

**A RED SQUARE**

**William Ash**



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**The Autobiography of an  
Unconventional  
Revolutionary**



**WILLIAM ASH**



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### The Autobiography of an Unconventional Revolutionary

Born in Dallas, Texas, in 1917, the son of a handsome, strong-willed mother, and an almost classically unsuccessful travelling salesman, William Ash 'worked his way through college' at the University of Texas. Majoring in Classical Languages, he graduated with an Arts degree *summa cum laude* shortly before the beginning of the Second World War.

Late in 1939, he crossed the border into Canada and enlisted in the Royal Canadian Air Force for flying training. Passed out as a fighter pilot, he reached the UK shortly after the end of the Battle of Britain and flew his Spitfire on many defensive and offensive missions — including a fiasco of an attack on the German battleships *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau* — culminating in 'big wing' fighter sweeps over France, on one of which, in March 1942, he was shot down.

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On the run from the enemy, he was finally caught by the Gestapo, and twice sentenced to death before being 'rescued' by the Luftwaffe, and shipped off to his first *Stalag Luft*. He promptly attempted escape again — and again. The thought, and the act, of escape became his prime preoccupation for the rest of the war, and he was subsequently awarded the MBE for his escaping activities.

Demobilised back in England at the end of hostilities, he discovered that the act of 'taking the King's shilling' in 1939 had robbed him of his U.S. citizenship, and that he was now a stateless person, (even forbidden by law to ride a bike!) He became a naturalised Briton, and went to Balliol to read for another degree — in Philosophy, Politics and Economics — before getting himself a job in the BBC's overseas service, and finding himself suddenly posted as the Corporation's official representative to the Indian sub-continent.

Returned to England some four years later, and still on the staff of the BBC's External Services, he began to take an active part in left-wing 'Gutter Politics', frequently to the embarrassment of his employers. Consequently he soon found himself out of a job, and at about the same time the Communist Party refused him membership. A rare double!

Later, he was able to get work in the BBC's radio drama department as a script editor, but he never did enter the ranks of the Communist Party of Great Britain. Instead, he and others formed the Communist Party of Britain (Marxist-Leninist) and his association with it has taken him to China; to Paris as 'a secret agent'; and into close relationships with leading men and women of the Left all over the world.

Here is a lively and thoroughly different autobiography. Frequently very funny, always thought-provoking, it illumines the many facets of a most interesting man of our times.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

The 'Sixties were a very confusing period politically, and I like to think that simply by dint of being involved in practically everything, I contributed something to that general confusion.

The Soviet Union, as a result of internal changes in the relations of production by which the working class lost political power, was ceasing to be a socialist country and was reverting to a kind of a bureaucratic capitalism. Not only did this involve changes in the relations of the major world powers but it was also reflected in considerable turbulence inside communist parties and front organisations and liberation movements all over the world.

Socialism, betrayed in the USSR, was finding its voice in China and Albania and thus the two sides of the great debate between revisionism and Marxism-Leninism were delineated.

Albania was a tiny country, before the war the most backward in Europe, but its bitter experience with Yugoslavia, the first country all set for socialist advance to turn revisionist and sell out to imperialism, equipped the Albanian people to recognise and challenge the much more serious revisionism of the Soviet Union as soon as it appeared.

Not only did China assume the tasks of the world's leading

socialist country such as making the classics of Marxism-Leninism available in appropriate languages everywhere, and carrying out a crash exercise in developing science and technology so that the defection of the Soviet Union would not leave the socialist camp bereft of up-to-date industrial expertise, but also in devising the principles and practice of the proletarian culture revolution China seemed to provide the best guarantee against a repetition of the Soviet debacle.

As an example of the way these shifts and changes could affect individuals even on the edge of things, I was invited by the Soviet Union, where several of my novels had been popular, to attend a conference of writers who had fought in the anti-fascist war for the purpose of dedicating ourselves publicly to the maintenance of world peace. I decided to accept the invitation and use the occasion to challenge a world peace which conveniently ignored colonial wars.

The Soviet Union may have written off the struggles of the peoples against imperialism in order to declare themselves in on the nuclear club which was blackmailing the world into an acceptance of imperialist exploitation; but I did not see why I should pretend that it represented a world at peace.

I could see myself making quite a stir at some big banquet in Moscow, like one of those Bateman cartoons of the man who wore a plastic bow tie to the Haberdashers Ball; but my friends at the Chinese legation were very doubtful about this brilliant plan of mine.

'Did I not think that such a possibility might have occurred to the organisers of the conference and would they not know how to make use of the fact that I had been there without giving me any opportunity for sabotaging their efforts?'

I could not deny that they were probably right and in any case some literary hack in the CPGB must have tipped the Russians off that they had better be a little more exclusive

in their distribution of invitations and mine was withdrawn. And with it also went my last chance to cash in on the blocked roubles from my books.

The American journalist, Anna Louise Strong, who lived for a long time in the Soviet Union before making her home in Peking, solved that problem by publicly making over to the Vietnamese people for their struggle against US imperialism all her own blocked roubles; and, of course, the Soviet authorities could hardly refuse to hand this money over to the Vietnamese whom they were supposed to be helping.

Every communist party in the world was on the rack, stretched to breaking point as a result of the split in the world movement between revisionist-led Russia, on the one hand, and, on the other, the countries defending socialism, China and Albania. As the tension grew, splits in these parties, reflecting the split in the world movement, were bound to occur.

Sometimes individuals and small groups left the party or were expelled to drift about in a kind of political limbo till enough cohesion developed among them to form new parties. Sometimes a whole section left the old party with the express intention of forming anew, as when the engineering leader, Reg Birch, marched out of the CPGB with a coherent group of industrial workers to pick up whatever good elements there were among the floating anti-revisionists and founded the Communist Party of Britain (Marxist-Leninist).

In one case, New Zealand, the whole party under Wilcox's leadership swung over to what was called the Peking line and revisionist individuals and tiny groups had to drop out.

But the Provisional Committee for the formation of the CPGB (ML) was not set up till 1967 and its actual inauguration took place at Easter 1968. In the meanwhile there was considerable ferment and a lot of loose, free-wheeling political fragments hurtling about, like elements shooting off every which way when a nuclear entity is bombarded in a

cloud chamber.

One of the first individuals in Western Europe to start trying to collect these fragments into some kind of an organisation was a Belgian lawyer, Jacques G——, who, just to show how much confusion there was in those days, was quite possibly a Russian agent pretending to be Peking-orientated in order both to mislead those random elements and to render an account to the Kremlin of who the main dissidents were.

And, of course, among the detached elements themselves there were those who did not at all want a new party founded on correct Marxist-Leninist principles but were simply delighted to escape from any kind of party discipline whatsoever and enjoy an anarchic situation in which every man was his own world Marxist leader.

All those calling themselves communists, from the local councillors of some small north Italian town to guerrillas operating somewhere deep in a South American jungle, were subjected to this tremendous sorting out, and for a long period the opportunities for misunderstanding and for misleading, for making mistakes and for double-dealing were endless — till eventually time and social practice began to shake it all down into recognisable political forms again.

Similar transformations and reassessments were taking place in the anti-communist world as well. Russia, from being the number one subversive enemy of world capitalism, was becoming an imperialist rival no longer different in kind, either in tactics or strategy, from the US. That left China as the great socialist bogey threatening the very basis of world capitalism and suborning every liberation movement and resistance struggle from Vietnam to a students revolt at the LSE.

This was a bit hard on the Russian-language-based cold warriors at Bush House who knew no Chinese and had to go on for years pretending that nothing had happened and

Russia was still capitalism's main enemy. Since it was no more fantastic than their previous picture of the world had been, no one paid much attention.

In other broadcasting fields though a more serious attempt was made to grapple with the new political situation. At a conference on serial writing for BBC television, attended by a number of popular writers the final injunction was: 'And please, gentlemen, no more Russian villains. Chinese if you don't mind.'

The yellow peril was with us again, only it had turned red.

Harold Wilson's answer to young people protesting at the Labour Government's reactionary foreign policy, including full support for the US aggression in Vietnam, was to invite them to demonstrate outside the Chinese legation. 'They're the ones who're making all the trouble in the world.'

Eventually this sort of attitude did prompt some fascist hooligans with police protection to attack members of the Chinese diplomatic staff who did not behave in a particularly diplomatic way but gave rather better than they got, taking on the police as well.

A cordon was thrown around the Legation building and the place was practically under siege with members of staff and of the Chinese news agency, Hsinhua, being followed by the police every time they went outside to post a letter.

A group of us who regarded the Chinese as our good friends pushed our way through the police lines and insisted on our right to enter the Legation. Inside, a party was organised for us. We sang songs, made fraternal speeches and toasted in tiny glasses of mou-tai the Proletarian Cultural Revolution which was then at its height. The singing of the Internationale, which unites communists everywhere no matter what their own peculiar language and culture, was a moving experience.

Since I was working in Broadcasting House, only a stone's throw away if you happened to be a fascist hooligan, I used

to pop around to the Legation quite frequently for a bit of private siege-lifting, always going through the same procedure of being stopped by the police and asked what my name and business were and replying that I had no intention of telling them whereupon they, being rather better at names than I, stepped aside with a polite, 'You can go in, Mr. Ash.'

It had been at a Chinese Legation reception some years before that I had been introduced by one of the officials there to someone he assured me I would find politically congenial, Reg Birch, at that time still on the Executive Committee of the Communist Party of Great Britain and yet to become a member of the Executive Council of the Amalgamated Engineering Union. Reg Birch had been to China and Albania where he had talked to leaders and people and was probably the best informed man in Britain on the differences between revisionists and Marxist-Leninists. We became very good friends, in addition to establishing a political association which has lasted ever since.

Through Reg, I began to acquire a much firmer grounding in the British labour movement and, therefore, in the working class which was essential if I was ever to graduate from the writing of theoretical articles and the throwing of spontaneous punches into real political activity.

Otherwise I would go on demonstrating and marching around outside in the rain in support of this cause or that while the class enemy remained warm and dry and fat inside. The essence of politics was to reverse that situation and get *them* outside in the rain.

The only difficulty was that Reg, who could be very tough and loud indeed when the need arose, spoke very quietly when just the two of us were setting the world, and mainly Britain, to rights in our lunchtime meetings at, say, a wine bar in Camden Town. Very often I was not altogether sure what he had said to me about how I, in his opinion, ought to handle this situation or that and after lunch I would rush off in all

directions at once, hastily carrying out instructions I was not very clear about.

Another difficulty was that Reg, the horny-handed worker – and no AEU officials ever get very far away from their trade – knew a lot about wine as well as other aspects of cultivated living and I, the white collar employee, well, as white as London's atmosphere permits, was limited to being able, when the light was right, to tell red from white; but he was reasonably tolerant when it was my time to choose what went with our cheese sandwiches.

This was the basis for my understanding, before it became a principle of our Party's analysis of the class structure of Britain, that there were, in a country like ours where the polarisation capitalism brings about had gone on longer than anywhere else, only the two classes – capitalists and workers.

It was just that some workers, in addition to all the skills of their engineering craft, knew about wine and others knew about, well, they knew about – let's say they were not entirely ignorant of the way a long run of iambs can spoil a prose passage. There!

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Simply by virtue of belonging to everything, helping to organise practically every demonstration, contributing articles to most left-wing publications and acting as a kind of clearing house for the latest news of Marxist-Leninist organisations in India and the United States as well as in Britain and on the continent, I was inevitably amassing a good deal of information about individuals and groups all over the world during that confused period.

I made contact with obscure little bands proclaiming themselves new ML parties in various parts of Europe and got to know as friends many of the new leaders like Jacques Jurquet in France or Milt Rosen in the States. I knew that the editor of the English edition of one of the earliest continental magazines which was taking the Peking line, was working for the CIA and, indeed, during the war in Algeria while posing as a sympathiser with Algerian liberation had actually been working for the CIA and the Deuxieme Bureau at the same time.

I took representatives of the National Liberation Front of Vietnam to a meeting of the organisers of the Campaign for Vietnamese Liberation in London and when silly Trots denounced Ho Chi Minh as a Stalinist, as if that were a bad thing, I and the Vietnamese representatives walked out of the

meeting again.

I came to know that the Afro-Asian Journalists Association based in Jakarta was one of the most penetrated organisations in the world with CIA, KGB and the agents of half a dozen other countries falling all over each other. Then, after the tragic debacle in Indonesia with the massacre of thousands of communists, the AAJA with all its highly dubious elements was moved into Peking itself.

Whenever I became aware of the real allegiance of those posing as leaders and supporters of this or that liberation organisation, I passed this information to political friends in various countries. It must have been very annoying to somebody somewhere because pretty soon an attempt was made to discredit anything I had to say by the circulation of documents purporting to prove that I myself was working for the CIA. I pointed out that the fact that the worst thing they could think of saying about me was that I worked for them did not reflect on them very creditably; but in spite of anything I said progressive friends were beginning to eye me somewhat askance.

However there was one use I could make of this campaign against me: I applied at the US Embassy for a visa to pay a visit to friends and relations in Dallas, Texas. Usually it was very difficult for me to obtain a visa; but they could hardly turn down my application on the grounds of my subversive activities when they were pretending that I was a member in good standing of the CIA. A visa was granted without a hitch. Years later when I was in economic difficulties I wondered if I ought not to sue the CIA for back pay from the time they first claimed me as one of theirs.

And it was not only my associates who were getting a bit mixed up about who I really was, politically speaking. It was beginning to bother me a bit too. Sometimes, particularly in the morning when I first woke up, I would say to myself: 'Now let's get this straight. Your name is — hang

about, it's on the tip of my tongue — Oh yes, Bill Ash. You are a normal, fun-loving ex-American. But you are not on the CIA's pay-roll because there is not anywhere in this world so much as a single crumpled dollar bill that belongs to you. You support the Chinese Party and people because they are socialist; but you are not yourself Chinese because it takes you hours to get through a Chinese meal using chopsticks.

'You are British by naturalisation as well as inclination even if your accent places you somewhere in the middle of the Sargasso Sea. You are not, as certain BBC officials, security officers and members of the Keep Britain White movement claim, anti-British. You are anti-capitalist. And in so far as capitalism is destroying Britain, only anti-capitalists can genuinely claim to be pro-British.'

I could argue the case like that, but I did not always succeed in convincing myself. It sounded just a bit too plausible I sometimes thought.

This wide acquaintanceship with those on the Left in three or four continents did not mean that I had improved in my ability to recognise people by name or face. I spent a good deal of time in friendly banter with, to me, absolute strangers, hoping that sooner or later they would drop some hint as to where and in what context we had met. I got involved in highly conspiratorial conversations with the man who turned out to have rung my bell for no other reason than to read the gas meter and in off-hand rambling discussions about the weather with someone looking nervously over his shoulder and waiting frantically for me to hand him an important missive from comrades in some foreign land.

But there are names that come back to me from that time just to prove a wayward inconsistency against me even in my capacity to forget. There was the Bengali revolutionary leader, Charu Mazumdar, who was murdered in an Indian gaol, and there was Clint Jencks, El Palomino, who stayed

at my house when he was studying in London. Jencks had been the union leader in one of the longest strikes in the United States, at a silver mine in New Mexico which involved questions of racial discrimination against the predominantly Mexican work-force and also women's rights when the Mexican women revolted against a double repression. Clint was repeatedly beaten-up by company goons and played himself in the documentary film about the strike, "Salt of the Earth," which was made by some of the Hollywood Ten.

I got to know those members of the Hollywood Ten, like Lester Cole and Paul Jarrico, who drifted to Britain when they were black-listed in the States and could not work there. My own novel, *The Longest Way Round*, covers much the same period in a town not too unlike Dallas, Texas.

Lester Cole and Ring Lardner Junior were doing their year's imprisonment at a prison farm in New England when Parnell Thomas, chairman of the un-American Activities Committee which had sent them there, was sent to the same prison farm himself, having been caught embezzling the funds of the Committee. One day Ring Lardner Junior passed a barn where Thomas was shovelling manure. 'I see they've given you your old job back,' he said.

He and Lester Cole persuaded the warden that he could make a name for himself as one of the great liberal prison reformers of all time by allowing them to organise lectures and discussion groups in the evening as a contribution to the rehabilitation of the inmates.

The first lecture of the series was on "The Criminal and Society" and drew heavily on that section of *Theories of Surplus Value* where Marx, not too seriously, writes about the importance of the criminal to the capitalist system since without him there would be no locksmiths and much less insurance business and, except for the example of his incarceration, no real understanding and appreciation of property rights.

The prisoners got to thinking about this and decided that, such being their services to the system, instead of being locked-up and deprived, they ought to be granted considerably more freedom and material rewards by a grateful nation. It was also the last lecture of the series.

Of all the causes I became identified with during that period, the war in Vietnam claimed my most consistent and committed sympathy. It started very early because just after returning from India I was staying in lodgings over a cafe run by a Vietnamese and, together with young Vietnamese students, I used to watch films in the basement there of the struggle against the French whom the British had re-installed in Indo-China at the end of the war.

We celebrated the great victory of Dien Bien Phu with a feast of Vietnamese delicacies. As US invasion and occupation of a country whose people were determined to be free whatever the cost led to ever more insensate acts of savage brutality and an utter disregard for human life, so we in various parts of the world in our own way, which bears no comparison with what the Vietnamese themselves were doing, began to express our anger at such cruelty and inhumanity.

We established Vietnam committees all over the country, we staged and took part in talk-ins and teach-ins at which we challenged American spokesmen and the leading figures of the British government, whether Labour or Tory, since both whole-heartedly supported the US aggression.

I had never liked speaking in public, for I found facing a large audience quite intimidating and, while I could get through a set speech somehow or other, was quite incapable of thinking on my feet. It was one of the reasons I had become a writer who could think up the kinds of arguments the opposition would use and then work out in the study, with reference material at hand, the most elaborate and telling refutations.

But in these confrontations over the war in Vietnam it

occurred to me that the people and issues I was speaking and arguing about were so important and whether somebody called, as far as I could remember, Bill Ash, made a good personal impression or not so utterly insignificant that I largely got over my dread of the platform.

And sometimes, just as when, in a fight, I might get so angry as to use whatever experience I had in an inspired way, so in these debates against people who infuriated me with their smug equivocations I would surprise myself with the cogency of my arguments.

I believe Ranjana and I launched the first appeal in Britain for medical aid for Vietnam. Using some excellent film stock shot in Vietnam by Joris Ivens and writing a commentary which was spoken by Lindsay Anderson I put together a forty-five minute documentary called "The Threatening Sky" which had a great compliment paid to it by the staff of the US Embassy. Attending the first showing, they all got up in the middle and walked out of the cinema in a body. They missed the best part. Subsequently a dramatic representation of the suffering under attack, and the courageous determination to fight on, of the heroic Vietnamese people which I had pieced together out of the letters and personal accounts of those men, women and children engaged in the war was staged at the Unity Theatre with actors giving their time freely and Reggie Smith producing.

Much to my embarrassment I would occasionally get calls at my office in the BBC when some American voice would ask: 'Are you the man who helps deserters from the US army?,' and I would have to think what in the hell I was supposed to do about that. One of my proudest possessions is a gold medal with Ho Chi Minh's head on it given to me by Vietnamese friends.

It all led to a stint I did as a — well, I guess you would have to call it, for want of a better term, a secret agent? It happened this way. I had for some time, knowing my

incapacity for remembering the details I collected about who was working for whom, been in the habit of passing on this information as quickly as possible to those who would see that it got to Peking or Hanoi or wherever it would be of most use to the anti-imperialist cause.

I was asked to go to Paris to talk to somebody about supplying such information on a more regular basis, about finding out the answers to additional questions and about obtaining certain material from the States that it was hard for those having no diplomatic representation there to come by.

In Paris I met someone I had known for several years but who explained to me that I must try to think of him as someone I was just meeting for the first time since our relationship was going to be so different. I shall call him Johnny, though that was neither his real nor his assumed name, and I assured him that no new arrangement was necessary since I had always been perfectly willing to find out anything for them I could.

That was not exactly what they had in mind, Johnny told me. 'You see, we want you to work for us.'

I said that was exactly what I meant too: I was willing to work for them.

'Ah, but you don't work for us unless we pay you.'

I told him that it would be ridiculous for them to pay me when I should consider it an honour to provide anything they wanted for nothing. That worried Johnny because it was not covered by his instructions about setting up an organisation.

'You see,' he said, 'if others I recruit also insist on working for nothing I won't have any control over my own organisation, will I?'

We finally compromised on an agreement that they should pay my expenses for rather frequent visits to Paris.

Johnny was continuously trying to make our "relationship"

conform to some pattern in his mind which seemed to be a mixture of modern American films and ancient legends of his own land. Since there was very little change in the amount or quality of the information I was supplying I took it to be my main responsibility in the "new organisation" to try to live up to this mental image.

We used to meet for our lengthier exchanges and for the transference of material, none of which I was breaking any law in passing on to him, in the Luxembourg Gardens where normally the crowds of students, strolling citizens and playing children adequately masked our meeting.

But on wintry days, pouring with rain, two figures sitting together talking animatedly about something which involved the frequent passing back and forth of small plastic-wrapped parcels in gardens otherwise absolutely deserted must have looked a bit odd if not downright suspicious.

Once at 3 a.m. Johnny rang me at the little hotel near the Odéon which he had helped me choose, so cheap that there was no telephone in the room and I had to go all the way down to the cold foyer to take his call, only to tell me that he had just learned that this hotel was bugged.

'All right,' I said sleepily, 'I won't stay here again.' But that was not enough for him and so I promised to look for another hotel in the morning. Even that did not satisfy Johnny who thought I ought to leave at once. 'In the middle of the night?'

He pointed out that no one in our business would stay in an hotel he knew was bugged.

'But, I'm not saying anything anyone could listen to,' I protested — 'at least I wasn't till you rang me. There isn't even a telephone in my room. I'm standing here in the foyer shivering. If I'm not saying anything, if I don't even talk in my sleep, what possible difference does it make if the hotel *is* bugged?'

But Johnny thought there was a principle involved and in

the end I had to dress and pack and leave and wander around the pre-dawn Left Bank with a heavy suitcase looking for someplace where I could get a cup of coffee.

We were eating in an Algerian restaurant one day, it was part of Johnny's cover that we did not dine in restaurants of his land, when he assumed a look of carefully staged detachment, eyes cast ceilingward, fingers of one hand drumming idly on the table-top while I felt his other hand groping my knees under the table.

'Oh no,' I murmured to myself in a kind of humorous despair. 'Not that from you, Johnny.'

But he signalled to me elaborately with his eyes that I was to put my hand under the table too.

I did so and he tried to pass me an object wrapped in a copy of *Le Mond*, also cover no doubt, which I fumbled and dropped on the floor with a loud clatter. Both our heads ducked under the table at once where they collided with a dull thud. There lying on the floor was a pistol which we both reached for. Johnny retrieved it and straightened up again cradling it to his bosom. I straightened up too, banging my head on the table in the process.

'I'm not having that,' I told him. 'I'm not wandering around Paris at all hours of the night looking for unbugged hotels with a loaded revolver on me.'

Johnny shook his head. 'It's not loaded,' he said. 'It's very old and I got it very cheap. It may not even work.'

'No thanks,' I told him firmly.

'But in our business shouldn't you have something you can wave about to frighten off attackers?'

'There's my mastery of unarmed combat,' I pointed out, 'which they taught us in the airforce — in case things got so bad we had to grapple with German pilots hand to hand.' I did not try to explain to Johnny the substance of a remark George — or was it Frank? Coe made to us boys years ago in New Mexico when we asked him why he was still alive

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when so many others from the Billy the Kid era were not. 'I never made no move at all toward a gun,' he told us, 'lessen I was dead set on killing somebody.'

Toward the end of my career as an agent someone broke into Johnny's Paris flat and stole a list of his contacts, thus rendering me probably one of the most open and above board under-cover operators of our time.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

All the while, in between meetings and demonstrations, when not actively, for example, covering for a radical American journal the May-June '68 student uprising in Paris and, incidentally, dropping behind a running crowd to help a girl who had fallen and getting myself clobbered by a couple of C.S. heavies, and when not actually involved in writing books many of which would never see the light of day, I was getting on with the job of making a living.

By then I had spent so much time way out in left field a lot of people did not realise that I was still in the ball game. I met the Director General in a lift at Broadcasting House one morning and he said, amiably enough: 'I thought we got rid of you.' I answered as amiably: 'Close — but no cigar.'

In fact, though my status and salary in the BBC were considerably reduced, the work I was doing as a script editor in radio drama, discovering and fostering new playwrights, suited me better than anything else I had ever done in the Corporation. With hundreds of drama spots to fill in a medium no longer subjected to the same competitive pressures as television, stage and screen, it was possible to maintain standards of quiet excellence and to provide wholesome edifying dramatic entertainment which was fast disappearing elsewhere.

There was scope for encouraging the writing of plays I particularly liked – zany half-hour comedies with a wacky kind of innocence, or well-made plays at ninety minutes or more, emotionally involving and unobtrusively defending, deepening or getting fun out of certain fundamental human values. I could also sometimes commission the work of a writer with a masterly command of language and something worth saying like John Arden.

Compared with the pretentious, vicious rubbish, whether superficially of the left or right, which was offered the would-be *cognoscenti*, or with the flagrant pornography of sex and violence which was invading the media generally, we were a pleasant, cultivated backwater which influential people including the BBC middle and upper management did not bother about too much since it was, literally and figuratively, so little in the public eye.

I tended to exist in the interstices of capitalist society, and public service radio drama – the most non-commercial of all the arts – was itself an interstice in capitalism's cultural superstructure wherein I could function quite happily, frequently throwing out ropes, not very long ones it is true, to talented people buffeted by that senseless, brutal world and its unlovely artistic image blown up all around us.

There was great satisfaction in singling out a script arriving unheralded on my cluttered desk, whose bare top I do not believe I ever saw, which had that quality of good dramatic writing one could help the author shape into a good play to be offered to a first audience – an audience, mind you, of some million people which it would take over a year's run at the National to equal.

As far as my own writing was concerned – fortunately very different from the kind of writing I was judging and advising about – for every novel which was published, like *Ride a Paper Tiger* or *Take Off*, at least one other, like

*The Big Idea* or *But My Fist is Free* was not; and my own growing stack of rejection slips was the guarantee of a proper respect for and sympathy with the lonely and often frustrating task of writing.

After ten years of being primarily responsible for what went into the afternoon theatre drama spots I became aware that the crop of plays I was beginning to reap was to a considerable extent the fruit of the kinds of plays I had been sowing in earlier selections for broadcast. Since women predominated in this daytime audience, for quite a number of women the primary dramatic experience was the radio play and the talented among them took to this form of expression with the greatest freedom and assurance.

The nature of listening to radio plays in borrowed moments of quiet, and in an exclusive intimacy which shuts out the world more completely than any other form of artistic communication, makes it a particularly sympathetic medium for women who, on the whole, have to write in the same snatched moments of privacy hollowed out of hectic days.

Just at a time when women, anyway, were feeling under-represented in all the modes of expression there appeared this platform which they were peculiarly equipped to make their own.

I liked to imagine crowds of irate males angrily shaking their umbrellas outside my office because they thought I had been instrumental in introducing revolt in their homes and offices; and I am very pleased to think that I may have been of some service to such lovely writers as Jill Hyem, Jennifer Phillips, Liane Aukin, Gaie Houston, Rose Tremain, Tanith Lee, Rachel Billington, Gilly Fraser or Shirley Gee to name but one.

There is a sense in which an editor who handles something produced in creative agony out of another human being's life experience ought to be as delicate and careful as a heart surgeon. He has to be aware of the influence he is inevitably

having on other people just where they are most exposed and vulnerable. He is subject to the same kind of temptation as might occur to a mad scientist, taking this spinsterish woman submitting dessicated plays of purely academic interest and that ebullient young man sending in plays of great verve but no discipline and putting them together under laboratory conditions to breed a remarkable new play – not only dry as dust but also completely undisciplined!

There was this woman who lived somewhere in the Essex marshes and wrote very amusing plays, with dialogue something like Ivy Compton Burnet's, on the subject of a woman who was just about to, in the actual process of or cleaning up after, killing her husband. We broadcast quite a few of them and one day I lured her to London, told her how much we all liked her work and asked her if she thought she could write about something besides, significant as that theme was, mariticide. She returned to the Essex marshes and we never heard from her again.

Now if she was sublimating an intense desire to do her husband in by writing funny plays about it, then not only had I put an end to further brilliant works from her pen but also somewhere out there in the Essex marshes there is a six foot plot where the turf is a richer green, the undergrowth more wildly luxuriant for which I am directly responsible.

By and large I managed to keep my life fairly neatly compartmentalised. I never thought of the BBC as a conceivable outlet for my revolutionary views and considered that good political drama ought to deal with the feelings out of which specific political commitment sprang rather than with that commitment itself. At the same time I did not expect my political associates to be interested in the plays I chose for broadcasting. And I could not think of anybody in either camp who might be concerned with the novels I wrote, often apparently for my private amusement.

Sometimes, though, several of these separate worlds would

overlap in odd ways. A dame of the theatre – dame dropper! – had asked to talk to me about her son who, I immediately supposed, must have written a play which, simply because it had been turned down for stage, screen and television, had to be right for radio. But no; it turned out that he had got mixed up with some way-out lefties, William Reichists or something, and she thought that perhaps a solid, middle of the road revolutionary like myself might talk some sense into him.

There was I, fondly thinking of myself as a dangerous subversive when, really, I was your friendly neighbourhood Marxist-Leninist with whom you left the cat when you went away on holiday and who would keep an eye on the children and shake an admonitory finger at them if they got in with a bad crowd.

Far and away one of my favourite actors was Michael Spice who played me twice in radio adaptations of one of my first-person political adventure novels, achieving a credibility in the part which I have never managed. If I could have afforded it, I would have hired him to do me on a more or less permanent basis.

I thought very little of most of the senior people in the BBC who, like the people who float to the top in any large organisation, were mainly concerned with staying warm and cosy with the promise of a fat, inflation-adjusted pension on retirement. They were determined never to run the slightest risk on any question of principle of finding themselves in that cold, frightening, under-paid world outside where the artists, writers and actors, on whose creative talents their jobs ultimately depended, so precariously live.

Among my colleagues on the editing, production and studio managing side, however, were such admirable work-mates as Alfred Bradley, capable of a truly selfless devotion to the development and presentation of the work of others, or the beautiful and talented Kay Patrick, not only bringing

## A RED SQUARE

such sensitivity to the judging and producing of plays but realising the necessity of organising to defend jobs and conditions of work and to safeguard programme standards.

In spite of a constantly expanding body of administrators who for the most part could not organise a medium sized clambake, the programme staff maintain whatever cultural integrity the BBC has managed to preserve against the general corruption and degeneration of bourgeois society on its last legs.

In what I thought was my last year at the BBC, in the course of industrial action to secure comparable pay and conditions with such bodies as ITV, I addressed a packed meeting of central London staff and called for a campaign for the defence of public service broadcasting in Britain. There was unanimous support for the move, partly because it was suspected that some of our leaders could not have managed a strike in a match factory and partly because it was realised that only mass public backing could make BBC management stand up to the Government in demanding adequate pay and conditions for junior staff and an end to the use of financial pressure to keep the BBC subservient to Government influence.

The campaign was duly launched by the Association of Broadcasting Staff and a committee was formed consisting of a good proportion of the sort of self-seeking, would-be public figures I most despise, and not one genuine worker in the field of broadcasting.

Still, it helped my BBC workmates appreciate the social lesson that any institution working people create and do not keep a firm grip on themselves will always turn into a weapon which will be used against them. And there may yet be time for me to launch a campaign for the defeat of the campaign to defend public service broadcasting.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

In September 1967, Reg Birch called a meeting at Conway Hall of all those who felt that Britain had for long enough been a deprived country as far as having a genuine working class revolutionary party was concerned. He was uniquely entitled to issue this political summons because of his peculiar revolutionary insight, not entirely accounted for simply by a lifetime of working on the front line of production and fighting the employer in an organised way and struggling for many years on the Executive Committee of the CPGB to breathe a bit of proletarian militancy into that social democratic body.

In Britain, the oldest capitalised country with the oldest proletariat, where Marx had found in the social practice of the industrial working class the material out of which he wove the ideology of that class, it was fitting that from the ranks of skilled manual workers should have come a national Marxist-Leninist leader.

At the Conway Hall meeting a provisional committee was set up to establish a revolutionary party within a limited period of time. To the hard core of industrial workers, shop stewards and full time union officials who had followed Reg out of the revisionist CPGB were added all those from the confused mass of anti-revisionists, pro-Peking individuals

and grouplets, radical young people politically window-shopping and white collar employees beginning to realise that they also belonged to the working class, all who were sincere in wanting to see a revolutionary party of the Leninist type established in Britain.

A lot of them did not. Belonging to a tiny new revolutionary party in the oldest and most cunning capitalist country in the world was not exactly the prescription for a cushy number.

At Easter the following year the Communist Party of Britain (Marxist-Leninist) was founded. By the beginning of 1969 I was back in journalism again having started our Party newspaper *The Worker*.

The interesting thing about, taking a distinctively arbitrary step, like going off and joining a foreign airforce to fight in what at the time was somebody else's war at some point fairly early in life, is that it sets in train a whole series of decisions at junctions one would not ordinarily have arrived at which, cumulatively, take one further and further afield.

Not only does it introduce an agreeable element of novelty but it also provides some startling incongruities compared with a more usual line of development one might have taken instead – like that short story by Henry James, "*The Jolly Corner*", in which an American is haunted by the self he would have been if he had not gone to live in Europe as a young man.

Thus the son of a travelling salesman trying to sell women's hats in Texas, Oklahoma and Arkansas becomes the editor of a revolutionary paper for British Workers. But then the longer one lives, anyway, the longer the odds become against one's doing any particular thing; and it may be that life has to end when it usually does because no supernal computer of whatever capacity could go on coping with such astronomical improbabilities.

People may ask: 'How can a little party like yours make

a revolution in a country like Britain?'

The answer is simple.

'It can't and won't.'

The party does not make the revolution. The working class does – all those who have to sell their labour power to live and who make up at least ninety per cent of the population. Nothing done on behalf of or in the name of the working class will ever be anything but some new form of their exploitation. They have to liberate themselves.

Their party, which is of and for them and has no interests apart from theirs, helps to convince them that they have to do it themselves and helps them to organise for their revolutionary mission. The founding of the party is an act of conviction that ordinary working people will not indefinitely allow the world they made to be destroyed and themselves to be exploited by a selfish class of capitalists seeking only their own profit. It is a pledge that our children will not inherit a smoking ruin.

Recently a group of scientists was called together in the United States to forecast developments over the next twenty years. The prognostications were so gloomy they had to be suppressed. But their forecast was based on the continuation of an irrational and immoral system in which production is not geared to people's needs but to expectations of profit.

Socialism, the system of the future, has been established in this place or that by proletarian revolutions and it has worked – so well that enemies without and within have combined their efforts frantically to destroy it and restore some form of bureaucratic capitalism. And given a lack of vigilance on the part of the working masses these efforts, as in the Soviet Union, have for the time being prevailed, turning Russia into a competing imperialist power whose internal economy has lost its vigour and élan.

'But suppose,' you say, 'the British working class doesn't choose to make a revolution?' Well then you have nothing

to worry about – except massive unemployment, the destruction of Britain's industrial base, the erosion of the social services we have fought to establish and the certainty of the kind of war in which everybody loses but the capitalists.

That the conviction of those forming the party was shared was soon proved by the new members who joined and threw themselves energetically and enthusiastically into the hardest, unpaid labour in the world. Most of them are of course very young, in their twenties. The future is theirs. And there is nothing like joining together to overthrow the state for keeping young people out of mischief.

I consider myself exceptionally fortunate to have spent so much of my life, particularly the latter part of it, in the company of those who, in addition to earning a living like everyone else, and to organising themselves in their places of work to improve conditions and pay for their workmates, have also found the time and energy to devote to the selfless task of changing the world into a better place for generations yet to come.

In their dedication to the bringing about of such changes through the emancipation of working people everywhere, they are, in fact, changing themselves – changing themselves from narrow, egoistic, self-seeking people who, whatever material success they may achieve, have not, morally speaking, taken one step beyond the animal kingdom into true citizenship of the grand community of human beings with all their enormous co-operative potential.

As long as there are young people like that around, accounts of human nature in the oversimplified terms of a mechanically-materialist, pleasure-pain utilitarian, animal-behavioural motivation, which only serve to exonerate the selfish and mean-spirited, completely fall to the ground.

At the end of 1970 a delegation from our Party visited China, still at that time a closed book to most people in the West. We were met at Peking airport by Chou En-lai, already

Reg Birch's close friend, and a number of senior Party and State officials. We spent a week in the most intensive discussions about conditions in our two countries from the point of view of making or of preserving the revolution and the whole strategy of the cultural revolution was unfolded before us.

In spite of the enormous differences in size and state position of our two parties our conversations could not have been on a more fraternal and equal footing. After these mutual exchanges we visited factories and communes and saw other parts of China. I suppose padding along the top of the Great Wall of China is something every school child studying geography must wonder if he will ever do.

While we were in Peking I became good friends with a fellow writer, Yao Wen-yuan, whose criticisms of the use of the restorationist opposition was making of certain literary publications helped to spark off the cultural revolution. A few years later we met again in Albania where he was representing China at the Thirtieth Anniversary celebrations of Albanian liberation. By that time we had discovered that we not only believed in the same things but also laughed at the same things.

In 1969 I also paid my first visit to Albania to collect material for a book, *Pickaxe and Rifle*,\* written for the purpose of giving workers in Britain an idea of what life in a socialist country is like. I have made a number of trips to Albania, once as Party delegate to their VIth Party Congress. Always there is that heady sensation when visiting a socialist country of moving from a place of fixed graduations where one's own place is pretty low down on the scale to a place where one is on the best terms with everyone from the Head of State and senior members of the Political Bureau to the youngest worker in the tractor spare parts factory because they all have that kind of relationship with each other. Among my closest friends in Albania

are the writers, Dritero Agolli and Ismail Kadare. A radio adaptation of the latter's *The General of the Dead Army* I arranged to have broadcast by the BBC; but the former's excellent novel of the liberation war, *Commissar Memo*, is still unknown in the West.

Going to these countries where, because of ideas and values shared, one's disregarded books are published and one's political and philosophical views respectfully discussed with one's peers in university, central committee and government is the socialist equivalent of the escape of bourgeois dissidents from the bureaucratic capitalist countries of Russia and Eastern Europe to preach the gospel of individual liberty and selfishness in the lands where it originated.

I have mentioned that I am the same age as socialism in the world, having been born a few weeks after the October Revolution. When socialism and I were in about our thirty-third year, around 1950, with the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe and China all socialist and with Korea, Vietnam, the Philippines and Malaya all fighting anti-imperialism wars for the right to build socialist societies, it looked as though I might live to see the yoke of exploitation lifted from the backs of the majority of the world's population.

But progress was not to be so unswervingly straightforward. Some of the anti-imperialist wars lost their impetus and temporarily failed. Though, as I wrote of the struggle in Malaya in *Choice of Arms*: "I've lived and worked with those for whom a real purpose burned so high and bright that it never failed to illuminate both their goal and the only way to reach it, so that the two things were seen as really one."

"They fed that flame with their very being; they never stood in its light to become fascinated by their own shadows . . . Fighting for a better world is itself an end — something already accomplished, already beyond the reach of any attempt to destroy it.

"Whatever happens, no one will ever be able to put the

clock back to a time before they took up arms on behalf of an oppressed people. And when oppression has become a thing of the past, their struggle will be remembered as one heroic episode in that final victory."

And as well as failures to press anti-imperialist struggles through to real emancipation there have been vast defections from the socialist camp, great revolutions undone and requiring to be made again. Along with so many tremendous consequences of these huge changes I have found in the tiny sphere of my own political relationships this month's friends turned into next month's bitter enemies, further complicating a life already confused by failures to remember this person's face and that person's name among my closest associates.

But on the other hand, it could be said that the loss over the period of a few months of eight hundred million comrades, as has recently happened, does put in some perspective the fact that a pretty girl I smiled at the other morning, thinking she was my last-secretary-but-one, looked as though she might call a cop.

I believe the failure to defend a revolution once made — and thus to preserve the foundations of socialism once established — is connected with the nature of the original revolutionary commitment. Where it was the only alternative to starvation and imperialist enslavement, once economic well being and national independence were achieved there was a feeling that the revolution had done its job and a consequent slackening of zeal.

The cultural revolution was the attempt to change men's minds and hearts as profoundly as their economic and political conditions and thus to inspire them with the courage and determination to carry on toward full socialism and, eventually, communism.

But as Mao Tse-tung said, whether China would take the socialist or the capitalist road was not finally decided

and many cultural revolutions might be necessary. This is not, as some Trotskyists argue, an economic question from which we would have to conclude that poor countries are incapable of making a revolution. It is a moral question — a question of choosing a different system because it is more just and more humane as well as more beneficial in material ways.

The first working class in a highly industrialised country to make a revolution, not as part of a liberation war of national survival, not as the only alternative to grinding poverty, but because the working class judges socialism the better system and fights for it, will shed new light on this unresolved problem. That could well be the contribution the workers of Britain are to make to the ending of the exploitation of man by man.

My life, possibly because of that arbitrary step of voluntary enlistment which may have exaggerated my feeling that one chooses one's course with some degree of freedom, has inevitably been episodic, a whole new order of friendships and relationships coming into being with each radical alteration of direction.

I have even had the illusion sometimes that I was a volunteer in the class war!

The comrades I have had in each episode are like trophies marking the ebb and flow of a campaign on some vast field. The fact that if you collected together in one time and place such disparate characters as Pat Candler, Greer Taylor, Paul Burden, Paddy Barthropp, Evan Gibbon, Krishna Kripalani and Reg Birch they would have almost nothing in common but me is a pleasant reminder of my life's variety.

Along with geographic wanderings and changes in kind of work have gone intellectual divagations as various, though now I would consider as an entirely superfluous luxury any idea which did not take me where people are struggling for a better life.

If these last few pages seem rather solemn, boring and pontifical, it is probably the difficulty of knowing how to end an autobiography when one's life is still maundering on. As I once put the problem in *Right Side Up*: "Naturally, it would be hard to complete such a work while I was still alive and did not know how everything was going to come out in the end.

Had not some Greek or Roman, if it was not some Frenchman, once said that you could not really judge a man till you had seen how he died? Not that for any practical purposes it would be a judgement you could do much with — particularly if it were about yourself.

And yet, feeling a bit suicidal anyway, was there any valid reason, having decided how I was going to die — opening a vein while soaking in a hot bath would have a nice classical touch — why I should not finish my autobiography and then finish myself in exactly the same manner? None, except that the Ascot heater in the bathroom was not working."

My inability to remember names and faces has turned from a limitation which could be acutely embarrassing at times into a diffuse amiable glow in which everybody I see looks vaguely familiar. And everything that happens to me now also seems vaguely familiar, striking chords reverberant with something similar in the past and echoing with overtones like the sympathetic strings of a veena.

I suppose, looking back, I am most grateful that so many funny things have happened to me, or if they only seemed to be funny then I am grateful for that peculiar vision.

Human beings surrounded by a universe many sizes too big for them which they are only beginning, painstakingly, to understand are in a real Buster Keaton situation.

If that enormous incongruity strikes them as funny, their laughter is an absolutely new thing in the vast abyss of space and goes echoing among the nebulae with an entirely human significance.