

On The Barricades

The Battle for Tolmers Square by Nick Wates, Routledge & Kegan Paul, £2.95, 232 pages.

This book is published by a "straight" firm but with known libertarian views (Routledge & Kegan Paul were also publishers of Herbert Read) and I believe this has helped the presentation of this book, which is unfussy and well set out in very readable type with text and photographs and other reproductions working together to make the documentation as clear as possible. The historical maps should have been printed larger, though.

Although the book is written in a documentary style the actual effect on me was of reading fiction, hoping that the goodies would win in the end after all. But reading the book through finally convinced me that in this particular area everybody has lost and continues to lose.

The map of 1746 shows Tottenham Manor and its surrounds as pure country with just a few houses where Tolmers Square now is. The local history appended to the book is concise and was written by Tim Wilson, a history graduate who has been squatting in Tolmers Square since 1974.

The first shabby deal, one learns from the appendix, was not the one between Joseph Levy and Camden Council in 1973 but the one between the Duke of Grafton and the Canons of St Paul's in the year 1768. Until then the Canons of St Paul's owned the freehold, the lessee being the Duke of Grafton's younger brother, Charles Fitzroy (b. 1737). The transfer is a lesson in how power and property acquisition go together. From the book (p. 206): "When inherited by Charles Fitzroy the manor was still on a lease, periodically renewable, from the Canons of St Paul's. A remarkable piece of aristocratic sharp practice in 1768 transformed this lease into a freehold. The transaction is described by a writer in the Morning Chronicle in 1837:

"In the year 1768 the Duke of Grafton was Prime Minister. His brother, Mr Fitzroy, was lessee of the Manor and Lordship of Tottenham, the property of the Dean and Chapter of St Paul's, London. Dr Richard Brown, the then prebendary of the stall of Tottenham, having pocketed the emolument attending the renewal of the lease, and there being very little chance of any further advantages to him from the estate, readily listened to a proposal of Mr Fitzroy for the purchase of the estate. The thing was agreed, and the Duke of Grafton, with his great standing majority, quickly passed an act through Parliament, in March 1768, diverting the estate, with all its rights, privileges, and emoluments from the prebend, and conveyed the fee-simple, entire, and without reserve, to Mr Charles Fitzroy and his heirs for ever. The Act states it to be with the consent of Richard, Lord Bishop of London, and the privity of the Dean and Chapter of St Paul's."

Charles Fitzroy became the first baron of Southampton in 1780 and the Southampton family until this century held on to this estate, a long strip of land which stretched from Chalk Farm to Oxford Street. The names of the streets got their names from members of the family, my local electoral ward being Grafton, for example.

But the method by which this relatively impecunious family has built up their estate from end to end and made sure of future strife and urban chaos is again succinctly described by Tim Wilson:

"The system on which the Southampton Estate, like most of the great London estates, was built over was one that enabled the landowners to develop their land at no financial risk to themselves and with the certainty of a substantial profit only in the very long term. The land to be developed would be divided up into building plots and leased to a contractor, or

directly to a builder, for a long period of time - usually 99 years - at a low ground rent, say £5 a year for each house. The builder or contractor built the houses at his own expense, and then normally tried to make his profit by selling the lease. It was a perilous business for the builder ... (some ending up in the bankruptcy courts). At the end of the 99-year term, the land and the houses on it reverted to the ground landlord (the Southampton family), who might then renew the lease (at a much higher rent) or else redevelop the now urbanised land to make a further profit."

How simple this was from the Southampton family's point of view, how tragic for those who lived in their houses. When the leases came to an end many families who lived in the houses could not afford the new rents or the expense of repairs. That and the coming of the railways, the building of Euston, King's Cross and St Pancras stations, not only meant the destruction of nearby housing land but also the bringing by rail of many people into the town who wanted to live near the stations. You must read this book alone for the description of the ensuing poverty in the fast developing slum.

This is the "environment" that the Southampton family's spiritual heirs, the Levy type property speculators, enjoy working in best. Whereas the Duke of Grafton could purchase the whole land in one shabby deal Joseph Levy used money and brute force, employing estate agents, bailiffs, the police and the Council officers, until he pieced together land big enough for his type of profit-making enterprise.

We now have to turn to the beginning of the book for Nick Wates' extremely simple explanation of the property speculator's method of calculation. It again stems from the fact that the property speculator, like the aristocrat before him, is reluctant or does not want to use his own money. What he wants is land cheap enough to buy so that when his office building is completed it can be sold at inflated values to anybody who prefers the income of high rents to fixed interest on his capital.

Wates gives figures to demonstrate the deal that Camden Council initially accepted from Stock Conversion (Levy's company). An investor who would accept a 5 per cent yield and wants his money back in 20 years (plus ownership of the freehold) would be prepared to pay Levy a sum in the region of £27,380,000. This would have given J. Levy £12 million profit in 1973 on Tolmer's Square alone. Camden Council then declared:

"In our opinion the foregoing proposals represent the only way in which the Council will attain the planning objective of a comprehensive development providing a satisfactory housing content in a part of the Borough where it is desperately needed and, at the same time, ensure that the land can be acquired at a cost acceptable to the Department of the Environment for subsidy purposes and considerably below the current market value." (Council minutes, 10 Jan, 1973).

Brian Loughram, who fought this scheme and defeated Levy, expressed himself differently. He said: "the provisional wing of the property speculators were holding the community to ransom and getting their pound of flesh out of the demand for land for housing needs in London."

I have concentrated on the speculation exposé part of this book at the neglect of much more that it contains. Squatters have moved in to Tolmers Square since 1973 and the area has begun to look up a little. The Council has bought Levy out at a price of millions and is still paying interest of over £400,000 a year on the option of building on the land to the present owners Morgan Crenfell the merchant bankers. To recoup all this the Council have come up with another monstrous office scheme cum housing development.

But for the past four years, through squatting and community action, most of the houses are looked after and lived in again. I walked through Tolmers Square on the morning of 19 March on my way to the demonstration against the Criminal Trespass law. Children were playing by the improvised rock garden. Many windows displayed the red and black CACTL posters. And on the east side, above the words "Levy - the writing is on the wall" was also the phrase "Property is theft."

Try to get hold of this book; you will hear in it the true voice of direct action. Here are the facts. But the struggle continues.

Footnotes

*See also Paul Avrich's wider survey "A New Soviet History of Anarchism" (FREEDOM Suppl. Vol. 37 no. 2, 1976) which includes two books relevant to Kronstadt: S.N. Semanov's *Likvidatsiia antisovetskago kronshtadtskogo iniatezha* (The Liquidation of the Anti-Soviet Kronstadt Mutiny 1921) (Moscow 1973) and S. N. Kanev's *Oktiabr'skaia Revoliutsiia i krakh anarkhizma...* (The October Revolution and the Fall of Anarchism: The Struggle of the Bolshevik Party Against Anarchism, 1917-22) (Moscow, 1974).