

JOHN MAYNARD KEYNES: Fighting for Britain 1937–46

by Robert Skidelsky, Macmillan, 2000. xxiv + 580pp, RRP \$A59.95.
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Reviewer: Mark Thomas*

Robert Skidelsky talked himself out of sub-titling the third volume of his biography of Keynes, 'The Economist as Prince'. He did so for typically, and commendably, precise reasons, since 'Fighting for Britain' is 'a story, above all else, about Keynes' patriotism'. Nonetheless, Skidelsky passed up an opportunity to remind us by his title of one of the most formidable, intimidating and influential blends of lion and fox to be found in the public life of the twentieth century.

Keynes was not quite a Renaissance man. Skidelsky does note that his subject never shot animals, but passes over most other permutations of physical exertion in silence. In any case, between 1937 and 1946, Keynes was chronically sick with a medley of misdiagnosed illnesses, often working from day-beds or suffering with ice-packs plonked on his chest. Skidelsky's most exceptional gift is to know Keynes intimately enough to be able to illuminate every disparate aspect of the life which this sick, old, worried, rude and quizzical man lived during his last decade. In doing so, Skidelsky has completed (and I have Robert Caro, Edmund Morris and Martin Gilbert in mind as cross-bearings) the finest, fullest biography of a truly great man to be written (at least) in the 18 years since Volume 1, 'Hopes Betrayed', was published.

Skidelsky is an historian, that is, a practitioner of the un-discipline from which all social sciences flow and to which they all owe their grounding in common sense and the common dog. He understands Keynes's economics, here making sense of convoluted argumentation on buffer stocks, clearing unions, Bretton Woods, re-armament employment programs, and — the words of Keynes's failures — Britain's 1945 loan from the United States. Skidelsky's skill is in giving that economics a political and historical context, then in placing his hero in all those quite distinct, non-economic contexts in which he formed and enjoyed his life.

First of all, Skidelsky again gives full credit to Keynes' Russian ballerina wife. 'She had been necessary for the completion of his egoism; now he depended on her for his survival'. He makes us understand why Keynes tried to insist on exemption of ballet dancers from military service. He obliges us to take, almost as seriously as did Keynes, devotion to the survival of Eton school as 'an aspect of his traditionalism'. He lets us eavesdrop on Keynes testing elasticity of demand by cutting the price of 1929 Cliquot at his Cambridge theatre. He explains why Keynes sought to sponsor a ten-week season of Ibsen and Chekhov during the war, but with a grudging attempt made 'to raise the average cheerfulness' of those plays. He wants us, finally, to know and respect a 'prodigiously successful prodigal son', a man

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‘incapable of banality’, and thus to recognize that ‘we live in the shadow of Keynes, not because his legacy has been assimilated, but because it is still disputed’.

As for the subject of Keynes’s endeavours, which he wonderfully described as ‘the perplexed business so the world’ (never ‘perplexing’, to his anyway), Skidelsky is consistently enlightening. He dissects Keynes’s every venture, always appraising his actual, practical impact, never taking his hero for granted, invariably giving his opponents their due. Those rivals often turn out to be Americans, arguing bitterly over continuation of Lend Lease or the terms of loan re-payments, and separated from the British negotiators by much more than just a common language.

The conclusion which matters most is Skidelsky’s judgment that ‘perhaps it is in the realm of rhetoric that his true greatness lies, using that word in the classic sense of the “art of the possible”.’ Let us test that proposition with two examples. Who has defined more exactly the task of international lawyers, than did Keynes in his insistence that their job was simply ‘to devise means by which it will be lawful for me to go on being sensible in unforeseen circumstances’? Who has better exposed Britain’s position in Europe than Keynes in his war-time assessment that: ‘if Hitler gets his new Europe going properly, with barter replacing gold . . . and with all the nations playing the cultural and ethnographic roles allotted to them, while the Vatican provides the slave states with a philosophy of life, then England can be made to look like an intolerably disruptive pirate nuisance in the eyes of Europe, we would become the real aliens, the Protestant dissenters, the Berbers of the North’?

Volume 3 is not beyond criticism. Skidelsky’s accounts of developments in the war are skimpy and limited. His suggestion that Keynes comprised ‘the Churchill of his domain’ is forced and over-stated. His conviction that Keynes was ‘not an appeaser in the technical sense’ warrants further scrutiny. That said, this book captures marvelously what Virginia Woolf called Keynes’ ‘quiet imaginative ardour’. Skidelsky reckons that Keynes impressed colleague economists as someone ‘who could speak their language, yet had another up his sleeve’. Skidelsky has discerned and de-coded all those other languages, enriching a man already ludicrously rich in life’s fights, most of all in a sustained dexterity in getting the best out of all worlds going. ▲