

R.H. TAWNEY by Anthony Wright. *Manchester University Press*
(Hardback, no price)

In the last chapter of this timely book, Dr Wright reports the advice of Peregrine Worsthorne to Mrs. Thatcher, as she became Conservative Party leader: she should read Tawney if she wanted to understand the fundamental beliefs of British socialists. Although this advice may seem quaint to socialists of the 1980s, formed in the cauldrons of (say) Liverpool or Brent, it was sound all the same. It may still turn out that Mrs Thatcher's failure to heed it was her downfall.

What Tawney stood for, above everything else, was the priority of ends over means. Socialism was first of all an affirmation of certain priorities concerning what people needed if they were ever to flourish as persons. People must always be treated as ends, never just means. But capitalism, based as it is on an irresponsible form of ownership of the means of production, necessarily has to treat some people as mere means. Hence its immorality. Now the treatment of all people as ends entails equality of access to public goods; and this can only be achieved by developing a consensus about ends from which an effective system of public provision of goods and services will naturally follow. A society based on private acquisitiveness can never deliver what people really need. Tawney developed this theme both as an historian, drawing lessons from the past, and as a prescriptive moralist and social philosopher who based his political beliefs on Christianity. The English class system, for example, was not only inefficient in economic terms, as history shows; it was also an affront to the Christian belief in the equality of all in the sight of God.

It is a common criticism of Tawney that he underestimated the difficulties of achieving the ends he sought. He was so concerned, in an age which had lost all sense of common purpose, to emphasise the priority of ends, that he spent too little time analysing the means needed for their realisation. This is doubtless true. Indeed one may go further and say that Tawney gravely underestimated the structural obstacles which would always lie in the way of attaining such ends as equality, or the elimination of private greed. It was not enough to preach the obvious truths about the common good: it was necessary to understand and confront what theologians call 'the sin of the world'. Tawney, being a supremely decent man himself, tended to think that once the ends had been understood intellectually, the natural decency of people would see to it that they were properly pursued. Furthermore, he took too relaxed a view about the variety of means for the realisation of his ends. In being as flexible as he was about the means, Tawney sometimes allowed himself to be co-opted by his opponents, and be drawn into speaking their kind of language. As Raymond Williams said, Tawney's use of irony against his opponents easily became 'a device for lowering the tension when, however, the tension is necessary'.

Yet, despite this weakness and vagueness about the means, Tawney's insistence on the definition of ends is immensely valuable and relevant to Thatcherite Britain. If he was right in the 1920s, that Britain was a society that had lost its sense of any common purpose, how much more true that is of the 1980s! We now live, publicly speaking, at a time when talk of

fundamental ends is practically non-existent. Nothing could be more evident, in this connection, than the bankruptcy of government thinking about education. A recent leader in the Times Higher Education Supplement rightly noted how the 'great debate' about education which extended from the time of Arnold and Newman in the middle of the last century to that of Tawney and Leavis (to name only two contributors) in the middle of this, has now degenerated into the mere 'clatter of policy speak'. But this clatter is not really just the absence of a genuine philosophy of education: it is rather an alternative to all philosophising whatsoever, an attempt to forget the tradition we have inherited, and to deny, if only by consciously failing to notice, the very principles which Tawney and others affirmed as almost self-evident to all decent people. Thus, underneath the veneer of respect for 'religious education' and the RE lobby, lies a practical atheism: a denial of the very principles of equality of all as members of God's family, of fellowship in Christ, and of that sharing in a common purpose for the good of all which is the Christian underpinning of Tawney's socialism.

But a house built on sand cannot last long. Tawney, and this new book on him, are relevant to us now because it is beginning to become all too obvious that a social project such as Thatcherism, which practically excludes all serious discussion of fundamentals, in a frenetic pursuit of means without ends, cannot succeed even on its own terms. This is obvious from the fact that the government clearly needs the rich suddenly to become 'responsible' for the poor, in order to bail it out of a mess it has created for itself. It is unrealistic to expect those who have been ardently pursuing what Mr Baker calls 'acquisitive individualism' in accordance with Thatcherite imperatives, since 1979, suddenly to start voluntarily sharing their riches with those who have been unable or unwilling to pursue those imperatives. Tawney was always aware that a purely voluntary form of social responsibility would never be enough, and that Tory romantics who (for example) see the country landowner as one who has a responsibility to conserve the environment for future generations, or liberal industrialists (such as the great Quaker families) who see their wealth as giving them an opportunity for widespread charitable and educational works, will always be exceptions which prove the rule. Recent Thatcherite pleas to the rich, who have become so by what Tawney called 'irresponsible' ownership, to turn around and become 'responsible', are signs of the instability of any policy based on telling people that their worst instincts are actually their best ones. Tawney would have enjoyed the irony of this if he had lived to see it.

BRIAN WICKER

BETWEEN HEAVEN AND CHARING CROSS: THE LIFE OF FRANCIS THOMPSON By **Brigid Boardman**. *Yale University Press*. 1987. £19.95.

The excellence of this study is the fruit of rigorous scholarship and a determination to start from the positive qualities of its subject. Thompson has suffered as much from his mindless supporters as from his narrow-minded detractors. In his lifetime also he was the victim of a society which could tolerate neither a tramp nor a 'failed priest'. In addition Ushaw in the