

Review

NIGEL THOMAS reviews *Rebels and the Hostage* by David Craig and Nigel Gray (Fireweed Press, £1)

IAN WALKER reviews *The Battle for Tolmers Square* by Nick Wates (Routledge and Kegan Paul, £3.95)

Rebels with a cause

THE REBELS AND THE HOSTAGE doesn't try anything clever with its title. It's a novel about three young English terrorists and their civil servant hostage holed up in an isolated farmhouse waiting for the police to arrive.

As the tension grows they, and we, find out more about themselves and each other. That's the idea anyway. As Edward Bond writes in the blurb on the back: "To know their motives would mean questioning your own, would mean listening to their opinions, would mean asking whether 'our' tolerance isn't used to mask more violence than 'their' intolerance (Note: the intolerance of a creative age can become the tolerance of a dead one)."

It's published by Fireweed, the "quarterly magazine of socialist and working class arts", and is clearly more of an attempt to write a political novel than to explain and understand terrorism. Bon's blurb is an honest admission of one theory of the political possibilities of fiction. Unfortunately it could apply equally well to an earlier book on the same subject, Alan Burns' factoid *The Angry Brigade* (published in 1973 just after the trial). Burns' book, although allegedly based on interviews with "real" Angry Brigaders was in the end just another attempt to turn a social event into a sky pilot's problem. And even though Burns' used a much more sophisticated presentation, and almost certainly knows more about the subject, his book was just as unconvincing.

The three "rebels" are Donald, the intellectual, Ken, rough, tough and one of nature's rebels, whose violent antipathy to a repressive society has been channelled into politics, and Jane, the nice girl who has revolted against her background. Three short descriptions which make them sound like an identikit bunch of leftist troublemakers, which is fair to the book, and also, like most popular beliefs, contains some truth.

The book is an easy read — it's very straightforwardly written — and it tells the story of their two day wait with respect for the classic unity of place and much use of the classic dodge of flashback and memory to get round the problem of making a book out of only one scene.

Sex is brought in. Donald is worried about it and Ken and Jane do a little unconvincing fucking. The two lovers are induced by the pressures of the occasion to make a declaration of their

commitment to each other, but that doesn't ring particularly true either.

In fact truth is the nut that Craig and Gray have failed to crack. Socialist fiction is something that writers in English haven't managed to get organised. The special perception, the "truth" that can only be demonstrated imaginatively, which is where Dickens had it over Mayhew in reporting the slums of 19th century London, always seems to come down to character. However "socialist" their ideals, the actors in the drama become people first. The novelist's doubtful privilege of being able to look inside their heads also makes it difficult for him to extend the springs of their behaviour into the functioning of society.

It's a great double bind. By perceiving your characters as individuals you can convince the reader of their reality, at the expense of making it an inner instead of a social reality. And it doesn't help to explain how their inner life acquired a political dimension unless you show how that acquisition is apparently and inevitably going on inside other skulls outside the story.

It's a problem of form as well. The realism of *The Rebels* and *The Hostage* is the realism of the mainstream novel, and that too tends to particularise. To emphasise what's unusual, what's going on, not what's general. Why the individuals are different from the common run instead of why they are typical. Alan Burns, by adopting the form of "interviews" manages to give a much greater feeling of the wider reality of his characters, but then he is concerned to show that these terrorists are just people like any other. In other words, to reduce the content of their actions by explaining their motives. To excuse them by making their terrorism a reaction rather than an initiative.

Of course there is another strand of political fiction. This is the novel as propaganda. Some books have a remarkable politicising effect. *The Iron Heel*, *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropist*, *The Grapes of Wrath* are classic examples, (see the profiles of many of our elder TU leaders in the Sunday papers). Here the fiction is just the sauce, the invitation to read. The real meat lies in the political argument. It may be Zola describing the conditions in which French miners lived to people who literally had no idea of what was going on; or it may be Jack London's characters sitting round a dinner table explaining the inevitable collapse of capitalism to each other. It's dressed up argument.

But Craig and Gray have not done this. The demand of the three rebels is the release of one of their comrades from prison, in exchange for the life of the hostage. Tactically worthy, but it doesn't stretch beyond notions of loyalty. The accounts of their politicisation are trivial, they could just as easily drive one into the Young Liberals. Although the book is extremely accessible, there's little in it to change the mind of the reader.

What it might do is serve as a starting place for a discussion led by a highly-political teacher. In fact the whole book has that clear narrative, lack of density which is typical of children's books. It also has the feeling of a book written and organised the way somebody thinks it ought to have been. There's no spark or soul. It's very cool. It reads as if it was prepared by a teacher. If it wasn't for the fucking I would have been convinced it was written for children. With a bit of censorship it would make a good set book for an 'O' level class.

Having said all these critical things, it was still a try at something worth trying. It deserves a read, both to make up your own mind and to encourage the authors. Which is why you won't find out here what happens in the end.

An office is not a home

'**THE BATTLE FOR Tolmers Square**' is a battle between the community against business, for home against offices. Nick Wates, a former squatter in the area, has written a thoroughly-researched and vivid account — packed with photographs depicting the rape of Tolmers and memorabilia of the campaigns: posters, leaflets, graffiti, demonstrations — of this class struggle waged in 12 acres of land next to Euston station.

The story begins with the 1957 Rent Act, which substantially raised the legal maximum rent for tenants, and the formation of the Tolmers Square Tenants' Association to defend the community. It continues through the attempt by Joe Levy of Stock Conversion to replace Tolmers with office blocks, the much-publicised intervention of buccaneering journalists Bookler and Gray, the entry of squatters into the area and the buying out of Stock Conversion by Camden Council in June 1975.

When the council took control of the area it was hailed as a victory. A year later posters on the streets told the turn of events: 'Council Sell Out On Tolmers; We Demand Homes Not Offices.' The spectre of Levy, in the shadowy form of Camden Council, continues to haunt Tolmers Square.

One of the most fascinating sections of the book records the kiss-of-life given to the area by squatters: "By 1973 the population had dwindled, the remaining residents had lost the will to fight and the buildings were decaying. The squatters brought new energy... halted the decay of the buildings... and injected new enthusiasm into the battle." Two houses were squatted in 1973, by 1975 the number had risen to fifty.

The squatters proceeded to transform the word 'community' into something with meaning: the Tolmers Village Association, a food co-operative, printing and art workshops were all set up, the area was cleaned up and brightened with paint, trees were planted and an annual carnival held in summer.

Anti-squatting myths, like the one which says local tenants universally detest squatters, are exploded. A local immigrant, Jeyant Patel, says in the book: "As a direct result of the influx of squatters and the establishment of the TVA I have seen a community re-established in these streets, which is unique in my experience of London... I have made more friends among these people in the last 18 months than I have in the 22 years I have lived in London."

But despite resistance from the TVA, the destruction of Tolmers goes on. A month ago, after the publication of this book, the Lord Palmerton — a grand Victorian pub much loved by local tenants, squatters and the *Leveller* collective — was boarded up ready for demolition.

The last films to be shown at the Tolmers Square cinema before its closure in 1972 were 'The Looters' and 'Die Slowly You'll Enjoy It More'.