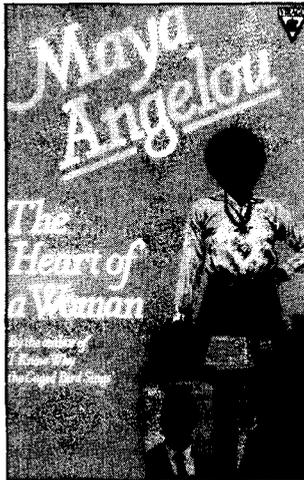


## A Talent to Inspire

### The Heart of a Woman

Maya Angelou  
Virago, £3.95 pbk



The unprecedented explosion of writings by African-American women in recent years tends to obscure the fact that black women were writing well before the advent of the women's movement in the 1970s. There exists a rich and myriad body of literature which begins with the slave narratives of outstanding women such as Phyllis Wheatly and Sojourner Truth and extends through the years to 20th century writers like Zora Neal Hurston, Nella Larsen, Ida B Wells and Gwendolyn Brooks.

While much of their work still remains hidden, they are the indisputable foremothers to the present genre of autobiographical writings amongst black women. Their books provide invaluable insights into black women's search for selfhood and signal the historical contexts of their lives.

Fortunately contemporary black women writers such as Audre Lorde, Alice Walker and Maya Angelou have not had to wait too long to see their writings published. Indeed they are rapidly becoming household names in Britain where the indigenous black community is eager for literary and cultural works which reflect their struggles imaginatively. Coupled with

the growing vogue amongst publishers to add black women writers to their lists, it is fast proving to be a good commercial venture to market such books. Whatever the motive, such mass access to black women's writings is welcome.

Maya Angelou is one writer whose books have become rapid bestsellers in Britain. It would be somewhat of an understatement to call it a rare and unique achievement to have written four volumes of one's autobiography while still only in your fifties. But when that individual is a black woman who has lived the life that Maya Angelou has, then such an achievement can only be described as an extraordinary feat.

Maya Angelou began her literary career as a poet. When she was asked by Robert Loomis at Random House to write her autobiography, she refused. It was only when he said that he thought writing an autobiography as literature was the most difficult thing anyone could do, that she rose to the challenge. Since then, she has gone on to write four enthralling and awe-inspiring volumes of her autobiography.

Born in 1928 in St Louis, Missouri, Maya Angelou has had many careers and lived through exciting and revolutionary times, many of which are brilliantly recorded in these books. In *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969), she recalls her bruised childhood, when at the age of three she goes to live with her grandmother in a small southern town. It is the story of girlhood maimed by the experience of rape at the age of eight. At 16 she gets pregnant and gives birth to her son Guy.

The second book, *Gather Together In My Name* (1974), vividly traces her courageous struggle as an unemployed and isolated single parent, briefly forced through circumstances to turn to prostitution and drugs. *Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin' Merry Like Christmas* (1976), her third book, describes Maya's stage

debut, concluding with her return from the international tour of *Porgy and Bess* in which she was a featured dancer.

Maya Angelou lives her life with the energy of a tornado, resiliently struggling for self-affirmation and self-definition. In the face of appalling discrimination she retains her humour and optimism. These books chronicle and interpret Angelou's engagement with racist America as much as her struggle as a woman, a writer, an actress and a mother.

She continues to weave the emotionally rich and moving tapestry of her life in her fourth book, *The Heart of a Woman*, which Virago launched in September. This book sees Maya maturing into a writer and a full-time political activist who feels at ease with her success and creativity. The time is the 1950s and 60s and the book begins with Maya in Los Angeles going to live in Laurel Canyon (the official residential area of Hollywood), despite the efforts of a racist landlord who refuses to rent her the house. It is here that the legendary Billie Holiday visits and gets to know Maya and her son.

Mother and son are soon on the move again, this time to a neighbourhood 'where black skin was not regarded as one of nature's more unsightly mistakes'. She begins writing but feels restless and decides to move to New York where she survives her baptism into the Harlem Writers Group.

In the awakening summer of 1960, Angelou is fired with enthusiasm after hearing Martin Luther King speak. She organises a fund-raising 'Cabaret For Freedom' for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference who invite her to become their coordinator. The fervour of those times is vividly recalled as she gets caught up in the civil rights movement. It is in writing about these events that Maya Angelou shows her skill as a literary crafts-woman by highlighting the intrinsic relationship between her individual life and

the social and political movements of the 1960s. In doing so she does not subordinate literature to political rhetoric yet reveals herself to be a very adept social and political commentator.

One envies her as she witnesses many crucial historical moments. She meets Martin Luther King and reveals a humorous side to this legendary man; she is present when Cuba and Russia meet on the streets of Harlem. . . Castro and Khrushchev embracing each other on 125th Street.

Amidst such momentous and significant events Maya is beset with loneliness. She meets a South African freedom fighter who promises 'a life of beckoning adventure and Africa.' Married life creates many tensions and frustrations for a woman not content to play the perfect wife, cooking, cleaning and scrubbing to her husband's satisfaction. Refusing such insularity she agrees to act in Genet's *The Blacks*, an experience she describes with brutal honesty.

A life full of partings and beginnings takes her to Cairo where her panache for adventure and survival come to her rescue as she is forced to take a job as an editor of the *Arab Observer*. Slowly the marriage disintegrates and she decides to go to Ghana to place her son in the university there.

The book ends with a moving account of Maya's separation from her son. This final parting does not leave her as devastated as she imagined she would be, but eager to begin a new chapter in her life.

Through charting her personal journey, Maya Angelou has succeeded in mapping out the contours of the collective history of her people. In the true tradition of her ancestral sisters, she has captured the political and cultural realities of her time. Maya Angelou writes with vivacity, force and emotion. It is not difficult to be stunned by her radiance and inspired by her capacity for creative survival. I eagerly await future volumes ●  
Pratibha Parmar

## Glasgow the Brave

### The Politics of the UCS Work-In: Class Alliances and the Right to Work

John Foster and Charles Woolfson  
Lawrence and Wishart £9.95  
pbk

Of the major industrial disputes in postwar Britain, the work-in at Upper Clyde Shipbuilders in 1971-72 was one of the most politically significant. It was not only about wages and conditions, but also about the right to work and the defence of working class communities.

In Scotland the work-in captured the imagination of the country. UCS was argued upon a Scottish basis – defence of Scottish jobs and industry – and raised the level of national consciousness; significantly, in 1973 the Scottish National Party managed to win Govan (where UCS was partly situated) from Labour at a parliamentary bye-election.

The 'anti-monopoly' alliance forged by the UCS shop stewards was an essentially Scottish phenomenon involving small and middle business (threatened creditors of UCS), middle management, manual workers and clerical staff, tenants and

community groups, the churches, local authorities, and individuals from all parties. The closure of UCS was perceived as a crisis for Scotland already facing the run-down of its traditional industries, rising unemployment, loss of control to England and America, and the loss of opportunity.

The formation of the anti-monopoly alliance in Scotland did not occur, the authors insist, through any dilution of the class content of the struggle. It was the working class which took the lead in posing the questions – moral and political – concerning the future of Scotland's national development.

Jimmy Reid was, undoubtedly, the most eloquent of the leading figures, but it was, perhaps, Jimmy Airlie who best summed up the prevailing mood when he spoke to a tv interviewer in the pouring rain outside the House of Commons: 'If there's any contraction or redundancies in this industry we will work-in, not occupy the yard because that's the word the press has been using. We are not a foreign power, we were born in that area and we will work-in. The right to work, it's our birth-right and we won't give it up for any hatchmen...'

The role played by the shop stewards was, not for the

first time in Clydeside's history, crucial. Reid, Barr, Airlie and the others were part of the workforce and of the local communities (Reid was an elected Communist Party local councillor and member of the party's executive).

Gramscians would undoubtedly refer to them as prime examples of 'organic intellectuals'. Foster and Woolfson prefer the Leninist concept of the 'vanguard'. The stewards received their authority from the 'sectional' interests of the trades they represented but they also needed a strategic understanding of the dynamics of British capitalism and a political strategy suitable to the task confronting them. The Communist Party and its development of the popular front is seen as the crucial element in providing the perspective of the stewards.

If the authors successfully convey the excitement and optimism of the workforce in the early days of the work-in, they also bring out the tensions and uncertainties that came to the surface as the dispute dragged on for a full 16 months. Divisions arose between yards (UCS comprised four separate shipyards) and between trades; the boilermakers, in particular, threatened to 'snatch defeat from the jaws of victory' by their unwillingness to

give up their differential. However, unity was maintained. This, the authors argue was the significant factor. The sectionalism of the Clyde trades is revealed as being anti-individualistic and having become, through technological development, more about group control over the production process.

It is one of the many strengths of this excellent book that it makes the national question of central significance, and explains how the working class came to dominate the national question in Scotland. As the recent campaign over Gartcosh has shown, the anti-monopoly alliance still commands widespread (in fact majority) support in Scotland. But, in the 14 years since UCS Scottish manufacturing industry has been decimated, and the closure of Gartcosh has sealed the fate of the Ravenscraig steel mill. The question now is whether the workers in large-scale industry still retain the strength to lead, or as is more likely, that only a much broader conception of working class strength can provide the basis of political leadership in the struggle against monopoly rule and to safeguard the future of Scotland's national development. ●

Jim Smyth



## Familiar Trenches

### Hidden Agendas: Theory, Politics and Experience in the Women's Movement

Elizabeth Wilson  
(with Angela Weir)  
Tavistock £7.50 pbk

It is a bold act to exhume one's old articles and represent them as part of the politics of today. Elizabeth Wilson introduces her choice of articles as a critical commentary on a tendency which she calls 'socialist-feminism' which has 'moved away from a transformative perspective'. It is a pertinent anxiety.

She is a courageous writer who has written as an historian, a sociologist, a novelist

and an autobiographer. Here it is her writings as political critic and polemicist which she has brought together. Polemic is a hard form to bring off, not least because it exposes the writer to the question Wilson herself raises in a couple of essays: OK, so all these people are wrong; what are you proposing? Perhaps this is why the best polemicists have been those with a sure sense of their core theory in history and politics. Whatever the stimulating and perceptive insights in Wilson's retrospective view of past controversies, it does not have a coherent core from which the polemical darts are fired.

At one point, Wilson suggests that the themes in the opening set of articles lead to

a denunciation of nearly all the 1970s pioneers of new marxist and feminist thought. It is hard to find these consistent themes. She does seem to argue, with consistency, for the 'primacy of the political'; the works of Ros Coward, Juliet Mitchell, Beatrix Campbell, Selma James, Barry Hindess, Paul Hirst and a host of others are, in the end, criticised for their political implications – 'dead end' or reactionary – rather than for any theoretical shortcomings. And yet, by 1984, in defending an orthodox marxist tradition, she is castigating Michel Foucault for contributing to the 'deconstruction' of the 'primacy of the economic'. Does she think marxism is a comprehensive theory which, read

correctly, holds the key to race and sex oppression as well as to class? Or does she think it inhabits a separate sphere while the politics of women's liberation inhabit another?

She seems to be arguing for separation in one of the best pieces in the book, her critique of *Beyond the Fragments*. Here she develops an important and underrated argument that 'socialist-feminists' see feminism as the humanising hand-maiden of socialism.

In her 1980 piece on socialist welfare, a subject in which she has done original research, she buzzes so fast from one target of attack to the next, that I found it very hard to grasp exactly what she does think are the forces