

Master Of Arts

At the end of last year, **Arnold Kettle** (below), a leading communist intellectual, died after a long and painful illness. We reprint here the speech given by **Eric Hobsbawm** at his funeral.



Some time ago, when Arnold read the obituary of an old friend and former comrade, he was struck by the absence of any reference to the man's politics. He hoped that when his time came, his politics would not be forgotten. Well, they have not been, at least by the reactionaries and witch-hunters. Bernard Levin in Murdoch's *Times* spent four columns attacking him on January 5. I suppose it is a sort of compliment to be able to arouse the self-indulgent fury of a well-known super-hack from beyond the grave.

How could Arnold's politics be forgotten? He belonged to the generation of Cambridge students for whom politics meant not the choice of a daily newspaper or an occasional vote, nor even, as for many leftwingers of more recent vintage, a series of *rites of passage* which can take a person from Maoism to Toryism between leaving school and finishing a PhD. It meant a commitment for life. I do not say that it always meant a lifetime commitment to the Communist Party, which we all then joined - Arnold did so in 1936 - though it was a lifetime of Arnold's loyalty to his party which provoked Levin's hysteria. But even those who separated from the party after years, sometimes still feeling its presence in their lives as people can have feeling in a limb which has been amputated, for the most part stayed on the Left. This is more than can be said of ex-communist intellectuals in some other countries.

I speak today as an old comrade and friend of Arnold and Margot, his wife, but chiefly as a member of his generation of student Communists. Hardly any of us were from working-class families, although we in the Cambridge student CP of the 1930s were almost certainly not, typically, the upper-class products of top public schools of current mythology about the interwar Cambridge Left. We joined in the shadows of fascism, slump and war. Our proletarian experiences were marginal, at least until we joined the forces: welcoming hunger marchers in Cambridge, distributing leaflets for local bus-strikers, going to anti-Mosley demos in London. Even our most profound political experiences were indirect: we saw the Spanish civil war from afar, or at best through the few of us who fought and died in it, like John Cornford. Only later did Arnold acquire a more direct experience of the anti-fascist struggle in wartime Yugoslavia, and of imperialism in pre-independence India.

And yet the political commitment we then acquired was neither superficial nor just a youthful phase. We learned that the world needed changing, and we wanted to change it. We still do. Fifty years later we are old, less certain, less clear about exactly what we would want the changed world to be like, though we have unfortunately discovered some of the things we don't want it to be like. We don't expect to see it in our lifetime. But, like Arnold to his dying day, we are unreconciled to the immoral and inhuman system of capitalism, and we believe that, if it is not overcome, its internal contradictions will be fatal to mankind and to civilisation. We have seen no reason to unlearn the fundamental lesson of our youth.

Many of us gave the cause complete priority over everything else in our lives for many years. Arnold did. Only a few of us became full-time political militants, though we tried to practise our trade and profession in the light of our convictions. Arnold, though he probably did his best, most effective and most important political work as a marxist literary critic and an extraordinarily sensitive, gifted and car-

ing teacher, came closer than most of us to being a full-time activist, through his long membership of the party's executive committee which he joined in the years of the first cold war. He was one of the rare members of our generation of intellectuals to become a nationally leading figure. But then he came from Pembroke, a college which for some reason had the densest concentration of political activists in Cambridge. At the time it produced leaders of the Socialist Club and CP, later leaders of national trade unions and communist parties. As I talk, names float back into my mind from all those years ago, the living and the dead, the remembered and forgotten, those who are still political and those who have gone elsewhere: Ram Nahum, Pieter Keuneman, Gerald Croasdel, Arnold Kettle, Spencer, Hodgart, Pascal, Birley, Wallis...

As I say these names, others cluster in on me, and I am surrounded by the faces of 50 years ago, the smell of the rooms, the memory of committee meetings, agendas and afternoons on the river. And I can hear the voices, among them the curiously and quite needlessly tentative voice of the young Communist Arnold Kettle.

It is hard for those of us who never knew the obligations of national leadership to judge those who were bound by them, as Arnold felt himself to be, especially in the traumatic year 1956. It was a tense time, and although, happily, personal relations did not suffer, political relations deteriorated between those who followed the official line, as he did, and those who criticised it. It would be wrong to conceal that it sometimes took a while to re-establish political understanding and intimacy, but in the end we once again found ourselves in agreement, as the Prague Spring of 1968 was to prove.

Now he is dead, after much suffering, and before his time: for while 70 years is old, it is no longer a dying age. At least this has meant that at his funeral Arnold is surrounded not only by people of all ages who loved and respected him, but by people of his own time, who knew without the need for historical explanations and commentaries what made him live his life the way he did. And who know that it was a life worth living and why it was so. But Arnold would not want us to dwell on his and our past. The world still needs changing, and this country more even than in 1936. And there are still things that even we veterans can do about it, even if they are not quite what we expected 50 years ago. As we say goodbye to Arnold there is still a future to think of, and he would want us to think of it. But we shall not forget him or our common past either. •

Arnold Kettle: 1916-1986. Taught at Leeds University, 1946-67; as Professor of Literature at Dar es Salaam 1967-1970, and at the Open University 1970-81. On the executive committee of the Communist Party 1954-1967. Editorial board of *Marxism Today* 1957-1986.