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Phil Cohen, *Reading Room Only: Memoir of a Radical Bibliophile*, hardback, 274 pages, Nottingham: Five Leaves, 2013. ISBN: 978-1907869785; £14.99.

and

Sophie Parkin, *The Colony Room Club: A History of Bohemian Soho, 1948-2006*, hardback, 265 pages, London: Palmtree Publishers, 2012. ISBN: 978-0957435407; £35.

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Bloomsbury and Soho in the nineteenth century were places where political refugees lived, though the Germans preferred Bloomsbury, just to the north, on the grounds that the Parisians of Soho were all drunks and womanisers. Phil Cohen is a long-standing activist and now academic, who has written his memoir of radical Bloomsbury, while writer and club manager Sophie Parkin's history of drinking clubs takes Soho as its epicentre, and in particular the Colony Club on Dean Street.

Phil Cohen was sent to St Paul's School and later Oxford, but his attention was taken up by the London of Somerstown and Bloomsbury. As a youth worker, he wandered through the radical 1960s, being involved in various movements of the Fluxus and Situationist art scene that he met in bookshops like Better Books, India, and later Gay's the Word, and working for a while as an assistant to the surrealist John Latham. He participated in the radical psychoanalytic movement led by R. D. Laing, paying for his treatment with more youth work, and then took part in the Dialectic of Liberation conference with Black Power's Stokely Carmichael, New Leftist Herbert Marcuse and Beat poet Allen Ginsberg at the Roundhouse in 1967.

Cohen's youth work was an in to many of the different scenes that were opening up in the 1960s. He brushed up against the alarming hustler Michael de Freitas, the one-time rent collector and enforcer for Peter Rachman, who restyled himself Michael

X (some of Cohen's youth club attendees get sucked into an armed robbery at de Freitas's prompting). Cohen protested against police brutality, organising a Pig's Beauty Contest that won support from Vanessa Redgrave but drew more attention from the forces of law and order. A highlight of Cohen's radical journey is a long squatting protest in the Queen Mother's ex-residence at 144 Piccadilly that saw the young Cohen re-styled as 'Dr John', spokesman of the hippy squatters, fending off police attacks, managing collaborating gangs of Hell's Angel guards, and liaising with the press.

As wild as Cohen's journey is, he tells it in a curiously po-faced, self-mocking way. His early gay life is quite guardedly related, and he only tells stories of not quite going through with it—with the handsome public schoolboy naked on the bed, or the heroic North Sea fisherman, or, at one point, of being offered up like a sacrificial lamb to Allen Ginsberg. There have of course been many sixties memoirs now, but this one has its own charm; Cohen is often on the periphery of the Trotskyist groups that have generated so many of the memoirs, but he was firmly in the centre of the events he describes. Still Cohen makes no grandiose claims for his activism, and affectionately teases himself and those around him. He tells a great story about John Latham using acid to dissolve a copy of the critic Clement Greenberg's book, which he had taken out of the college library, before returning it in its essential form (though the version I heard was that Latham distilled alcohol from the fermented pages). Latham was sacked from St Martin's College of Art.

Some of the characters that haunt Cohen's account wander into the Colony Club in the 1960s, like the author of *Absolute Beginners* and *City of Spades*, Colin MacInnes, as does his nemesis Peter Rachman. Sophie Parkin's fabulous and lovingly researched story of Soho drinking clubs intersects, but is a whole other world from Cohen's radical hippy scene.

Parkin tells the story of Soho, of the French House that once housed de Gaulle's government in exile, and a score of other clubs, but most lovingly, the Colony Club, which served artists, and also writers. Club owner Muriel Belcher managed a louche gaggle that included Dylan Thomas, Lucien Freud, Nina Hamnett, the painter Francis Bacon, Molly Parkin—Sophie's mother—Daniel Farson, Jeffery Bernard, George Melly and Tom Driberg. Later, after Muriel died, the club attracted many of the Hoxton artists, like Damien Hirst.

The story is a hymn to bad behaviour, with Muriel Belcher leading the charge. Her now well-known greeting of 'Hello Cunt' is recalled by almost all the patrons and members Parkin has interviewed. Belcher followed the gay underworld in referring to all men as 'she', as in the often-repeated apology for an older drinker, 'she was a very brave girl at the Somme', and their wallets are generally 'bead bags' which must be opened up to buy drinks for the younger and poorer members.

Craig Brown said that 'each afternoon was like a bizarre cocktail party, hosted by Jean Genet and Albert Steptoe, an extraordinary mix of the exotic and down-at-heel'. You get the idea that Brown was looking through his cocktail glasses. 'Even the burglars were a better class' he adds, remembering Brian, having 'just done over Mrs Thatcher's house in Chelsea [...] expressing himself flabbergasted at her reported insurance claim' (133).

Parkin gives a great account of the heyday of the Colony Room, with her mother 'in her hats and gold lame, Melly in his pinstripe suits and big cigars, Bacon in his black leather and [chef Robert] Carrier in his pinny, not forgetting Peter Langan in his easily stained white suits' (126). Poet Michael Horovitz was a more sensitive soul despairing at 'the aspect of Soho and bohemia that delights in malicious humour and humiliation' (91). As well as many stories, there are hundreds of stunning photos of the artists, poets, beautiful people and hangers-on that frequented Soho.

Belcher's obscenity did rise to surreal heights, at one point telling a man that his new bride had had so many cocks that in a row they would make a rail across the Alps. Most of these stories though, you guess, would have been funnier if you had been there, the punch line generally being someone pissing themselves, or being called a cunt, or more.

In the second half of his memoirs of Bloomsbury, Cohen turns to the life of the mind, or, more specifically, the life of books, which he collects, and, if he does not own, reads in the reading room of the British Library, remembering fondly its former spot in the heart of the British Museum. As I recall it, its visitors, like some of the less sober in the Colony Club, smelt of pee.

Cohen is book-fixated, and the latter part of his memoir is a kaleidoscope of book facts and reflections. This is compelling, and compellingly mad. At times you worry that he is looking at the frame, not the picture. Paper, after all, is not really interesting in its own right, but then the attraction of the story is at least in part seeing that awful pile of books towering over Cohen's head.

Books themselves, of course, are so much dead wood, as they rest inert in the lumberyard of the British Library stacks, only coming to life as they are read. Sophie Parkin's stories of the Colony Club, of Muriel Belcher's caustic putdowns, and the cackling insults ('Tom [Driberg] was happy enough with Ronnie Kray's cock in his mouth' (105)) are at the other extreme, the witticisms and anecdotes of the drink-fuelled evenings all disappear in the ether, only half-remembered in the hung-over morning, but we are lucky to have Sophie Parkin catch a few of them for posterity.

Note on contributor

James Heartfield's publications include *Let's Build! Why We Need Five Million New Homes in the Next 10 Years* (Audacity, 2005), *The Aborigines' Protection Society, 1836-1909* (Hurst, 2012), and *The European Union and the End of Politics* (Zero Books 2013).

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