

by Michael Meadowcroft

Everyone involved in the history of democracy, research into electoral systems or in political journalism should make a daily obeisance to Chris Cook and urge the gods to make him immortal. For over thirty years he has assiduously produced a stream of remarkably reliable statistical volumes on a commendably wide area of national and international topics, all of which have shortened considerably the amount of time each of us would otherwise need to spend digging out crucial facts. This current volume is but the latest in a long line of such tomes.

This guide to British political archives is the successor to the two volume Longman guides, published in 1994, which were themselves the follow up to the six volumes published by Palgrave Macmillan between 1975 and 1985. Thanks to the tenacity of Dr Cook, to which I can personally attest, researchers and writers at least know the location of those political archives that are available and the excuses for those that are not.

The book includes 1500 individuals active in political and public life since 1945 and a splendidly eclectic array of organisations with a political connotation. In addition there is an appendix, compiled by Jane Leonard, on archives relating to Northern Ireland. There is also a useful list of relevant major websites.

I suspect that Chris Cook is, like an alarming number of us, a congenital collector of material, in which case he must be cut to the quick by the number of entries stating "papers with family", "will make provision" or "has retained personal papers," with all the inherent dangers of them ending up as "papers lost". Completeness in this field is, alas, a utopian dream and one notes the absence amongst others of such important figures in their respective parties as George Cunningham, Phil Piratin, Donald Wade and John Biffen.

The other problem category is that of political figures who were never in parliament. Where, for instance, are the papers of the late Donald Chesworth, Labour member of the London County Council and the Kensington Borough Council, who for some thirty years was one of the best political fixers around. He was the man who effectively ended the infamous career of Peter Rachman and his papers would certainly illuminate many dark corners of post war politics.

The section on organisations will be valuable to researchers and it turns up some splendidly named groups. I was, for instance, wholly ignorant of the existence of the Society of Socialist Clergy and Ministers. I note also that the papers of the Liberal Movement have been preserved, however Dr Cook states that it was "a Liberal splinter group opposed to amalgamation with the SDP" whereas it was in fact precisely the opposite - a post-merger group that attempted to serve as a vehicle to maintain contacts with Liberals in and out of the new amalgamated party.

This is a valuable book which adds incrementally to its predecessors. My main criticism relates to its elevated price which puts it out of the reach of many individuals and, I suspect, even some libraries these days.

The Routledge Guide to British Political Archives Sources since 1945

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