

Long Road from Jarrow – Stuart Maconie

The Jarrow march in 1936 is one of those events which has entered British mythology, even if the details are a bit hazy for most of us. In this book Stuart Maconie was intrigued by comparisons being made in the media with current events and conditions in Britain to those of the 1930's. He decided to use the 80th anniversary of the march to walk the identical route and in doing so take the pulse of Britain today and compare it with that of 1936. The success of the book comes from a combination of Maconie's writing style and his ability to engage in conversation with people he met. His willingness to let people speak and his refusal to pass superficial judgement on them allowed a more subtle and nuanced account of how Britain thinks than the two tribes mentality portrayed too readily by sections of the popular media.

He sets the scene well by looking at the thirties through the lens of conditions in Jarrow but also alludes to other popular movements, such as Mosely's Black Shirts and the anti-fascism response which they generated. He also conveys the antipathy to the march of the Labour Party and TUC of the time; but rightly gives Ellen Wilkinson, the local MP, the credit she so richly deserves for her service to her community and her socialist ideals. He also captures that very strange mixture of the sense of purpose the march gave to a town in which 70% of the men were unemployed allied to a somewhat naïve belief that the government of the day would and could do something to provide the work that that the men sought.

Maconie brings their march and his to life with well-chosen anecdotes. The tale of one of the marchers posting home the slice of ham in the sandwich he received at Ferryhill because his family had had no meat for six weeks humanises the plight of Jarrow more effectively than a mass of statistical data.

He does not aim to provide a hagiography of the men but his respect for their quiet dignity never fails to come across. He helps us wonder how they would have received the changed Britain they would now have encountered, with its greater ethnic diversity, its institutional changes and the transformation of industry. I suspect that the North-South divide would seem as great as it was in their time. The original route passed through locations that post-march made their own single word contributions to this country's mythology – Orgreave and Hillsborough. However, he is also able to reflect on some much older conflicts and by doing so reminds us that the veneer of civilised Britain is very thin.

His account of the end of the march, the failure of the prime minister to even acknowledge their effort and the disappearance of the petition they faithfully bore along the journey leave a tinge a sadness. He balances the quote by the last surviving full marcher, Con Whalen, "the march had made not a ha'porth of difference' to the town's fortunes with a perspective from the 1960's that the awareness of the impact on human beings of poverty and unemployment had influenced subsequent policy makers and may have helped the mood of the electorate at the end of the second world war when they voted for the Welfare State.

I had read some of Stuart Maconie's previous books and they informed, entertained and made me think. I am still thinking about some of the events he described and topics he raised. He did not disappoint, although I do fear for the state of his liver after so many meetings and conversations in so many pubs.

Ronnie Glavin