



A Blaze of Autumn Sunshine: The Last Diaries

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In this final volume of diaries, Tony Benn reflects on the compensations and the disadvantages of old age.

With the support of a small circle of friends and his extended family, he continues his activities on behalf of social justice, peace and accountability in public life, to a background of political change and the international economic crisis.

Following an illness in 2009 the diaries, kept for over sixty years, cease. Published here alongside these last diaries are Tony Benn's highly personal insights into the challenges of old age and failing health, of widowhood, and of moving out of the family home after sixty years.

Finally, we share in Tony Benn's hopes for the future based on his years of experience and his natural optimism.

A Blaze of Autumn Sunshine: The Last Diaries Details

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Ian says

An interesting read, a snapshot of former MP Tony Benn's life as it neared its conclusion. This book is interesting enough for its political diary, but the human element to its stories is what makes this a great book. Benn, on the fringe of politics when he wrote this, was still very active politically in many communities as well as being a doting grandfather, one who revels in his busy life. (more... bit.ly/1mGFmTC)

David Civil says

Tony Benn provides a fascinating insight into politics, current affairs and growing old. The book was incredibly easy to read, flowed very well and brought back memories of the disastrous collapse of New Labour and the financial system. Benn's warmth, passion and intelligence shine through and provide an important source of hope and inspiration.

Bill Lawrence says

I came to political diaries late in life and enjoy reading them. I started with Robin Cook's Point of Departure and found it a fascinating insight, not only into politics but also the man. The natural follow up was to head to the best diaries of his generation and Tony Benn. I have now read the last three and am intending to go back to the beginning and read the remainders. It is amazing the energy of the man in this eighties, attending meetings, demonstrations and delivering his one-man show. But what is so insightful and saddening is the insight to life outside the mainstream that had given him his purpose and the increasing frailty that hangs heavily over him. Nonetheless, Tony Benn shines through in his autumn blaze and provides an excellent commentary on the end of New Labour and the real world outside politics. Continually rewarding and unparalleled.

Amanda Milburn says

A fascinating book written by a fascinating man. I am inspired to read the rest of his diaries: what a brilliant contribution Tony Benn made to the world.

Jeff Howells says

So that's it then, the end of an era. I first started reading Tony Benn's diaries over 20 years ago at Uni and having read all previous volumes we reach the end. I can't say I always agreed with what he wrote (he was strangely naive on occasion) and his regard for cabinet government in the 70s I think harmed the Labour movement. He wouldn't have made a great labour leader (although better than Foot and Brown I expect) but he stood for something and that counts. Also he would disagree with you but engage in debate...not hurl

abuse. I was lucky to see him talk on a couple of occasions and he was (in his National Treasure years) very engaging. He'll be missed and I'll miss reading these. The most important series of books about the post war Labour Party ever written.

Paul says

Just a note to people who say Obama is a socialist. He's not, Tony Benn was a socialist and this is his last diary and last book after a lifetime of writing and politics. He's a son of privilege who rejected it for a seat in the House of Commons. He's been a cabinet minister and a critic of his own party, the Labour Party. He was an early critic of the growth of oligarchical corporate power and politicians becoming its lackeys. He wrote this warning in 1970s:

"How "the Civil Service can frustrate the policies and decisions of popularly elected governments";

The centralised nature of the Labour Party allowing to the Leader to run "the Party almost as if it were his personal kingdom"

"The power of industrialists and bankers to get their way by use of the crudest form of economic pressure, even blackmail, against a Labour Government"; and

The power of the media, which "like the power of the medieval Church, ensures that events of the day are always presented from the point of the view of those who enjoy economic privilege.[43]

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As regards the power of industrialists and bankers, Benn remarked:

Compared to this, the pressure brought to bear in industrial disputes by the unions is minuscule. This power was revealed even more clearly in 1976 when the International Monetary Fund secured cuts in our public expenditure. ... These [four] lessons led me to the conclusion that the UK is only superficially governed by MPs and the voters who elect them. Parliamentary democracy is, in truth, little more than a means of securing a periodical change in the management team, which is then allowed to preside over a system that remains in essence intact. If the British people were ever to ask themselves what power they truly enjoyed under our political system they would be amazed to discover how little it is, and some new Chartist agitation might be born and might quickly gather momentum."

Mark says

Excellent, as were all his previous diaries.

Mr Benn is a wonderful man, politician, thinker, socialist and family man. You should read his diaries. Informative and poignant, I am very sad this will be the last volume.

Stephen says

First of all, I need to start off this review by saying that I have read all of Tony Benn's diaries (not recorded on Goodreads as from before I started using it) - think that there are 7 or 8 volumes of them now spanning from the 1940s to the present day. In his time, Tony Benn was right at the heart of the UK government - he was a minister in the cabinet in various different roles in the 1960s and 70s and then very nearly became leader of the Labour party in the 1980s. But then his left wing policies scared off the public and could be argued to have helped Margaret Thatcher to remain in power so long, split the Labour Party and brought about "New Labour" and the SDP both of which he obviously detests from his diaries. Thought it was very telling at one point in this book where a Labour would be leader comes up to him and tells him that she is trying to model herself on him and he replies that "That's a bit of a mistake, because I was a great failure".

As a teenager in the 1980s, I remember Tony Benn being absolutely vilified in the press and thinking of him as a really terrifying politician and that everything would be terrible if he ever got in power. But now, in his ninetieth year, he is an absolute national treasure loved by almost everyone. Funny how things change.

The Benn diaries are the best political diaries that you can read about UK politics - particularly the ones that cover the 1960s to 1980s when he was in a position of power. There is nothing to compare with them - and it amazes me that he was allowed to sometimes take a tape recorder into cabinet meetings and record what was said

This current volume is quite different from the rest - Tony Benn is very much on the fringes now. The diaries are mainly about growing old - loneliness, missing his wife (who died 13 years ago in 2000), considering death, having to move out of the family home as he is too frail to cope. It is all very sad but very intimate and personal, with everything said exactly as it is and nothing sanitised as is the case with all of his diaries. This volume is the weakest of the diaries as ill health and old age affects the author but I am glad that I have read it and sad that it will be the last one.

Incidentally, there is a film of Tony Benn's life, which he has been heavily involved with, called "Last Will and Testament" due out in Spring 2014 and that should hopefully be well worth seeing.

Nigel says

Like Tony Benn's other diaries this volume, which covered the last few years of his life during which he was retired, at least from being an MP but he never really retired from being an activist and campaigner for what he believed in. If you are interested in politics or in Tony Benn, whether or not you agree with his views his diaries are a really interesting read.

A few memories I have taken away from this volume are:

- He continued to go on demonstrations and marches and every one he went to also seemed to be attended by the same people eg Jeremy Corbyn. One gets the impression that that is all they do in their lives (not a criticism just an observation).
- Each year Benn would go up to the Durham Miners' Gala and with the same colleagues (probably including Jeremy Corbyn) stand on the balcony of the County Hotel saluting the miners as they walked past. Reading each year's account of this event I could not prevent the image entering my mind of the old Soviet May Day Parades marching past Brezhnev and his Politburo comrades.
- Whenever there was a strike Tony was there, supporting the strikers, lobbying on their behalf, standing on the picket line and contributing to their strike fund. I don't recall him ever criticising any group of workers for going on strike. His reaction was almost Pavlovian: workers on strike, support them.
- A recurring theme from the other volumes that I've read: he regularly and scathingly criticised his beloved

Labour Party. OK in his latter years it was run by Blair and Brown but if he were still alive I would love to ask him "When did you last love the Labour Party and were fully in agreement with their policies? I suspect the answer would be "Never".

- His roof. It was always leaking. Whoever his builder was took him for a ride because year after year whenever it rained his kitchen flooded.

- He loved trying to use technology but really struggled to make it work on his own. Not surprising really for someone 80+ years old.

- He loved Pizza Express. When he died the takings at the Notting Hill branch must have plummeted.

Whatever you say about Tony Benn and his views you have to admire him. He stuck to his principles and was not corrupted by power (although he didn't really have any post 1979). In many cases he was naive especially from a geo-political standpoint.

Paul Miller says

This is very different from the other diaries. As Tony Benn enters his final years he is more reflective. It begins with a trip to a conference with Bill Clinton and Kofi Annan but the remainder is more about Tony on the periphery. It's bittersweet to read as he feels less physically confident but still pursuing a schedule of appearances and speeches. The book is a biography of aging as much as anything else. He describes his frustrations at New Labour but still shows the passion and idealism of his younger days. There is much more insight into his family life and his pride as his children and grandchildren succeed. The closing chapter is a broad summary of the stage as he leaves it and is a very poignant end to the book. I think you can read this regardless of how you view his politics.

Ipswichblade says

The last diaries of an icon and possible national treasure. Very sad in parts as Tony realises he is getting old and can't cope with technology etc. Also the feeling of him that he doesn't have a lot of time left on the political stage to make an impact

RK says

Interesting book. Very readable. Borrowed it from the library. It got me using the library again (which is one way to complete a book in a week). Also made me think that I should start keeping a diary. Wouldn't that be fun.

Helen says

I haven't read the earlier volumes of the diaries - something I've been saving up for a future date! - so this was starting at the wrong end, and rather sad as it is the last volume. Tony Benn's diaries were famous in his lifetime, and stories abounded about his huge archive in his Holland Park basement. The diary stops rather abruptly in the summer of 2009 after an operation that turned out more difficult than expected, although there's a sort of dictated summary of the four subsequent years - the move out of his home of 60 years, the Coalition government, and so on. Tony Benn died soon after this volume was published. I am going to miss

his intelligent and principled contributions to public life very much.

Diaries are always great fun; they convey the immediate impressions of events in a way a memoir cannot. That doesn't mean they are necessarily evidence to be accepted in an unquestioning way - they will still reflect the beliefs and prejudices of the writer - but they will also capture the moment, in particular the detail which later recollections lack. Political diaries are great for capturing passing comments and predictions - some of the latter are spot on and some are wide of the mark.

Tony Benn was in his 80s by the time this volume of diaries begins. He complains quite a bit about how he was beginning to find the pace of his life a bit too much - and yet what strikes the reader is his energy, especially his mental energy. He had quite a gruelling timetable of travel, early morning starts, interviews and long days which would be a bit much for any octogenarian. He also seems to have made a very valiant effort to get to grips with modern technology. There are some very funny moments, and some shrewd comments. The predictions of politicians can be quite wide of the mark, but his are not- he even predicted a coalition government (but thought it would be Tory/Labour).

Sadly missed!

Sarah Walsh says

I write this as Gaia shifts the Earth from under my pity shaken, pretty shaken, quaked body. Dearest Benn-y. The radical statesman, a title that strikes me odd so too, the idea of Socialism being the Catholic Church's equivalent of confessional toilet, Pop Porn masturbation. Why is it hands dirty? Benn admitting to his privilege and his children's, grandchildren's privilege all maintained his life lived in comfort. Articulate and diary-conscious, a bare-bones user of technology if only to manage his emails, a somewhat burdened task in old-age. Letter-writing and fighting depression, emotionally tied in to the ever-changing public and *expert* opinion, travelling extensively up and down the country, all this weighed heavy on dearest Benn, especially in his final years.

His real, genuine concerns lay to others not in a privileged position. The silent voices he gave voice to. Voices suffering in generational misfortune handed down by B'stards of Money God. He gave hope which I'd relate to the modern-day equivalent of action. Hope sits idle. Looking toward his grandchildren, the bringers of fresh ideas to pull us out of this white-man, decision-making, swamp. Capitalism's Casino.

I wouldn't go so far as to send an email to Benn, begging he father my children, his spirit'd say that's silly as his body decays in peace. Nor would I leave a demonic message on his home phone alerting him to socialist, arse-holery. Fans and trolls are to public life what Benn is to Socialism, an enemy in the *expert*, public eye, a friend to the working man. Trolls and The Faces of Capitalism did not put a stop on his agenda, an absolute gentleman rarely stooping low, the worst name-call, 'empty-head'.

Love is another dirty word. On this occasion, I will extend my fondness to a man who stuck by Labour as he watched the Evils of Blair and Thatcherite policies destroy what Labour stood for. I think this would have been the edge in his final years, to keep spreading the dirty words as someone certainly with not as much Power as the silent hand that's wrung our throats but to challenge our thoughts. Radical? No. Dear Socialism, Love Benn.

Esther says

Scored from an Evanston charity shop for a mere 50c. I've read some of his earlier diaries, I think my Dads copies most likely and I remember Radio 4 serialized the Benn Tapes years ago (he dictates his diary entries into tape before having them transcribed). These final diaries find him in his early 80s and my god he puts us all to shame with his schedule of traveling, giving talks, attending rallies and protests. Also he has a huge family and keeps up with them as well, I was tired just reading some of the entries.
