The real history of US labour

Dianne Finger and Barry Finger review 'Injury to All' by Kim Moody, Verso, London.

"This book," as Moody correctly forewarns, "is about the demise of the labour movement that was born in the 1930s and 1940s." While chronicling its social decline in contemporary American life, this book concerns itself with the "abandonment of the early social unionism of the CIO in favour of a modern version of business unionism". It is written from the singular perspective of the rank and file militant. Moody therefore suffers no pretensions of having offered anything resembling an "official" history, nor one which aspire to such ends.

Moody himself is uniquely equipped in providing this anti-canonical "unofficial guide" to modern unionism. He is one of the founders and leading forces behind the rank and file newsletter, Labor Notes. This journal, founded in 1979, picks up from where the International Socialists of the 1960s and '70s left off. The IS group(s), probably never numbering more than a few hundred, was unique among the so-called New Left. It traced its roots back to the anti-orthodox wing of the 1930s' Trotskyist movement which in its day played a memorable, if minor role in the early period of the CIO. Unlike their more blinkered cohorts of the "official" Trotskyist party, the Socialist Workers Party, the Workers Party, later the Independent Socialist League, developed a Third Camp socialist position. It refused to support, critically or otherwise, the Soviet Union as a workers' state, and championed instead a socialism from below. This perspective, at once revolutionary and democratic, firmly committed the group to participation in the mass movements of its day with pride of place naturally reserved for labour struggles. But such participation never entailed the subordination of its activities to the interests of any existing social system. This tradition was faithfully replicated in the IS which, unlike the New Left in general, never wound up as claque in the authoritarian of the month club for Mao or Ho'sa or Castro or Ho or Tito.

The IS itself no longer exists. Its membership dissolved into the insurmountable movements of organized and semi-organized labour, in which the political apparatus merged with other distinctly similar groups on the American left. But it did not vanish from the political scene before playing a leading part in the 1976 founding of the Teamsters for a Democratic Union, nor before queuing in Labor Notes an ongoing project of linking the anti-bureaucratic chorus in the labour movement to new voices within the Black, feminist, and anti-interventionist movements. The critical assumption that informs Labor Notes as it does An Injury to All is that "the working class remains the central agency of progressive politics and social change".

The heyday of American trade unionism was the later 1930s and early 1940s when, as Moody evokes, "millions of workers flowed into new organisations, stamping them with their own democratic aspirations and shaping a new generation of leaders from the shop floor to the international union headquarters".

Concomitant with this organisation challenge to the accommodationist AFL's business unionism was a new vision of social unionism. In this modern version of social unionism the values of the old Knights of Labour were to find new expression. The democratic, collective thrust of the new industrial unions envisioned organized labour as a "force that would lead to the raising of the living standards of the entire nation...and (pointed to) an egalitarian future for all..." This egalitarianism and its broader social vision provided the "only real potential springboards toward the development of an aggressive, class-based movement in post World War Two America."

Though not socialist, the new unionism of the 1930s was aggressively participatory, organisationally incestuous and if not built completely from the ground up was at least a "hybrid of rank and file democracy and bureaucracy". It provided a hospitable environment for radicals not only due to the freewheeling structure of the organisations which were conducing to new initiatives, but because workers began to see themselves as a class. As the CIO's Philip Murray was to admit in his 1945 "It is a new departure for American labour to lead...a national movement devoted to the general welfare just as much as to the particular interests of labour groups."

But with the resurgence and ultimate triumph of business unionism that all came to an end. For Moody the wartime institutional accords between the CIO, management and the federal government provided an immediate backdrop to the decline of social unionism. "Basically," according to Moody, "the leadership of the CIO offered the Roosevelt administration a no-strike pledge and a wage freeze in return for government pressure on the employers to allow the growth and stabilisation of union membership". Shopfloor initiatives were unwieldy and incompatible with the rationalisation of industrial relations needed to prosecute the war effort. The transcendence of ever more issues from the local level summoned forth a standing, self-perpetuating union bureaucracy required to implement and enforce these tripartite agreements.

This bureaucratic mechanism bore fruit in the form of industry-wide wage patterns and standardised grievance procedures, while at the same time choking off union democracy and suppressing internal dissent. As mediator rather than immediate participant in the shopfloor struggle, the union bureaucracy eventually began to identify the well being of the worker with the wealth and profitability of the company.

Even more remote were the days when labour could be counted to rally to any social cause. Nothing perhaps more illustrate this than the descent of the union participation in the civil rights movement. When in the 1920s at least some of the CIO unions worked in a cooperative relationship with the Black community, by the 1960s active participation gave way to interested bystanding. The civil rights movement was to find its principal allies and organisational support outside the union establishment.

Sidney Lens aptly described this transformation, "In both its moral overtones and its intrinsic philosophy it has tended to blend with the very forces of Big Business which it fights so steadily on the narrow economic front. Involving itself in a movement which has force with the social stream, as it has grown older, it has become 'responsible', sluggish towards new currents rather than idealistic, legalistic rather than militant, more conformist than anti-authoritarian..." The unions were, in other words, willing to utterly concede to the bosses the right to manage in exchange for.
the expansion of wages and benefits.

Eventually with the throttling of internal political ferment, labour's role as "a pressure group within the Democratic Party" rather than as the leader of a broad movement — was unchallenged policy. Labour's slogan was "paved in gold" and its narrow compass of legislative goals that directly affected the unions themselves, National health care, federal public housing and economic planning all retreated to the background to be dusted off only for ceremonial display. With the eventual decline in the worldwide competitiveness of American business, the post-war accord between labour and management was to erode. And when the time came, the descent into narrow, business unionism had already disarmed labour and stripped it of its ability to challenge capitalism.

For Mondy argues explicitly that the decline of labour in the 1970s was not due to the structural shift in employment patterns from manufacturing to services. Indeed, the level of unionisation has declined in both sectors. Rather the cause resides in the lack of adaptability on the part of a mummatled labour movement. This retreat reached its climax during the 1970-80 Chrysler bailout, when the UAW overrode recalcitrant locals and forced workers to accept a wage freeze and other massive concessions. Despite these givebacks, almost half the workforce eventually bought into the plan.

Concessionary bargaining is not seen by employers as an aberration, to be invoked only under extreme circumstances. Rather, as a way of life, employers see profit sharing and profit sharing 'tools as utter failures in terms of altering the real power relationships between labour and management. Mondy concludes, "The popularization of the idea that the narrow set goals of the busines enterprise... Unions became a mechanism whereby work life is adapted to the demands of intensified global competition. This slide in the quality of shop-floor and union life is not inevitable or irreversible. Drawing on the careful discussion of the P-9 and Watsonville Cannings strikes as well as a detailed history of the Teamsters for a Democratic Union, L. Mondy presents what he calls "A New Vision for US Labour". This vision draws on the "positive traditions of the past labour movements. "In the US these traditions include the social inclusiveness, the rank and file democracy, the militant egalitarianism, the quest for universal justice that characterised, to one degree or another, the Knights of Labour, the Industrial Workers of the World, and the early CIO." Compared to the present, Mondy's project would be more culturally diverse, bringing to bear feminist and multi-ethnic concerns; it would "return to industrial structure"; and would "include cross- or multi-labor fonnations such as stewards' councils, rank and file based coordinated bargaining, the use of collective campaigning to regularisation of active solidarity through the recognition of picquet lines and through various forms of mass action."

As Mondy argues, "The restructuring of the unions must include the most thorough rank and file democracy possible... This is not simply because democracy is a nice thing or even because the rank and file are presumed to be more militant than the bureaucrats, but because the working class cannot remake its own institutions unless it controls them.

Finally, Mondy would crown this movement with the creation of a union based labour party. Business unionism, and Democratic Party to which it is wed, have exhausted their abilities to defend the living standards of working people. Neither can do the job of a new party in the possible break-away by any major social constituency of the Democratic Party, such as the Rainforest Coalition or unions at the state or local levels, and the activation of a significant number of working class non-voters.

Only this new labour movement could give resonance to solving the problems of the Black underclass, of joblessness, of environmental and community decay, and of ageism, racism and sexism. But it could do so only by challenging the bourgeois individualist values of American culture. Mondy concludes that "embraced in the slogans 'An Injury to One is an Injury to All' is an ethic in which labour takes social responsibility for all working people. It is the opposite of the competitive logic of the business enterprise in which the competitive struggle of each against all is imagined to advance the common weal." Labour's ethics requires even more new tactics or new forms of organisation: it requires a vision that allows the millions facing downward mobility the hope of labour as the carrier of justice.

It is in keeping this vision alive that Mondy's work moves beyond all else stands as the transition to American labour history.

It takes all sorts?

Liz Millward reviews Reg and Ron Kray, 'Our Story'

A fictional detective once said that the trouble with most criminals was their inability to reason from B to C. The Krays could only make it to B, if the path of reason ran along a well-worn cliché.

Ronnie and Reggie Kray were imprisoned on 8 March 1969, with a recommendation that they serve at least 30 years. Ronnie is in Broadmoor and unlikely ever to be released. Technically, the twins were sentenced for the murders of Jack McVitie and George Cornell, but they were also suspected of having a hand in at least three other murders. They ran several protection rackets and frauds, and acted as an information service for Lon- don's drug dealers and pointless affair. McVitie was lured to a flat in Stoke Newington where Reggie tried to stab him, but the attempt failed. McVitie pleaded for his life and tried to jump through a window, but got stuck. As a scene in a comedy film it would have been a wild success — until, that is, two men held McVitie so that Reggie could stab him in the face, neck and stomach. Regge hated the Killing.

'I felt bad afterwards though. Not because I'd killed McVitie — one of the nastiest villains I've ever met — but because sticking a knife into anyone is not a pleasant thing to do unless you are a psychopath and you are not. It's a bloody awful feeling.'

Reggie was not obsessed with killing like Ronnie was. During part of his hospitalisation, Reggie's favourite pastime was assembling lists of people to be killed. Reggie was happy to injure, but didn't want to kill. Ronnie was happy to kill anyone. His excuses for 'having' to kill Jack McVitie are tame to say the least, or at least the justification of art. At best McVitie was killed 'pour encourager les autres', at worst to assuage Ron-
As modest as Stalin
Jim Denham reviews 'The Artful Albanian'

— the memoirs of Enver Hoxha' edited by Jon Halliday, Chatto, £6.95

Back in the late '70s a Maoist who had just transferred his allegiance from China to Albania, told me a joke.

During one of their many heated disputes, Krouchew turned in exasperation to Enver Hoxha and declared "We have nothing in common — even our backgrounds are completely different. I come from the proletariat, while you're from the bourgeoisie!" At this, Comrade Enver calmly replied, "But we do have something in common. Comrade Krouchew: We're both class traitors." 

It's a rather pithy, side-splittingly funny, I agree. But after reading the memoirs of the man who ruled Albania with a rod of iron for over twenty years, I can almost believe that he really did say that. Certainly he is on record as describing Krouchew as "the greatest counter-revolutionary buffoon and charlatan the world has ever known."

Unusually (one suspects) for a Stalinist dictator, Enver Hoxha appears to have possessed a certain sense of humour, albeit one that manifested itself mainly in his depictions of vitriolic mockery of the pretentions, stupidity and cowardice of his political opponents and rivals within the "family" of Stalinism.

Editor Jon Halliday has painstakingly selected extracts from Hoxha's voluminous memoirs covering the years after World War Two and its aftermath (including the break with Tito's Yugoslavia in 1948), the 1980s (in the course of which Yugoslavia's relations with the Soviet Union were cordial) and the period of close alignment with China throughout the 1960s and into the '70s until Hoxha broke with them as well.

The memoirs are in diary form, which Halliday reckons is on the whole a frank account of events as Hoxha saw them, although some self-justifying re-writing of history with the benefit of hindsight is pointed out by the editor. Halliday also provides some most useful historical background and commentary for those of us not entirely 'au fait' with the finer points of post-war Balkan politics.

So well does Halliday present the politics of this glossy style of subject's diary, that it is easy to be seduced into regarding Hoxha as a rather jolly fellow — at worst a likable, crude politician. The memorable scene is of Hoxha and the Brigadier who headed the British mission in Albania towards the end of World War Two, thinking the memoirs of Swift, Byron, Shelley, Kipling (!) and Jerome K Jerome (!).

But we are brought back down to earth by a bump in the account of Hoxha's relations with political opponents (real and imagined) including many old comrades from the early days, like Krouchew (corroborated to death on Hoxha's orders as a suspected Titoite agent) and Meksi Shehu, prime minister from 1954 till his alleged suicide 'in 1981. How many other less prominent 'spies', 'agents', 'enemies of the people', 'counter-revolutionaries', etc. also perished on Hoxha's orders can only be guessed at.

When Hoxha comes to discuss Stalin, his tone becomes suddenly stilted and reverential: "Stalin was the first, no doubt, to take on a man of principle, he was just, modest and very kindly and considered towards people, the common man."

Hoxha's open and benign regime is contrasted with the 'Mafia-like methods' of his revisionist successors.

Hoxha points out that Hoxha's account of a discussion with Stalin on the Greek Civil War simply does not tally with the known facts. At that meeting, says Hoxha, his hero expressed full support for the Greek Communists as late as March 1949: in fact, Stalin had abandoned them at least a year earlier. Whether Stalin was lying to Hoxha about this, or Hoxha re-wrote the account to suit the image of the great man as the embodiment of revolutionary principle, is not clear.

This is even more chilling, perhaps, is Hoxha's account of a meeting in 1948 with Andrei Vyshinsky, the Russian Deputy Foreign Minister, who had been chief prosecutor in the 1936-8 Moscow Trials, and who demonstrated that he had not lost his touch by holding an impromptu 'trial' of the "Yugoslav Titoites" especially for his host Hoxha.

"With his penetrating style, with arguments and the amazing clarity characteristic of him, Vyshinsky, as the true Bolshevik prosecutor that he was, made them seem very clear. This time we did not have the accused before us in the dock, but the fact is that their trial was being held. It was a trial of a single man based on sound arguments, an historic trial, the justice of which was to be completely confirmed by the outcome of the trial.

Apart from a total contempt for the laws of natural justice and for democracy in any shape or form, one other constant theme runs through these memoirs: an absolute commitment to Albanian
REVIEWS

nationalism. Every situation, every alliance and every dispute is viewed from the standpoint of Albania's immediate political and economic interests. This is what really lies behind Hoxha's disputes with Tito and Krushchev. Such fierce nationalism, combined with a keen instinct for the maintenance of personal and political survival, plus a total unfamiliarity with the working class, made Enver Hoxha the consumate post-Stalinist Stalinist.

These memoirs provide us with a disturbing glimpse of the kind of society that such people would put into effect given the chance. Jon Halliday's book should be made compulsory reading for all supporters of Socialist Action, Briefing and Socialist Outlook.

Helter skelter and stage by stage

Martin Thomas reviews
"Livingstone's Labour: A Programme for the Nineties", by Ken Livingstone, Unwin Hyman £12.95; and "Beyond the Casino Economy", by Nicholas Costello, Jonathan Michie and Seumas Milne, Verso.

When I was about nine years old, I spent some weeks ill in bed, reading through a vast heap of old boys' annuals, Readers' Digest, and similar literature contributed by my great-great-grandmother. "Livingstone's Labour", with its helter-skelter-would-you-believe-it style, reminds me strongly of that reading matter. When I interviewed Ken Livingstone for Socialist Organiser shortly before he became leader of the Greater London Council in 1983, he assured me that he had never read any Marx; indeed, he said, he had no time to read anything but council papers. Judging from his bibliography, he has still read no Marx, but he has read a few other books, and this has been his stock-in-trade throughout the ideas he had picked up from those books and from his associates.

Hoping around from the pre-birth origins of women's oppression through the glories of Irish Gaelic culture in the first century BC to the "totalitarianism and anti-capitalism for the future" that Livingstone found "in almost every conversation with an ordinary Soviet citizen", in political conclusions the book shows the influence especially of John Ross and Gerry Healy.

One chapter claims that all post-war British politics had been governed by the machinations of MIS and MI6. There are a few questionable phrases - "three of these treasonable activities [by MIS and MI6] Callaghan would have succeeded Wilson and that Wilson would have won the 1979 election" - but the drift of the chapter is in line with Healy's characteristic spy-mania and Livingstone's recent allegation that the break-up of Healy's "Workers' Revolutionary Party" in 1985 (when Healy was expelled for sexual abuses) was engineered by MIS.

Healy's influence is also visible in the chapter lauding Gorbachev as "the new moral leadership for the world".

John Ross of Socialist Action is credited for the "economic data base" and "much of the material for the chapters dealing with international relations". His influence shows in the book's economic programme.

The book explains Britain's economic problems as shaped by "key decisions", "between 1841 and 1946", which have exceptionally large proportion of British capitalists' investments being overseas. The remedy? Bring back the Corn Laws? No, a drive to force capitalists to bring their money back to Britain; a cut in arms spending; increased taxes on the rich; and a trade pact with the USSR.

This programme is proposed in radical language, both by Livingstone and by Socialist Action. However, it is neither workable nor necessarily anti-capitalist.

Livingstone does not propose any new public ownership beyond the renationalisation of utilities sold off by the Tories. He certainly does not propose public ownership of the banks and financial institutions, only remarking vaguely that "If the City refused to cooperate then the people's anger that the Fourtis montage would arouse would allow Labour to take further powers (whut?) to ensure that the memorandum of the way we got "nationalised".

Without public ownership - and effective workers' control at all levels - the programme is nothing more than a proposal to put more cash in the hands of the capitalists and of the capitalist state, and to hope that they will invest it brightly. If the industries bringing prosperity to all. The programme is wishful thinking today; tomorrow, after a severe world slump and lurch towards protectionism, a version of it might be sober capitalist policy.

Like so much of Livingstone's self-righteousness, it is no coincidence that the top side is radical, socialist, quasi-revolutionary; the flip-side of the same coin, "an achievable package" (as he calls it) "of modernising reforms capable of being carried out in the lifetime of one Parliament".

"Beyond the Casino Economy" is much more solid and well-crafted book. Like Livingstone's volume, it was published for last Labour Party conference. It was sponsored by the Campaign for Labour Party Democracy, the National Committee for Unison, and the National Union of Mineworkers, and acknowledges contributions from dozens of economists, trade unionists and Labour activists.

To the great credit of the three authors, it reads well and clearly, not like a book drafted by a committee. The core of it is detailed and convincing argument that modern information technology makes planning and social control more, not less, necessary and practicable. The technology lends itself easily to wide free distribution of information, but capitalism compels "increasingly roundabout strategies aimed at making knowledge unusable by competitors".

The book, however, has two grave shortcomings.

Any convincing socialist programme today has to explain very clearly how what it proposes is different from the debacle of Stalinism. The authors, however, accept the claim of Stalinism to represent socialism, with only minor criticism ("the advantages of autocratic reliance on highly centralised planning have now exhausted themselves"). Drafted before the recent upheavals in Eastern Europe, but published in the midst of them, the book suffered discredit from events before it was even on the shelves.

The texts it quotes reverently to back up its strategic arguments - titles like "Zaradov, Leninism and Contemporary Problems of the Transition from Capitalism to Socialism", Moscow 1976" - are those now being pulped or relegated to dusty reserve stacks all over Eastern Europe.

Strategic ideas from such sources contribute to the second main problem with "Beyond the Casino Economy" - that it would make a good case for a comprehensive socialist programme of public ownership and workers' control, the book then concludes by proposing no such thing, but instead that old Stalinist favourite, an "anti-monopolist" programme. The "anti-monopolist" programme would centre around the nationalisation of 25 of the top 100 industrial companies, and of the banks and financial institutions. This would not "of itself break the boundaries of capitalist society", but it would move us into an intermediate stage (presumably what the Stalinists used to call "advanced democracy") from which progress to socialism would be easier.

The tiger of capitalism still cannot be skinned by claw. Limited action programmes to mobilise workers round particular issues are one thing; blueprints for a future Labour government to skin one claw of the tiger are another.

Marxism without bullshit?

Jon Pike reviews "Alternatives to Capitalism (Studies in Marxism and Social Theory)", edited by Jon Elster and Karl Ove Moene, CUP "Alternatives to Capitalism" the latest in the series "Studies in Marxism and Social Theory" that has provided the main voice for the school known as analytical Marxism. The book is fairly boring in itself but it is important as the mark in the evolution of that group to an acceptance of market socialism and provides an opportunity to assess the way academic Marxism has gone over the last decade.

"Analytical Marxism" or 'no bullshit Marxism' began with the publication of Gerry Cohen's and "Karl Marx's Theory of History" in 1978. It was an attempt to recast orthodox historical materialism with the tools of analytical philosophy. There are two key features of this approach. Firstly, the analytical Marxists tend to assume that all fundamental entities are 'simples' - non-contradictory, unitary - premises which would centre around the nationalisation of 25 of the top 100 industrial companies, and of the banks and financial institutions.
nus and bolts are static ideas and this poses problems for Marxists. To elaborate, Marxism has to do with movement: the "laws of motion" of classes of development, and so on. But movement implies contradiction. At its most basic level it implies something both is, and is not, in a certain state at a particular instant of time. Contradiction within an entity however means that the entity has at least two attributes. For example, it is both a use value and an exchange value. If an entity has two attributes essentially (in other words, take away one attribute and you haven't got the same thing — in this case a commodity) then it's not a "simple" as required for analytical purposes.

The second and consequent problem is that it's difficult to value philosophy to include the "necessary cause" or causation, since, as Hume pointed out if we can imagine every connection, why should we believe that any particular connection should hold true? Causation then becomes a matter of coincidence and accident rather than that of necessity.

This adds up to Marxism without Hegel, dialectics, or the analysis of alienation. Cohen's book presents a form of "technological determinism" where the productive forces are the determining feature of any society and the conflictive conditions exist in a form that is functional for the development of the forces. "Karl Marx's Theory of History" struck a lot of people as interesting and worthwhile book, but one which could be read in a number of different ways. With the problem of the "over-existence of Marx' (sic) by Jon Else in $5 the theoretical framework comes clearer. The ensuing of Marxism means that the nature of Marx's method and his world of essence and its representation by rational choice theory and 'methodological individualism': the idea that classes as such don't act and instead all worthwhile explanation must be rooted in terms of individuals. These two approaches meant a framework lifted more or less straight from classical economics. Economic Man, that all-knowing, all-calculating, entirely selfish fiction is the new basis for the rescue of Marxism.

Two things are worth saying: first that this is not only wrong but shows a wilful misunderstanding of Marx. His polemic against the bourgeois economists and "bourgeois sociologists" is a polemic against much of what passes for theory in Marxism today. Marx argued that the idea of the 'individual' was a socially and historically specific construct, related to the needs of a capitalist ruling class, of a generalised profit and narrow self interest as its ideological justification.

Second, that to use the loaded notion of the individual like this is less a rescue of Marxism itself than an attempt to rescue the Marxian of the academy, by bringing the most respectable tools of Marxist philosophy, analytical philosophy, rational choice theory and liberal economics — to bear on Marx's writings. As such, the present project has secured a few careers — Cohen is now Professor of Political Theory at Oxford. But the analytical Marxists are not just interested. They also reflect Anglo-Saxon prejudice against the sorts of tradition Marxists value: the essentialist, dialectical methods of Aristotle, Hegel and Marx himself, and against continental philosophy more generally. The school can also be seen as an attempt to patch up the gaps in Stalinist 'theory' after key hits of Marxism have been abandoned. The analytical Marxist project is throwing away the labour theory of value, dialectics and contradiction, class, alienation, essence and appearance and the conception of society as a totality of social relations. 'Alternatives to Capitalism' reveals something of what is left after this de-bushhitting of Marxism has happened. But there's a problem. Else and Moene don't seem sure what such capitalism is, since the main focus is on profit-sharing and competing cooperatives within a framework of state-relations and widespread private ownership.

More than this, however, the impression is of an amalgam of hugely different articles (we go from 'internal subcontracting in Hungarian Firms' to 'Are freedom and equity compatible?' (in eighty pages) and a comparison of various 'alternatives' completely abstracted from the living movement. The realist socialist position gives us a discussion of four criteria on which we're supposed to decide upon which 'alternative to capitalism' to go for. This sort of choice, outside history, is the mark of utopianism, unrelated to the labour movement and its history or to any analysis of where capitalist societies are going.

Why is any of this important? It's true for a long time that active socialists test treat academic Marxism with a great deal of caution. On the other hand, the label 'bourgeois theory' is too often used as a meaningless swear word. We need to say why these books are bourgeois and welcome the excellent analytical Marxism constitutes a challenge to and critique of Marxism normally from within, and is widely influential. A few examples: New Left Review and the turn towards 'market socialism'. It should be rejected in favour of a decent materialist and dialectical method and a politics that is rooted in the labour movement.

P.S.

"I have made enough faces"

"She's like wax in my hands... and when I am finished with her, she will please the very gods."

Thus spoke Mauritz Stiller, the Swedish film director who discovered Garbo and took her to America in 1924. Garbo was only nineteen but was soon to become the brightest star at MGM, the studio whose boast was "more stars than there are in heaven!"

Garbo may have been impressionable while she was still learning the craft of film acting, but the star was soon to become formidable. When, after three successful pictures, MGM refused to raise her wages from $600 to $5,000 a week, Garbo went on strike for six months, MGM, with the public clamouring for more Garbo pictures, was forced to climb down. Garbo had won her independence.

She lost all her savings in the Wall Street crash of 1929, but went on to make another fortune in costume dramas like Camille, Congress and Anna Karenina. At 27 she was earning $250,000 a picture. She died a millionaire.

Public interest in Garbo never waned. Her romances which, despite a few close calls, never led to marriage, her yoga, her brief vegetarianism, were all splashed across the world press. She was as newsworthy in her eighties as she had been in her heyday.

Sightings of Garbo on the streets of New York were rare, but always eagerly reported. With her death come more probings of the mystery surrounding the star.

For Garbo never explained herself. In her last press interview in 1928, she said: "Your joys and sorrows, you never can tell them. If you do tell them, you cheapen the inside of yourself." Garbo refused to speak to the press again. When she retired at the height of her spectacular career, her only explanation was: "I have made enough faces!"

Garbo's films were immensely popular, providing romantic escape for a country in the grip of the Great Depression. Surprisingly, most of her films ended unhappily. The audience went to see Garbo, in love with an image of masochistic martyred nobility. For Garbo was always noble.

More sinned against than sinning, her fallen women always redeemed themselves by self sacrifice of the loveliest kind. Her lovers, usually called up younger men, were denounced at the cost of great suffering. Her eyes seemed fixed on an ideal, something higher than human love, a divine love, distant and noble, far removed from the mundane and everyday. Her eroticism wasn't threatening, or carnal, like Marlene Dietrich's; it was almost spiritual. On screen she wasn't a woman, she was a goddess, a deus ex machina, and therefore different from mere ordinary mortals.

"We were a get a face like that in front of the camera once every hundred years," said Stiller, and the public agreed. But it wasn't only her incredible beauty that made Garbo endurable and interesting. It was her mystery, her reserve, and the inexplicable worldliness that lay behind the amazing face. What could be wrong with Garbo? Why couldn't she find happiness? iconic Garbo, only twenty six when she played the ballerina Grusinskaya in Grand Hotel, but when she spoke the lines: "I've never been so tired in my life," the words rang true. And the film she also spoke the lines that would ever after be attributed to her.