

Book Reviews

Outside In (Peter Hain)
Publisher: Biteback, £20

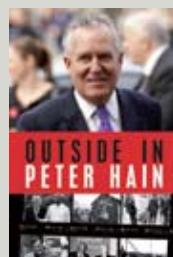
Outside in', but perhaps never totally 'in', is the theme of Peter Hain's memoirs.

Fellow parliamentarians will know him as a consummate campaigner, a most media-savvy politician, and a senior cabinet minister with the good fortune to be in key posts at the right time.

For us South Walians he is recognised as a most diligent constituency MP for Neath, and an approachable and successful Welsh secretary. Some may well ask how, in his own words, did a 'troublemaker, a former Liberal and an ex-South African' ever become MP for a traditional Welsh Valley seat. This very personal memoir provides answers to this and other questions.

The story begins in apartheid South Africa – a radical family, and enforced exile. He came to prominence as a prime mover of the sports boycott. This was the first serious blow to the self-confident regime and paved the way for the business sanctions of the mid-1980s and eventual liberation. As opposition spokesman on Africa for much of the 1980s, I can confirm the accuracy of his analysis of that very different world. So many Conservatives, with convenient amnesia, forget their collusive role at the time. I well recall being roughly elbowed aside in Westminster Hall during Mandela's historic visit by former friends of apartheid seeking the front seats.

The section on political change in Northern Ireland is fascinating. He was a key figure in the formal ending of the IRA's armed struggle and the installation in Stormont of Ian Paisley and Martin McGuinness. Politicians, academics and the general reader will value his insider account on this, and the numerous *vignettes* on issues



such as the abortive negotiations on Israel/Palestine and on Gibraltar.

They will also find of intense interest his description of cabinet debates, the Blair/Brown relationship, and reflections on how to be a minister. Clearly, the experience of being a target of the South African security machine, including his trial for the faked bank robbery, the radical politics of the 1970s and his work as a trade union researcher, hardened him and gave him an excellent hinterland for his work.

The book is a good read. This is not a dry-as-dust account, meticulously trawled from turgid cabinet minutes, nor the perspective of someone at the base camp of politics. He is a man of firm principle, eyes fixed on objectives, flexible on the route. Yet he comes across as a private person, surprisingly conventional and non-trendy.

Hain had experience of many departments, particularly the wide responsibilities in Northern Ireland and Wales – thus understandably, he can illuminate only part of the political landscape. So, for example, Home Office responsibilities, including civil liberties and immigration, are not in focus. But he was there at times of change at home and abroad, where he had a part in changing history.

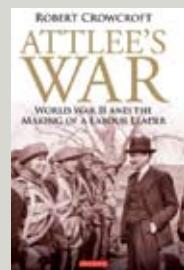
Yet lurking questions remain. Nobody doubts that he is a big hitter, yet he came fifth in the deputy leader contest. He muses at the end of this book, "I have never seen myself as a politicians' politician."

Some critics may claim that there is a whiff of excessive personal apologia, an exaggeration of the personal contribution. The big picture is, however, of an outsider who became a most active and valuable insider, and who in these memoirs has fully succeeded in his stated aim. ■

Lord Anderson of Swansea is a Labour peer

Attlee's War: World War II and the Making of a Labour Leader

(Robert Crowcroft)
Publisher: I.B. Tauris,
£56.50



Throughout the 1930s the whole of Whitehall, and most of Westminster, were in awe of a very great man, Neville Chamberlain. One star-struck MP went into raptures about his 'amazing efficiency and complete mastery over subjects which to me are boring a mourir'. What mattered above all to Chamberlain was the domestic battle that he pursued remorselessly to establish a welfare state based on Tory principles.

A draft manifesto for an election planned for 1940 set out radical proposals: they included action to bring the whole population within the national health services he had already established, a wider and more generous pensions system developing a Chamberlainite achievement of 1925, the introduction of family allowances, and the intensification of his massive slum-clearance programme.

The Labour Party would have been utterly humiliated in Chamberlain's general election that never was. Hitler saved socialism in Britain. It not only survived; for the first time in its history it entered a period of steady political success, described in this extremely important new book by Robert Crowcroft, who teaches political history at Edinburgh University.

Few political conquests have been accomplished as easily as Labour's. No minority party has ever used participation in a coalition government to advance its interests so effectively as Labour after 1940 – providing an object lesson that Mr Clegg would do well to ponder.



Theatre Review

Churchill was Conservative by convenience, not conviction – and never felt the slightest affection for the party, whose leadership he assumed with the utmost reluctance on Chamberlain's resignation in October 1940, in the face of vehement opposition from his wife. As long as he was able to run the war without political interference, he did not much care who ran Britain itself, as long as it was well run. Within two years, highly talented Labour ministers had been appointed to fill most of the principal posts responsible for domestic policy, leaving finance as the only really big prize in Tory hands.

Crowcroft weaves the sorry tale of Tory decline under Churchill deftly into his account of Labour's remarkable triumph. High (and low) politics fell under Labour's sway as it took control of almost all the commanding heights of the state in the first years of the war, and then extended them massively. But his overriding aim in this book is to transform the reputation of Clement Attlee. That 'much maligned and misunderstood man', hitherto widely regarded as possessing modest political talent, is depicted here as the grand master of wartime high politics who brought about Labour's ascendancy.

According to Crowcroft, at every stage Attlee demonstrated political skills of the highest order, exhibiting in particular that single-minded ruthlessness without which success in high politics is rarely achieved. He had no hesitation in authorising fierce public attacks on his Conservative coalition partners when he deemed them to be in his own, and Labour's, best interests.

After attributing unbroken success to Attlee's cunning, sure-footed machinations, Crowcroft concludes that 'in a real sense, he was an English Stalin'. It is appropriate that this provocative book should end on such a controversial note. ■

Lord Lexden is a Conservative peer

Collaborators

(John Hodge) Cottesloe Theatre, South Bank, transfers to Olivier Theatre in April

So much of what happened in Stalin's Russia now seems bloodily surreal that the *Daliesque* qualities of this new play by John Hodge, which started life as a film project and has transmogrified into a zig-zaggy comedy of communist manners, seem perfectly realistic.

It's based on a loose fact. The Russian writer Mikhail Bulgakov, most famous for his two novels *The White Guard* and *The Master and Margarita*, both of which are (in the original) stoutly anti-communist, did accept a commission to write a eulogy of a play about Stalin's youth for the Moscow Art Theatre.

He had little choice. The party had either banned or consigned to the purgatory of permanent rehearsal all his work, bar the communised dramatisation of *The White Guard* (which was reputedly Stalin's favourite play). And whilst the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs (or NKVD) was busy despatching dissident writers, enemies of Stalin and even his friends to the Gulags and/or their deaths, Bulgakov worried not just about his own survival but that of his wife.

Surreal it is. The crazy-paving set by Bob Crowley, and the many ostentatiously hammed-up scenes, make the whole play focus on the most fanciful and yet most delicately played moments. These are a series of secret meetings between Stalin and Bulgakov, played respectively by Simon Russell Beale and Alex Jennings, in which Stalin steadily takes over writing more and more of the play and Bulgakov is enticed into authorising some of Stalin's darkest deeds.

It is a nice conceit and Russell Beale



Dictator as playwright: Simon Russell Beale plays Stalin in John Hodge's *Collaborators*

manages to slide from light irony, in a gentle country (Georgian) accent, into caustic menace with such elegant ease that you can just imagine how he managed to hold his nation in such thrall. Likewise Jennings conveys such a convincing sense of tortured conscience without ever becoming self-pitying that it is easy to imagine oneself faced with the same moral dilemma: to collaborate and save oneself and others, or to hold out in impecunious danger. Mark Addy is good too as the NKVD officer and dramaturge *manqué*.

If I had a quibble it is that in presenting the excerpts of Bulgakov's Stalin play, *Batum*, as satire, the seeping danger of subtle propaganda is missed and the dangerous becomes just absurd.

Mind you, Russia hasn't changed all that much. Under Putin's regime journalists are murdered with impunity, the free media are closed down, political opponents are imprisoned. Maybe the best thing is to laugh at the monster. ■

Chris Bryant is Labour MP for Rhondda