

us to come to terms with the China that actually exists instead of a land of fantasy and to recognize the damage Mao caused in his last years.

*Chinese Shadows* must be read. Leys's more recent collection of essays, *Images brisées* (Paris, Robert Laffont), takes some of its points further, and is also well worth obtaining. Of course it would be quite wrong to accept uncritically everything Leys says; the last thing we need is yet another China orthodoxy. There are no comfortable and reliable general truths about that country, and given the wretched trickle of information, on most issues we can do little more than ask questions. □

**THE FABIANS, by Norman and Jeanne MacKenzie. Simon and Schuster, 446 pp., \$12.95.**

## The earnestness of being important

JOSEPH R. STROMBERG

IN THE FABIANS, NORMAN AND Jeanne MacKenzie chronicle the political and personal lives of the early Fabians from the founding of the society in 1884 to World War I. The three outstanding "Old Guard" Fabians, Sidney and Beatrice Webb, and George Bernard Shaw, gradually come to dominate the text, just as they dominated Fabianism. A wealth of anecdotal material on the Webbs, Shaw, and others makes for interesting and easy reading of this longish book. Although at times the historical context recedes into a backdrop, the authors generally hold a nice balance between biography and history. Indeed, they almost arm-twist one into sympathizing with these social engineers and rather constipated Victorian hippies, including the overserious Webbs and the brilliantly erratic Shaw.

The Victorian consensus was crumbling when the Fabian Society was formed. The great Gladstonian Liberal Party divided internally, eventually coming to grief over "social reform," tariffs, imperialism, and Ireland. Socialist ideas were in the air—those of Comte, Marx, Ruskin, and Morris—and activists called for a new labor poli-

tics. It was an age of Social Imperialism, a key concept that the MacKenzies don't explore.

Social Imperialism, not only in England, but in Germany, France, and elsewhere in those pre-1914 days, was a means by which paternalists of both Left and Right sought to reorder domestic society and sustain Empire abroad. The Fabians were right in the middle of the Social Imperialist trend and hoped to be its British brain trust. The first Fabians were mostly civil servants and unsuccessful businessmen whose dislike of trade went together with a belief in the saving mission of government experts. Their ideas, temperaments, and backgrounds ideally suited them for the self-appointed task of achieving maximum "National Efficiency."

The MacKenzies lay considerable stress on the religious background of the leading Fabians, who tended to come from evangelical homes. When they abandoned religion in the face of science, evolution, and Darwin, their inherited moralism sought secular outlets such as positivism, which in turn readied them for authoritarian socialism. The sad turn of latter-day Benthamite Radicalism toward the positive state was another influence. The conception of society finally generated by Benthamism and positivism was surprisingly unsophisticated. Society was a machine, it seemed, and the experts, armed with factual data, would do good by using the state to better align the machine's parts.

Social engineering was the Fabian way. Their attitude toward poverty was characteristic. The state was a benign, neutral tool to be used to eliminate poverty as soon as the "studies" demonstrated the best line of attack. That the state with its wars, taxes, regulations, and restrictions on trade could have something to do with causing poverty never occurred to the Fabians. At an earlier time, Radicals like Richard Cobden and John Bright—autodidactic businessmen who had a shrewd idea of how society really works—would have made such a connection. But if the Fabians agreed totally on any one thing it was the abandonment of classical liberalism and the earthbound business ethos at home and abroad.

THE FABIANS' PRACTICAL POLITICS reflected their elitism. Disdainful also of the working-class activists of the trade unions and embryonic socialist parties, they sought to reform England through "permeation," working with and influencing people and parties already in power or likely to get there. There is an amusing side to the MacKenzies' account of permeation, an endless round of tedious, self-sacrificing dinner parties, meetings, and discussions, which ended in general failure when the Fabians repeatedly bet on the wrong set of politicians. Ultimately, the Fabians found themselves the brain trust of a Labour Party they had never especially cared for.

The Fabians' chief success lay in the

long-run influence of their ideas and programs, which were an internally consistent set of piecemeal reforms all going in the direction of state interference with every aspect of life. The "National Minimum," "National Efficiency," and—most significant—an "Imperial Race" were slogans underlining Fabian concern with order and power. Within the society itself, the Old Guard considered their top-down leadership perfectly natural. The MacKenzies show that this was the case, but unlike, for instance, Josephine Fishel Milburn, another student of Fabianism, they show little concern that the Webbs' domination drove out too many potential leaders.

THE LONDON SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS also enhanced the Fabians' prestige. Financed by a legacy from a wealthy member of the society, and with a subsidy from the London County Council (engineered by Sidney Webb, who served on it), the school became a world-famous center of research and thinking. Sidney Webb, the driving force behind the school, clearly understood the importance of winning the intellectuals over to the Fabian *Weltanschauung*.

Up to his neck in clever paradoxes, George Bernard Shaw carried on the war of ideas in his many plays. Mixing evolution, socialism, and Nietzsche, Shaw promoted the idea of the socialist Superman who would *force* society to develop in the most favorable direction. His embarrassing defense of Italian fascism and Mussolini followed logically from his Fabian views, as did the Webbs' elaborate apologies for Stalinism. Shaw's advocacy of (for those days) radical views on sex and marriage highlights one of the paradoxes that *The Fabians* brings out. As a group, the Fabians tended to the individualistic and sexually irregular (whether in the direction of promiscuity or celibacy didn't seem to matter). Yet, intent as they were on tightly restricting liberty, they believed in such freedom only for the superior elite. It was Shaw, too, who shocked even fellow Fabians by defending the odious Boer War, on the ground that small states were just in the way. For Shaw and the Webbs, larger units of power were better than smaller ones any day.

That the major bias of the Fabians was toward authoritarian measures is illustrated by Beatrice Webb's suggestion in her famous *Minority Report to the Poor Law Commission* that "industrial malingers" be sent to severe detention colonies if they declined to work (as it turned out, she was never one to gag on Gulag). Her favorable evaluation of Mormon polygamy likewise rested on grounds not, say, of religious liberty, but on the fact that here had been the possibility of a marvelous experiment in eugenics—the breeding of a superior race. Throughout the entire Fabian worldview, leaving people alone was the one option they never deemed to consider, much less the notion that people had a *natural right* to be left alone. Hilaire Belloc was surely on target when he wrote

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that such reformers would only bring about a servile state.

The great radical individualist thinker Auberon Herbert once told Beatrice that she and Sidney would “do a lot of harm and be happy doing it.” Truer words were never spoken. Part of the evidence is the admission by Beatrice Webb, spoken sheepishly (one hopes), toward the end: “Old people,” she said, “often fall in love in extraordinary and ridiculous ways—with their chauffeurs, for instance: We felt it more dignified to have fallen in love with Soviet Communism.”

*More dignified.* The words speak volumes on the bent Fabian view of what political struggle, love, and human dignity are all about. □

**THE WAY OF DISCOVERY:  
An Introduction to the  
Thought of Michael Polanyi,  
by Richard Gelwick. Oxford  
University Press, 200 pp.,  
\$12.95.**

## Estimating Polanyi

ALAN RYAN

IT IS ALMOST AS TEMPTING TO describe Michael Polanyi as one of the most overestimated thinkers of recent years as it is to describe him as one of the most underestimated thinkers of our time. It is, of course, hard to see how one could overestimate the talents of a man who had a strikingly successful career in physical chemistry, in Budapest, Berlin, and Manchester; who, even while holding a chair in chemistry, had become a very considerable authority on the social and economic organization of the Soviet Union; and who embarked on a second career as philosopher of science, social theorist (where his major work was *The Logic of Liberty*), and architect of a new metaphysics.

In his second career—which the University of Manchester recognized by giving him a personal chair in social theory in 1948, but which he had been nourishing since the 1920s—Polanyi tackled some of the most intractable issues in all these varied fields. What connection is there between the practice of science and the maintenance of a free society? Is it an

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accident that the way in which scientific research is usually written up systematically misreports the processes by which scientists come to their discoveries? Does science somehow show that men are merely elaborate physico-chemical systems—or that they are so elaborate that it is a sort of superstition to think of them as merely anything? Is it an inescapable conclusion of the march of science that the universe is a cold, unfeeling, unhomelike place, in which humanity just happens to have found a temporary niche?

In more overtly political contexts, Polanyi was deeply concerned with phenomena that are by any standard extraordinary: Why was it that Marxism, when put into practice as the ideology of Stalinist Russia, derided all talk of morality as mere bourgeois mystification, and yet called on the fanatical loyalty of its adherents, who employed the most old-fashioned and unabashed moral terminology in denouncing, for instance, the treachery of Trotskyist wreckers. And how did Nazism come to persuade ordinary, decent men actively to assist in administering a system of mass extermination? How, for that matter, did a man like Himmler, who was taken ill when he forced himself to witness one of the mass executions he had ordered, still follow a policy that was a mixture of the deepest moral cynicism and the extremest moral fanaticism?

At a rather more everyday level, too, Polanyi constantly chewed over the familiar liberal problems: A society without ideals was intolerable, and a society that tried to realize all its ideals immediately was sure to degenerate into terrorism. But how can we live with the knowledge that we must pursue our ideals, yet always in a spirit of moderation, and in the knowledge that they may be forever unattainable? Again, the liberal requires the rule of law and demands legal safeguards, yet liberalism deplores inequalities of power and does not share the conservative assumption that whatever is well entrenched is best. Must liberals, then, put up with the fact that the defense of freedom will have conservative consequences? In *Personal Knowledge*, Polanyi reluctantly concludes that they must.

RICHARD GELWICK'S LITTLE book is an addition to the evidence that, in some quarters at least, Polanyi is not only too highly regarded, but treated with the reverence due to beings higher than mere men. Gelwick is an illuminating and generally lucid guide to what is distinctive in Polanyi's understanding of the history and methodology of science; he is at any rate interesting, though to my mind both long-winded and ultimately obscure, in his account of what Polanyi meant by “tacit knowing” and what his “heuristic philosophy” amounted to; and he has certainly provided a useful introductory book for anyone who is curious about Polanyi. It's hard to imagine any of his readers putting down *The Way of Discovery* without at least

some desire to read Polanyi's *Personal Knowledge*, or the shorter lectures collected in *Science, Faith and Society* and *The Study of Man*. Nonetheless, I fear that the moderately skeptical reader will end the book quite as doubtful as when he started—with science and religion unreconciled, with the contrast between the world's brute factuality and humanity's evaluation of it quite as stark as ever. The messianic tone that sometimes creeps into Polanyi's work, and the hagiographic style of Richard Gelwick's introduction to it, are likely between them to send the skeptic scurrying back to the agnosticism of Hume, Mill, and Russell.

Still, it would be a pity if that was all. For Polanyi set out to do something very worthwhile in his account of the social implica-

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tions of scientific inquiry. The orthodoxy of recent years has been to contrast the psychological conditions of discovery—which are an empirical question of the sort of mental set that assists its possessor to spot workable and elegant theories—with the logical requirements of verifying or falsifying what the scientist claims to be true. Polanyi closes this gap, a gap on which the work of Karl Popper is, so to speak, built, by claiming that science would simply be unintelligible as an activity if scientists did not bring all sorts of skills, all sorts of assumptions, and all sorts of epistemological, ontological, and even moral commitments to the task of discovery. Science is a matter of finding a rational order in the world; we find it only by being passionately committed to its presence; the finding is a personal achievement of a highly skilled kind. The claim that its presence is a characteristic of reality in itself is not entirely intelligible, since that reality is unknown, and yet the assumption must be made that it is the rational structure of reality that we discover, and that genuine discovery is valid for all inquirers, not just the man who happens to make it.

These assumptions are sustained by the scientist's membership in a community of like-minded explorers. Unlike Thomas Kuhn, the most famous of Sir Karl Popper's critics, whose account of scientific progress makes the scientific community look like a