



BOOK REVIEW

Drennan, James. 1934. *B.U.F. Oswald Mosley and British Fascism*. Republished by Antelope Hill Publishing (2020)

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Although not deemed as a major character, inter-war British political history is, nevertheless, incomplete without the proper evaluation of Sir Oswald Mosley. In many respects, he personified the emotions of a generation that came shell-shocked from the battle-front and which carried deep physical as well as psychological scars. The sheer atrociousness of the trench warfare where the alive had to reconcile with the stench of their dead comrades, an existence more torturous than the perpetual fear of a sudden arrival of an enemy artillery piece, shattered a significant chunk of the youth for the rest of their lives. Those who survived this hellish ordeal, perhaps, never smiled again. It was not possible to experience happiness anymore. The economic downturn only furthered the misery of this lost generation. Indeed, a terrible time to be young.

The first major conflict since industrialization shook the very foundations of civilised life. A kind of transition into another age had begun. Fatigue had started to set in the colonial machines. After butchering the flower of European youth for four years, the grey-haired men of old Europe had no choice but to ration their energies towards the home front. The unthinkable had started to surface in the corridors of power that imperial acquisitions would have to be abandoned one day. Sir Oswald was one of those men who foresaw that another European war would seal the political fate of the continent. The destructive efficiency of armaments could terminally wound the body of Europe. Moreover, the financial health of Britain was such that conventional treatments might not work.

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This book under review gives a good start to anyone seriously interested in the political life of Sir Oswald and its wider historical context. It came out in 1934. Its author, who uses a pseudonym here, was a Northern Irish backer of Mosley who later on developed differences with the latter and parted ways with the British fascists. His real name was William Edward David Allen. However, that doesn't lessen the importance of his book which remains a valuable contribution to inter-war political literature.

The language is quite effervescent and passionate. The book comprises of ten chapters including the introduction.

The introduction conveys optimism and youthful anticipation. The young eagerly awaits an age which would take out the darkness and give purpose to a life which was taken hostage by listlessness and dejection. It describes the state of affairs as of 1933. It has been 15 years since Sir Oswald entered the Westminster corridors. He is looked down upon by his more senior contemporaries. According to the author, his tough and masculine bearing does not fit in with the effeminate character of the post-industrialized bourgeois English politics. Also, we are cautioned in the same introductory space that it would be a grave tragedy if the run-of-the-mill, routine political haggling subsumes this extraordinary moment of history.

He states:

If England slips into another long Walpolean lassitude, as it did after the Marlborough wars, and if some form of continuing "National Government"—a revived Whigdom—proves to be the measured expression of the English mind through a period of quiescence or decay, then Mosley will have achieved the greatest personal tragedy in English history since Bolingbroke.¹

The author also challenges the notion that the Fascist doctrine is alien to the British temperament in the following lines:

¹ James Drennan, *B.U.F. Oswald Mosley and British Fascism* (United States of America: Antelope Hill Publishing, 2020), 11, Epub version. [Although it originally came out in 1934, it has been re-released by Antelope Hill Publishing, an online book selling outlet. All the pagination referenced here is based on the epub cell phone version.]

...Fascism is a growth which is potentially no more foreign to British soil than was Norman feudalism, pan-European Catholicism, Bohemian Protestantism, Dutch Parliamentarism, French Social Democracy, or German Marxism. We have, in fact, to consider whether all political movements which have developed within the framework of European culture, have not in fact become common to the European world.²

The reader should always keep the fact in perspective that these words were written before the tumult of the Second World War, and long before words like *Fascism* and *Fascist* became political slurs in mainstream socio-political communication. There is a temptation to treat a historical text in contemporary manner. Let us refrain ourselves from passing ex post facto laws when analysing historical occurrences. These developments should be measured strictly according to the scales prevalent within their own respective contexts.

The argument formally begins with the chapter titled, 'The Background of the Bourgeois Mind'. The author gives his assessment of the term 'bourgeois'. He traces the origin of this group in the closing years of the Middle Ages. The merchant trading sector had by then outmuscled the feudal aristocratic arrangement. Its political expression fully manifested itself with the 'Glorious Revolution' of 1688 when bourgeois interests were bargained at the expense of the 'Tudor nation-state'. When the industrial revolution arrived a generation or two later, there were no organic social forces to restrain that beast. He also takes aim at Whiggish historiography which clothed freedom for unbridled commerce under the garbs of political freedom. After martyring Charles I, the path was clear for Whigs to restructure the social equation in their favour. The disequilibrium between industry and agriculture grew by leaps and bounds gravely weakening the latter. The sheer internationalist character of Capital meant that the nation would be expected to make sacrifices to allow the smooth running of finances. The accompanied social instability was the cost the bourgeoisie was willing to pay. Hence, the parliamentary machinery should either accept drastic changes or it would have to done away with.

² Ibid., 15.

'The State is a necessary evil in any form of ordered society, but it must be so regulated to serve, rather than to hinder or to check, the interests of the bourgeois class. Hence has been gradually evolved the elaborate system of Parliamentary Government, which is a system of maintaining the minimum necessary State machinery, and at the same time of subordinating that machinery, in the name of civil liberties, to the control of one or other of the groups into which the bourgeois class—owing to its varying economic interests—is divided.'³

The next few chapters give space to Sir Oswald's close encounter with the state of British politics. The author quotes long passages from his speeches and writings.

On his part, Mosley found it impossible to permanently align with any political faction.

'It is unpatriotic to maintain an impotent aloofness when pressing problems demand the co-operation of likeminded men. I am not a free-lance incapable of such co-operation, and am prepared to work immediately with men who hold similar opinions in face of the great new issues of our day. I claim, however, that in the present transitional condition of politics it is unfair to ask men who come fresh to post-war problems to form party ties and allegiances before the alignments of the future are clear.'⁴

He began with the Tories, remained independent for a while, then switched to Labour before forming his own *The New Party*. He tested the whole political spectrum and found it utterly lacking in capacity for efficient management. The old guard was just not going to allow any major surgical intervention to the system.

It was not that he entered the political field with Fascist tendencies and then in a sinister way tried to undermine or manoeuvre the system according to a rigid ideological framework. The obdurate elders largely forced his hand.

After the failure of *The New Party* venture and when he was about to embrace the Fascist alternative, he wrote:

³ Ibid., 35.

⁴ Ibid., 41.

‘We are going to keep a little powder for the day when we need it most. Our time will come, and even if it should never come, we shall yet have been right to have done what we have done and will have no regrets at our decision. Better the great adventure, better the great attempt for England’s sake, better defeat, disaster, better far the end of that trivial thing called a Political Career than stifling in the uniform of Blue and Gold, strutting and posturing on the stage of Little England, amid the scenery of decadence, until history in turning over an heroic page of the human story writes of us the contemptuous postscript—‘These were the men to whom was entrusted the Empire of Great Britain, and whose idleness, ignorance and cowardice left it a Spain.’ We shall win: or at least we shall return upon our shields.’⁵

Under the title, ‘Fascism and the crisis of the West’, the author begins his analysis of the phenomenon of Fascism. He relies heavily on Oswald Spengler. He quotes extensively from his *Untergang des Abendlandes* which appeared in English in 1926 as *The Decline of the West*.

According to the author, the nascent Caesarism which has taken the Fascistic form is in its essence a revolt against the machine dominated modernity. It is an attempt to overcome the city as the principal expression of culture.

‘The emphasis of both Fascists and Nazis is on the country, the peasant family, on manhood and true womanliness—on all the old values which have become subjects for the epileptic giggling and the idiot witticisms of the decadent intellectuals of the Megapolis.’⁶

Thus, Fascism is a desperate emergency measure to rescue a civilization almost at its wit’s end. What about the material advancement that has been the hallmark of Europe for centuries? Well, a Fascist would answer that this precise ‘prosperity’ and ‘advancement’ sapped the spiritual energies out of a people whose physical footprints can be found across the globe. The sun is setting and it should be the Fascists who must lead the people into a new day.

⁵ Ibid., 72.

⁶ Ibid., 180.

Every resource should be mobilised in service of the whole. The Parliament hitherto an avenue for professional politicians and lawyers would be freed from petty factional squabbles. The House of Lords would give way to the body representing the industry. The deliberate deceleratory measures of the bureaucracy would be abolished.

'Revolution will be stabilized, and when we stabilize revolution we create a new civilization.'⁷

Conclusion

A hundred years ago the European continent was coming to terms with the loss of global influence. Two new players, the United States of America and Soviet Union, had entered the field. The European man had nearly exhausted himself. The First World War had him severely crippled. He was desperate to avoid a repeat. *Fascism was one final attempt to salvage a compromise between the forces of aggressive globalised capitalism and communist internationalism.*

However, further bloodshed did take place, and by the time German forces surrendered to their Soviet conquerors, Europe's role as a socio-political nerve centre of the world was over. The continent's vast political fortune scattered around the world was to be divided between Washington and Moscow.

Sir Oswald Mosley tried his luck again after the Second World War. His *Union Movement* could not take off. Electoral setbacks forced him to abandon political activity altogether.

There is considerable material available on cyberspace both audio-visual and documentary. Interestingly, it garners extremely favourable views which shows a certain disdain for mainstream politics.

⁷ Ibid., 256.