which they were a part. The final chapter considers the Labour Church Movement, its 'antitheological doctrines' (p. 284), philanthropic activities, and ties with the ILP. Bevir explains the movement's decline by reference to the contradiction between its political and religious identities, each of which challenged and weakened the other.

Bevir concludes the book by analysing his three groups' attitude towards the state and towards independent labour – in fact, this is the first time he addresses the formation of the ILP on its own terms – and takes the story forward to the twentieth century. He ends with a brief tour of the Labour party, syndicalism, guild socialism, and the rise of 'modernism' (a concept imported from Bevir's other work which remains unintegrated here), bringing the story back full circle to recent neo-liberal developments and the contemporary relevance of alternative socialist traditions.

All the 'isms' in the foregoing summary, though inescapable, do point to an underlying problem: Bevir's language suffers from an excess of labelling, with historical processes often reduced to mechanical equations of cause and effect – 'Unitarianism' leads to 'immanentism' which leads to the 'religion of socialism'. Yet simultaneously he does an excellent job of showing that the traditional categories were neither 'monolithic nor stable', that the 'isms' were 'often in flux' (p. 196). Bevir's stated aims are to trace the modification of 'traditions' by agents in response to new 'dilemmas', and to understand late

nineteenth-century socialists 'in their own terms' (p. 14). Unfortunately, these two aims often prove incompatible, and in the search for a 'general narrative', Bevir ends up simply with generality. Sentences such as the following are all too frequent: 'ethical socialism arose as Victorian culture disintegrated into modernism – a collection of fragmented pieces lacking secure and accepted principles' (p. 256), and some variation on the assertion that 'The British socialist movement emerged as people from diverse traditions grappled with the crisis of faith and the collapse of classical political economy' (p. 131) recurs in virtually every section. Everything from the Webbs' evolutionary positivism and Shaw's theory of rent to John Trevor's immanentist theology and the new anarchists' ethic of fellowship is traced back to the decline of evangelicalism and liberal economics, and this compulsion, when summing up, to reduce everything to a knee-jerk 'reaction' is a disfiguring trait of the analysis. The same reification of mere words that Bevir skewers mercilessly in the introduction haunts the book from beginning to end. The 'crisis of faith' is surely nothing more than a convenient shorthand for a complex constellation of phenomena, as Bevir's concrete examples illustrate admirably, yet he still insists on repeating at every available opportunity the formula that so-and-so 'broke with earlier strands of liberal radicalism due to the crisis of faith and the collapse of classical economics' (p. 174), as if reiterating bullet-points in an undergraduate lecture. This gets us no closer to socialism as a lived experience, or to understanding the Victorians 'in their own terms'. Yet, despite the wearying refrain, the book as a whole demonstrates persuasively and meticulously that 'socialism is a fluid set of beliefs and practices that people are constantly making and remaking and in which no one idea or action has a fixed or necessary place' (p. 13), and it is a pity that the introductions and conclusions with their repeated mantras do not reflect the nuanced nature of the case-studies.

The book's other main weakness, largely due to its nature as a compilation of already published articles, is incompleteness.<sup>2</sup> Even in the chapters dedicated to individual figures, crucial elements are neglected, and the emphasis is often skewed. It is of course impossible to do justice to anyone's thought in the space of a single chapter, but the weakness of the chosen method is particularly evident in the treatment of William Morris, whose focus on daily activity is attributed to 'Protestantism' (another in a long catalogue of 'isms') without any proper biographical substantiation, and the complexity and evolution of whose thought on matters such as organization and party unity are ignored.

<sup>2</sup> Some recent scholarship remains unacknowledged, such as Ruth Livesey's *Socialism, sex, and the culture of aestheticism in Britain, 1880–1914* (Oxford, 2007), Michael Robertson's *Worshipping Walt: the Whitman disciples* (Princeton, NJ, 2008), the work of Vincent Geoghegan on socialism and religion, and of Caroline Sumpter and Deborah Mutch on the socialist periodical press, as well as some important books on key figures, such as Ruth Kinna's *William Morris: the art of socialism* (Cardiff, 2000). There is very sparse reference in the relevant sections to the large secondary literatures on late nineteenth-century communalism, anarchism, suffrage and New Woman writers.

The analysis of the philosophical and economic sources of, respectively, E. B. Bax's and G. B. Shaw's worldviews is superb, but underplays other elements in their thought which are arguably just as important.<sup>3</sup>

However, a bigger issue is the unexplained omission or glossing over of figures and organizations which a survey of 'the making of British socialism' with any claim to comprehensiveness cannot afford to leave out. One wishes for more on Scottish socialism, on the provincial figures active in the SDF and the Fabian Society, on Beatrice Webb and Christian socialists like Stewart Headlam. Other desiderata would include a separate chapter on the ILP, a more in-depth discussion of Kropotkin's actual theories in the chapter on ethical anarchism, and some stronger acknowledgement of other 'religious' initiatives such as the Socialist Sunday Schools, which emerged towards the end of Bevir's period, just as the Labour Churches were declining. Inexplicably, Robert Blatchford and the Clarion movement are referred to only briefly and in passing, although they are absolutely central to any discussion of the religion of socialism, of socialist educational, philanthropic and cultural activity, and of debates among ethical socialists about the effect of organization on socialism as a 'personal way of life'. In fact, the omission conceals a flaw in the argument, for it was entirely possible to subscribe to the values Bevir associates with immanentism without the requisite theological underpinning: the case of Blatchford surely shows that all ethical socialism cannot be reduced to an immanentist response to the crisis of faith. Furthermore, Blatchford was the foremost propagandist of the 'making socialists' approach, education in a new morality, the belief that social change depended on ethical transformation, and so on, yet he finds no place in Bevir's exposition of ethical socialism.

This third section is by far the most problematic. The chapter on the influence of American romanticism implies, through its omission of the wider context, that the idea of moral reform through education, back-to-the-land communes, simple life experimental schools, even interest in the religions of India, were all imported from America. Elsewhere, unwarranted elisions result in obvious self-contradiction, as when the claim that ethical socialists were mostly bohemian 'middle-class writers, journalists, and artists', primarily interested in 'experiments with unorthodox lifestyles' (p. 256) is followed by a chapter on the Labour Church Movement, in which nonconformist (and generally austere) 'lower-middle-class and upper-working-class males predominated' (p. 285). Certainly, both demographics produced their own kind of 'ethical socialism', but the distinctions are never examined explicitly, and the two case-studies are simply placed side by side under the aegis of 'ethical socialism' without explanation. The Labour Church chapter also perpetuates the dubious chronology of the 1890s, which sees an initial enthusiastic optimism about making socialists give way to a realistic focus on political party organization and a growing detachment from the workers. Recent scholarship

<sup>3</sup> See, for instance, James Alexander's *Shaw's controversial socialism* (Gainesville, FL, 2009).

has shown that this narrative is as misleading as Bevir's insistence that the ethical socialists subscribed to a cast-iron distinction between ethics and economics, emphasizing the former and neglecting the latter.<sup>4</sup>

Eagles's book addresses precisely this relationship between ethics and economics as viewed by Ruskin's many disciples and followers from the 1870s onwards. A sentence from Bevir's conclusion encapsulates the broadly progressive, cross-party attitude Eagles examines: 'Capitalism stood condemned for its failure to ground economics on an ethic of cooperative fellowship' (p. 302). The people doing the condemning were predominantly middle-class professionals, civic leaders, and businessmen, often (though not necessarily) Liberal, and in treating this group's engagement with social reform Eagles provides a useful counterpart to Bevir's account of the socialists. Eagles's study begins with an overview of Ruskin's own politics: an exercise which is particularly important given the wilful neglect of certain less palatable (from a Liberal or Labour point of view) aspects of Ruskin's thought by many of his followers. Ruskin's contempt for 'contemporary party politics and parliamentary democracy' (p. 27), his 'old-school Tory' belief in a hierarchical social order emerge as clearly as his advocacy of social harmony, his alternative understanding of political economy and work, his virulent anti-capitalism and support for state intervention.

Eagles argues that it was Ruskin's hands-on projects as much as his voluminous writings that inspired and motivated his disciples to social action, and the second chapter is accordingly dedicated to the Guild of St George, its origins and intentions, its Companions and its museum in Sheffield, its agricultural projects, and its fate after Ruskin's death. Equal attention is given to initiatives that were 'allied to' but outside of 'the formal structure of the Guild' (p. 70), such as the Langdale Linen Industry, the Keswick School, and many other endeavours to revive pre-industrial arts and crafts that were 'inspired and supported by Ruskin' (p. 77), such as C. R. Ashbee's Guild of Handicraft. The level of detail here, as elsewhere in the book, is impressive.

Eagles then moves on to consider another example of Ruskin's personal influence: his stints as Slade Professor in Oxford in the 1870s and 1880s, and in particular his (in)famous Hinksey road-digging project. Many of the (primarily Balliol) undergraduates who participated in the digging went on to occupy significant positions in British civil and political life. Arnold Toynbee was among the most enthusiastic, and through him, as well as some other 'Hinksey disciples' committed to public service, Ruskin's influence radiated outwards, especially to the University Settlement movement in London and Manchester. As with the Guild Companions, Eagles provides a finely textured biographical

<sup>4</sup> See, for instance, Logie Barrow and Ian Bullock, *Democratic ideas in the British labour movement, 1880-1914* (Cambridge, 1996); Kevin Manton, *Socialism and education in Britain, 1884-1902* (London, 2001); Anna Vaninskaya, *William Morris and the idea of community: romance, history and propaganda 1880-1914* (Edinburgh, 2010).

group portrait of the Hinksey participants, underlining their divergences from Ruskin's thought (as in their commitment to improving city life and reforming the industrial capitalist system, instead of rejecting them *in toto*, as Ruskin often advocated), as well as their debts to him. He then focuses on the constellation of influences which gave rise to Toynbee Hall – Benjamin Jowett, T. H. Green, Octavia Hill, and the Barnetts – emphasizing Ruskin's inspirational presence in its activities and publications, and via the personal connections of the many individuals involved in its running. Eagles concludes by tracing the fortunes of the Manchester Settlement, and T. C. Horsfall's associated Art Museum in Ancoats, directly inspired by Ruskin.

From the 'philanthropist seeking to do good through housing schemes and the exhibition of works of art' (p. 146), Eagles passes to a slightly different kind of middle-class Ruskinian, also dedicated to civic reform: the kind who chose to express his or her indebtedness to the Master by banding with fellow devotees into Ruskin Societies. Eagles traces the rise (in the late 1870s) and fall (by the time of World War I) of this network of institutions, making a case for their social and political significance, and their role in 'mediating Ruskin's message' to the wider society (p. 198). In what is probably the most original and superbly researched chapter of the book, he gives an overview of the societies' membership, activities, local campaigns and municipal interventions (e.g. in relation to sweated labour), their speakers and publications. A survey of the core and smaller branches, as well as the co-ordinating body, the Ruskin Union, is accompanied by biographies of leading members. The list of speakers is particularly impressive, including many prominent names in late Victorian and Edwardian culture, from Patrick Geddes to Michael Sadler, and from figures in the town planning and Garden City movement to Labour politicians.

It is at this point that the discussion shifts gears and moves from the middle to the working classes, from reformers to socialists, in order to assess the kind and degree of Ruskin's influence among the 'first generation of parliamentary representatives of Labour' (p. 204). This is a better-trodden field than the virgin domain of the Ruskin societies, but even here Eagles manages to provide some new insights. His contention that one of the reasons for the eventual decline of Ruskin's public influence was the adoption of many of his suggestions into the policies of the welfare state, as government took responsibility for the reforms shouldered by individuals and private institutions in the late Victorian period, gains credence from the testimonies analysed in this chapter. Unfortunately, the related claim that Ruskin's role as motivator and inspirer diminished because the labour movement shifted its focus from 'emotion' to the 'reality' of specific government policies (p. 228) ignores the presence of *realpolitik* in the earliest and the continued power of 'ethical' rhetoric in the later stages of the movement. Such assumptions of the 'old' historiography persist tenaciously despite the work of Barrow, Bullock, Manton, and others (see n. 4 above). Eagles also advances a number of other unwarranted claims here, usually generalizations from one or two examples about the nature of the wider



reader response: that Ruskin's 'apocalyptic vision of an industrial landscape perverting nature ... resonated with working-class readers', or that 'for those who had lived in poverty and worked in the factories and mills, Ruskin's was an authentic language of their lived experience' (p. 206). These broad assertions are hard to credit without significantly more evidence, as is the assumption that Ruskin's working-class audience was 'rebell[ing] against the same irrelevancies, cant, and hypocrisy' that he castigated in his attacks on 'orthodox' political economy (p. 207), or that his new 'politics concerned with communities and justice ... had an immediate and obvious appeal for hard-working family men' (p. 209). If Eagles does not quite demonstrate the significance of Ruskin's writings in awakening 'a new working-class political consciousness' (p. 210), he does persuasively delineate the enthusiasm for Ruskin shared by labour leaders from Tom Mann and Keir Hardie to Clement Attlee, and by selected rank-and-file ethical socialists of the Labour Churches and the ILP. Ruskin's vision of social justice and a moral economy, Eagles concludes, provided the perfect soil for the 'conservative' and 'insular roots of British Labourism' (p. 220), but though labour activists admired and often adopted his language, for Ruskin's real inheritors one has to look back to the milieu detailed in the first part of the book. Eagles's final chapter presents a biographical case-study of the most committed Ruskin disciple, J. H. Whitehouse, who was involved in most of the initiatives summarized above. Whitehouse also organized the 1919 Ruskin centenary celebrations, applied Ruskin's educational ideas in his 'pioneering Bembridge School' (p. 248), and continued single-handedly to champion Ruskin through decades of neglect until his own death in 1955, saving 'much invaluable Ruskiniana' and Ruskin's house Brantwood in the process (p. 261).

Eagles's book is not without its flaws. There is a tendency at times to overstate Ruskin's importance and the revolutionary nature of his writings. The case for particular individuals' indebtedness is convincingly made, but the case for the influence of Ruskinian institutions and projects in society at large remains open. Eagles argues that the 'true significance' of Ruskin's many 'doomed project[s]' was 'symbolic' (p. 121), his 'challenge' to the age 'entirely undiminished' by the failure of his 'practical scheme[s]' (p. 108), but the claim is usually supported by more general assertions. While it may be true that Ruskin inspired a hatred of 'ugly' industrialism, and created a new language of political economy, the long catalogue of his own and his disciples' practical undertakings that did not achieve their stated aims creates an overall impression of futility that is hard to dismiss.

The decision to focus so narrowly on Ruskin and his disciples brings other problems in its wake. One wishes for a clearer and more systematic overview of the activities of the university settlements, and of the publications of the Ruskin societies, which receive only cursory treatment, presumably through lack of space. More serious, though, is the lack of context for many parts of the discussion. The summary of Ruskin's thought offers no explanation of the discourses with which he was engaging – in particular what 'orthodox' political

economy actually was—just vague phrases about laissez-faire and industrial capitalism, about ‘a society suffocated by contemporary notions of utilitarian political economy’ (p. 81). Neither do we learn what the criticisms of Ruskin in the 1860s entailed, or receive a satisfactory account of the public turn from criticism to acceptance. We get to hear Ruskin’s side of the story, but no word is given to his enemies, or, surprisingly, to his friends. Fairly brief treatments of T. H. Green, Henry Acland, and some others aside, the narrative offers little acknowledgement of the numerous non-Ruskinian ‘progressive’ influences upon the men and women with whom it deals. The result is unfortunate. One can never be certain whether these people were engaging in social reform because they read Ruskin, as Eagles ultimately claims, or whether they were reading Ruskin and joining or forming the relevant organizations because they were the type of people interested in all aspects of social reform, the type of people who read Ruskin for the same reasons they read Carlyle and Morris. Furthermore, if Eagles’s grasp of the political history of the time, and of the interrelations between different political currents were a bit stronger, inaccurate statements about the ethical socialist reception of the ‘secular’, ‘doctrinal Marxist’ Morris (p. 216),<sup>5</sup> or generalizations about the ‘bureaucratic’ and ‘utilitarian’ Fabians could have been avoided. The ‘Organised Labour’ chapter in particular would have benefited from precisely the kind of thorough engagement with intellectual history that Bevir offers in his book. But in their weaknesses as well as in their strengths, these two studies are complementary, and put side by side they present a multifaceted and vivid portrait of the many varieties of social reformism in late Victorian and Edwardian Britain.

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<sup>5</sup> Far from being unable to ‘satisfy’ the ‘spiritual focus’ of the ethical socialists, Morris was one of the main sources of the ‘social gospel’ for ethical socialists of all kinds (p. 216), from the founders of the Socialist Sunday Schools, to ethical anarchists, to leaders of the ILP such as J. B. Glasier.