Class-crossed lovers

SOFIE BUCKLAND REVIEWS ATONEMENT

James McAvoy as Robbie

ENGLAND, 1935, and four children are putting on a play. The author, Briony, forced to give the lead role to another, snaps: "if I cannot be the lead, I think I will direct, thank you very much".

So the scene is set for *Atonement*, the film adaptation of Ian McEwan's 2001 novel. The film revolves around Briony's fantasies and need for drama, and the one mistake for which she is too old to be completely forgiven.

In the summer of 1935, the Tallis household is waiting for weekend guests. Beautifully shot and acted, the scene evokes the political tension and sexual repression of the late 1930s.

Briony (Romola Garai), the youngest Tallis at 13, is frustrated that her play will not be performed for guests, and desperately seeking drama. In the background to her typewritten fantasies, her sister Cecilia (Keira Knightley) falls in love with the university-educated housekeeper's son Robbie (James McAvoy). With the collected incidents of a perceived sexual humiliation, a pornographic love letter and the sexual assault of a guest, the scene is set for Briony's lie, turning the course of the protagonist's lives for good.

The film jumps four years to World War Two, following Robbie as a jarringly over-educated private soldier amongst working-class London lads in Northern France. The scenes at Dunkirk are surreal and hellish — from soldier's choirs in broken bandstands to the shooting of the horses, to the torn, bombed out sailing ship on the beach, McAvoy's character wanders desperately, unaware if he'll ever make it home. Neither these nor the London hospital scenes flinch from the horrors of war, the blood, or the tension for lovers of waiting to see if either survives.

There are even hints of anti-war sentiment, rather than the usual nostalgic patriotism in such films — Robbie's companion, a cheeky working-class Cockney, jokes about giving Europe to Germany because "Britain's got Africa", a tacit acknowledgement of the imperial roots of the war. Later, in Dunkirk, the audience catches the end of an anti-hierarchy army song.

The war is shown from a working-class perspective — the nurses, the soldiers lost in France with no superiors, the bloody, dirty horror of it, with no mention of the glories of war. There are no Germans, or imperial sentiments about the honour of dying for one's country, or even a purpose. It's just hell.

And, aside from the war, this is no ordinary story of frustrated love across the classes — McAvoy's Robbie is bright, aspiring and looks to have almost escaped his working-class background. At the beginning of the film it seems almost possible, despite the class divide, that he could win the girl from the big house.

But as Robbie writes Cecilia an explicit note, it's hard to avoid shouting at the screen — his acceptance into the bourgeois world is shaky to say the least, and unlikely to withstand any sexual transgression.

Neither is this a story of working-class desire to become bourgeois. Whilst discussing university with Cecilia, McAvoy's character forcefully declares he will "pay [her] father back" for funding him through Cambridge. Later, in the Dunkirk scenes, he writes a letter talking of a "life without shame" — searching, throughout the film, simply for dignity.

Of course, all of this is tempered by the film's last twist (don't worry, I won't reveal it – go see for yourself), which entirely changes the character of the story. Far above the tale of class-crossed lovers, this is a film about Briony's lie, and her continual drive to both atone for her mistake, and become the central character in the drama of her life.

Good haters, bad democrats

DALE STREET REVIEWS THE BLAIR YEARS — EXTRACTS FROM THE ALASTAIR CAMPBELL DIARIES

"Some twat with a Trot poster came up to me on the way in (to the conference) and yelled 'Butcher! Traitor!' at me," writes Campbell in his diary entry for 29 April 1995. "I stopped and mustered as much visual contempt as I could, then assured him that if we win the general election, then don't worry — thanks to wankers like him, there will always be another Tory government along afterwards. These people make me vomit."

There are many people in Campbell's diaries who make him want to vomit.

Roy Hattersley is "a fat pompous bugger". Bernard Ingham is "a silly old fucker". Matthew Parris is "a little shit". Martin Sixsmith is "a twat". Simon Jenkins is "a total wanker". And as for Clare Short, singled out for serial abuse throughout Campbell's diaries, she is "the most self-indulgent and attention-seeking of all the Shadow Cabinet … God, does she turn my stomach."

In fact, such is Campbell's general disdain for the rest of humanity that, asked on one occasion by Peter Mandelson whether he actually likes anyone, Campbell names only his children and his partner (when she is not arguing) — "the rest can fuck off."

There are also many people in Campbell's diaries who make his patron, Tony Blair, want to vomit as well. Trade unions and trade union general secretaries feature particularly prominently amongst such people.

When Campbell "reported back to TB" after a meeting with the then UNISON General Secretary Rodney Bickerstaffe, who had "come round for another general whinge", Blair's response was to tell Campbell: "They can just fuck off. We will never get elected if every little change produces this kind of nonsense."

The "little change" in question was the re-writing of Clause Four. Union opposition to the re-writing of Clause Four was a particular target of Blair's loathing: "Pat (McFadden) called to say the TGWU were joining UNISON in opposing us (over Clause Four). This produced the inevitable tirade (from Blair): 'These people are criminally stupid. They simply do not care if we win or lose'."

In the run-up to the 1995 TGWU conference, Blair launched a further broadside at the union: "He (Blair) was almost speechless with rage. 'These people are stupid and they are malevolent. … They complain that we want to distance ourselves, and then give us all the evidence why we should distance ourselves. I have no option but to go up there (to TGWU conference) and blow them out of the water. I'm finished with these people. Absolutely finished with them."

Blair's opinion of Labour Party members, and Labour Party activists in particular — of whom there were still a substantial number when Blair was elected party leader — was scarcely any higher than his opinion of trade union activists.

Party activists were simply out of touch with the real world. In December of 1994 the press ran a story that Labour intended taxing school fees. Campbell records Blair's response on being informed of the press coverage: "The exasperated silence spoke volumes. He went into one of his 'will we ever get serious' tirades. Do we care about what a few activists think, or do we care about what millions of people think?"

Activists also failed to recognise the promethean status of Blair himself. In the 1997 election campaign Campbell writes: "Phillip Gould called from the (focus) groups to say there was a real sense that TB had the energy and the drive to get Britain going. That was the same message coming through on the phone banks in the Pennine belt. I said to TB later: 'So much of this hangs on you.' He sighed: 'I know, and the only people who don't know it are in the Labour Party'."

Blair had even less time for Labour traditions than he had for its members: "TB would push change as hard as it would go, and he was able to do it because he was different. His lack of roots actually in some ways helped politically. He could do things Neil (Kinnock, Blair's predecessor-but-one) might have wanted to do but would have found more difficult."

When Blair decided to send one of his children to a grant-maintained school, one of his advisers suggested that "it gave the party the sense he (Blair) wasn't one of them." In a rare moment of incisiveness, Campbell points out that not being "one of them" is "his (Blair's) strength and his weakness." It was his "strength" because it meant that he was not hidebound by tradition. And it was his "weakness" because it isolated him from the broader party membership.

Blair was much more on the Lib Dems' political wavelength than on that of the movement of which he had been elected political leader.

On the eve of Labour's election victory in 1997 Blair was already considering the idea of a merger with the Lib Dems: "He (Blair) stunned me straight out with the boldest plan yet. 'How would people feel if I gave Paddy (Ashdown) a place in the Cabinet and started merger talks?' Fuck me. I loved the boldness of it, but doubted he could get it through the key players. … He'd hinted at it a few times in the past, but this sounded like a plan. … We flew back by helicopter. TB asked me repeatedly if I thought he could put Ashdown in the Cabinet. 'It makes sense politically,' he said."

If the publication of Campbell's diaries has any value, then it is to confirm the extent to which the Blairite takeover of the Labour Party was not simply just another shift to the right — of which there has been no shortage in the party's history — but a 'project' undertaken by political forces fundamentally hostile to the history, values and traditions of the labour movement.

In fact, however, it is questionable in the extreme whether the publication of the diaries serves any political purpose whatsoever.

Such occasional anecdotes and incidents apart, the diaries are largely taken up with what Campbell himself refers to as "Peyton fucking Place" — the trivia and title-tattle of the personal grouses and relationships of members of Blair's Shadow Cabinet and of his first and second governments.