

The Angry Brigade, Alan Burns

Stuart Christie

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It is becoming increasingly fashionable these days for academics and professional writers and historians to illustrate their theses with the assistance of the tape-recorded mumbblings of the inarticulate to support their unsubstantiated class-prejudices. This book is described by its publishers as “a deft combination of serious in-depth research and imaginative reconstruction”, but not one word of fact emerges from it. (We subsequently learned that the “in-depth research” and information came from a fringe theatre group). The author’s “imaginative reconstruction” consists of one specific reference to the blowing-up of the Post Office Tower which, incidentally, was omitted from the police charges which led up the trial of the “Stoke Newington Eight”. In another incident a character, who for some reason is “known to be involved with the Special Branch” and therefore presumably interested in maintaining his cover at that point – only suspected by one girl because of his unpleasant appearance and his sexual aggression, smashes her head in while her cowardly Jewish boyfriend looks on impassively. It turns out he is the one who “allocates tasks in disciplined fashion” and she believes that blowing up Telstar House would “really kick them in the balls” (bring about the downfall of capitalism).

It is highly unlikely that the Angry Brigade thought they would destroy capitalism, but whatever their aims they were successful harbingers of revolution, frightening the ruling-class sufficiently to cast them as ‘Public Enemy No.1’, and – when a few people were convicted, not of causing any explosions, but of sympathy with the politics of those who did, induced the disgusting apologies for journalists on *The Sun* (who appeared only during the last days of the trial) to describe them as drug-taking schizoid hippies.

Alan Burns – whose six years at the bar and “research in politics at the time of LSE” allow him to refer to the period “before the anarchists died out” and have one of his characters say “we worked on Maoist precepts” – picks up the *Sun* pieces and a police officer’s remark that the AB consisted of several groups and allow him to say, ingenuously, that maybe his doubtful tape-recorded documentary-fictional characters are the ones that got away.

According to Alexander Dumas the novelist is entitled to rape history provided he produces a child; but Mr. Burns, in his fraudulently titled book *The Angry Brigade* and equally fraudulent description of it in the blurb as a “documentary novel”, has produced neither a documentary nor a novel. His book is a rambling series of extracts from tape-recordings made with the help of a gullible “left-wing” theatre group, the most improbable and unlikely people on the hippy scene at the time – a homosexual who is “a kind of an anarchist”; a rich rabbi’s grandson; the son

of a Catholic Indian businessman, etc. It does not make a novel nor does it have any plot. It refers to nothing remotely resembling the activities of the Angry Brigade nor to what the Stoke Newington Eight trial was about. The jury's refusal to accept a large part of the police evidence no doubt put paid to a number of highly-paid professional commentators' plans to document the trial of "the anarchist conspirators", but Mr. Burns seems quite cheerfully to have picked up the pieces and present them in place of a novel.

But since the book is neither fact nor fiction, let alone the "masterly blend" it is claimed to be, neither a novel or documentary, let alone a "deft combination" – what is it? It is, in fact, a propaganda piece, financially supported, in part at least, by the Arts Council, characterising the Angry Brigade as the stereotype "underground" hippy freak with which the establishment would like to associate it. Mr. Burns, who on his own admission has never done a hard day's work in his life – "as a novelist, playwright and lawyer" – wants to portray those who rebel against the Establishment not as workers, but as professional agitators who work, live, and play in a social vacuum outside, and unaffected by, the framework of industrial, social and economic conflict produced by capitalism. It is a classic propagandist technique that those who oppose the State must in some way be outside society and working for some ulterior motive. By associating the name Angry Brigade with "drop-outs" at their most caricaturable, he endeavours to supplement the *Sun* type image; to show the revolutionaries as something apart from the working-class. But propaganda should be given away, not sold.

If an author wrote a novel concerning a group of upper-class opium smoking "drop-outs" and presented it as "The Luddites" (or "Molly Maguires") it could not stand as historical fiction but on its merits as a novel. Such merits Mr Burns does not possess. He tries to cover his efforts under the mantle of the "documentary novel", but although it may not be actionable under the Trades Description Act, he should be careful not to let his publishers apply adjectives like "mindless" to those whose politics they oppose.

Stuart Christie (Time Out)

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