

Living in a post-work age

How to Live Easily Into Your Nineties; Sam Almond; Melrose Books; £5.99

RECIPES FOR older age come thick and fast; maybe there should be a Great British Bake Off final for all these equivalents of cookery books for old age.

This one, by nonagenarian Sam Almond, is mercifully brief, clear and to the point and it includes a useful piece on nutrition by Kate Arnold, an experienced and thoughtful expert.

Aimed primarily at those of fully mature years who may and should be ambitious to score a century, it makes for a decent primer.

One suspects its chief merit is its certificate of achievement, that is, it is compiled by someone who is already on the inside track to complete the marathon. It is proof, if we require it, of the possible.

Personal advice – and here Sam Almond is conspicuously wary of the single “secret to longevity” that individuals offer – is valuable but only as a stimulus for thought.

Certainly my own studies of older age, now occupying almost 40 years, indicate to me that there are many roads to that Rome where all its citizens are centenarians; indeed, I would go so far as to suggest that each of us requires our own private driveway in that laudable direction.

Books like this should help

us to consider our own road map rather than be relied on for exact directions.

One general factor – and it was inherent in the decision to formulate the idea of the U3A in the UK – was and is the sheer ignorance of what long, mass retirement entailed for society.

Ours is the first society ever to experience the post-work phenomenon.

Until our generation, work was to all intents and purposes the be-all and end-all of adult life.

Although we gerontologists have studied pensions, health care, housing and all those other subjects, very little has been done on the basic and essential theme itself of long retirement for all.

As was wisely said (and this is just one version of a much used saying) if fish were anthropologists the last thing they would discover would be water.

Certainly, a society where over a fifth of the population are in the post-work “Third Age” is the crucial setting for the individual’s quest for longer life.

Eric Midwinter

■ *Eric Midwinter's The Collective Age 1850 – 1950: The Rise and Fall of a Fairer Society, published by the Third Age Press and reviewed in our last issue, can be bought as a PDF – which can be sent as an email attachment and printed at home – from bit.ly/TAP-TCA for £5. An ebook version is available from Amazon for £8. Apologies for not making this clear last time.*

Politically engaged

Party Animals: My family and other communists; David Aaronovitch; Jonathan Cape; £17.99

WHAT'S THE connection between Nelson Mandela, Angela Davis and Paul Robeson? I'll tell you: they were all communists.

OK, what's the connection between Peter Hitchens, Martin Kettle and David Aaronovitch? They are all journalists who started out on the political left and now ply their trade from the right.

As a paid up member of the Communist Party until it packed up in 1991, I approached David Aaronovitch's autobiography with a jaundiced eye. He, like me, had grown up in a Communist Party family with roots in the Jewish East End of London. So how come he is now a scourge of the left who supported the invasion of Iraq?

I had the briefest contact with David's parents in the past: I attended dad Sam's 70th birthday party in Hackney, and

mum Lavender babysat for my parents once. Sam was a high ranking full-timer for the Party, which necessitated long hours away from home. The book reveals a tormented childhood; David says his father showed little interest in him and he couldn't get on with his mother.

He refers to his father's infidelities leading to “constant bitterness on her part and defiant guilt on his”. You get a feeling of how corrosive to young David the family rancour was. All this played out

against the colourful backdrop of contemporary national and international politics and his early participation in party activity.

The collapse of the eastern European communist block, along with his questioning of British party members' handling of revelations about Stalin and co, must have combined with those family wars to tip David into the ranks of the critics. But he acknowledges the “rich heritage” gained from growing up in a politically engaged environment.

“British communists were not ... gulag operators. They ... cared about the downtrodden, oppressed and as a result enjoyed ostracism rather than power,” he observes.

For myself, I still believe in common ownership of property and the means of production and “from each according to their ability, to each according to their needs”.

I do not believe this any less because the USSR failed. It's not about Russia or Sam or Lavender, David. It's about resisting the rising threat of fascism and fashioning a society which gives everyone a chance.

Chris Kaufman

