

20 Books/Society/Germany

On the edge of Euston Road . . .

Liz Forgan

The Battle for Tolmers Square. By Nick Wates.
Routledge and Kegan Paul £2.95.
7100 8448 X.

Aesop himself could hardly have improved on the classic little fable of twentieth-century capitalism which has come to be known as the story of Tolmers Square. By a combination of accident and cold commercial design, this 12½-acre patch of grubby buildings on the edge of the Euston Road became a perfect paradigm of the great property boom of the late sixties and early seventies—a living illustration of the dazzling economics of speculation, but also the chosen battleground of a series of people who were out to stop it.

The history of this site explains exactly how the huge office development fortunes were made, how utterly impotent the local authorities were to control their own urban planning, indeed, how inexorably they were forced to become the agents of the very speculators they were trying to fight. It shows precisely the problem which the Community Land Act was designed to solve and immediately demonstrates how it is doomed to failure. And because it is a fable not a fairy story, it ends not happily ever after but with a dreadful irony.

Tolmers Square, tatty, under-exploited but on a potentially prime commercial site, was worth a fortune to a developer if he could buy cheap, demolish existing buildings and erect offices. To do this, however, he needed the local authority to rezone the area for commercial development.

Tolmers Square was worth a political fortune to the local council if they could get their hands on it for urgently-needed housing. To do this, however, they needed a developer since the Government would not allow them to buy at the high market price of inner city land. Mr Joe Levy's Stock Conversion and Investment Trust and the Labour-controlled Camden Council therefore embraced each other in what was known as the Levy Deal.

It was only one among many struck during those years between developers and councils, but the Levy Deal is interesting not only for the planning dilemma it illustrates but also for the extraordinary explosion of public controversy which eventually killed it. A key figure in that controversy was Nick Wates, full-time coordinator of the Tolmers Village Association set up by some of those who actually lived in the area and saw the struggle going on over their heads.

The Battle for Tolmers Square is his account of the causes, events and consequences of that struggle.

With the help of a mass of eloquent photographs he disentangles 20 complex years of manoeuvring and politicking with admirable clarity but with no pretence at objectivity. He was a partisan in the action he chronicles and his book is alive with the furious emotion that Tolmers Square did—and still does—inspire in everyone involved. It is a drama as well as a documentary, with a cast that includes not only the wicked uncle and the agonized councillors but also a pair of crusading journalists who nearly succeed in upsetting the world and all its ways, and a band of Johnny-come-lately radicals who seek to storm the citadel by squatting it and transforming the keep into a wholefood factory.

It is a fascinating tale, if a depressing one, because after all the campaigns and the speeches the good folk of Camden lose out in the end. Mr Levy's plan was stopped, but in the very week this book comes out, Camden Council has been given approval to build a rather larger office block than Stock Conversion themselves were asking for. Nobody wants the offices, but the economics of planning dictate that they have to be built to finance the houses and community buildings that would otherwise be too expensive. Meanwhile, around Tolmers Square itself, the buildings grow a little more dilapidated every day.

Entrepreneurship in Britain 1750-1939, edited by R. H. Campbell and R. G. Wilson (Adam and Charles Black £4.00, 7136 1524 9) is on an

Paperbacks

PSYCHOPATH

The Case of Patrick Mackay

TIM CLARK and JOHN PENYCATE

In 1968 Patrick Mackay was diagnosed 'a cold psychopathic killer' and committed 'indefinitely' to a mental hospital; in 1974 with a string of muggings and killings behind him he was on trial for murder. Anthony Storr writing in the *Sunday Times* describes this account of Mackay's life and crimes by the BBC Panorama Team who investigated the case as 'sober, unsensational, objective . . . raises important problems to which, as yet, society has no solutions'. Ludovic Kennedy calls it 'A tragic and pitiful story of how we fail to deal with misfits in our society'.
Illustrated £3.95

The Battle for Tolmers Square

NICK WATES

For seventeen years Tolmers Square in North London has been the focus of a struggle involving tenants' groups, community associations, students, squatters, intellectuals, political parties at both national and local level, and property developers. The dramatic story of that struggle is told by Nick Wates, who describes how Tolmers Square became a national symbol of the fight against property speculation.
Illustrated £2.95