

## BOOK REVIEW

# 'Ill Fares the Land' by Tony Judt

A heart's cry from a preeminent, dying historian on the West's need to reclaim a collective sense of duty and justice before it's too late.

By Tim Rutton

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"Ill Fares the Land" is a remarkably compelling book made all the more so by the remarkable circumstances surrounding its composition.

Its author, British-born Tony Judt, is our preeminent historian of postwar Europe, a scholar of remarkable breadth and erudition and one of the West's foremost and most outspoken public intellectuals.

Educated at Cambridge and at the École Normale Supérieure in Paris and currently university professor and head of the Remarque Institute of European Studies at New York University, Judt is by conviction a man of the left, though a formidable independence of mind seems to have rendered him impervious to orthodoxy. In his youth, for example, he was a fervent Labor Zionist, lived on a kibbutz and volunteered as a driver and translator for the Israeli Defense Forces during the 1967 war. By 2003, his disenchantment with Israel had become so complete that he argued in the New York Review of Books that the Jewish state had become an "anachronism" and should be replaced by a single binational entity. Bitter controversy ensued, estranging Judt from a number of his former friends and colleagues. More recently, he assailed one of the academic American left's sacred cows, ethnic and gender studies, saying it encourages "members of that minority to study *themselves* -- thereby simultaneously negating the goals of a liberal education and reinforcing the sectarian and ghetto mentalities they purport to undermine."

As Judt recently told an interviewer: "Today I'm regarded outside New York University as a loony-tune lefty self-hating Jewish communist; inside the university I'm regarded as a typical old-fashioned white male liberal elitist. I like that. I'm on the edge of both, it makes me feel comfortable."

Less than a year and a half ago, Judt was diagnosed with an aggressive form of amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), commonly called Lou Gehrig's disease. In the months since, he has become a quadriplegic, dependent on an apparatus to sustain even his breathing. He is dying. Depending on your point of view, one of ALS' mercies or perversities is that its sufferers' mental faculties are undiminished. Judt's disability has become the occasion of an astonishing outpouring of movingly provocative work. He is immobile from the time he is put to bed at night, and through the hours until morning he uses the Renaissance mnemonic device of a memory palace -- in his case, a Swiss chalet - - in which to store, room by room, his reflections. In the morning, he dictates them to an assistant.

Many of these have appeared as autobiographical sketches in the New York Review of Books; Bob Silvers, the NYRB's editor, has called them "some of his best work. The pure intensity of effort and courage needed to arrive at the ability to do it is something difficult to imagine. It's a great victory for him."

Last August, Judt delivered what was likely his last public lecture, to a packed auditorium at NYU. He spoke for 90 unbroken minutes from memory and, by all accounts, held his listeners in utter thrall. Silvers suggested that the talk be transcribed into a piece for his magazine and that, with further revisions and expansion, has now become his most recent book, "Ill Fares the Land."

The title is taken from Oliver Goldsmith's 1770 poem "The Deserted Village": "Ill fares the land, to

hastening ill a prey, / Where wealth accumulates, and men decay." This, in effect, is the moral testament of a historian who has given a lifetime of intense study and deep reflection to the West's failures and successes since the end of World War II.

Judt argues that "Something is profoundly wrong with the way we live today. For 30 years we have made a virtue out of the pursuit of material self-interest. . . . The materialistic and selfish quality of contemporary life is not inherent in the human condition. Much of what appears 'natural' today dates from the 1980s: the obsession with wealth creation, the cult of privatization and the private sector, the growing disparities of rich and poor. And above all, the rhetoric which accompanies these: uncritical admiration for unfettered markets, disdain for the public sector, the delusion of endless growth." This rhetoric, in Judt's view, stems from a simplified Anglo-American reading of that generation of Austrian thinkers -- the economists Friedrich von Hayek, Ludwig von Mises and Joseph Schumpeter, the social philosopher Karl Popper and the managerial theorist Peter Drucker -- whose traumatized experiences of fascism drove them to oppose any governmental intervention in economic affairs. Judt's argument is that, in fact, the postwar expansion of social democracy and its benefits across Western Europe and in the United States and Britain under other names -- the New Deal, the Great Society and the Welfare State -- weaned the middle classes from their long susceptibility to authoritarianism and ushered in the era of peace and prosperity now at risk. To abandon that now because we have lost any sense of solidarity, the common good or faith in the efficacy (however imperfect) of collective action on behalf of those qualities, Judt argues, "is to betray those who came before us as well as generations yet to come."

In the latest issue of the London Review of Books, Judt tells an interviewer, "I think what we need is a return to a belief not in liberty, because that is easily converted into something else . . . but in equality. Equality, which is not the same as sameness. Equality of access to information, equality of access to knowledge, equality of access to education, equality of access to power and to politics. . . . It is another way of talking about injustice. We need to rediscover a language of dissent. It can't be an economic language since part of the problem is that we have for too long spoken about politics in an economic language where everything has been about growth, efficiency, productivity and wealth, and not enough has been about collective ideals around which we can gather . . . around which we can be motivated collectively, whether on the issue of justice, inequality, cruelty or unethical behavior. We have thrown away the language with which to do that."

Where is that to be found? It says something of the author's capacious intelligence that, in the concluding chapter of "Ill Fares the Land," he quotes Edmund Burke's belief that society is "a partnership not only between those who are living, but between those who are living, those who are dead and those who are to be born."

"Ill Fares the Land" is a deeply learned, deeply humane heart's cry for the rediscovery of the language and values that make such a partnership possible.

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