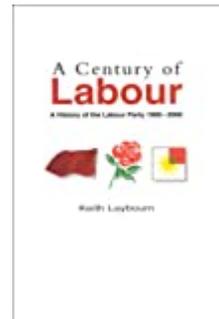




Keith Laybourn. *A Century of Labour: A History of the Labour Party 1900-2000.* Gloucestershire: Sutton Publishing, 2000. xv + 184 pp. \$37.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7509-2305-7.



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Labour Party History

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Keith Laybourn's brief history of the Labour Party is a useful introduction to the party which has gone a long way to transform British politics in the course of the twentieth century. Laybourn traces the party from its initial creation as the Labour Representation Committee in 1900 to the apparent triumph of New Labour following the election of 1997. Along with an introduction and conclusion, he covers the topic in eight chapters: "The Rise of Labour" covers the original creation of Party in 1900 up to World War I (although it would have been useful to include somewhat more recognition of the Lib-Lab trade union MPs in the last decade of the nineteenth century). "Labour at War" deals with the party's inclusion in the World War I coalition and the growth of popular support which went with that. The chapter on "Ramsay MacDonald" covers the period of the first two minoirty Labour governments in the 1920s and would seem to finally dispose of the idea that MacDonald planned or intended to betray the party in 1931. "Collapse and Revival" takes us through the 1930s and to the end of World War II. "The High Point" quite rightly gives credit to Labour's

achievements in the 1945-51 period. "Crisis in the Labour Party" covers the long frustrating Conservative domination in the 1950s and early 60s only marginally modified by the creation of two weak Labour governments in the 1960s and 70s. "Despair, Reconstruction and Revival" covers the apparent turn of the party to the left following the 1979 defeat, the political disasters which followed and the efforts by Party Leaders starting with Neil Kinnock to bring the party back to a more moderate position. The results are shown in Laybourn's final chapter on Tony Blair's "New Labour and the Labour Government" elected in 1997, an excellent, but short, introduction to what New Labour is all about.

Throughout the book there is an emphasis on the evolution of party policy and the ongoing conflicts within the Labour Party between the Left (of some sort of socialist orientation) and the Right (more interested in reaching some sort of accommodation with contemporary capitalism which would make it more just and equitable). Laybourn makes clear that the party was never simply a Marxist organization and always had to try to incorporate a variety of points of view. The Labour Party has

always been at least partially an alliance (albeit a “contentious” one) between the British trade union movement and more radical/marxist/socialist oriented middle class dominated groups such as the Fabians or the Independent Labour Party. And while discussing the evolution of party policy, he also gives some attention to ongoing conflict between the leadership of the Parliamentary Labour Party which sought to maintain its independence against the claims of the Party Conference and the National Executive Committee that determined policy.

But the emphasis on a policy or programmatic perspective helps to remind us of what the book does NOT do. There is little attention to electoral politics (or constituency politics for that matter). But there is enough to make clear that, in Britain which is otherwise so much dominated by London and the South East, the Labour Party owes a great deal to areas outside of London. And the attempts to explain electoral results could well have benefited from more use of poll data in the years since 1950.

There is little attention to the internal dynamics of the trade union movement as it has fought a losing battle for the party’s soul even while being transformed by the changing nature of the British economy which has seen the decline of heavy industries such as mining (and the National Union of Mineworkers) and the rise of various white collar unions. The class base which led the Trades Union Congress to call for representation of workers by

workers in 1860s has gradually been eroded by the new international political economy of the post industrial age. And with the decline of that traditional working class base the Party (in the late 1980s and 1990s) realized that it would have to find a new constituency if it was going to win elections again. Thus New Labour and a further diminished role for the unions.

Nor is there much attention to the actual parliamentary struggle between the Party and its opponents in the House of Commons. The connivance of the other two parties in the 1920s to allow Labour to form minority governments as part of an effort to “educate” the party to the responsibilities of office is not mentioned. The implications of the parliamentary alliance with the Liberals in the late 1970s is barely mentioned.

Having said this, Laybourn still gives us a good introduction to the Party which students and scholars alike should find useful. While less comprehensive than the old Henry Pelling history, it is more up to date. A somewhat longer bibliography would have made it even more useful.

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