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A View from the Foothills: the Diaries of Chris Mullin edited by Ruth Winstone¹

Review by Martin Farr²

It is one of the curiosities of political diaries that as popular publishing phenomena they are often in inverse proportion to the actual significance of the author. There were prominent trilogies by Alan Clark and Woodrow Wyatt portraying Conservatives at work and play; a substantial volume by Giles Radice fulfilling a similar role for Labour; another, Giles Brandreth, somewhat self-consciously surveyed the crumbling Major administration; straddling the Second World War, there were those of Chips Channon and Duff Cooper (which were published much later). It may be that only those really at one or more removes from the summit of actual power – in the foothills – have the perspective (and the time). There is also a party dimension. As a rule Tories are less regular diarists than their Labour opponents, of whom a much higher proportion had been academics or journalists. The Hughs Gaitskell and Dalton managed substantial journals, published posthumously; the Cabinets of Harold Wilson and James Callaghan will be illuminated forever by the holy trinity of diarists of British politics in the 1960s and 70s: Dick Crossman, Barbara Castle, and Tony Benn (the latter continuing his chronicle to the present day, where length is indeed in inverse proportion to significance). Crossman's were the first to be published, and occasioned a great debate about ethics: each of the trio could be exonerated by being published after their government had left office. Of those diarists close to the present Labour administration, Jonathan Powell and Robin Cook maintained a narrow subject remit, respectively Ireland and Iraq, whilst Alistair Campbell and David Blunkett excised anything that might embarrass their erstwhile colleagues. In Campbell's case, an unexpurgated version has been promised in the fullness of time, and Opposition.

At the time of Crossman, Michael Foot said that it was unethical for ministers to keep diaries, and certainly there are colleagues of Mullin who may feel betrayed, though only mildly and by the most couched revelations and asides; all may wait tentatively for the unexpurgated version Mullin has promised. Yet real offence is hard to imagine where regret is felt more strongly than revenge. The author palpably is a nice man. Almost unfeasibly nice if this self-critical volume is anything like accurate, characterised by a persistent grace, good humour, and sometimes general befuddlement quite unlike the professionalised cadres of modern Westminster politics. He is, above all, humane, and there is a very strong sense of pathos (a favourite adjective is "little"). What Mullin manages unusually to do is to connect the poetry of politics – serving as a tribune of the people – with the prose: the people themselves, the residents of a wretched inner-city constituency. It also goes some way to

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explaining his aversion to the graces and favours of high office – even a chauffeur, that most basic perk of office, is resisted.

It is through such struggles with the government car pool that *A View from the Foothills* serves as something of a guide to government; an updating of sorts of Gerald Kaufman's *How to be a Minister*. Certainly if Mullin was concerned with *How to be Influential* he would never have abandoned the chairmanship of a major select committee to be a junior minister in the first place. But he was too curious, too loyal to resist serving, and what he finds on the inside is a government that was as extemporised almost as much as it appeared to be from the outside. If the Blair ministries were too often triumphs of style over substance, it was nowhere more evident than in the conduct of government. The central, if usually fleeting, presence is 'The Man' himself, the Prime Minister, Tony Blair. It is here that the most serious criticisms might be made of Mullin the minister, indeed the member, but characteristically Mullin himself admits to it first: hero-worship. Charisma is hard to resist.

The last hero to be so regarded was a quite different Tony. Earlier in his political career, Mullin had been of the hard left, dubbed "Tony Benn's representative on earth", and yet far from besmirching his credentials in serving of a New Labour travesty of socialism, Mullin's trimming and evasions were not unlike those of Benn twenty-five years before. "Tony seems genuinely pleased by my elevation", Mullin reflects during party conference, "although privately he must be contemptuous" (28 September 1999). There is a striking moment, which if not marking a parting of the ways, at least points to the effect of experience on innocence. During the firemen's industrial dispute, when Benn, advocating a ludicrous wage claim, spouted "irrelevant, Socialist Worker-type guff", Mullin despairs. "I love him dearly but he's getting worse" (12 December 2002).

One Labour MP still happy to describe himself as a socialist, Mullin is therefore an internationalist (though one with a suspicion of the French), and has a deep distrust of America, something developed no doubt from a youthful perspective on Vietnam. It is an inclination justified by the political centrepiece of the diary: Iraq. Mullin had already resigned as a minister, and thrillingly describes the course of 18 March 2003 as a backbencher who voted against the war, despite repeated entreaties. Yet three months later and Mullin was back in office, an appointment suggesting either magnanimity or deviousness on the part of the Prime Minister. Perhaps it was neither, as the diaries provide further evidence that the Blair governments were grievously weakened by the ad hoc fashion in which the PM hired and fired. There are few better examples than Mullin as Minister for Africa, a post to which he was ideally suited and in which he was both widely liked and highly effective. The day after the 2005 election he is sacked for no apparent reason, and the diary ends.

The dropping of so sound a politician seems even less justifiable when the acuteness of his antennae is recognised. Were one to have read these diaries after the expenses scandal of the spring of 2009 one might have identified opportunistic editing, but this reviewer read them at the same time as parliamentary democracy appeared to be crumbling around him, and Mullin had predicted it all, both in the general and in the particular: in the climate of entitlement, and with the lightning rod for the storm, the speaker Michael Martin. When he stood for election, Mullin records "unease on our side as to whether Michael is up to it. 'The word from the clerks is that he isn't'". Confessing that the tribal tends to prevail, Mullin voted for Martin rather than the

Tory Sir George Young: “my heart overruled my head” (23 October 2000). Nine years later he could rue the fact, with the comfort of having been proved correct.

If, as with most worthwhile diaries, these deal with both the specific and the universal, they also demonstrate the greater value as historical sources of first-hand records over memoirs (Prescott’s own – *Prezza: Pulling no Punches* – surely marking the nadir of the form). Yet it is difficult to imagine a reader completing the volume in anything but a depressed state; for an opponent of the government because of the way in which affairs of state were conducted, and for a supporter of the government, because of the way in which affairs of state were conducted. Moreover, and too often for Mullin’s taste, decisions are taken with the cynically hysterical tabloid press in mind. The *Daily Mail* is undoubtedly one of the worst features of contemporary Britain, and Mullin condemns the “Harmsworth Lie Machine”, which makes it all the more interesting that he chose to serialise the diaries in the *Mail*, with exclusive photographs of beaming father and young daughters.

Mullin’s diaries – and the impact this volume has already had suggests that his plan for a published trilogy is likely to be fulfilled – recall those of the holy Labour trinity. Politically they incline with Benn’s, and are as full of the elisions of office and conscience; personally they are at one with Castle’s, and the blizzard of slights and doubts that ministerial life is heir to; and as a record of high office they revise Crossman in revealing the unworkings of modern government. For one who, for all his leader-worship, was singularly uncomfortable with New Labour and its doings, Chris Mullin has provided us with an invaluable record whilst at the same time ensuring that his bonds with Old Labour are those that posterity is most likely to remember.