Debunking Myths: Review of Matt Perry, *The Jarrow Crusade: Protest and Legend* (University of Sunderland Press, 2005)

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As the recent 'fuel lobby' has shown, the Jarrow March is a useful hold-all kind of protest that can lend its name to almost any kind of grievance about almost anything. Given the persistence of the myth and how widely known the name, it is surprising that Matt Perry's is the first properly researched book-length account of the Jarrow March and subsequent efforts to lay claim to and employ its legacy. (Perry usually deems it the 'Jarrow Crusade', but notes that Jarrovians normally refer to it as the 'March').

Perry has done a good job on exposing many of the March's multifarious and contradictory aspects. Keen to de-bunk myths, Perry considers the myths of 'success' and 'universal support'. He shows that the marchers themselves were aware that the March failed to achieve anything in terms of securing work for Jarrow. Many authorities were, and remained, unsympathetic to the March, including the Labour Party's national leadership, some newspapers, and, of course, the government itself. Hensley Henson, the Bishop of Durham, was angered at the Bishop of Jarrow's support for the March and in the letters pages of the *Times* went as far as to condemn hysterically the marchers as revolutionaries. The self-serving motives of many of the wealthy backers of the March are exposed. The imagery of the March -particularly the use of the word 'crusade' given its association with Franco's military uprising in Spain- was especially unfortunate, as Perry ably demonstrates. Another myth was that of its Englishness: Perry points out that most of the marchers were of Scottish or Irish descent. The book also traces how the myth itself developed: the Jarrow March disappeared from view with post-war affluence, only to be dredged up again when unemployment inevitably returned.

In its new incarnations the Jarrow March was the symbol of respectable protest. Though antagonistic in 1936, the post-war national Labour leadership could associate itself with the image, without fear of awkward questions. Now, March images are used to market the north-east region as a tourist destination. Posterity certainly has a keen sense of irony.

The book seeks to locate the Jarrow March firmly in the tradition of inter-war Hunger Marches organised by the National Unemployed Worker's Movement (NUWM – a Communist inspired and led organisation). Indeed, NUWM activists were marching to London at around the same time. Clearly, in some senses the Jarrow March drew its inspiration from these marches, both earlier and contemporaneous. However, in an effort to contextualise the Jarrow March the aspects that made it very different from the NUWM Hunger Marches seem to be under-emphasised. Its 'non-political' stance, which in effect meant it accepted help from the major political parties but refused it from the far left (CP) and far right (British Union of Fascists) but not far right Conservatives, made it very different to the NUWM efforts. So keen were the organisers to maintain the 'non-political' appearance that care was even taken to choose 'neutral' colours for marchers' banners.

Rigorous application of this stance saw CP-donated money refused as it contravened the 'non-political' aspect of the March! (p.84) March Marshall David Riley was even prepared, apparently, to get the authorities to intervene against the CP if the need arose. This treatment did not, however, prevent Communists from interrupting a meeting they were holding in Hyde Park in order to support the Jarrow marchers' meeting when it arrived in London. As Perry points out, anti-communism was necessary in order to appeal to Conservatives. The tactic partly worked. Conservative support was -in some senses- obvious and fairly substantial. The Jarrow Conservative agent went ahead of the

March with his Labour counterpart in order to arrange accommodation and so forth. Local Tories provided support for the March in Leeds (p.59). In Chesterfield, when Labour stayed away, the friendly local Conservatives were there to help out with tea and sympathy. (Here Labour was more anti-Communist than the Tories). So successful in appealing to the right was this strategy that even the implacably capitalist Economic League supported the marchers. In effect, this tactic inevitably allowed the Conservatives to present themselves as a concerned party eager to do what they could – although it might not be very much- for the doughty unemployed fighters of Jarrow. Even Gratton Doyle, the pro-fascist Tory MP for Newcastle North, got a chance to show his caring side when the marchers reached Parliament.

Clearly, Perry was right to show that many of the rich and powerful were not sympathetic, or if they were it was for their own personal gain, such as self-publicity. (p.154) The key self-publicist was Sir John Jarvis and his role and motives are detailed. One possible aspect of Jarvis' motives that goes un-remarked in *The Jarrow Crusade* is that his son-in-law became Conservative parliamentary candidate for Jarrow. This did not happen until mid-1938, but it would be interesting to know the extent to which Jarvis' actions were part of a long-term endeavour to build a safe Tory seat for his daughter's husband to begin a political career.

The 'myth' of working-class support is not given the same detailed treatment. Yet it is more significant in terms of the March's failure to secure universal support given that, in theory at least, there were very many in the north-east in the same boat as the Jarrow marchers. As already mentioned, the organised working-class in the Labour Party in some localities the March passed through (such as Chesterfield) kept away, terrified by the spectre of communism and mindful of the trade union movement's anti-Communist 'Black Circular'. The lukewarm response in Chester-le-Street suggested that a local

councillor's claim that the Jarrow March was a protest for the region as a whole was not widely felt. (p.31). It certainly appeared that they did not enjoy widespread support amongst their own. Indeed, the handful of resolutions and letters that the government received from organisations and individuals supporting the marchers was hardly a ringing endorsement.

This is also evident in the funds the March raised. Perry provides the total raised but there is little mention of organisations that might have been expected to be favourable, which refused to donate. (p.46) There are certainly examples of working-class organisations in the north-east region – such as trade union branches – that might be expected to support the marchers but which did not donate when they were asked. And many of these self-same organisations would often donate to other causes at local, national and even international levels (such as the Spanish relief funds). They had the money, and a requisite level of solidarity, but the Jarrow marchers often did not receive the benefits of this.[1]

The explanation for this must be due, in part, to mis-conceived anti-communism. The 1936 NUWM March helped muddy the waters in this respect, distracting attention from Jarrow and also, perhaps, engendering a level of 'March fatigue' (there were veterans and blind marches also going on at this time too; autumn 1936 truly was the British 'marching season'). But it must also have had a great deal to do with the way in which the Jarrow marchers presented their case. They purposely distinguished their plight from

[1] For example, Burradon miner's lodge. On 1 October 1936 it decided against donating 5/- to the Jarrow March, but the same meeting did vote in favour of sending 5/- to Blyth anti-Means Test marchers (presumably the Blyth NUWM contingent). It did not support many appeals received from various Spanish Aid campaigns until December 1937 when it sent £1 to the International Brigade Wounded Aid Association.

Tyne and Wear Archives Service, 1691/1/3, Burradon Lodge Minutes, 1 October 1936; 9 December 1937.

that of the rest of the unemployed in the region -and in many of the towns they passed through- who were ‘simply’ victims of the depression. The Jarrow unemployed, claimed the marchers, were demonstrably direct victims of government policy. Jarrow’s situation, this argument implied, could be remedied by the government in a way that that of all other impoverished, workless places could not. The Jarrow March organisers’ message effectively put them outside of the rest of the unemployed working-class. It was no wonder the March struggled to secure working-class support. Furthermore, in securing the ostensible support of some of the powerful -including representatives of the party in power- the Jarrow March looked like it did not need the help of the rest of the working-class.

The non-political tactic presented the March with new problems and contradictions, but it also gave it a far better chance of good publicity. As Perry shows, the publicity it received was not universally good, but it was clearly predominantly very favourable. And it was surely this contemporary usually positive and widespread publicity that ensured it was remembered in later generations by the BBC and Labour Party leadership – and for the same reason (one that Perry discusses): that it offered no threat to the rulers of Britain. As Perry points out, those leading the March, and presumably most or all of those on it, were somewhere on the political left (with the exception, of course, of the Conservative agent for Jarrow). The ‘non-political’ label was only a tactic, intended to avoid the indifference or demonisation from the mainstream media that was the predominant lot of the other Hunger Marches. In that the March secured such predominantly favourable –and extensive- coverage from the mainstream media it was a brilliant success (and this is all that most of the historians Perry cites appear to have said).

Yet this publicity came at a significant cost. The price the March paid was to have its political impact, its political message, almost totally negated. A contemporary Communist activist claimed that the Jarrow March 'went with a begging bowl' to ask for work.[2] The government did not deign to throw a penny in the bowl, and the March had failed. Parliament did not even accept the all-Tyneside supporting petition because it had not been presented in the correct format. (p.165) It was a cruel ending and a bitter lesson for the marchers: constitutionalism and respectability ultimately counted for nothing. Perry claims early in the book that the other Hunger Marches were more successful than Jarrow's, but the reasons for this are not discussed at length. ('Begging' or 'demanding'- as the NUWM marchers- there *was* a deeper essential similarity. All Hunger Marches were basically legitimising the government of the day in their attempts to get it to provide work which, for many leftists, is merely to line the pockets of the capitalists in capitalist societies). As Perry writes: 'Some historians seem to accept, uncritically, the idea of contemporary publicity as the criterion of success but publicity was a means to an end not an end in itself'. (p.101) With the Jarrow March, the means and the end had become so confused that the sacrifices necessary to secure the means largely obviated the end.

Linked to this question of tactics is that of who invented the Jarrow March myth. Perry has rightly pointed out that the myth has served to obscure class antagonism, and has been employed and reinforced by various institutions such as the Church, the Labour Party, the BBC and so forth. At the time the mainstream media presented its version of the March to the public. But the myth was not merely an invention of the various institutions of capitalism. The protesters themselves, by appealing to 'respectable' cross-party opinion, deliberately chose to play down class antagonism. In this

[2] Imperial War Museum Sound Archive, 11877, Tape-recorded Interview with Frank Graham.

fundamental sense they were not being misrepresented by hostile capitalist interests; their own leaders had misrepresented them. Maybe not the rank-and-file marchers - about who we still know very little- but certainly their leaders, played a far larger part in the creation of their own myth than they might have liked. Capitalism has, in recent times, increasingly revealed its remarkable ability to commodify almost anything; to take something subversive and turn a profit. With its appeal to 'moderate', conservative opinion, the Jarrow March was a gift.

Given these considerations, Perry's claim that 'the Jarrow crusade was inescapably a working class protest and stands in a tradition of popular radicalism' (p.180) is somewhat misleading. Perry claims that the Jarrow riot of 1939 was in the same lineage of protest as the 1936 March. There probably was one kind of lineal connection. Many of the town's inhabitants remained unemployed and poor and their anger and frustration must have played a part in sparking the 1939 riot. The March's failure to secure work for Jarrow's unemployed must have made the riot more likely. But in terms of 'working-class protest' the two actions were in fact polar opposites: the Jarrow March all order, peace, organisation and an appeal to moderate opinion, the riot all spontaneity, violence, disorder and with no interest in making any kind of appeal to anyone. Clearly the state did not approve of the marchers, and petty bureaucrats showed this by denying their families benefits, etc., But the March itself did nothing but legitimate the state. In no way was it a threat. Only the predictable paranoia of some State officials obscured this.

The Jarrow March is of most significance not for the class and politics of its protagonists but rather for how, given their class and politics, they chose to act in the political world. The tactical choice to adopt effectively a 'non-political' label in an effort to secure the support of those who otherwise were likely to have been hostile

clearly distinguished the Jarrow March from the contemporary NUWM Hunger Marches. However, it did bare close comparison with another set of contemporary campaigns. Many of the Spanish Aid campaigns; most notably -in terms of its size and 'success'- the Tyneside foodship, made the self-same Faustian pact.[3] The simple lesson from both the Jarrow March and the Tyneside foodship campaigns is for activists to think very carefully about the extent of the sacrifices they make in order to curry favour with the powerful, be they newspaper proprietors, the government or wealthy benefactors. A radical political message, and the tactics to make it effective, should not be rejected in pursuit of the chimera of ruling class approval. A letter to the *Daily Worker* about the Jarrow March quoted by Perry put it well: 'to be non-political in such circumstances is surely criminal'. (p.147).

This book is almost as much about Ellen Wilkinson as it is about the Jarrow March. The depiction of Wilkinson is a contentious one. Perry appears to endorse Wilkinson's associate Conze's claim that she was a 'British Rosa Luxembourg'. Perry claims that 'Because of her association with the respectable and non-political Crusade, representations of Ellen Wilkinson tend to water down her radicalism'. (p.14) and cites several of her actions in support of this claim. In 1935, Wilkinson identified herself clearly in print with the tradition of revolutionary soviets, in the 'worker's council' sense of the word. But when the chance came to champion a revolution occurring in significant parts of Republican Spain from late July 1936 (inspired and largely carried out by anarchists), Wilkinson did not do so. Perry notes that on the Spanish civil War Wilkinson was 'closer to the Stalinist position than the revolutionary one'. (p.107). But

[3] See Lewis Mates, 'Britain's De Facto Popular Front? The Case of the Tyneside Foodship Campaign, 1938-1939', *Labour History Review*, 69:1, 2004, pp.323-345.

this position was not an aberration; it is key to understanding where Wilkinson was politically in the late 1930s.[4]

There are some questions, too, over precisely the role Wilkinson played before, during and after the Jarrow March. Clearly an inspiration to the marchers as they were walking to London her role becomes a little more problematic on arrival in Parliament. She ensured, in collaboration with the police, that the marchers were enjoying a boat trip on the Thames when the petition was presented, in order to avoid an 'outcry' in parliament. (p.163). Later Wilkinson and the March leaders persuaded the marches not to stage a spontaneous 'stay in protest'. Again Wilkinson's role was to ensure that the marchers did not get out of control. (p.168). As Perry writes, the occupation tactic was an expression of working-class confidence at this time. But it was a tactic not favoured by the supposed revolutionary Ellen Wilkinson: at least, not when she was in charge in 1936.

On return from the March the four key Labour Party organising figures, including March marshal Riley, left Jarrow Labour Party. Perry mentions this incident twice but omits the fact that these organisers claimed Wilkinson had tried her best to prevent the March going ahead.[5] That the one individual (on the left at least) who arguably came out of the whole affair having gained the most (in terms of popular exposure) could have tried everything she could to stop the March happening is an astonishing claim. Of course, it may well have been an exaggeration, or even a fabrication, borne out of bitterness at the recognition of the March's failure and the need to find a scapegoat. But

[4] For discussion of aspects of the Jarrow March and Ellen Wilkinson, see Lewis H. Mates, 'The United Front and the Popular Front in the North East of England, 1936-1939', unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, Newcastle University, 2002, pp.33-4, 79-108, 200-202.

[5] *North Mail*, 30 December 1936.

it is surely worthy of a mention, precisely because it suggests a more complex- and less harmonious- relationship between Wilkinson, the marchers and its key organisers. It also hints at anger at Wilkinson's upwardly moving career.

Perry's depiction of the departure of the 'four laddies' from the party as a result of their moving to the left also seems problematic. (p.181) They did eventually establish a short-lived branch of the left-wing ILP in the town, but their stated reason for leaving the party was in protest at the misappropriation of funds. They claimed that funds for the Jarrow marchers were wasted by Labour Party members who did not go on the March themselves. (One Jarrow councillor was alleged to have had a lift to London in a car and then claimed the rail fare!) The four then spent a good deal of time attacking the supposed communists who remained inside Jarrow Labour Party, not what would be expected of any but the most militant of anti-Stalinist left wingers (and there is no evidence that the four were so inclined). If the 'four laddies' were disenchanted with the results of their first March, it did not prevent them, as Perry points out, advocating a second on more than one occasion. (p.180).

Wilkinson's career, as Perry himself notes, 'blossomed after the Crusade'. This did not occur by accident. Indeed, there may even have been some kind of link between her involvement in the March and her subsequent rise through the ranks. Clearly, advocacy of the March put her at odds with some of the Communist-obsessed Labour leadership, but her 'courageous' stance at 1936 party conference must have brought her a good deal of respect from much of the party rank-and-file, in her own constituency as throughout the country. Evidently**,** Wilkinson was a complex individual. But she was far more a calculating politician than a Marxist revolutionary who happened to adopt -almost accidentally- a few Stalinist positions. This is not to say that she had no political principles or that she would jettison anything that was awkward. It is merely to

recognise that she was operating in confusing times with various influences pushing her in very different directions, and that this inevitably had its complex, contradictory effects. Her relationship with Morrison, who was, after all, a relatively strong advocate for Republican Spain, becomes more comprehensible if she is considered in this way.

This book is well researched. Perry has done a very good job in consulting a wide range of sources, including rent books for marchers as well as securing the release of some files under the Freedom of Information Act. Perry's intention was 'to reach a popular audience, including both North-easterners interested in their ancestors and those more widely interested in the history of labour and to write in a scholarly manner'. (p.8). He certainly succeeded in this, as the book is well-written in an engaging and lively style. The book is structured as a diary, detailing the marcher's experiences each day, but broken up by 'asides' into various relevant aspects of the March, its participants and other events (including the other contemporaneous marches). Some of the most revealing sections are those detailing what the cabinet was discussing as the March was on its way south. Invariably, the cabinet did not concern itself with the March and its demands: it certainly did not appear scared.

At times this narrative method works very well, breaking up what would otherwise be a fairly dry account of the daily drudge of the marchers. Some of the segues are a little clunky, and occasionally, the 'popular style' grates a little. There are also some (admirably few) niggling inaccuracies and a handful of typos.

The history of the Jarrow March is shot through with ironies. The ultimate irony must be that the European war and re-armament eventually provided work for Jarrow's unemployed, the very thing Ellen Wilkinson and the left in general were trying to avoid. Whether the survival of the memory and the myth of the Jarrow March is a reflection of

a widely held belief that it was ‘successful’ or not, there is at least one sense in which the Jarrow March was a fitting symbol for the 1930s. The experience of the Jarrow March, in all its facets, nicely illustrates just how muddle-headed and impotent the left was in the period; how hopelessly incapable it was of extricating itself from the contradictions of its own theoretical and practical imbroglios.

The Jarrow Crusade: Protest and Legend is a good book on the topic. It provides some fascinating insights into how the myth of the Jarrow March was constructed and how it has been used and recuperated since 1936, by who and for what ends. It also contains a good deal of material on social conditions, providing something of an antidote to the ‘revisionists’. It is engaging and passionately written, stimulating and provocative. It is a good place to start a debate on the nature of the British ‘left’ in the 1930s, the problems it faced and the ways in which it dealt with them and why. As Perry has shown, history is there to be contested. There is a story here still to contest and Perry has made a good contribution to this ongoing process. Some myths have been laid to rest. But others, arguably, have been created. This book perhaps poses more questions than it answers, many of which are directly related to contemporary and future ‘protest’ movements. For this reason, they are certainly questions worth posing.