

Ray Ferris reviews 'Oscar Wilde', by Richard Ellman. Penguin, £6.99.

Oscar Wilde was born in 1853 into an Irish middle-class family — Protestant and Republican. Educated at Trinity College, Dublin, then Oxford, Wilde quickly developed the ideas and characteristics that would make him famous.

The charges of plagiarism, insincerity and indecency — ones that would become more familiar — levelled by the critics at Wilde's 'Poems' thrust him into the limelight and prompted an American lecture tour. Wilde, having already made a reputation for himself as a well read and witty conversationalist, would champion his ideas of an aesthetic renaissance, against American materialism. He would fight for an appreciation of "the beautiful".

Wilde was also very grateful for the tour's income — his generosity and his capacity to spend more than he earned haunted him till his deathbed.

Wilde in America declared art as both the secret and the future to life. His ideas were to change and develop, culminating in the two essays 'Pen, Pencil and Poison' and 'The Decay of Lying' at the end of the 1880s. He asserts "no essential incongruity between crime and culture". In 'The Decay' he presents his finished views on art in his typical style of deliberate paradox.

"As a method Realism is a complete failure." For Wilde "Life imitates Art, Life in fact is the mirror, and Art the reality....As long as a thing is useful or necessary to use, or affects us in any way...it is outside the proper sphere of Art". An age does not shape art; rather, art gives an age its character.

These bold idealistic assertions became a pole of attraction. As Ellman says, "Wilde restored art to the power that the romantic poets had claimed for it, able once again to legislate for the world."

Wilde was also a socialist. In 'The Soul of Man Under Socialism' he declared socialism to be a means to an end, that end being a new individualism. In 'Dorian Grey' (1891) Wilde's clear theme is that, "To become a work of art is the object of living." As Ellman notes, "'Dorian Grey', besides being about aestheticism, is also one of the first attempts to bring homosexuality into the English novel." The enthusiastic response of Lord Alfred Douglas to 'Dorian Grey' led to his relationship with Wilde.

Wilde declared himself an anarchist and avowed a horror of democracy. In 'The Soul of Man' he wrote: "There are three kinds of despots. There is the despot



Oscar Wilde, gay martyr

who tyrannises over the body. There is the despot who tyrannises over the soul. There is the despot who tyrannises over the body and soul alike. The first is called the Prince. The second is called the Pope. The third is called the People."

The vision Wilde outlined is a utopia. Though he sincerely sympathised with the sufferings of the working class, he argued largely from the point of view of his own class. There must be no authority, or no government, since absence of government is "most suitable to the artist".

Wilde's sexuality became both a creative driving force and the source of his downfall. After his marriage to Constance Lloyd in 1884, Wilde's interest in men increased.

In 1892 Wilde met up with Lord Alfred Douglas, son of the eccentric Marquess of Queensbury and a young student at Oxford, who arranged to meet Wilde after reading 'Dorian Grey'.

Wilde was introduced to a circle of high society male prostitution — what he later was to call "feasting with panthers". Both Wilde and Douglas ('Bosie' in Wilde's letters) slept with the boys. Their relationship became more intense.

Douglas would have fits of temper and spent Wilde's money at a frightening rate. He insisted on being wined and dined and

kept in luxurious hotels. Wilde made several attempts to end their relationship, even going abroad and leaving a false address, but each time succumbed to Douglas' will. Wilde began to lose close friends over the affair.

Ellman notes: "It says much for Wilde's seriousness as an artist that under such pressure he worked at his best." Indeed, in the 15 months before suing Queensbury, Wilde wrote most of four plays and completed a fifth — his last and greatest play, 'The Importance of Being Earnest'. One of the charges he would later level at Douglas was that being with Douglas stalled his creativity.

Douglas failed his exams at Oxford, infuriating his father who blamed Wilde and who was determined to take action against him. Wilde became caught between father and son. His fate became increasingly clear. Ironically, Wilde made the first move.

Goaded by Douglas, he sued Queensbury for libel in 1885 — it was legal suicide. Not only did Wilde lose the case, incurring costs, but his defence was forced to concede that his being called a sodomite was in the public interest. His arrest was certain. But Wilde hesitated. Instead of taking off to France, he was led off to Bow Street Police Station.

Most of Wilde's friends peeled away after his arrest. Some fellow homosexuals fled the country;

others chose to ignore him. 'Bosie' Douglas, for his part, visited Wilde daily and obviously still captivated him.

It took two trials to convict Wilde. In between he was granted bail and again urged to flee, but refused. He later wrote to Douglas: "I decided that it was nobler and more beautiful to stay...I did not want to be called a coward or deserter. A false name, a disguise, a hunted life, all that is not for me."

Ellman suggests "he submitted to the society he had criticised, and so earned the right to criticise it further." His mother's impassioned plea adds another dimension: "If you can stay, even if you go to prison, you will always be my son. It will make no difference to my affection. But if you go, I will never speak to you again."

Wilde faced a hostile judge, and a public scandal — his plays were cancelled during the trials. He was given the maximum sentence for indecency: two years hard labour. The costs of the trial were later to bankrupt him. Wilde's life had been ruined by Douglas and his obsessive father.

Wilde was scapegoated. Public schools in England were rife with male love. One of the reasons Wilde was sent to a second trial, after the first failed to convict, was to protect Lord Rosebery, Foreign Minister under Gladstone, who had a reputation for homosexual affairs. High society closed its ranks and could not have hoped for an easier victim.

The late 19th century was the era when sex first began to be discussed seriously as a social and psychological fact, producing a mass of literature and the new discipline of sexology. Wilde's trial laid down an important marker, forbidding the love that "dare not speak its name". It would take another seven decades before the positive assertion of gayness.

Paradoxically the persecution of Wilde helped consolidate and cohere a homosexual identity that fed into the gay movement of 70 years later.

Wilde survived for only three years after prison. Wilde's last years were sad and lonely — staying in downmarket Parisian hotels, cadging money, and shuffling from bar to bar. Ellman believes Wilde died of syphilis contracted in his youth. Whatever the physical cause, prison and ignominy killed his creative spirit: "My life is like a work of art. An artist never starts the same thing twice."

Ellman's book is thoroughly researched and well written, peppered with Wilde's epigrams and quotes from his work. He presents a tragic affair. My only regret — in the nature of a biography — as I neared the end, was that the story was true.

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From Fatal Shore to Bondi Beach

Belinda Weaver reviews 'The Fatal Shore', by Robert Hughes. Collins and Harvill.

The publication of Robert Hughes' 'The Fatal Shore' has coincided rather neatly with the celebration of Australia's Bicentennial. The hype of the two hundred years 'celebration' has helped sales of the book. And the book provides an antidote to the distortions and jingoism of the Bicentennial 'party'.

It's chic now in Australia to claim convict descent. Everyone wants to get in on the act. Tracing family history is now a national obsession. The convict past, no longer the shameful stigma it was, seems just another lovable aspect of Australia's history. Aussies are supposed to be ruggedly independent, jovial, anti-authoritarian, loyal to their mates, fond of the outdoor life. The popular image of the convict — a republican outcast in British society, or an early trade unionist — chimes in with this 'typical Aussie' image.

Hughes' book answers many questions — the who, what, why and how of Australia's founding. It's a timely and necessary book. For too long, Australian children learned only British history. Our own past was taboo, dealing as it did with the convicts, the suppression of the Aborigines, the bushrangers and the split from Britain's rule. The Australian past was too close for comfort. Better the recital of far away kings and queens than an investigation of the fatal shore. The current tide of nationalism in Australia bends the stick too far the other way. Far from being shamed or worried by the past, Australians want to celebrate it, get drunk on it. Both approaches end up hiding the truth.

Hughes has ripped open the past. This is no anodyne history aimed at pleasing the world. It is raw truth and history, bloody, violent and savage. It gets at the real beginnings, not simply with the first white foot on Australian soil in 1788. It tells us where that foot came from and why. It also describes Australia before the white man. No Garden of Eden, peopled with noble savages but a harsh, dry land peopled with a stone-age race with little culture, living a hand-to-mouth

existence with no agriculture, no domestic animals, no permanent structures. Hughes romanticises nothing.

The British convict experiment was a desperate solution to a desperate problem. A whole continent would become a jail. Georgian Britain was a cruel society. Those with money and position clung grimly to them, with the law firmly on their side. Crimes against property were punished more severely than any other, often ending with hanging. The ruling class believed in the existence of a criminal 'class' — a set of bad apples who would turn the rest rotten. The need was to punish them, and if possible, to segregate them for the sake of the 'good'. Can anything have seemed more futile than this experiment?

Attacking the symptoms of extreme poverty couldn't cure the cause. People stole to stay alive in a world which denied them a living. Laws and punishment could not deter the starving from stealing food or money to survive. In many cases, the amounts stolen were pitifully small, but the punishments were heavy — long imprisonment or death.

Yet Georgian Britain lacked the prisons or the police to manage its criminal problem. Many convicts had previously been sent off to America at the expense of colonists for whom they were forced to work on arrival. This form of slavery was closed after the American War of Independence. A new solution was needed. Many prisoners were locked up on rotting hulks, but this was only temporary. The hulks themselves were overcrowded and were so unsafe that many sank with all aboard. They were filthy and hotbeds of crime. They provided no real answer.

So the Australian experiment was tried. Luckily, this new venture was so far away that few convicts would ever return. 14,000 miles — the end of the world. To many convicts, the mere thought of it evoked death. It was simply unimaginable. Not only the convicts worried. The Marines who sailed with the First Fleet were also anxious. They were sailing into a complete unknown. Letters and supplies could take six months or longer to arrive. Many would not see families and friends for many years, if ever. Australia seemed worse than death. Death could be imagined, Australia could not.

The First Fleet were lucky to survive. Their journey was horrendous. The victualling of the ship had been done by crooked merchants, so many supplies were rotten. The rigours of the journey killed many. The Fleet sailed with no special precautions against scurvy; the weather was bad; convict insubordination was rife; and morale was low in the crew. Their arrival at Botany Bay was a let-

down. Though glad that the journey was finally ended, they were appalled to discover the Bay unsuitable for settlement. A further search found Port Jackson just a few miles north; a natural harbour, teeming with fish and with rich soil and abundant water. The site of modern Sydney was eagerly settled.

But it didn't live up to its early promise. The soil was poorer than expected, seeds failed to thrive, the rain came down in buckets or not at all. The Fleet faced starvation years until the Second Fleet could arrive to succour them. Bad beginnings.

Convicts were fed 'on the store'. The government were the main supplier of all food and goods. Convicts were set to work building shelters and tilling the soil. No need for a prison here; the whole country was one. No convict could escape and hope to



survive. The Australian bush was inhospitable to all but the Aborigines who could find waterholes and live off the native animals and insects. Totally ignorant of geography, many convicts fled, hoping to find China or some other hospitable land. All they found was a lonely death.

After the starvation years, the convicts could hope for a better lot. Instead of being stuck in prison, they were assigned to work for free settlers. In time, they could hope to get tickets-of-leave, and become free settlers themselves, though they could not leave the colony. For many, this was the road to a respectable living, the living that 'old England' couldn't provide. But many convicts met a harsher fate. Assigned to brutal masters who worked them to the bones and flogged them at will, many convicts preferred death itself.

Many convicts, usually the 'hardened criminals', were not assigned, but worked in government chain gangs doing the hardest work, such as road building. Life on the gangs was grim. Heavy irons weighed them down. The legs of many were open sores from the incessant chafing. The work was punishing, their overseers were cruel and arbitrary, often stealing the food meant for the convicts.

There was no thought of rehabilitation for criminals. The system had to be cruel if it was to deter the criminal back 'home'. Thus punishment and work was the never ending round, with special places of punishment created for persistent offenders.

In places like Macquarie Harbour, men often worked knee deep all day in freezing water, building pylons for a bridge, and spent cheerless nights on a wind-swept, rocky island with no blankets and with empty bellies. For whistling, smiling, singing or loafing, endless lashings were given. Men had little enough to be cheerful about, anyway. Talking was frowned upon, as all convicts were suspected of plotting some crime. The system brutalised because it denied any humanity to the convict. He had to be crushed absolutely so that he could never commit a crime again. Such was the system on the fatal shore.

The special hells created included Norfolk Island, Moreton Bay and Port Arthur, as well as the frightful Macquarie Harbour. Run by sadistic men who were beyond the control of any government, they were precursors of the 20th century gulags. They aimed to break men utterly, by consistent hard work, by flogging and by crushing discipline. Men were given thousands of lashes. The faces of spectators would be splashed with flesh and blood. The cat o' nine tails frequently wore out. Blood would slop in the shoes of the lashed man. One man had so little skin left on his back from incessant floggings that his shoulder blades showed through.

In creating these special hells, the system was fulfilling its deterrent role. Men would rather die than go there; many killed themselves or killed others in suicide pacts to escape.

'The Fatal Shore' is living history. It could have been just a catalogue of horrors, or a list of numbing statistics. But Hughes has found the language to touch our hearts and minds. He has made the unimaginable imaginable.

He has also touched on three taboo areas in some detail — the treatment of women, the existence of homosexuality and the fate of the Aborigines.

The 'popular' view of convict women is that they were all prostitutes. This is shown to be false. Many, like men, simply stole to survive. Many had been seduced and abandoned, but not all had turned to prostitution as a result. Some had been Irish nationalists or agitators of one kind or another. The colony's treatment of them was shameful. In the Female Factory at Parramatta, men could come to feel the merchandise before choosing a wife. When a new ship arrived, men turned up to take their pick of the women; the rest were sent to

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the Female Factory. Most needed a man's help to get on.

The 'curse' of homosexuality was decried by all managers of the convict system. The jailers were surprised that locking men up together, far from the sight of women, should result in homosexuality. It was rife throughout the colony, especially in the hell holes like Norfolk Island. No wonder that prisoners took what solace they could from each other. Yet the official reports drip with loathing and contempt for these 'unnatural practices'. It had to be stamped out. But floggings had no effect, though the punishment was severe.

The official policy towards the Aborigines was always one of peaceful coexistence. All the same, the advent of the white man was an unmitigated disaster for the Aborigines. In Tasmania, they were completely wiped out; their numbers today on the mainland are still small. They could never defeat the white man militarily, and they succumbed in huge numbers to two imported evils, disease and liquor.

The spread of white settlement forced tribes out of their natural hunting grounds and into conflicts with other tribes. The convicts hated them. Themselves the lowest on the white ladder, they longed for someone they could beat down. The Aborigines became their victims. When convicts became free and got some land for themselves, they kept their mistrust of the Aborigines, who had often helped to track down escaped convicts for the government. As more of the country became settled, white settlers killed off Aborigines rather than live in fear of attack. Poisoned flour was given out, along with tobacco and rum.

Aborigines had no settled religion or gods, but they did have an almost mystical attachment to their land. Certain sites were sacred to them. In driving them off, settling on these sacred sites, and barring them from their traditional grounds, white settlers destroyed the Aborigines' relationship with the land, and thus their whole way of life. This fact must stand with the other facts of disease and drunkenness as one of the destroyers of Aboriginal life.

For many convicts, arrival on the fatal shore had been utter misery. But others had prospered, had made a living, and could call themselves free. This fact led many criminals in Britain to petition for the chance to be transported. They too hoped to finally reach a better life. Even free settlers were becoming more numerous. Some settlers talked of independence from Britain and the end to transportation. Free, waged workers would be better value than convicts. The colony was developing its own life and politics different from that of

England. England wanted things to be tightened up, with more Moreton Bays and Port Arthurs to deter the criminals at home; many colonists wanted a free Australian society, rid of the convict stain. By 1840 transportation to New South Wales had officially ended.

With all the hype of the Bicentennial promoting a healthy outdoor life in a sunny climate, thousands of Britons are now queuing up to emigrate to Australia, which has changed its image from fatal shore to the land of sunshine and opportunity. But the Bicentennial advertising hides the truth about the present as much as it does the truth about the past. You'll find the real story in the pages of 'The Fatal Shore'.

State of the unions

Alan Gilbert reviews 'Trade Unions in Britain Today' by John McIlroy. Manchester University Press, £5.95.

"In the past management couldn't shift you without the agreement of the union; now it's done without consultation..."

"It means you never get to know any of the blokes, it breaks up any unity..."

"In the old days the target was set by timing the operator; now the target is based on the gross potential of the machine. That means they set the machine as fast as possible and you have to keep up with it..."

That's the reality of modern 'flexible working', as described by a worker at the Longbridge BL/Austin Rover car factory. Much of the picture of trade unions in Britain today is a grim one: legal attacks, battered organisation, demoralised leaders, speed-up.

John McIlroy paints the picture soberly and in detail, without any false optimism. But he also notes carefully the counter-tendencies, the reservoirs of strength, the potential for a fight back.

"The changes taking place (in the workplace) are real, not superficial or temporary, but they are, on the whole, changes *within* the working class. What we are observing is not a withering away, but a *reconstitution* of the working class...The working class is *expanding not shrinking*..."

"There is no iron law which dictates that unions cannot recruit



women, part-time employees... There is nothing intrinsic in possessing a mortgage, owning a video or purchasing shares which is antagonistic to holding a union card. A recent MORI poll found, for example, that 80% of union members own their own home, 9% more than the public generally... (Another) survey found a massive 88% believing that trade unions are essential to protect workers' interests.

"While the unions have suffered important reverses compared with the previous two decades, we are still witnessing national industrial action — absent in the dog-days of the twenties and thirties. And the resilience of the unions is illustrated by the spate of disputes in the mines, the civil service, the schools, the car industry and the Post Office in 1986-87".

Gay fiction best sellers

Clive Bradley reviews 'The Beautiful Room is Empty', by Edmund White (Picador); and 'The Lost Language of Cranes', by David Leavitt (Penguin).

Edmund White is probably the world's top gay writer, at least in English. You can find his 'A Boy's Own Story' on railway station bestsellers' stands. 'The Beautiful Room is Empty' is his latest, and best, novel.

I have not generally enjoyed his previous work. He tends to write about desperately sophisticated people who bitch subliminally at each other. His last novel, 'Caracole', was an excruciatingly poised examination of a decadently suave society on the verge of revolution.

On one level 'The Beautiful Room' is similar — the characters are all Greenwich Village-type young artists who flirt with communism because it is fashionable. The unnamed central character, who is an aspirant genius, has beautifully artistic traumas.

Yet here there is a great deal more genuine self-mockery than in previous books. It is, in fact, the sequel to 'A Boy's Own Story' in which our hero goes to college, discovers anonymous sex in university toilets and eventually gets caught up in the 1969 Stonewall Riot, the protest which initiated the modern gay movement.

White's subject matter is homosexuality and homosexuals in middle class 1960s America. It is a novel about the change that took place in homosexuals' self-perception in this period — the transformation from immense guilt and self-contempt, to the feeling that came later to be called 'Pride'. Stonewall is here only the end of a story, the first pangs of a new sense of riotousness, still very embryonic, but White captures that feeling well.

None of his characters are happy being gay. They go to shrinks, try to date girls or attempt doomed marriages. Aggressively dumping it up is often no more than an expression of self-hatred. Yet there is a new consciousness of sexuality on the way, and the scourge of AIDS is two decades in the future.

'The Beautiful Room' is both politically and artistically more satisfying than White's previous novels. I actually felt that I liked the characters for once.

If White's subject is gay America in the 1960s, Leavitt's is gay America in the early 1980s. His first, extraordinary novel, 'The Lost Language of Cranes' is nevertheless different to White in more than chronology.

At its centre is a family in which a gay son, Phillip, comes out to his parents as a result of a failed relationship. This acts as a catalyst to the very belated coming out of his father. So there is an intricate web of relationships — husband and wife with a marriage slowly decaying, father and son finally getting to know each other, mother and son failing to do so.

It is a remarkably believable story, with absolutely believable characters, depicted so vividly that you have to read on to know what happens to them. Leavitt captures everything with poignant accuracy: the traumatic decline of Phillip's first love affair, the tension between guilt and release in his father's gradual coming to terms with himself, his mother's impatient indifference. It is a very human book.

Phillip's father is one of the closet-cases of White's generation, finding satisfaction after a lifetime of self-oppression. Phillip

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is a child of the gay movement itself, or at least a product of the social change it brought about: when he decides he is gay he goes up to very vague friends at college to inform them; he moves in a world where there is an open gay scene as well as sordid porno shows.

Moreover, whereas all White's characters are eccentric or exotic or even slightly mad, Leavitt's are 'normal', down-to-earth, lower middle class people. Philip's parents worry about losing their apartment; they are glad their son has gone to college.

The two novels together could hardly be said to give a 'picture of gay America'; what they do suggest is the extent to which 'gay fiction' has come out of its ghetto. Both books are published by major publishing houses, although neither author has a 'reputation' independently of their writing about homosexuality.

Others may see this as unwanted respectability; to me it seems a good sign, especially in these times of Section 28. The more libraries that stock them, the better.

The USSR's ruling class

Chris Reynolds reviews 'The Soviet Union Demystified', by Frank Furedi. Junius, £5.95.

Frank Furedi argues that the Soviet bureaucracy is not a ruling class, and is not imperialist. His arguments don't convince me.

It is not a ruling class because its role in production has to be imposed by political power, rather than flowing from automatic economic mechanisms; and because the individual bureaucrats' competitive striving for personal advantage disunites it.

Criteria of this sort can be used to define out of existence almost every class in history. What about the bureaucratic ruling classes of ancient Eastern despotisms, who intervened in the basic process of production (agriculture) only to despoil the peasants? What about the feudal landlords, constantly warring with each other, and unifiable only by an absolute monarchy?

The ruling bureaucracies in the Eastern bloc have a distinctive relation to the means of production: they control and effectively own them. They seize, control, and live from the surplus product. They are relatively stable; individual bureaucrats get purged,

but less frequently than individual capitalists in the West are ruined.

They reproduce themselves: through educational privilege and patronage, they make sure that the next generation of bureaucrats is recruited from the sons and daughters of this generation. The chances for a Soviet working-class child of becoming a manager are smaller than those for an American working-class child.

Their cohesion and community of interest, though not unlimited, has been quite sufficient to see many bureaucracies — in the USSR, in China, in Yugoslavia, in Hungary, in Poland — through enormous shifts in policy without big internal splits. *And every year, every month, every day, they are counterposed in class struggle to the working class.*

The bureaucracies are not alien organs somehow attached to socialist planned economies. Everywhere but in the USSR, the bureaucracies created and shaped the planned economies.

In the USSR, industry was nationalised by the working class rather than by the bureaucracy. But the Stalinist economic system — of detailed administrative regulation on the basis of scarcity and the ruthless squeezing-out and centralisation of the surplus product — was never even proposed, much less instituted, while the workers still held political power in the USSR. The sort of planned economy that has existed in the USSR since the 1930s — in all its many variants — is bureaucratic in its very essence.

The USSR is not imperialist, so Furedi argues, because its foreign policy is fundamentally conservative and defensive, and is not propelled by a drive to export capital. This argument is no less pettifogging than the ones used to deny that the bureaucracy is a ruling class.

After World War 2 the Kremlin seized Eastern Europe and staked claims over parts of Iran, China, and Libya. In 1979 it invaded Afghanistan. It has consistently sought to expand its sphere of influence and its circle of friendly states.

Aware of its economic and military inferiority to the US, the Kremlin is indeed cautious. In a sense its policy is indeed consistently defensive. But then all the imperialist states have been more or less on the defensive since World War 2. Britain and France waged losing wars to try to preserve their empires; the US fought in Vietnam to try to 'defend' its existing sphere of influence.

Lenin wrote a pamphlet in 1916 focused on the particular sort of 'imperialism' which had developed since 1898-1902. Even then, he never used pedantry to argue that Russia and Turkey, for example, were not imperialist because they lacked such features as export of capital. To use such pedantry today is to turn theory into a shield from reality. Especially so, since the USSR

does in fact export capital, albeit modestly.

Despite rejecting the idea that the state-monopoly systems are new systems of class exploitation, parallel to capitalism or special forms of capitalism, Furedi equally rejects the mainstream Trotskyist thesis that they are 'degenerated and deformed workers' states. Indeed, he is haughtily contemptuous of the whole debate on the left over these issues.

True, that debate sometimes seems like futile playing with words. Yet, in substance, no debate is more important for modern socialism.

Furedi loftily distances himself from the war of labels — and loftily evades the substantive issues underlying that war.

The core of his book is a description of the USSR based on the work of Hillel Ticktin and the magazine 'Critique'.

Capitalism, argues Furedi, decides who produces what, how, through the mechanisms of supply and demand — the market. (At one point he notes that in the Third World today capitalism relies "primarily upon state intervention rather than upon the market" — however, he never allows this observation to disturb his generalisations). The capitalist market is inhuman and crisis-prone; but within limits it works.

Workers' democracy allows an alternative way of deciding who produces what, how — through conscious planning. But, Furedi says, the bureaucratic system existing in the USSR since the '30s has neither effective markets nor conscious planning.

So the stultified economy has "no developmental dynamic". In the jungle of bureaucratic blundering, everyone just looks after themselves. Despite its collectivist pretences, the USSR's economic and social life is more privatised, more un-cooperative, than life in avowed private-enterprise societies.

To my mind Furedi's picture is not so much false as partial. The USSR proceeds chaotically and wastefully — but where does it proceed? If it is only wasteful, then it is a society which, in terms of the historical evolution of modes of production, ranks far behind capitalism and indeed behind feudalism.

Furedi's basic picture is that the USSR is irreformably stagnant. This thesis may be very anti-Stalinist, but it is also very nonsensical. Why did Stalinism manage to industrialise the USSR? Why has the model of the USSR been followed by many post-war revolutions which have led to similarly spectacular industrialisation, for example in China?

Furedi offers no discussion at all of the revolutions which have copied the USSR's type of society, nor of the undeniable dynamism of societies like post-1949 China.

Indeed he seems to argue that replication of the USSR is practically impossible, because it

arose through peculiar accident. "The emergence and survival of a new social formation, one without any developmental dynamic, was a result of special historical circumstances. The worldwide defeats of the working class ... the weakness of the world capitalist system... A tremendous reservoir of resources and labour... If any one of these accidental factors had been missing, the survival of the new social formation would have been jeopardised". And "accident" is about as far as he gets in explaining Stalinist industrialisation, too.

Worse: if Furedi drew appropriate political conclusions from his picture of the USSR as a return to the pre-feudal Dark Ages, then at least he would be consistent. In fact he concludes only that the USSR "can claim no superiority over capitalism". And, as we've seen, on some key issues he chimes in with those who insist that the USSR is progressive compared to capitalism.

Furedi is a leader of the 'Revolutionary Communist Party', a group notorious for decking out primitive sectarian politics with a pompous pretence of being the first and only Marxist theorists since Marx himself. This book is in the same mould.

Butter, guns and power

Martin Thomas reviews Paul Kennedy's 'The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers'. Unwin Hyman.

"Nothing is more dependent on economic conditions" — Paul Kennedy quotes Engels — "than precisely the army and the navy."

Paul Kennedy's book expounds this theme and adds another in counterpoint: economic might leads to military over-extension, which leads to economic eclipse.

The book is a bestseller because of what it says about the US today. The US, Kennedy argues, has arrived at the stage when a big drain of resources to military spending brings relative economic decline. But, he suggests, a careful military scaling-down could make the decline slow and comfortable. Since the domination of the world by the two superpowers, the US and the USSR, is breaking down with the rise of Japan, the EEC and China as comparable powers — and the US can get these three new powers more or less on its side — the US need not fear any dramatic eclipse.

Paul Kennedy offers no solid backing for his belief that the

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world's main groupings of capitalists and bureaucrats can be trusted to readjust their relations smoothly, without violent tests of strength. And the historical part of the book — it is, after all, supposed to be a history book, surveying world power politics from 1500 to today — is desultory and slackly written. It is a pity, because Kennedy's chosen themes are important ones.

High military spending can slow down an economy. That was certainly true of the feudal Hapsburg Empire in the 16th and 17th centuries. It is also true of the advanced industrial economies today. Britain, the US and the USSR have all spent heavily on arms, and grown sluggishly; Japan, West Germany, and Italy have spent much less on arms, and grown faster. Careful statistical studies have confirmed this picture.

The reason is obvious: the resources (in Marxian terms, the surplus value) pumped into the military are wasted from the point of view of production. They are a deduction from the investment, research, and mobilisation of skilled person-power making for economic growth.

Yet the rule has very big exceptions. Britain's huge military spending during the Napoleonic Wars of 1799-1815 — up to 24% of national income — did not stop the Industrial Revolution, and may indeed have stimulated it. In the late 1930s both Japan and the USSR were spending more of their national income on the military than even Hitler's furiously-rearming Germany; yet they were by far the fastest-growing industrial powers of the time. From 1945 through to the early '60s, the USSR continued to combine heavy military spending

with rapid industrial growth.

In the Third World today — as against the advanced industrial countries — heavy military spending does not seem to hinder growth. On average, countries with heavy military spending, like South Korea, Pakistan, Egypt, Malaysia and China, have indeed grown *faster* than low-spending ones like Mexico, Brazil, the Philippines, India and Indonesia.

The Third World figures are not straightforward. Many countries with heavy military spending also receive a lot of aid from the US, so that the military spending is effectively not a drain.

But it does seem that in countries which are still mostly agricultural, and where an industrial base is being built, heavy military spending can pull industrial development forward. It can mobilise resources for building railways, roads, steelworks, power stations and engineering factories whose profit prospects are doubtful and at best long term, but which are now justified as essential underpinning to the state's military strength. It may even help to mobilise resources for the health and education to the mass of the people — those who have to form the rank and file of the army.

Once an industrial base is established, things change. Economic development is no longer a matter of building more steelworks, railways and power stations, but of replacing old industrial technology with new. It is no longer a matter of pulling millions of people from the countryside to labour in industry, but of increasing the productivity of a more-or-less stable workforce. In Marxian terms, relative surplus value is now central rather than absolute.

At that stage, heavy military spending becomes a brake.

The jitters on Wall Street

Colin Foster reviews "Boom and Bust", by Christopher Wood. Sidgwick and Jackson, £15

This is a weird book. The author is New York correspondent of the big business magazine *The Economist* and was educated at Eton.

Although the jacket photo shows him looking more like a hippy than a yuppie, he is no sceptic about the virtues of capitalism.

Yet he is utterly convinced that a huge slump is coming in the wake of the October 1987 stock

market crash. The slump is not just likely (as I would argue), it is *certain*. And it will be worse than the 1930s.

Wood earnestly advises his readers to put all their assets into gold, Swiss francs, and maybe a few government bonds.

His basic argument is simple, and not enough to prove his conclusion. Debt, internationally and within economies like the US, is ballooning. It can't go on ballooning forever. The confidence trick will collapse some day. And when it does, the bigger the bubble of debt, the bigger the collapse.

There is a debt bubble and it could burst; but there is no fixed rule that says *when* it will burst, or that it is impossible to deflate it more gradually.

Maybe the most interesting thing about the book is that a leading financial journalist could write it, and could find a sizeable number of leading money men to quote who say roughly the same as he does. Wall Street has got the jitters.

Liberty, equality, fraternity

Paul Vizard reviews "The French Revolution", by George Rude. Weidenfeld £14.95.

According to the dust jacket, "1989 marks the Revolution's 200th Anniversary. *The French Revolution* by George Rude is the one book for those who want to know what the celebrations and arguments are all about".

The book is written from a broadly Marxist viewpoint. It gives a clear story and well-informed judgements. Instead of halting at 1799 or 1793 as too many histories do, it devotes almost half its pages to tracing the repercussions of the revolution across Europe during the Napoleonic Wars.

But as a basic guide to the Revolution, I think it is inferior to the same author's brief *Revolutionary Europe*, or Soboul's classic *The French Revolution*.

The narrative is intertwined with a discussion of different historians' theories and debates on each development. The discussion is interesting, and in some ways makes the book more valuable, but it does spoil the sweep, grandeur and excitement of the story.

Read *Revolutionary Europe* or Soboul first, and this book afterwards.

The Greens show the way?

from back cover left.

The Greens now face the same problem as the far-left of the '70s — how to move from a protest movement to challenging the hold of the right-wing social democracy. None of the factions has proposed a plausible strategy to do this. Huelsberg suggests (with an implicit comparison of the Greens to the Communist Party of the '20s!) that the Greens should make a united front with the SPD against the conservatives, support an SPD government against the right, while maintaining Green independence. Such a tactic presupposes, however, that the Greens can put forward a programme that would form a basis for the real defence of the SPD's base against the government. In the Greens' present state, any move to a programme unambiguously based on working class interests would be likely to split the party.

Huelsberg's book is full of optimistic prognostications about the Greens and their continued development to the left. He tends to blur the differences between the working class and a rainbow coalition of the 'new social movements', between vague statements about the need for an alternative to the present society and an anti-capitalist programme, between the Greens and the German Communist Party of the 1920s in their relation to social democracy, between ecology and Marxism. The Greens' move to the left in the early '80s is attributed to the "logic of development asserting itself behind the backs of the participants," rather than the far-left deciding that the Greens were the place to be. In short, this book is marred by Huelsberg's wishful thinking, which seems to have come from his time in the Mandeliste Fourth International, with its years of searching for the 'new mass vanguard'.

However, for anyone interested in the West German left there is a lot of useful information in this book, particularly on the pre-Green history of the far-left. Much of the statement of the Greens' problems is also perceptive. Where the book fails is in its perspectives for the left. Ultimately, hitching the wagon of the revolutionary left to the Greens will prove as arid as the strident proclamations of revolution in the '60s and '70s.

The Greens show the way?

Bruce Robinson reviews 'The German Greens', by Werner Huelsberg. Verso, £9.95.

The West German Green Party is the envy of much of the West European left — to the left of the mainstream labour movement, yet regularly polling between 5 and 10% in elections. Few of their admirers have looked closely at the causes of this success. Huelsberg's book is an attempt to explain where the Greens came from, who they are and where they are going.

It is impossible to understand the rise of the Greens without understanding the terminal decline of the post-'68 left that preceded it. When in 1977 the far left was completely ghettoised and facing the repression ostensibly aimed at the Red Army Fraction, and large sections of the left had retreated into 'alternative lifestyles', the anti-nuclear movement seemed to be the only mass movement around. As Huelsberg puts it, "It really was a fantastic feeling to be in a demonstration not totally isolated from the public, to be part of a new turn in public attitudes." The far left's subsequent collapse into the ecological movement can be summed up as a bad case of 'never mind the quality, feel the width'. It explains the apparent paradox of someone like Daniel Cohn-Bendit describing himself as a "member of the Green Party who cannot stand the countryside."

The isolation of the West German left that emerged from the massive student radicalisation of 1968 was caused by a number of factors: institutionalised anti-Communism bolstered by the division of Germany, the conformity of the generation brought up under fascism and the relative prosperity of the '50s and '60s. But the left itself was also to blame: there was a tendency to write off the labour movement and to see the working class as totally integrated into capitalist society, an inability to find allies in the working class.

Huelsberg sees the development of the Greens as a radical break with this tradition, a party with a mass base in the 'new social movements' and the 'new working class'. Huelsberg provides a mass of evidence about who the Greens are, who votes for them and why. It may not be surprising to learn that the Greens are "under-represented among workers" and "over-represented"



among academics. The Greens in their social composition "are certainly not a party of the traditional labour movement. But they are disproportionately represented among the new wage earners that are the product of the structural changes occurring in the West German economy." These people share a series of values often inherited from the post-'68 left (many of them were the post-'68 left!) and often take part in single-issue campaigns.

This is not particular to West Germany. As Huelsberg points out, similar groups have gravitated to the left in many countries in Western Europe. In Britain, they have "an orientation towards the traditional labour movement," where they have formed the core of the local government/rainbow coalition left in the Labour Party. In other countries such as Italy or Denmark they have gone directly to parties

to the left of the traditional labour movement, but with no particular ecological orientation. Why then did this movement take on an ecological hue in West Germany?

West Germany has very serious environmental problems, inherited both from its geographical position in the centre of Europe and from the fast growth of its capitalism. Movements from below on environmental issues began to draw in 'ordinary people'. To some extent the popularity of the ecological and anti-nuclear issues was precisely because they were not identified with socialism and thus were able to circumvent the anti-Communism so prevalent in West Germany. Much of the politics of the anti-nuclear weapons movement was also concerned with a "Germany outside the blocs".

Ecology gelled with the common far-left view that one of the problems with capitalism was its

concern with consumption and economic growth. This was far from the concerns of most industrial workers, more concerned with protecting jobs which they often saw threatened by the environmentalists' concerns.

Though some common ground has now been found with the Greens' echoing the trade unions' demands for a shorter working week, in the early phase of the ecological movement it often played into the hands of the right-wing union leaders by seeking to confront working class interests rather than find a way to accommodate them. One 'eco-socialist' is quoted by Huelsberg as saying, "The great majority of SPD (social democratic) voters wanted to see the harshest contradictions somehow made more bearable. To destroy those illusions...represented a tremendous attack on the day-to-day consciousness of ordinary people."

The attitude of the Greens towards the existing labour movement and in particular the question of electoral pacts and coalitions has been a major issue of debate in the party. By the mid-80s the Greens had become established as an electoral force with seats in state and national parliaments, sometimes holding the balance of power, but were no longer increasing their support. The tactical and strategic questions led to the Greens dividing into a number of highly antagonistic factions: primarily, the 'realists' who were effectively reformists, saying the important thing was to deliver something from government and who rejected 'utopias'; and the 'fundamentalists' who were against concessions from principle and wanted to remain pure oppositionists uncorrupted by power. There are also smaller factions: the 'eco-socialist' left wing and the 'eco-libertarian' right.

The Greens have held together because successive conferences have balanced between different factions (a sort of Bonapartism of the rank and file), fearing that the total victory of one group would lead to a split. For similar reasons, the Greens have never worked out a fundamental programmatic platform that goes beyond general issues all can agree on.

Huelsberg points out in detail that the Greens' attitude to the SPD became increasingly important in determining their electoral success once they had to go beyond their hard-core voters. Many Green voters split their votes between the Greens and the SPD and saw a Green vote as a way of forcing the SPD to the

turn to inside back cover