



Clash

Ellen Wilkinson

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Seen through the eyes of the trade unionist Joan Craig, this novel records the events of the General Strike of 1926 and its aftermath - the fervour of the committee meetings at which the strike call is heard, the mobilization of support during that week and the struggle of the mining communities.

Clash Details

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Author : Ellen Wilkinson

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Mel says

I really enjoyed this. I found it randomly at the Bishopsgate book sale for 50p and I'm so glad I did. A book written about the General strike in the 1920s by a woman who was there (who later went on to become an MP and serve in the cabinet). This was really great. It was political, and funny. There was a lot in here about socialism, the miner's strikes, how the first world war affected people and how when they came back from it they felt like they deserved better. The book was an interesting look at both the miners and the working class and the dynamics within socialism at the time for the people that were trying to help them, and those who were rich and just couldn't understand what was going on.

There was also a really strong element of women's history to this book. The main character was an independent working class woman who was working as an organiser but the man who had fallen in love with her wanted her to give up her work. There was honest portrayal of the conflict that women had at that time between work, political work and families. There was even talk of birth control and how the miner's wives wanted birth control, how one of them had a daughter who'd accidentally killed herself in an attempt to abort. How they were being refused birth control due to the catholic's religious objections which they thought was unfair for the rest of them.

And on top of all the fascinating gender and socialist history there was also a very dry humour. The characters were able to make fun of themselves and were witty and funny (as you'd expect from a book written in the 20s). I'm really glad I read this.

Paul says

4.5 stars

This is the first of Ellen Wilkinson's two novels; it is semi-autobiographical and concerns the General Strike and its immediate aftermath when the Trades Unions went back to work and the miners stayed out. Ellen Wilkinson was an interesting and controversial figure who seems to have been largely airbrushed out of labour history; given the prominence she had in her time. Her list of achievements is significant. Known as Red Ellen (because of her politics and hair colour), she was a trade unionist, feminist and socialist, born in 1891. She tried teaching, but was too modern in her methods, leading one school inspector to tell her she would be better off as a missionary in China. She worked for women's suffrage, opposed the First World War and read history at Manchester University (an achievement for a working class woman), then becoming involved in trade unionism, by 1924 she was one of the earliest women MPs. She was heavily involved in the General Strike; she employed her oratorical skills well and worked tirelessly. By 1935 she was MP for Jarrow and was one of the organisers and leaders of the 1936 Jarrow march. She spoke in the House of Commons about the march;

“As I marched down that road with those men, all of whom I knew well, whom I had worked with in my own constituency, as I marched with them hour after hour, just talking—I come from the working class myself, and my father was unemployed, but I have never known what it was to miss a meal that I wanted—it was just as we walked and talked so intimately that I began to understand something of what it meant, day after day after day, to get up and not know what you were going to do, and never have a copper in your pocket for anything. I mean that it was a revelation to me, and no amount of investigation, and going down

for a week, and no amount of talking with these men in the ordinary political sense would have taught me so much.”

During the war she was part of the Churchill government and was responsible for civil defence. In the 1945 Labour government she was minister of education and fought hard for the raising of the school leaving age. She was less convinced by the idea of the comprehensive system because she thought it was a way of ensuring the very poorest and most deprived would never escape from their backgrounds. Wilkinson died in 1947, still young (my age, I would say that!); she had worked herself relentlessly for many years, her hatred of poverty and injustice led her to a life of direct action. Her uncompromising feminism was seen as a threat was seen by the male dominated labour party of her time as a threat to their idealised model of working class family life. She never married; she did have relationships with men, but these were secondary to her work and her approach is summed up by Joan, the main protagonist of the novel;

“Now so much has been won, the vote, open professions, and all that, there must be some women in this generation who will put their job first and who will tackle some of these problems that are left lying around...Big things for humanity are only won by someone’s sacrifice.”

She even had a relationship with one of the main figures in the Labour Party, Herbert Morrison (grandfather of Peter Mandelson the architect of New Labour). There is a great deal more to Wilkinson’s life; she packed a great deal in. But what of the novel’

It is one of Wilkinson’s two works of fiction, her active life saw to that. The main protagonist is Joan Craig is a working class trade unionist activist who is sent down to London to assist with organising the General Strike. She meets some more middle class supporters of socialism, including members of the Bloomsbury Group. There are some wonderful portraits/satires of the Bloomsberries, including one who I am sure is meant to be Virginia Woolf. They are sharp satires, but not without some affection. There did come a point where I said to myself, Oh no, not a love triangle! However Wilkinson manages Joan’s two suitors very well. Tony Dacre is the husband of another Bloomsbury figure and he is attracted to socialism because he is attracted to Joan; he wants her to give up her work for him and settle down and have a family, he will contemplate her writing a little. This is complicated by the fact Joan does love him. Gerald Blain is an ex-soldier who was severely wounded in the war. He is a committed socialist and is attracted to Joan because of her commitment to socialism. This gives Wilkinson plenty of scope to explore Joan’s/women’s very genuine dilemmas and to look carefully at each side of the argument.

The strike is the backdrop and the heart of the novel and there are some powerful descriptions of a mining community, particularly the women in it. Again Wilkinson explores the dilemmas surrounding the tensions created by giving women power in strike situations, which means taking it from men. The dilemmas are real and handled with understanding of both sides.

The novel is dialogue based and is a little stilted at times. There are two examples of sloppy writing in relation to race which I would have tried to ignore once upon a time, but not now. It does explore genuine issues facing the early feminist and socialist movements with perception and sympathy. Wilkinson saw herself as an agent of change and she imparts this sense of destiny to Joan in the novel. Wilkinson puts the words in Joan’s mouth;

“If a woman of brains and power choses a career as the most important thing in her life, she must make it a whole time job if she is to compete on equal terms with men of her calibre. She may have love affairs, even marry, but if she means to do big things, then work is in the front of the picture ... freedom does not mean just slopping around”.

It is an easy read with some good exploration of the issues facing women in the socialist movements of the time; issues which sadly have not really gone away. The importance of Virago Modern Classics cannot be underestimated for publishing works like this which are too easily forgotten.

Jonathan Norton says

That state of the nation in 1926: a hopeless Tory cabinet unable to deal with industries urgently needing modernisation and investment but instead simply cutting wages; a Left unready to either wage revolution or win elections; well-meaning metropolitan liberals wringing their hands; war veterans angry that this wasn't what they fought for. Race as well as class and gender issues are here (Jewish characters are talked about in the way that was quite normal for the time - not actually anti-semitic, but not PC either. No one mentions Palestine, which at this time was under British control and simply not considered a problem). "Hottentot" is used as a benchmark term for an alien outsider. The Bloomsbury intellectuals, and "the Leeds highbrows" who mimic them, get swiped at. Now with a reprint this book ought to be better-known, certainly as much as "Fame Is The Spur", which has received some new attention.

Patrick Niyongabo says

I had to read this for "Inter-war British women writers" when I was studying abroad in the UK. I really enjoyed it even if it was an assigned reading, and I had to squeeze it into my already-busy schedule. What amazed me the most is how Mrs Wilkinson managed to present a somewhat political narration of the 1926 General Strike, and yet keeps the storyline more interesting by intertwining the fate of Labour Party movement with that of Mrs Craig, the heroine, who is struggling to make a vital personal choice ... a choice between having a career (professional life) or engaging in a personal relationship (marriage).

L Parks says

Was expecting to be annoyed by the romance but it was used quite well to illustrate the same points as the rest of the book in a way that was really not preachy at all.
