

# To the Finland Station

Belinda Weaver takes a fresh look at 'To the Finland Station', by Edmund Wilson

In suppressing the Paris Commune of 1871, the first workers' government, the French ruling class killed and exiled and imprisoned more people *in one week* than the three years of the Robespierre terror had done. Yet which is still held up today as an example of unrivalled brutality?

Facts like this point up how crucial the socialist historical tradition is to us. Our movement has suffered millions of casualties, but they lie in unmarked graves, those class-war martyrs whose names have been wiped from the record of history. We need to mark the places where our dead are buried; we must record how and where they fell. We too have our anniversaries.

The Paris Commune was the point from which two strands of history, bourgeois and socialist, separate and run parallel. There was official history, serving the ruling class, and our history, marginalised and little known.

If school history bored us, with its dry recitation of dates and dynasties, it's because something was left out — the people. All those buried generations need a voice which can take us beyond understanding into a world of fellow feeling and kinship. That is what history should do.

It rarely does. Apart from feeding us distortions and lies, official history kills our curiosity. We don't seek to *understand*; to endure (and pass exams) is enough.

Without knowledge of *our* history, we're like ducks in a shooting gallery, compelled to go round and round in a well worn, purposeless groove. Understanding of history, coupled with a materialist analysis, helps us to break out of the rut.

That can be daunting. When you are new to the left, it is hard to know where to start exploring the vast range of books, pamphlets, papers, and magazines. If only there was one book which summed it all up!

*To the Finland Station* comes close. It is an incomparable explorer's guide to how socialist ideas developed.

One little known date, January 1824, turned out to be crucial for the socialist historical tradition. In that month, a young French professor called Jules Michelet saw a reference in a book to the

writings of an earlier Italian historian, Giovanni Vico. So interested was Michelet in Vico, a writer then little known and untranslated into French, that he set about learning Italian so he could read him.

I can only admire his determination, and be thankful for it, since it inspired Michelet, one of the earliest social historians, to develop Vico's ideas further. Michelet wrote:

"From 1824 on, I was seized with frenzy caught from Vico, an incredible intoxication with his great historical principle."

Vico had begun to write history in a new way, to study the past the way scientists like Bacon had begun to study the world. No longer would history be written as "a series of biographies of great men or as a chronicle of remarkable happenings or as a pageant directed by God". Social history — the study of societies — had begun.

What Vico taught Michelet was that "societies...like individual human beings...have passed through regular phases of growth...The social world is certainly the work of men..."

This was not exactly a new idea. The Enlightenment of the eighteenth century, the writings of Voltaire and Montesquieu, had done much to explain the origins of social institutions. But "Vico, by force of an imaginative genius of remarkable power and scope, had enabled him [Michelet] to grasp fully for the first time the *organic* character of human society and the importance of re-integrating through history the various forces and factors which actually compose human life."

When Michelet, influenced by Vico, began his *History of the Middle Ages*, he hoped that for the first time would be heard "the whispers of the souls who had suffered so long ago and who were smothered now in the past."

Vico and Michelet put into the historical record what, up till then, had always been left out — the people.

Some centuries later, Edmund Wilson describes the elation he felt reading Vico: "The fogs that obscure the horizons of the remote reaches of time recede, the cloud-shapes of legend lift. In the shadows there are fewer monsters; the heroes and the gods float away...The myths that have made us wonder are projections of a human imagination like our own..."

No wonder Michelet was inspired. Michelet's writings began in the Middle Ages, where he felt the drag of the long, dark, unlightened centuries, making him impatient for the

Renaissance, through to the French Revolution of 1789, and beyond. In Michelet's study of the French Revolution can be found the sense of humanity creating itself anew, taking steps to build a better world. Michelet scoffs at the idea of the French Revolution being primarily the work of a few prominent men like Danton or Robespierre.

"...The people were usually more important than their leaders... It is quite wrong to take these brilliant and powerful talkers, who expressed the thought of the masses, for the sole actors in the drama... The principal actor is the people."

Excited by the French Revolution, Michelet no longer wanted to be on the sidelines recording the action; he wanted to use his knowledge to act upon society. He was a precursor of the socialist tradition of men like Marx, Lenin and Trotsky, who wanted to change the world.

Edmund Wilson's book, *To the Finland Station*, is subtitled "A study in the writing and acting of history". Beginning with Michelet's discovery of Vico, it closes with the arrival of Lenin at the Finland Station in Moscow in 1917. With that historic moment, says Wilson, the writing and acting of history became one.

From Michelet to Lenin, we cross a crowded terrain of ideas and personalities, with the early socialists, Saint-Simon, Babeuf, Fourier, Owen and later Marx, Engels, Lenin and Trotsky, as markers on our journey. Complex as the story is, it is never dull. The writing sparkles. No other book quite generates the intoxication of ideas.

Wilson, an American literary critic, was briefly married to the writer Mary McCarthy. Both were on the periphery of the American Trotskyist movement of the thirties, when Wilson started to work on *To the Finland Station*. It took him six years, in which he read over a thousand books.

It was an immense task. To write as easily, as clearly and as simply as he does required tremendous knowledge and familiarity with his subject. The book is a towering labour of love, yet it retains a freshness and vigour all through. Wilson's enthusiasms are not small ones; his excitement over Marx's *Capital* positively springs off the page. Reading him, you feel both the magnetic pull of the ideas he is explaining, and the counter attraction of the books that inspired him. You want to finish Wilson, but you want to read the others too.

Wilson's is not the least interesting of voices in the book. His description of the miseries of men in industrial society circa 1848 has rarely been bettered.

"Taking all the classes up one by one, the author [Michelet] shows how all are tied into the socio-economic web — each, exploiting or being exploited, and usually both extortionist and victim, generating by the very activities which are necessary to win its survival irreconcilable antagonisms with its neighbours, yet unable by climbing higher to escape the general degradation. The peasant, eternally in debt to the professional money-lender or the lawyer, and in continual fear of being dispossessed, envies the industrial worker. The factory worker, virtually imprisoned and broken in will by submission to his machines, demoralising himself still further by dissipation during the few moments of freedom he is allowed, envies the worker at a trade. But the apprentice to a trade belongs to his master, is servant as well as workman, and he is troubled by bourgeois aspirations. Among the bourgeoisie, on the other hand, the manufacturer, borrowing from the capitalist and always in danger of being wrecked on the shoal of over-production, drives his employees as if the devil were driving him. He gets to hate them as the only uncertain element that impairs the perfect functioning of the mechanism; the workers take it out in hating the foreman. The merchant, under pressure of his customers, who are eager to get something for nothing, brings pressure on the manufacturer to supply him with shoddy goods; he leads perhaps the most miserable existence of all, compelled to be servile to his customers, hated by and hating his competitors, making nothing, organising nothing. The civil servant, underpaid and struggling to keep up his respectability, always being shifted from place to place, has not merely to be polite to the tradesman, but to make sure that his political and religious views do not displease the administration. And, finally, the bourgeoisie of the leisure class have tied up their interests with the capitalists, the least public-spirited members of the nation; and they live in constant terror of communism. They have now wholly lost touch with the people. They have shut themselves up in their class; and inside their doors, locked so tightly, there is nothing but emptiness and chill."

Wilson's enthusiasm for *Capital* is infectious. He praises Marx's book for "its power of

# SURPLUS VALUE



...agination as well as the cogency of the argument?" and finds it has the "momentum of an epic". Marx has shown the human principle at work and revealed "those passions which are at once the most violent, the basest and the most abominable of which the human breast is capable: the furies of personal interest".

No-one but Marx, claims Wilson, has had so good a sense of "the infinite capacity of human nature for remaining oblivious or indifferent to the pains we inflict on others when we have a chance to get something out of them for ourselves."

Wilson gets parts of Marx wrong. He makes an unholy mess of the labour theory of value, for instance, but the flaws in no way spoil the book. His enthusiasm is what we remember, and the curiosity he generates, the drive to discover the ideas at first hand for ourselves.

After reading *Capital*, says Wilson, other economics never seem quite the same again. "We can always see through their arguments and figures the

realities of the crude human relations which it is their purpose or effect to mask".

Impersonal formulas and equations add up to "pennies withheld from the worker's pocket, sweat squeezed out of his body, and natural enjoyments denied his soul". Reading *Capital*, we feel we have been "taken through the real structure of our civilisation, and that it is the ugliest that has ever existed — a state of things where there is very little to choose between the physical degradation of the workers and the moral degradation of the owners".

*To the Finland Station* is firmly on the side of Marx, Lenin, Trotsky and all the people who want to act on history. Wilson approvingly calls one chapter 'Karl Marx decides to change the world'. He loves the vigour and ideals of the early Michelet, and is appalled by the decline of the historical tradition in the middle to late nineteenth century. From Renan through Taine down to Anatole France, the active principle is flagging. Wilson criticises France for his pygmy aims, for being content to capture the essence of

a period, rather than draw conclusions for action as the earlier historians had done.

Wilson saw the cultivation of intelligence for its own sake as a sign of growing decadence and lifelessness in the writing of history.

But hope was on the horizon. With the appearance on the scene of Marx and Engels, complacency about one's own superior understanding was replaced by more lofty ideals. The last thing Marx, even as a young man, wanted to do was fall into the fascination of abstract thought. He stated clearly as a student that "one has a field to serve humanity...[that there can be] no fulfillment unless working for the welfare of our fellows; then only shall our burdens not break us, then only shall our satisfactions not be confined to poor egoistic joys."

Still, Marx and Engels did not believe that thought should be strictly functional. Rather, as Wilson says, the tradition of the Renaissance hung around Marx and Engels. They wanted to act on history, but they also loved learning for its own sake, or rather they believed that learning gave power. Both Marx and Engels had tremendous respect for the past, for the wealth of accumulated culture and learning, a stance very different from the later ideas of some Bolsheviks, who believed that revolutionary man would begin to build a wholly new culture, borrowing nothing from the past, starting with a fresh slate.

Marx would not have agreed with that. He declared "Nihil humanum alienum puto [Nothing human is strange to me]". In fact, one of the chief objections Marx and Engels had to modern, industrialised society was that it narrowed down the possibilities open to man, that it schooled man to develop only a single aptitude. One of their great arguments for communism was that it would produce "complete" men and women again.

Marx believed many kinds of mastery were possible for human beings. After all, Engels, with his business, conviviality, his talent for sports, languages, natural sciences, economics, military studies, article writing, books, drawings, verses, and politics, was a Renaissance man, a thinker and a man of action, with a head for arts and sciences.

Capitalism crushed and destroyed men's potential for arts, politics and learning; socialism would set these impulses free.

Through his own writings, we know that Trotsky was passionately interested in culture, in literature and art. But Lenin too was not indifferent to such joys. While listening to Beethoven, he once remarked to a friend: "I

know of nothing that is greater than the Appassionata; I'd like to listen to it every day...I always think with pride — perhaps it is naive of me — what marvellous things human beings can do!"

Wilson understands the importance of words, the tremendous impact ideas, simply and truthfully expressed, can have. He quotes Gorky on Lenin: "[His words gave] the impression of the physical pressure of an irresistible truth..." He seemed to speak "not of his own will, but by the will of history".

Lenin had an unquenchable thirst for knowledge and ideas. A colleague described him picking up "a fresh newspaper to read as if he were burning a hole in it".

What struck me about *To the Finland Station* was the intelligence and breadth of culture behind it, the ceaseless striving by Wilson to achieve what Marx had achieved in *Capital* — an artistic whole.

Wilson made a valiant attempt to trace the entire trajectory of socialist thought and action. We should be equally ambitious today, interpreting the past as a guide for our future. It is a big task, but it must be done. Our movement desperately needs thinkers, people who can forge new ideas and discredit false ones.

After all, without Marx, what would have happened to the early socialist movement? Marx's *Capital* truly shook the world. It is never out of print; it has been translated into countless languages. Ideas leaped off its pages to become weapons for action all around the globe.

If we are to continue that trailblazing tradition, we have to steep ourselves in our culture and history. We must be interested in everything, whether past, present or future, as Marx and Engels were; we must be open to ideas, avid for knowledge.

But ideas don't appear by magic. It's not a matter of luck, nor of genius. Ideas, even ideas that shake the world, need the compost of living culture to flower. As Engels and others were to say:

"If I had seen farther, it is because I stood on the shoulders of giants."

We build on what has gone before. We must break the fetters that capitalism imposes and strive for knowledge and understanding; that's the only way to break out of the narrowness that this society imposes on us, the only way to become "complete" again. Remaking the world will help us remake ourselves. The first step is to reclaim our past.

"Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please, they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly found, given and transmitted from the past." — Karl Marx.