

## A MASTER OF THE SUPERFICIAL

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ANYTHING written by a Prime Minister is important. Whatever its content — Gladstone's theology and Homeric studies; Balfour's philosophy; Disraeli's romantic novels, Churchill's romantic history - the book of a Prime Minister must throw some light on the personal qualities which he brought to the times over which he presided. If he writes on the history of events with which he was intimately associated, then his book has an assured place in every serious library, and is bound to be used again and again by scholars as an important primary source of information.

Harold Wilson's lucid book, *The Labour Government 1964-1970* (Penguin, £1.50) will certainly be no exception. A thousand pages on a period which is less than heroic may be a lot for bedtime reading - but the subject really demands it.

This is chronicle, not analysis. The Prime Minister has taken successive two- or three-month periods of his first ministry as the subjects of successive Chapters. It therefore follows that he must constantly jump from topic to topic and back again, and it follows with almost equal inevitability that he cannot properly get to grips with any of the problems with which he treats.

There are many useful slants on personalities. Wilson's encounters with such diverse individuals as the Governor of the Bank of England, with Ian Smith, with Douglas Jay and Charles de Gaulle tell us much about both the author and the men with whom he treated. More than once, we receive confirmation of the view that Wilson and Heath are not merely the leaders of opposed political parties, but men who have a strong personal dislike for each other: a condition of affairs which makes for plenty of polemic and



lots of political news, but does not necessarily make for good government by either of them. One of the most telling passages in the book describes Wilson's own idea of his own job: -

" . . . A modern head of Government must be the managing director as well as chairman of his team, and this means that he must be completely *au fait* not only with developments in the work of all main departments including the particular responsibility of No. 10, but also with every short-run occurrence of political importance. And all he does, and says, must be part of a coherent political strategy."

This view may be right or wrong; but friend and foe alike should take careful note of the manner of man with whom they are dealing.

Perhaps the one piece of really penetrating analysis in the book does not derive from Wilson himself, but from Harry Lee (Lee Kuan Yew) of Singapore. Wilson summarises in a couple of pages (pp.755-7) what is perhaps the most brilliant assessment of the political problems of the Third World countries in existence. We may not agree with all of it; but no-one who is interested in their problems dare ignore it. As so often happens in history, the difficulties which people thought would beset newly-independent countries have largely failed to materialise; yet other difficulties, which few

people anticipated, have visited them with great force.

And what general picture emerges from the book? If modern authors followed the 19th century practice of giving alternative titles to their works, this one might be called, "or, Why the Tories won in 1970". There was a strong Labour Prime Minister; a man with a sincere social conscience and real humanity; a very hard worker indeed; a man of high intelligence and with a sense of realism which never left him. His team was able, though George Brown was obviously an impossible colleague, and some of Wilson's own comments on other Ministers suggest that the leader of the team was less loyal than a leader should be. There were few or no gigantic boobs.

Yet, when all is said and done, what did the Fourth Labour Government set out to achieve, and what did it achieve? The answer to both questions is, I fear, "Very little". Labour supporters do not point back with pride to the deeds of 1964-1970, even though they do not blush for shame. Assuredly, Keir Hardie would not have bothered to forge the Labour Party if he had thought that Harold Wilson was lurking at the end of the road. Stanley Baldwin once said of Sir John Simon, "A Rolls-Royce mind without a driver". The same might be said of Harold Wilson. The form of the book is curiously indicative of the mind of its author. He deals with problems as they arise, often with great skill and competence. But there is no sense of history; no sense either of roots deep in the past, or of branches extending far into the future. Everything is there but vision; and without vision, we are told, the people perish. The story ends "not with a bang, but a whimper". One day, perhaps, the Labour Party itself will do the same.