

born when the storm of publicity hit this book, and I read it with bated breath, and the occasional hiss of scorn. Having had the first child in the less well-known but equally stormy Libertarian Days of Hope, and having realised that some of our more adventurous ideas were better on the drawing board than in the creche, I felt particularly vulnerable to this forthright attack on what Penelope Leach defines as the "women's liberation movement's ideas about children".

MISREPRESENTATION

Ms Leach has little or no first hand idea of the women's movement, and so, gleaning her ideas from magazines and the mass media, she makes accusations which are so wide of the mark that they seem hysterical. She quotes "from a widely read women's liberation magazine" the view that full-time childcare is "Like spending all day, every day in the exclusive company of an incontinent mentally defective", and uses this to "prove" the anti-child attitude of the women's movement (P40) She says that "many advocates of the women's movement have put motherhood on one side as a tiresome and irrelevant barrier to being exactly like men" (p 38). "Exactly like men" is perhaps the oldest, male chauvinist misrepresentation of the women's movement, and it is particularly surprising from someone whose invaluable manual "Babyhood" refers to the baby throughout as "she"

But this book cannot be slotted into the "reactionary, sexist rubbish" pigeon-hole so loved by the left, because Penelope Leach is aiming at, and offering political solutions to a problem which all parents know to be real — and which we revolutionary socialists have not found a satisfactory answer to. The problem is: "How do we bring up our children to be independent, loving and creative people, while meeting our own needs for independence and fulfilment at the same time?"

FIRST THREE YEARS

Penelope Leach would object to formulating the problem in this way. She says that there should be no disjuncture between the mother's needs and those of the baby. Were it not for the women's movement's denigration of motherhood, women would find bringing up their children a fantastically creative and absorbing process. If this "job" was given more status, if "experts" were less intimidating and more helpful, and if all women were educated in child development so that they found the growth of their baby stimulating — then women would have no other needs to fulfil apart from caring for their child.

She adds to this the argument that children will only be truly



Who cares?

EACH MOTHER feels guilty about her children at some time or another. Increasingly, fathers are beginning to worry as well. I'd be surprised if any feminist mothers or fathers influenced by feminist ideas can read Penelope Leach's "Who Cares" (Penguin 75p) without feeling even more guilty. They will probably feel angry, outraged, and severely critical as well. But it would be a mistake to hide from the guilt behind a wall of criticism, because the guilt we feel shows that there's a lot still unresolved in socialist and feminist ideas about how we look after our children. Penelope Leach hits some sore points (as well as making some wholly misguided attacks) and we have to try and take them up, argues Paul Holt in this article.



happy and independent if they have had their first three years in their mother's company, or at least with another adult who is consistently there and always intimate with them.

NURSERIES

She argues that the women's movement has dictated that "all women mothers or not" should be "out in the commercial jungle proving something" (p39) and this idea has so undermined women's view of the value of motherhood that children are suffering and mothers are causing themselves unnecessary pain. She goes to some lengths to demonstrate that toddlers cannot cope with nurseries because they crave for their mother's attention, their language is insufficiently developed to communicate properly,

they are not creative or dextrous enough to deal with co-operative play, and they cannot control their impulses. To those who say "ours has been in a nursery since she was five months, and she's fine", Penelope Leach has the final stab: the toddler may behave alright but he is not understanding what's going on. "How he behaves is unimportant compared with what he is". (p83)

CRECHES

There are plenty of people who will dismiss all of this out of hand, and there are strong arguments against both points. But I feel less able to argue against her view that children under three need personal, intimate contact with the same adult, or small group of adults. I'm not sure that nurseries,

however well-equipped or well-trained the staff, are great places for very small children, and very few of our friends who have sent their children to nurseries seem completely satisfied.

I feel guilty when our three and a half year old has to come to a creche at a weekend meeting, because she's in a creche — arranged with friends — all week, and I feel she needs our more or less undivided attention at weekends. The guilt I felt reading this book warns me that I have to look carefully at the tantrums she sometimes throws at five o'clock — perhaps she feels that going to the creche is a rejection? It is easy to use the incessant refrain on motherhood as an excuse for dismissing this book, and that refrain is nauseating, and gives the book its reactionary gone, But she

another consistent, intimate adult will do, and she does, grudgingly, say that small group care is alright.

DISAGREEMENTS

I have two basic disagreements with Penelope Leach. I do not believe that for the vast majority of people full-time attention to tiny children is, or ever could be, the delightful, fulfilling occupation she says it is. I love my time in the creche — because it is only one day a week. And if I'm very tired, or if I have other pressing things to do apart from the housework, then I find it exhausting. For large families sleepless nights, continuous washing and changing, complete absence of "free time" etc. can go on for as long as ten years. She fails to point out that, for many working class people, the problems are compounded by lack of money, bad housing conditions, transport problems and the rest. In the end, her statement that childcare is or could be stimulating and fulfilling amounts to an unsubstantiated statement of faith.

CAPITALISM

I also challenge her other basic assumption, that we can achieve "a better deal for mothers and their small children" "without postulating revolution or a new society" (p16). She thinks it is a matter of caring. She seems to think that changes can be made if we care enough. But she gives the game away when she says "at a time of high unemployment why should employers accommodate parents?" There are enormous structural reasons why shops don't accommodate for children, why lifts don't work, why children get "a bad deal", and the main one is the capitalist idea of work itself. If Penelop Leach sympathises with employers who won't put themselves out for parents, she's never going to be in a position to make a real challenge to childcare in a capitalist society.

QUESTIONS

Before we heave a sigh of relief, relax on our marxist laurels, and bury Penelope Leach under an avalanche of demands for paternity leave, creches, guaranteed independent income, work or no work and so on, we should look again at the basic issue this book poses: how do we live our lives, and bring up our children. All the demands in the world cannot deal with the minute problems of the way we relate to our children — how we can go on with work and politics, while providing them with the love support and ability to develop independent ideas. In the left today children are often seen as the private property of their parents or as potential recruits for the party. Penelope Leach makes us focus our ideas on the nature of our relationships with children and, although we disagree with her conclusions, that would be a good thing for the left to talk about more often.

On Our Hols

AT LEAST I can claim originality not many of my school-friends would ever dream of going on holiday to Leeds. I can't help feeling they just might be missing something. Despite tales to the contrary, it was not blanketed with 3-inch thick smog, and we didn't all die of lead poisoning.

Instead, Beechwood House was set apart — almost in the country, much to my relief. Having found (at long last my bunk (and established home-base) I set out to explore. The best part of Beechwood House in my view is the loft (only older kids allowed). It is very important to me to find a place where I can read in comparative peace.

WHAT FOOD?

After scanning the house I went to see what the food was like — after living on boiled eggs and cheese for a week at Staithes, where we had the school last year, I was prepared to expect

anything. I needn't have worried, the food was marvellous.

The atmosphere was really good, even though everything grew very hectic as the week progressed. I got used to being woken to the news "be in the hall in 2½ minutes or you'll miss the outing!" The problem was, there were so many things I wanted to see, do and say.

BOSSY ADULTS

I found it rather strange that the adults were deciding where the kids went, and in which groups. It's no joke being stuck in the back of a Land-Rover with 12 screaming kids, somewhere in Leeds trying frantically to keep up with the car in front, which doesn't seem to know where it's going either.

I think my feelings came to a head at the Children's Rights meeting. We had a really good discussion, and decided we wanted a say in how

childcare was run. It seemed such an obvious thing to do, but (as I have found out) very often children my age are ignored unless they really state their point of view strongly — we have to be twice as forceful to make ourselves heard.

The week seemed to rush by at incredible speed, suddenly I found out that I had missed most of the discussions I had wanted to go to, and there was no way I could fit everything in.

KIDS PLAY

The last day was really fantastic. The morning was spent with me trying to help organise a kids' play. I hadn't realised how shattering it is to try keeping several small-children in order, never mind to remember lines. It was meant to be about a kids' strike over school meals (a good enough reason if you ask me), which ends in a riot with the cook and the teacher being



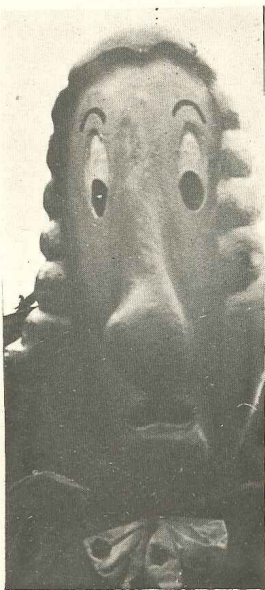
proposals: a threat to mothers

THE LAW COMMISSION has recently published its proposals to 'abolish the status of illegitimacy'. At first sight this may seem a liberal move, which should be supported, but on a closer look, the proposals do little to improve the situation of illegitimate children and one-parent families.

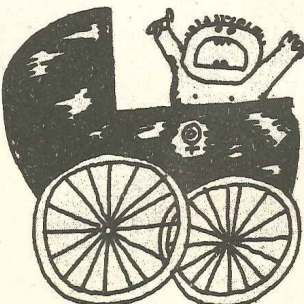
If there were to be a change in the law relating to illegitimacy, what would we be looking for? We would want firstly proposals which meant that motherhood became less of a trap for women. At the moment lack of nursery and after-school provision for children means that most mothers, single or married, cannot earn their own living or take the jobs they would like. Lack of adequate benefits for single mothers (and the overwhelming majority of single parents are women) forces them into poverty or dependence on a man. Secondly we would perhaps ask for some legal recognition of the fact that many parents choose to live outside marriage, which would enable the mother and father of an illegitimate child to have joint custody of it by consent (at present the mother has sole custody).

Thirdly we would support the abolition of the small technical distinctions at present existing between legitimate and illegitimate children (which cover things like the ability to confer nationality and the right to inherit, if an illegitimate child already has the right to maintenance from its father). The Law Commission proposals, however, do not deal with the first two points at all, yet they go beyond the abolition of the small technical distinctions mentioned. What they seek to do is to treat the parents of

an illegitimate child as if they were married - thus affecting the rights and responsibilities of the parents, rather than the child. At the



moment, the father of an illegitimate child has to apply to the court for custody and access and, where he has been involved in the child's upbringing, rights will be given him by the courts. However, if the father is treated as if he were married to the mother, then he would have an automatic right to custody, and the mother would have to apply to the courts to have it taken away. Can it be in the interests of a child that the father should have these automatic rights, even if he has taken no share in the child's upbringing, and even where there is a dispute between the mother and the father (and it is only where there is a dispute that the law matters)? Furthermore, this proposal springs from the idea that a child needs a father - that women are not capable of conferring legitimacy and status upon children, although they are fit to look after them on a day-to-day basis.



WOMEN'S ROOM: half the truth

THIS NOVEL Changes Lives declares (warns?) the front cover. Not true. Lives have been changed which is why Marilyn French's novel is a best-seller, as the cover also declares. The Women's Room is part of a wave of new feminist novels, which have become popular as the ideas of the women's movement have spread, and in turn have helped in popularising a feminist perspective. This novel stands out because it is so well written, acute and consistent in its account of the self-realization of an intelligent, sensitive woman from being a middle-class suburban housewife to establishing herself as an independent intellectual.

But.....Although it's written well, it's written by a radical feminist whose views I disagree with. It's a book I think everyone will enjoy reading but it ends as a cop-out. The central character Myra, escapes by leaving one closed world for another. She moves from a suffocating commu-

nity where wives support each other through adulteries and desertions, but often end as alcoholics, on welfare or in mental institutions to a competitive academic world - where again the women fail each other and independence, aloneness and loneliness become identified. The outside world is a backdrop to the literary games of the post-graduate world. Myra is treacherous too, and I can't help feeling that treachery will catch up with her. When she moves to Harvard College, she leaves behind her best friend Martha, who shared suicide attempts and desperate struggles for freedom. Martha never appears again, is barely even thought of, as though she was owed nothing because of her failure to make it out of the suburban ghetto.

The most political person in the book is Val, who comes across as a gigantic consciousness, with a vivid physical presence and yet disembodied. Some of the

funniest passages in the book come from Val, dredging up the unspeakable like the desecration of male intellectual halls with menstrual blood or puncturing every woman's illusions of romantic love with breathtaking hilarity. But Val's consciousness overwhelms her. She becomes political and alienated, both from the reader and the characters, as if to become committed to social change means only to have increasing sensibility which finally can only end explosively (literally).

The most unreal part of the book is the inevitable sexual awakening scene, where Myra is shown what a good relationship (with a man) can be like. I thought it must have been written by someone who'd read about heterosexual love in some corny magazine, and I wouldn't mention it except that I find it gigglesome, a few weeks later, because it is a strangely gross blunder in an otherwise very sharp perception of rela-

reviews

tions between men and women. Myra and Ben's sexual experiences are described as relying a lot on fantasy and acting out roles as some form of foreplay, as if this was the ultimate in a tender, fun relationship 'I spend my time trying to get to know people and their bodies for real in my sexual relationships and find that knowledge endlessly changing. Am I unimaginative or is her description dodging reality? When I finished I longed for a book in which women's commitment to change in their social identification and to change in the social political world were seen as part of each other, not in opposition. I was reminded by a comrade that both Simone de Beauvoir and Doris Lessing had covered much of that ground, but that was before the current growth of the women's liberation movement and our development of socialist feminism. Any offers for this novel yet to be written?

By a member of Coventry Big Flame

REAL IMPROVEMENTS?

To oppose these proposals is therefore not to say 'we don't want men involved in childcare', it is to say that we want, not the imposition of a mother/father/child norm that looks as much like marriage as possible but recognition of the fact that the vast numbers of women who are bringing up children on their own can give them the security and identity they need without the presence of the biological father. It is to say also that what is needed is a real improvement in the actual living conditions of single-parent families - the Finer Report, which

provision for one-parent families is now 5 years old and still has not been implemented - no doubt because unlike the present proposals, its implementation needs money.

In fact, the Law Commission proposals, like the cutting of nursery provision and abortion rights, are just another attack on the status and independence of women. The Commission has invited 'evidence' (written comments) on their proposals - write to them at Conquest House, 37 St. John St., London WC1N 2BQ. For further details of the proposals, and of the campaign against them which is being co-ordinated by Rights of Women, get in touch with ROW at 374 Grays Inn Rd., London WC1, (01-278 6349) Member of North London Big Flame

HALF THE SKY

"Half the Sky" - an introduction to women's studies, edited by Bristol Womens' Studies Group, published by Virago, £3.95.

"Here lies a poor woman who was always tired. She lived in a house where help wasn't hired. Her last words on earth were: 'Dear friends, I am going to where there's no cooking, or washing or sewing, for everything there is exact to my wishes. For where they don't eat there's no washing of dishes. I'll be where loud'

materials and references for those wishing to develop them.

SOME POSSIBILITIES

The Bristol Women's Studies Group say of the book "There is no one way to use this book. But by providing illustrations of the discussions that have arisen in the courses we have taught, and a few examples of course outlines and topics we hope to indicate at least some of the possibilities. We hope each chapter will provide enough material and comment for a teacher who has never tackled the topic before, so that she may feel confident to lead a class on the subject. For those who want more detailed material the guide to reading should enable them to extend each topic in a number of directions."

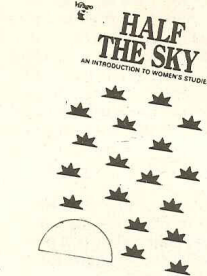
INFORMATION

They give 7 outlines of possible ways of organising women's studies courses, mainly aimed at adult students, but the book would also be invaluable for secondary school teachers and pupils. By arranging the material under topic chapters - such as education, work motherhood - it is easy to extract information, and it's possible to read each chapter in isolation from the others. Each chapter contains historical, cross cultural and general information on the particular theme, as well as the authors' comments.

WHY SEXUAL OPPRESSION?

In the conclusion the authors ask the questions - why should there be sexual oppression and what can we do about it. While they do not come up with the answers, the book's content will make it very much easier to grapple with these questions in an informed way. Anyone who has anything to do with the education system should ensure that the book is made widely available, and hopefully it will inspire more of us to organise women's studies courses.

by a member of Liverpool Big Flame



sacked. I must admit, I quite enjoyed playing the part of the authoritarian teacher. I found afterwards (at the kids' party) I could get served first by just threatening to raise my voice! For all those who were asking, I modelled myself on my form-teacher, but she's left to go to Hong Kong so we're rid of her anyway.

NEXT YEAR

Later on, we saw a stunning film called "The Patriot Game" about the political state of affairs in Ireland. I recommend it to anyone of any age as a real eye opener. The evening entertainment for the week was very good - especially the night Red Ladder came. I didn't want to leave the next day, after having learnt so much in such a friendly atmosphere. Still, it's only 365 days to the next one I suppose.....

Sarah Green (age 13)



Book now for a socialist alternative!

THE THEME of the Big Flame Summer School was "The socialist Alternative". There were a lot of good speakers on a variety of topics, Lucas Aerospace/Workers Plans, Alternative Health and so on. This is the first summer school that I have gone to and enjoyed all the discussions. One of the points of the summer school is to learn and I felt that I really did. One of the most enjoyable talks was given by Carl Gardner on "The Media and the Left." The media affects us all and even though you know it biased, you often don't notice because you're hearing the same old thing all the time.

ALTERNATIVE RADIO

The talk not only reminded me of the way the Left are the only ones to portray the other side of

the story, but how bad we are sometimes at doing that. It was stressed that there are other ways of getting the message across, for instance alternative radio stations. The discussion also covered the dangers of assuming that electronic media gets people more involved. Teachers brought up how things like videos are used to keep kids quiet. It was still important to develop the use of the written word and improve the presentation and content of newspapers like Big Flame, no matter how good it is.

MARX AND THE PARTY

The evenings' entertainment was generally good and back-up babysitting made sure everyone was free to enjoy themselves. What, with a feature film every night and video Marx brothers for the "midnight movies" you couldn't

go far wrong! If you felt like having a sing-song you could do so in Brenda's "Red Bar", where every revolutionary song (and some not so revolutionary) you could think of was sung, at sometime.

Red Ladder Theatre did some great poems and songs one night and what's more they did it for free. We were also entertained by a very funny magician and a woman who took the piss out of being the "beautiful assistant." He was a better version of Tommy Cooper, because some of his tricks did work, notably the fire-eating, juggling and sawing his assistant in half.

My conclusion was, great, even though we were all a bit tired by the end. I can't wait for next year. As comrade Fred Pontin says - book early! (by a member of Liverpool Big Flame)