

Book Review

John Bew

Citizen Clem: A Biography of Attlee

London, UK: Riverrun, 2017

Reviewed by Ron Hikel

Clement Attlee was a gentleman. Most observers agree on that. But what else was he? John Bew's widely hailed new biography (winner of the Orwell Prize for political writing and, for numerous reviewers, the 2017 book of the year) references over 40 adjectives to describe what he was and what he was not: honest, calm, patriotic, modest, hard-working and trustworthy were among the former and undramatic, unambitious and quite without need for domination or praise, among the latter.

One of the pleasures of a good political read, when finished, is to compare the subject with present-day office-holders. Clem Attlee was the full polar opposite of Donald J. Trump. But despite personal restraint and decency, Attlee in his lifetime nevertheless recorded immense achievements: creation of the National Health Service, National Insurance and the social safety net, self-government and independence for India and other former colonies, the transformation of the British Empire into the modern Commonwealth and unbroken leadership of the Labour Party for 20 years, among a very long list.

Attlee's life was a profound paradox. In the words of diplomat and Member of Parliament Harold Nicolson, Clem was "a dear little man." Yet in 2004 British academics named him the greatest of all 20th century prime ministers. How did someone so mild and monosyllabic, even said some a person of the second-rank, bring about so much valuable change that is still standing today? Bew unfortunately does not offer an over-arching explanation or interpretive theory to answer this puzzle. Rather, in 564 pages he describes dozens of episodes of challenge and response, culminating in Attlee's run as PM from 1945 to 1951, during which he re-made modern Britain.

This slowly unrolling narrative, while informative, would have benefitted from a bit more interpretive analysis; especially for those not already familiar with this landscape. A chronological time-line highlighting dates of key events would have been a welcome guide through the thicket. On the other hand, the end notes, bibliography and index are excellent.

As a patriotic young man, Attlee enlisted in the Territorial Army and in September 1914 was commissioned a lieutenant. In spring 1915 he and his company were sent to Gallipoli, then later in the year to Suvla Bay. In a December manoeuvre to avoid disaster, Attlee and commander General Maude were the last two soldiers to evacuate. This failed Gallipoli campaign cost the British 43,000 dead and 250,000 wounded. Attlee always felt Churchill's idea

of the campaign to be sound, but the military execution deeply flawed. Later, this view was to be a positive point in building and keeping his close relationship with Churchill. In spring 1916, Major Attlee was wounded in Mesopotamia and sent home to recuperate. His shooting war was soon over.

He was educated at Haileybury College, a public school with which he maintained a life-long relationship. He was then off to University College, Oxford, to study modern history. His first elective experience, sought shortly after being discharged from the Army at war's end, was contesting a seat for the London County Council from Stepney. He narrowly lost. Shortly after he became mayor of the same London borough.

The public schooling, Oxford degree, legal training, the rank of Major and demonstrated courage in combat, gave him a strong platform from which to seek public office and build a political career.

The moderate social democratic politics he acquired from his family, and from exposure to the poverty and squalor of London's east end slums while working at the Haileybury boys club in Stepney. As Bew makes clear, Attlee's ideology, to the extent he had one, was shaped by his life-long view of the fundamental importance of shared and lived citizenship for all classes. He had a strong sense of the value of all British subjects finding a high-minded balance between each individual's rights and their obligations to society.

In 1922 he was elected to the House of Commons for Limehouse, becoming the first Oxford graduate to gain a seat there for the Labour Party. Attlee was a classic "public school socialist." He became an exemplary parliamentarian.

In December 1933 he got one of many "lucky breaks" when the Parliamentary Labour Party leader George Lansbury broke a leg and Attlee was named temporary care-taker. When taking this on, it is a perfect measure of the man that he promptly told the more prominent Sir Stafford Cripps, another possible leadership choice, that "any time you wish it I should be ready to retire in your favour."

Two years later, as the next world war crept ever closer Lansbury, a life-long pacifist, resigned the PLP leadership. It was decided Attlee, as vice-chair, should become chairman for the remainder of that Parliamentary session. That made him Leader of the Opposition. Dissolution of the House was, however, expected shortly. The Attlee selection was seen as a way to temporarily avoid a difficult fight between several heavyweight leadership contenders. Attlee, again, declared he had no personal ambition for the post.

The general election in mid-November 1935, which pitted Attlee and Labour against the Conservative PM Stanley Baldwin, increased Labour's seats by more than 100. This was a considerable improvement over the J. Ramsay MacDonald electoral fiasco of 1931. When the new Parliament convened at year end, the PLP elected Attlee leader. He retained that position for the next 20 years.

Bew offers detailed and remarkably fair descriptions of many key events over these two decades. This tale is well told but would, again, have benefitted from a bit more summary and overview analysis of the institutional, social and psychological forces at work. Attlee's role as war-time deputy to Churchill in the coalition government and the part their crucial relationship played in the British military victory is vividly told. However, just as with the key elections of 1931 and 1935, Attlee's most important electoral win—1945—is not richly described or extensively explained.

Even more disappointing is the skimpy telling of how Attlee and Aneurin Bevan together accomplished, against strong opposition, their and the Labour Party's greatest monument, the National Health Service. This is doubly unfortunate because Bevan's work is directly relevant to the current challenges facing the NHS and to the continuing US conflict over Obama's *Affordable Care Act*. Further, Attlee's handing of his fraught personal relationship with the tempestuous Welshman could have demonstrated one of Attlee's central strength.

Clement Attlee lived 84 years. That span left Britain a better place than he found it; and it is a testimony to John Bew's worthy work that his telling is equal to this man's life.

Those looking for more background might consider: Correlli Barnett's *The Audit of War*; E.P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class*; Kenneth Harris' *Attlee*; Michael Foot's *Aneurin Bevan* or Brian Brivati's *Gaitskell*.

About the Author:

Ron Hikel is a political scientist, with degrees from Boston and Columbia universities. He has taught that subject in American and Canadian universities and has applied its insights as a senior public servant in Manitoba and Saskatchewan, and as a managing partner with KPMG Canada's management consulting practice. He has participated in numerous political campaigns from President and Prime Minister to municipal elections in the US, Canada and Britain, served as a Congressional staffer on Capitol Hill and managed several major Canadian public sector agencies. He can be reached at rhikel101@aol.com