

Reviews

PALESTINE COMES FIRST by Lucas Grollenberg, *SCM Press*, 1980, pp 151, £2.50

The translator of this short book writes in the preface of the "tremendous shock" he felt on reading the manuscript for the first time in Dutch. The causes of this shock, he goes on to say, were the historical events which the author describes – events with which the translator admits he was "unfamiliar".

What were these events? The Israelite invasion of the Land of Canaan? The wars against the Philistines? Not at all. People in this country and in the West in general *are* familiar with the Old Testament history of Palestine. What they are largely ignorant of is the history of Palestine in our own century; and what makes this ignorance all the more extraordinary is that many of the events with which people are "unfamiliar" took place during a lengthy period of British rule.

Father Grollenberg is a Dutch Dominican who became personally involved in the Palestine question during the last months of the British mandate and the early years of the Jewish state. His encounter with the Arab refugees near Nablus in 1950 was one of the central experiences in his life – two others which he acknowledges were the Nazi occupation of Holland and a visit to South Africa. On all three occasions he witnessed the oppression practised by one people against another.

The author's commitment to the Palestinian cause thus stems from his own experiences. But it has also been strengthened by the realisation that the true facts about Palestine have been consistently and deliberately distorted so that only now – thirty-two years after the Palestinians were expelled from their homeland – are Western governments at last beginning to understand the Palestinian 'problem'. But for someone like Father Grollenberg, who has been involved with the issue for so long, the facts have been plain from the

beginning. The Arabs of Palestine, who formed an overwhelming majority of their country's population, were denied independence after the First World War and placed under a British mandate. During the '20s and '30s Britain introduced large numbers of European Jews into the country and in 1947 the United Nations, bribed and bullied by the US, voted to take away the larger and more fertile area of Palestine from its rightful inhabitants and give it to the Zionists. In the war that followed, the Arabs were driven from their farms and villages while the new Israeli state, not content with the area allotted to it by the United Nations, seized large areas of the rest of Palestine and annexed them. In 1967 the Israelis conquered the last fragments of the country and created a vast number of new refugees.

Father Grollenberg recounts this horrific narrative lucidly and without rancour. He is mainly puzzled by the fact that the rights and wrongs of the conflict should not be obvious to everyone – especially as most of the evidence has at last been published (although less so in Holland, where the book first came out). For those who really are still "unfamiliar" with the Palestinian tragedy, then it is a book worth reading.

In a press release accompanying the book, SCM say that they are willing to publish another book "putting forward a different case" by which I assume they mean a pro-Zionist propaganda work of the sort Weidenfeld and Nicolson churn out every week. I can't really see the point of this. If one has taken the trouble to produce a book which has actually got the facts right, why bother to publish another one which gets them wrong – particularly as it has been done so many times before?

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