

When the Lights Went Out

Britain in the Seventies

Andy Beckett

London: Faber and Faber, 2009, £20.00

Strange Days Indeed

Francis Wheen

London: Fourth Estate, 2009, £18.99

Robin Ramsay

Decadeitis, the division of history into decades for media marketing purposes – ‘roaring twenties’, ‘swinging sixties’ – irritates serious historians; but in the case of the 1970s it does make a kind of sense, the decade being bookended by Conservative Party election victories in 1970 and 1979, heralding a return to the market: the half-hearted version under Heath, ‘Selsdon man’, and then the real thing with Mrs Thatcher.

As the delusions of the free marketeers crumble, so the history of the years in which these notions were dominant will be re-examined. And as the mainstream media’s view of the 1980s and 90s in Britain morphs from free market triumph to profligate idiocy, so their view of what preceded them will change: the 1970s are going to be reassessed. These two books are a sign of this, though only Beckett has anything to say.

Francis Wheen’s collection of essays on the 1970s is entertaining but of no consequence. Wheen has not reassessed much and this collection is mostly a rehash of previous thinking. You get the flavour of his methods on page 5 where, in a footnote attached to a comment on Australians in London in the early 1970s, Wheen has this:

‘Whitlam’s premiership was itself snuffed out by Her Majesty the Queen’s representative in Australia, Governor General Sir John Kerr, who sacked him in November 1975. In true Seventies fashion, some furious Whitlam supporters claimed that Kerr had acted on orders from the CIA.’

Wheen does not offer an opinion on whether the ‘furious Whitlam supporters’ were right or wrong (I don’t think he cares); he’s interested in the ‘true Seventies fashion’.

Once again we get the *Private Eye*-cynical hack view of Harold Wilson’s attempts to get an investigation of the security services going: Wilson was

paranoid and (using Bernard Donoughue's diaries as evidence), Marcia Williams was dreadful.

'The daily drama in Wilson's kitchen cabinet was a Strindberg play with scenes from *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*.' (p. 214)

We get another go round Watergate and Nixon without any of the more recent work on the story. He portrays all manner of potentially interesting material, and declines to draw any conclusions from it other than 'Man, how weird were the 1970s?' (and the default *Private Eye* position: how awful are politicians?). In other words, Wheen has (or here offers) no politics.

Beckett does have some politics but he mostly keeps them concealed enough not to scare off the general reader. Beckett's technique is part history and part journalism: he recounts episodes in the 1970s and then interviews one or two of the participants. He is trying to show how we got to Mrs Thatcher. It's pretty much the conventional story but with some touches which suggest that, were he not trying to make a living among the major media and publishers, he might write a different version. He says of Harold Wilson's claims that he was being covertly undermined:

'Yet since the seventies his claims have gained, not lost, credibility.' (p. 168)

But while he gives a little detail of 'the plots' he omits most of it.

After recounting the IMF incident in 1976, he goes to visit Dennis Healy who was Chancellor at the time. Healy describes, as others have before him, the way that during the 1976 IMF 'crisis', when Healey was Chancellor of the Exchequer, the Treasury gave him false – inflated – figures for the Public Sector Borrowing Requirement. Did he think the Treasury had duped him in 1976?

'The big problem they always have in the Treasury is getting governments to control spending,' he said calmly. 'So any excuse they can find for getting spending cut they will. It wasn't so much a conspiracy against the government so much as an attempt to get the policies they believed in.'

Beckett comments:

'It seemed rather a fine distinction. Perhaps sensing this, Healy immediately changed the subject.' (p. 356)

Beckett doesn't do these parapolitical themes justice: but not because he is unaware of them, I suspect. He just isn't willing to offer them to the general reader at whom his book is aimed.

It is mostly the familiar picture: Heath's failure and the 3-day week. The Tory right gives us Thatcher and the arrival of the ideas of Institute for Economic Affairs at the door to No 10. Oil is on the horizon, feminism is growing, the eco movement begins; and there is the struggle between the left and right. There is a long account of the Grunwick strike, including an interview with John Gouriet, stalwart of the anti-left groups such as the Freedom Association, who talks at length about Operation Pony Express, the improvised private mail delivery system which helped to break the strike. But Beckett makes no attempt to show the links between the 'anti subversive' lobby and the Freedom Association.

But he also portrays Wilson and Callaghan creating a more equal Britain: '[Callaghan] presided over a Britain that was probably more equal than it had ever been before' (p. 409). For all that the left hate and despise Wilson and Callaghan, they did deliver: not as much as the left wanted; but having received about 30% of the votes cast in the elections of 1974 and 76, they hardly had a mandate for revolution. But the little that Labour and the unions did deliver was too much for the the middle and upper classes. A more equal society means the prosperous lose more via taxation.

He briefly notes that all three prime ministers before Thatcher were looking at the German model of social democracy: the semi-corporate model with the unions, the state and capital working together. How this was frustrated by the activities of the left (in the unions and Labour Party) and the right (with the assistance of the spooks), is the real political story of the decade; the story which this magazine has been haphazardly and almost accidentally documenting for much of its existence.

Beckett is a good writer and interviewer. It is mostly the story we know already but approached from some interesting new angles. This is worth your attention.