

Book Review: Ellen Wilkinson: from Red Suffragist to Government Minister by Paula Bartley

Ellen Wilkinson was a key radical figure in the 20th century British socialist and feminist movement, a woman of passionate energy who was involved in most of the major struggles of her time. In this lively and engaging biography, Paula Bartley looks to chart the political life of this extraordinary campaigner who went from street agitator to government minister whilst keeping her principles intact. This book is clear, concise, and lively, and provides an interesting introductory insight into one of the lesser-known figures of the Labour Left, writes Gordon Bannerman.

Ellen Wilkinson: from Red Suffragist to Government Minister. Paula Bartley. Pluto Press. February 2014.

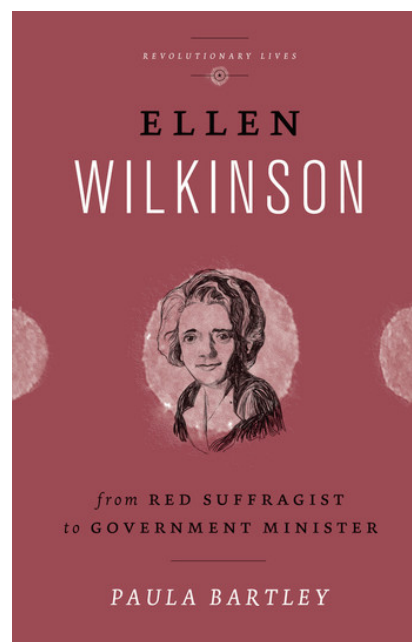
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In *Ellen Wilkinson: from Red Suffragist to Government Minister*, Paula Bartley provides a biographical sketch of an often-neglected figure in twentieth-century British labour history. Written as part of the *Revolutionary Lives* series – which, assessing the lives of individuals in short political biographies, aims to be ‘sympathetic but not sycophantic’ – the author claims Ellen Wilkinson (‘Red Ellen’) as a ‘key radical figure in twentieth century British history’. Certainly, in the first half of the twentieth century, an era long before ‘Blairite babes’, left-wing radical feminists within the trade union-dominated Labour Party were thin on the ground, and scholarly acknowledgment of Wilkinson is long overdue.

Late Victorian and early Edwardian biographies of labour movement politicians predominantly reflected the political advancement and social mobility of labour within the political system. Biographies of Keir Hardie (*From Pit to Parliament*) and Henry Broadhurst (*From Stonemason’s Bench to Treasury Bench*) typically used alliteration and humour to demonstrate this process. Bartley charts a similar but different course, describing political and ideological trajectory rather than personal advancement or the ‘March of Labour’ *per se*. The book is written chronologically which, while appropriate for biography, imparts a highly-narrative structure to the text. Much of the political context revolves around issues of austerity, welfare, and social justice, staple ingredients of working-class politics, and the author draws parallels between the 1930s National Government and the current Coalition Government. As an unashamed admirer of her subject, she locates Wilkinson within that context, as someone whose views retain contemporary relevance.

With a family background in industrial Manchester and Methodism, Wilkinson was heavily influenced by the secular, ethical socialism of the Independent Labour Party (ILP). An active suffragist and feminist, after a university education obtained via a scholarship, she became involved in trade union organisation, and increasingly radicalised, she was a founding member of the Communist Party (CP) in 1920. The Labour Party’s decision to remove the eligibility of CP members to stand as Labour candidates led to her resignation from the CP in 1924, followed by election to Parliament in the same year as the only female Labour MP. In the predominantly male labour movement, the competing claims of class, gender, feminism, and socialism frequently clashed, often leading to Wilkinson assuming outspoken, maverick status. More widely, her emphasis on principles and ideas sparked frustration at Labour’s ideological vacuum. On her appointment to the Programme Committee in 1927 she wrote that it was ‘curiously difficult to produce a programme for a Party which hasn’t a philosophy’ (p. 45).

Out of Parliament after the catastrophic events of the 1931 financial and political crisis reduced Labour to a small



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parliamentary rump, Wilkinson became more left-wing, joining many others on the Left as a fellow-traveller and apologist for Soviet Communism. Wilkinson often made rash political alliances with communist 'front' organisations, and domestically this association was apparent in her involvement in the hunger marches, largely dominated or instigated by the CP. As MP for Jarrow from 1935, Wilkinson was closely involved in the town's fight against mass unemployment and poverty, and despite official Labour Party disapproval of extra-parliamentary political activities, participated in the famous march to London in 1936.

Wilkinson's famous book *The Town That Was Murdered* provided a compelling narrative within working-class politics of the cold indifference of economic orthodoxy, and contributed towards the wave of working-class opinion towards acceptance of Keynesianism and Beveridge. Obviously influenced by Hobson and ILP economic doctrine, Wilkinson appears to have followed under-consumptionist theory but as the author concedes, was neither a 'profound' nor 'original' economic thinker (p. 136). The presentation of the Jarrow petition was indicative of the faith of the British working class in the ameliorative effects of constitutional methods and the parliamentary system. Bartley correctly identifies the tension, a constant feature of her political life, between Wilkinson's belief in the revolutionary transformation of society and her recognition that parliamentary activity was the most assured means of achieving socialist objectives.

Yet it was foreign affairs which increasingly concerned Wilkinson as the 1930s progressed. Visiting Germany in 1936, she broke the story of Hitler's impending march into the Rhineland, and was a passionate advocate of intervention in Spain. From an influential strategic position on Labour's National Executive Committee, she collaborated with the *Tribune* group to promote the idea of an anti-fascist Popular Front but left-wing idealism was increasingly tempered by pragmatism dictating the importance of staying attached to Labour as the only organization capable of advancing a socialist reform agenda. The 1939 Nazi-Soviet pact marked the end of Wilkinson's admiration of Soviet Communism, and Churchill's broad-based wartime government brought minor office, as Parliamentary Private Secretary to Herbert Morrison, and an important role organising public services, alongside frequent visits to heavily-bombed areas during the Blitz.

For Ellen Wilkinson, making the transition from being a critic of government to taking responsibility for policy was difficult. In stressing the need for a national war effort, notably supporting the Emergency Powers Act and direction of labour, she alienated many workers by appearing to casually sacrifice trade union rights. Moreover, after 1945, she was increasingly influenced by the electoral arguments of Morrison (with whom she had a long-standing affair) that Labour must appeal to moderate opinion and broaden out from its trade union base. Her endorsement of the 1945 programme *Let Us Face the Future* signified that her 'youthful aim to follow a revolutionary road to socialism was now well and truly relinquished' (p. 117). Politically maladroit attacks on Attlee's leadership in the post-war period, part of a misguided attempt to install Morrison as leader, displayed a lack of tact and judgment. Nevertheless, Attlee appointed her Minister of Education, something of a poisoned chalice implementing post-war education reforms, before her death in 1947. The book concludes with a commentary on contemporary politics, which attempts to draw parallels (not entirely convincingly) between the inter-war National Government, and the contemporary Coalition Government, and which elevates the 1945 Attlee Government as the exemplar of reformist socialism, worthy of emulation by the present-day Labour Party. Locating Wilkinson's life through the prism of contemporary politics, the author contrasts her 'passionate concern' with the present Government's lack of 'natural understanding' of the lives of the poor. (p. 135)

Bartley skilfully drives the narrative forward, taking account of the multiple and often fragmented facets of Wilkinson's political creed. She is sufficiently realistic to acknowledge that while Wilkinson was honest, passionate, and hard-working she lacked the tact, skill, and ability to compromise necessary to become a front-rank politician. Since Wilkinson left no private papers, evaluating ideological and personal influences on her political thought, motives, and actions is extremely difficult but more analysis of how personal relationships, notably with Morrison but also others, influenced Wilkinson's political career, may have helped. Despite the rather narrative account relating achievements and events, the book is clear, concise, and lively, and provides an interesting introductory insight into one of the lesser-known figures of the Labour Left. Inevitably, in a short biography, many complex issues are condensed and simplified, and the text will not alter or transform the historiography of Labour and the Left in the twentieth century but if it stimulates further interest in its subject then it will have succeeded in its primary objective.

Dr Gordon Bannerman is a private tutor, researcher, writer, and author based in Dundee. He received his Ph.D. from King's College London in 2005, having previously studied medieval and modern history at the London School of Economics and King's College London (BA: LSE, 1997; MA: KCL & LSE, 1998). He has previously taught Modern British History at the University of Dundee, King's College London, and the London School of Economics. [Read more reviews by Gordon.](#)

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