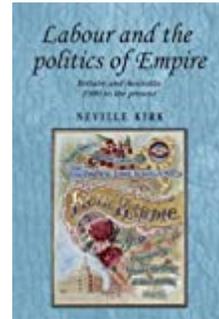


Neville Kirk. *Labour and the Politics of Empire: Britain and Australia 1900 to the present.* Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011. 319 S. \$105.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7190-8079-1.



Reviewed by Chris Wrigley

Published on H-Soz-u-Kult (June, 2014)

N. Kirk: Labour and the Politics of Empire

Professor Neville Kirk has considerable experience in comparing English speaking labour movements. His two volume comparison of British and American labour movements – *Labour and Society in Britain and the USA* (1994) – was an ambitious and successful project, impressive not least for the long period it covers. He later wrote on Britain, the US and Australia over a relatively short span in *Comrades and Cousins. Globalisation, Workers and Labour Movements in Britain, the USA and Australia from the 1880s to 1914* (2003). This book covers just over a century with its main focus on the importance of nation, empire, race and class on British and Australian Labour’s electoral fortunes.

A major feature of Kirk’s work is his pleasure in engaging in concepts. The opening chapter is a fleet footed tour of issues and concepts, ranging from gender and ethnicity to cross-national comparisons to transnationalism. He goes on to apply and discuss such concepts with skill in the ensuing chapters. Comparative history, when not glib, can often offer fresh insights. In this case his themes bring out clearly the substantial differences between British and Australian Labour Parties and also

more links than most would suppose existed in the past.

The Australian Labour Party was hindered more severely than the British by sectarianism. Catholic workers were hostile to communism or anything that could be smeared as such. The British Labour Party was not damaged as much by this, though education policies were divisive, especially before 1914. Largely because of the cities’ bitter religious divisions, British Labour underperformed in Liverpool for many years, and for a shorter period in Glasgow. It still does in Belfast. Some of Labour’s problems lessened markedly after the 1921 Irish settlement. Perhaps the Australian experience of the extent to which sectarianism damaged Labour was mid-way between the British experience and the confessional politics of much of continental Europe.

Neville Kirk makes well his points about the significance of race. Australian Labour was devoted to the White Australia policy until Gough Whitlam’s government formally ended it with the Racial Discrimination Act of 1975. British Labour was less overtly racist, though racist views were often not far from the surface. British trade unions had always sought to control

entry to the labour market, and the racial dimensions of this had been highlighted before 1914 by hostility to Asian sailors, the influx of Jewish refugees to the East End of London and the issue in South Africa (which concerned British labour) of indentured Chinese workers. The British Labour Party's multicultural protestations were undercut in the 1960s as it further limited entry to Britain, effectively on racial grounds, with the Commonwealth Immigrants Act 1968 (building on the Conservatives' 1962 Act).

While Kirk's skilful comparisons bring out differences, they also bring out substantial connections between the British and Australian Labour Parties. It was by no means one way, from the heart of the British Empire to the periphery. Australia could point the way in aspects of social welfare and women's suffrage before 1914. Two states provided non-contributory old age pensions in 1900, and a further state followed in 1907. Women secured the vote at federal level in 1902 and at state level from 1895 to 1911. Kirk rightly makes much of British Labour leaders, Keir Hardie, Ramsay MacDonald and, later, Arthur Henderson, going to see Australian Labour at first hand when Labour there had taken office very briefly at state level in 1899 and then at federal level in 1904, both as minority governments, then in 1910-14 as a majority government. The considerable electoral success of Bob Hawke and Paul Keating, and their Labour governments of 1983-96, was admired by New Labour. Tony Blair, Gordon Brown and John Prescott all visited Australia in the 1990s to learn from Australian Labour's success.

It would have been good if Kirk had explored the

Empire theme further and written a little less about the anti-communism. While anti-communism was very important, the British end at least has had much coverage. I suspect that the first Cold War (1917-40) and the anti-Labour smears has been researched more than Kirk realises and that his usual strong command of the secondary literature is weaker on 1917-24 than for other periods. In contrast, his research in Australia considerably benefits his analysis of Australian Labour's problems.

The book is in John Mackenzie's excellent 'Studies in Imperialism' series, published by Manchester University Press. It provides the series with another fine book. However, the Empire theme might have encouraged greater discussion of the various effects of decolonisation on the British and the Australian Labour Party and the tensions of multicultural societies on both parties. In Australia the success of Tony Abbott in 2013 owed something to such tensions. In Britain after 2010, the Labour Party's electoral recovery was hindered by UKIP, its Euro election leaflet of May 2014 simply declaring under a picture of Ed Miliband, Nick Clegg and David Cameron, 'Our politicians have allowed open-door immigration - Only UKIP will take back control.' (Even this single minded denunciation of immigration was out-trumped by the British National Party, with its Euro 2014 election leaflet headed with 'Ban the Burqa' and the assertion that 'the truth is that UKIP support immigration, especially Muslim immigration'.)

Overall, Kirk's book is a major addition to comparative labour history, and the author demonstrates convincingly the importance of his imperial and racial themes, as well as issues of national identity and class.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/>

Citation: Chris Wrigley. Review of Kirk, Neville, *Labour and the Politics of Empire: Britain and Australia 1900 to the present*. H-Soz-u-Kult, H-Net Reviews. June, 2014.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=42043>

Copyright © 2014 by H-Net, Clio-online, and the author, all rights reserved. This work may be copied and redistributed for non-commercial, educational purposes, if permission is granted by the author and usage right holders. For permission please contact H-SOZ-U-KULT@H-NET.MSU.EDU.