

BOOK REVIEW

**CONSENSUS versus CONTROVERSY:
MODERN BRITISH INTELLECTUAL HISTORY**

Noel Annan, *Our Age: Portrait of a Generation*, London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1990, x, 479 pp.

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'The attitudes of an age-group, no matter how delimited, can never be reduced to a single idea, principle, or theme. This was as true of Europeans born between 1880 and 1900 as it is of us today. But no one who has studied the writings and followed the careers of European intellectuals born during this period can doubt that generationalism was one of the most widespread and deeply enrooted convictions of the "generation of 1914."⁽¹⁾

Generational history is notoriously difficult to write. Many doubt if it is even possible to slice out sections of place and time into self-conscious and self-contained groups and then turn the microscope on what may well prove to be heterogeneous sub-clusters. One way forward, perhaps, is to adopt the personal approach of Lord Annan and depict the intellectual history of his generation in terms of 'the impression I as an individual have formed of the part of our times that I know something about...'⁽²⁾ Annan's ambition is to reject the conventional scheme of examining the cultural and political achievements of the particular age group and instead 'tell the story of my generation in a different way. What did we revolt against and who helped us to form our beliefs? What events influenced us as we grew up? When we did grow up and were in a position to put those beliefs into practice, did we do so? Indeed when some of us entered the

establishment, how did we behave?'⁽³⁾ Yet Annan continues: 'The contribution we made to the intellectual life of the country concerns me. So too does our contribution to politics. All the more so since, as Our Age begins to bow out, we heard some of our number repudiate our assumptions, and we suffered the mortification of being blamed for the political and economic decline of our country.'⁽⁴⁾

The result is a highly detailed—at times excessively so—account and analysis of Britain's first 20th century generation as it matured in the years from 1919 to 1951. It is a challenging, idiosyncratic, infuriating and, above all else, lively version of how Annan's cohort rebelled and adjusted to interwar, war and postwar British society. He admits that for all his generation's fireworks and manifestoes '[w]e were not original. We did not compose new themes and visions of life as our heroic predecessors before 1914 had done.'⁽⁵⁾ Annan has the modesty to acknowledge that: 'We played variations on our predecessors' themes. Only in the natural sciences and mathematics did we rival our forefathers. Our Age produced no socialists comparable in invention and importance to Shaw, Wells, the Webbs and Tawney, no writers of the stature of T. S. Eliot or Joyce or D. H. Lawrence, no thinkers of the originality of Russell or Keynes.'⁽⁶⁾

How then to justify the extraordinary length and care with which Annan has gone about his work? Do we really require lists of one author after another or potted biographies of eminent public figures? All too often *Our Age* resembles past editions of *Who's Who* and the yellowing press files of back numbers of *The Times*. Annan, deploying neither bibliography nor endnotes, uses the approach he perfected in a succession of review articles for *The New York Review of Books* in a determined bid to entertain the general reader. It is doubtful, however, if he or she will find the going too easy when, for example, the author blindly speaks of an intellectual aristocracy that sports 'the Arnold-Trevelyan-Huxley-Darwin-Wedgwood clan', which in turn 'contained members of the Keynes, Vaughan-Williams, Sidgwick, Cornford and Barlow families'⁽⁷⁾. Equally a mere cataloguing of modern authors and architects can hardly help retain the reader's attention or contribute

much to sustaining an argument. There is more than a hint of incest about the entire work; this acts both to deter potential readers and produces the inevitable reaction that senses that this is a *coterie* benefit performance.

Our Age is not a book that will travel well. Its faults, however, deserve to be overlooked for those curious to learn the strengths and weaknesses of contemporary Britain. Once the complacency is pushed to one side⁽⁸⁾ there is still a great deal to be gained. First and foremost the work has a breadth and verve that most academics instinctively shun. It is refreshing to read some one who is prepared to nail his colours to the mast and state openly (and surely correctly, at least in the longterm) that '...Our Age would have to endure the reproach that their failure to join the [European] Community when it was forming was the gravest of all political mistakes they made.' Or again to note that for Annan 'Britain's decline was hastened by one further assumption made by *Our Age* and even more by their elders. That was the assumption that Britain was one of the three great powers. This assumption diverted politicians' attention from the state of British industry and it destabilized the economy. The high level of expenditure overseas and on defence made the balance of payments worse.'⁽⁹⁾ Equally, he is correct to weigh the faults of the postwar Conservative cabinets responsible for persisting in inflating the influence of Britain, for the Suez debacle and the rejection of the entreaties from the founder fathers of the movement for European integration with Attlee's and later Macmillan's record on decolonization. Annan sees 'the peaceful divestment of the Empire' as 'the most successful political achievement of *Our Age*'⁽¹⁰⁾.

Whether his positive assessment of the Thatcher years, however, will prove as accurate as his comments on the consensual era from 1945 to 1979 is far from certain. Annan knows only too well that Thatcher's hopes and achievements are widely divorced but he finds it hard not to admire a prime minister who attacked with such obvious glee and venom the shibboleths held by his generation. He appreciates that the 'fundamental problem on which all others depended—the efficiency of

British industry and a revolution in industrial relations—remained unchanged⁽¹¹⁾, yet he openly applauds her hatred of statism and the dependent society. He correctly senses her impact on morale at home and (even more than he appreciates) abroad. Thatcher's reception in Washington and Tokyo left her, like Churchill in an earlier era, far more popular with those who could not vote than with those who could. She was surely the first postwar premier who 'hated the word consensus. To her it meant weak-kneed compromise. There could be no consensus with the IRA or the National Union of Mineworkers. To achieve anything you must form a policy and see it through'⁽¹²⁾. Undoubtedly true but not necessarily realizable when ministers, civil servants, the media and the public at large were treated as delinquents only just fit to be trusted when out of the nursery. Yet Annan has the grace to note that Mrs. Thatcher frequently had good grounds for her cavalry charges across British society. He rightly titles the conflict between Thatcherism and Our Age as a fight to the death with 'Our Vision of Life Rejected'⁽¹³⁾.

His problem, of course, is that Margaret Thatcher forms part of Annan's generation. The violent distaste that she felt for the results of Our Age's intellectual and political efforts goes totally against the drift of his previous 400 pages. Generationalism that has to attempt to fit together Keynesian economic management, welfarism and a high degree of artistic experimentation within a decade of counter-revolution associated with Mrs. Thatcher can hardly satisfy the reader. Annan recognizes that 'Margaret Thatcher belonged to the last cohort of Our Age, but in the choice and pursuit of her goals she exhibited the hard-headed professionalism of the undergraduates of the 1950s. Why were the educated classes of Our Age so incensed by this remarkable woman, far less hollow than her predecessors, elected and re-elected to lead her country, the victor over the Argentinian militarists and trade union militants—why did they hate the prime minister with a bitterness that had not been seen since the days of Neville Chamberlain?'⁽¹⁴⁾ Annan's reply was that 'she rejected practically all their beliefs and practices. It was she who led the hissing as Our Age made their

exit from the stage'. He feels that it was Thatcher's 'personality that some of Our Age and many of the succeeding generation of intellectuals disliked.'⁽⁵⁾ Certainly, but again this ignores the enthusiasm she could create and avoids the fact that, for example, the poet Philip Larkin frequently went out of his way to endorse her views. So too, as Annan recalls, did the novelist Kingsley Amis and the most famous of all British contemporary painters, Francis Bacon, is cited as distancing him from those ever quick to call Thatcher a philistine.⁽⁶⁾

Noel Annan's attempt to encompass sixty years of British intellectual and public life deserves better, however, than carping over differences in evaluating any single figure. It stands or falls by the totality of its scope. Probably *Our Age* will be used for two purposes: to provide a challenging picture of what it felt like to be a member of an elite, drawn in Annan's portrait from Oxford, Cambridge and the London School of Economics, that won its spurs in the second world war and then presided over the rapid decline of Britain in the ensuing decades and, secondly, as a series of *vignettes* of the major academic and cultural figures of the period. This is very far from being an insular study, though neither the United States' influence nor the recent factor of Japan's value to Britain gain a fair hearing.⁽⁷⁾ We have instead an impressive, Eurocentric picture that informs and amuses simultaneously. Consideration of the present and probable future state of Britain leaves one admitting that Our Age made a better job of things than My Age is fated to do. From now on it is surely Downhill All the Way.

Notes

- (1) Robert Wohl, *The Generation of 1914* (Cambridge, Mass., 1979) p.237. The passage here forms the final lines of a widely quoted study.
- (2) Noel Annan, *Our Age*, p.17
- (3) *Ibid.*, p.16
- (4) *Ibid.*, p.16
- (5) *Ibid.*, p.9

- (6) *Ibid.*, pp.9-10. If *Our Age* has a single representative figure it is, for Annan's liberal conscience at least, the Oxford philosopher and historian Sir Isaiah Berlin.
- (7) *Ibid.*, p.7
- (8) See Perry Anderson's article 'Components of the National Culture' in Alexander Cockburn and Robin Blackburn (eds.) *Student Power* (Harmondsworth, 1969) for a vastly more critical examination of the same period. Anderson acknowledges earlier writings by Annan but sees instead decades of 'arrested development' and disappointment for the Left. Anderson rues the lack in British society of a 'total theory of itself, that should have been either a classical sociology or a national Marxism'.
- (9) *Our Age*, p.352
- (10) *Ibid.*, p.357. It only posed serious domestic consequences in those relatively few areas of Empire where there were substantial settler populations, as in Kenya and Rhodesia. For most of the electorate for most of the postwar period colonial (and indeed foreign) affairs were of little importance.
- (11) *Ibid.*, pp.444-5
- (12) *Ibid.*, p.425
- (13) Chapter heading to chapter 26 of *Our Age*.
- (14) *Our Age*, p.424
- (15) *Ibid.*, p.437
- (16) Annan writes: 'Francis Bacon said it was beside the point whether politicians liked or disliked painting'. The critics never forgave Thatcher for reducing government funding of the arts.
- (17) Annan's *ex cathedra* statement on the penultimate page of a new Japanese menace is quite unsupported by any hard evidence. He simply proclaims that the 'collapse of communism in Europe forced our Age to consider the realities of power. Germany and Japan, their defeated enemies, were now the most powerful economies. America, like Britain after 1918, had become a debtor country. Power always evaporates in debtor countries and passes to their creditors. Would a united Germany, with considerable military power and financial clout, be a benevolent master in Western Europe? No treaty restrictions or demilitarization would impede her will any more than they did in the period between the wars. Japan was far more threatening—a country that ruthlessly had undercut her competitors by deceit and broken promises, a country psychologically as aggressive and arrogant as in 1941, a country as secretly, as it once had been openly, convinced it was the master race, now contemptuous of America, buying up American property and poised to teach her a lesson by selling its technological know-how in electronics to Soviet Russia.' *ibid.*, p.450