

London Review of Books publishes scurrilous account of Grenfell Tower fire

By Alice Summers
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On June 7, the *London Review of Books* featured *The Tower*, a lengthy essay on the Grenfell Tower inferno by journalist and novelist Andrew O'Hagan. The essay marked one year since the devastating fire that claimed at least 72 lives. It also coincided with the opening days of the official inquiry during which fire survivors and relatives of those who died gave moving tributes to their loved ones. O'Hagan's piece, however, is a mockery of journalistic and social integrity.

The Tower, a 60,000-word essay, was penned by the same individual who produced a hatchet job account of Julian Assange's life in 2011 in his book *The Secret Life*. In that work O'Hagan portrayed the WikiLeaks co-founder as narcissistic, paranoid and lying. In an interview with the *Times*, he accommodated himself to accusations that Assange was a Russian stooge because of WikiLeaks' role in leaking documents pertaining to Hillary Clinton's 2016 US election campaign, as well as to the bogus rape charges against Assange.

The same contempt for democratic rights and the lives of working people is abundantly present in *The Tower*. There are sensitive and moving portraits of those who lived in Grenfell Tower in the first part of O'Hagan's essay, but this is overshadowed and outweighed by the subsequent six parts.

O'Hagan's piece is characterised by vicious and dishonest misrepresentations, inaccuracies, the demonization of local activists, residents and firefighters, and hymns of praise to the local council.

Various survivors and local residents who were interviewed by O'Hagan, or have read his account, have denounced *The Tower*. They have condemned his apologetics for the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea (RBKC) council and vilification of the local community, as well as asserting that O'Hagan misled them as to the purpose of his piece and altered or invented some of their comments.

Nursery worker Melanie Coles wrote an open letter of complaint to LRB, which was posted on Twitter by Noha Maher (who lost her brother, Hesham Rahman, in the Grenfell fire) and which has been shared widely. Coles, who was interviewed by O'Hagan, had taught Fethia Hassan, a four-year-old girl who tragically died alongside her mother and sister in last year's fire. In her letter, Coles accuses O'Hagan's article of being "damaging to the credibility of our community" and making for "highly distressing reading for people directly affected, and for some of them offensive, due to the inaccuracies it contains."

She points to multiple inaccuracies in his account, including his naming of the school which Fethia Hassan attended as the Maxilla Children's Centre, which was closed in 2015 after council funding cuts and amalgamated with the nearby Golborne Children's Centre. According to Coles' letter, O'Hagan's article invented some of her comments and posted the recording of her interview online without her permission, when she had been told that the video recording would be used only for the purposes of creating a transcript.

Coles further explained that despite being told the article was intended as a sensitive tribute to those who died in the blaze, she and others were

misled into participating in a work with very different intentions, including being highly biased in favour of the local council.

The video of Coles was later taken down and some of the errors she pointed to altered or removed. However, rather than issuing an apology, one of O'Hagan's researchers, Lindsey Milligan, released a contemptuous response. Dismissing Coles' concerns over the use of the video as "all in your head" and accusing her of not having "understood the bigger picture," Milligan stated that "it is ludicrous to suggest that his story isn't compassionate about the victims."

Daniel Renwick—who produced, co-wrote and co-directed the Grenfell documentary *Failed by the State*—also criticised *The Tower* for misrepresenting members of the local community and for its ardent defence of the council, describing the essay as a "deeply insidious piece of writing."

From the second of the seven chapters of his essay, O'Hagan falls over himself in extolling the virtues of RBKC and its leaders, decrying the unfairness of those who dare to criticise it. The author in particular idealizes council leader Nicholas Paget-Brown (whose "gentle manners" O'Hagan fawns over in the third chapter of his piece) and his deputy Feilding-Mellen. He paints a picture of a noble and blameless council doing its best to help the victims in the face of much adversity and receiving only ingratitude and unfounded accusations in return.

O'Hagan dwells at length on the personal histories, feelings and families of these two esteemed Tory gentlemen (Feilding-Mellen is the son of Amanda Feilding, the countess of Wemyss and March, to whose aristocratic family history O'Hagan thought fit to dedicate nearly 700 words). Indeed, a considerable portion of the essay is little more than a sob story about how difficult it must have been for these two council leaders! He complains how Paget-Brown's honourable attempt to rise above "political mud-slinging" after the blaze was about "to bring his career to an end."

The majority of chapters two to five, and large sections of the final two chapters, are devoted almost entirely to absolving RBKC of any guilt for the outbreak of the fire and lionising their subsequent relief effort.

"The council leaders did not cause that fire," declares O'Hagan in the fifth chapter of the essay. "Like many councillors all over Britain they were in office when cladding was installed that we now know to be unsafe. ... They were not on a mission to cut costs."

He praises the council for its record in "protecting social housing," making much of the fact that its social housing stock has risen by 200 properties in the last 20 years! In the same period the population of the borough has risen by around 10,000, while the number of homeless people doubled in the five years leading up to 2015.

O'Hagan is able to contrast this record with that of Labour-run boroughs such as Islington, where the number of council properties has fallen by roughly 4,500. Also noting that the cladding used on Grenfell Tower had been used on at least 306 tower blocks across Britain, he points to comparable levels of criminality and cutbacks in other Labour-

(and Conservative-) run councils across London and throughout the UK. But this revelation about the filthy role played by both parties is hardly a defence of the RBKC.

His praise is for a local authority that struck deals with property developers to allow them to avoid the requirement to build “affordable accommodation” supposedly meant for the working class. Research, conducted by EG, a property consultancy firm, showed that in 2016 alone the council agreed deals worth almost £50 million [\$US66 million] to enable developers to avoid building “affordable homes.”

O’Hagan also celebrates the role played by the local council in response to the fire, describing how it “mobilised 340 staff on 14 June [2017]” and “found hotels for hundreds of residents that day. Everyone from the tower who wanted to go and everybody from the blocks below.” Railing against the “narrative” that council members were not present to help after the fire and that the local authority’s response was inadequate, O’Hagan quotes a council worker as saying: “That was the narrative. It was the story they wanted: the richest borough neglects people in social housing. It was very difficult. We had officers here working 18 hours a day.”

O’Hagan acts as though the RBKC is blameless and powerless, forced to satisfy the cost-cutting whims of a cruel and callous central government. He devotes several passages to criticisms of the central government response, accusing them of having “hung [the council] out to dry.”

He does not dwell on the fact that Paget-Brown, Feilding-Mellen and other Conservatives who make up nearly three-quarters of the borough’s elected councillors belong to the same party as the government he criticises.

O’Hagan’s presentation of the council contrasts starkly and sharply with the manner in which he depicts survivors, activists and local residents. He presents legitimate social outrage as anarchic brutishness, for example, in his description of protesters storming the Kensington Town Hall in the week after the fire.

Describing a meeting he held with local activists while researching his essay, O’Hagan comments, “No evidence was presented at the lunch [with the local activists], just repeated assertions, most of them defamatory, of extreme criminality on the part of individual councillors, and expressions of contempt, often on class grounds, for people they thought were ‘evil.’”

O’Hagan’s attack on anyone daring to bring class into the equation is significant. One of the most striking features of the response from survivors and local residents is the nearly universal understanding that this was a crime committed by the ruling class against the working class. This approach terrifies the privileged layer that O’Hagan speaks for.

He reserves his fiercest criticism for the Grenfell Action Group (GAG), the tenants’ association that played an important role in raising concerns about the safety of Grenfell Tower before the inferno. Presenting GAG as unreasonably prejudiced against the RBKC, he writes, “The Grenfell Action Group hate the Tory council. Over many years, the council had been the enemy and to them every move it makes stinks of corruption.”

The safety concerns that GAG had been raising for many years are dealt with only briefly in *The Tower*. They are brought in chiefly to point out that the flammable cladding installed on the tower in its refurbishment—which played an important role in facilitating the rapid and deadly spread of the flames—had not featured in GAG’s criticisms of the safety of the tower block.

O’Hagan declares that the group “had never been very popular on the estate,” giving significant space to an anonymous council worker who states, “[W]e tried to answer every issue raised by the action group, but it was never enough; they bombarded us with round-robin emails and to my knowledge we tried to keep on top of them... They hated everything the council and the TMO did, no matter what.”

He presents the many legitimate grievances brought forward by the

community group as paranoid and “obsessive” grumblings with little relevance to the actual deadly fire.

In truth, many of the warnings made by the residents’ association, including the dangers of the inadequate fire doors, exposed gas pipes and proximity of the newly built school to the tower (potentially obstructing access for emergency service vehicles), did bear significantly on the fire that eventually broke out and on the toxic smoke spreading so easily. They were key to the problems faced by the London Fire Brigade in its rescue effort.

O’Hagan devotes only a single sentence to the fact that the RBKC council threatened legal action against GAG for their efforts in raising safety concerns. Evidently this does not fit with his narrative of a blameless, noble council.

Expressing his contempt for the working class, O’Hagan seeks to delegitimize the safety concerns of local residents and grievances over housing standards by arguing that contemporary living conditions are far better than they were in Dickensian London!

“In the eyes of some,” he states, “the tower blocks are the continuation of the old habit of keeping minorities poorly housed. But, as always, it depends how you measure it. If the yardstick is the white people’s mansions on Elgin Crescent, then yes. If it’s Victorian pigsties, however, then improvement has definitely occurred, albeit too slowly and for too few.”

Firefighters are not spared O’Hagan’s venom. Joining in with the recent chorus of condemnation for the London Fire Brigade, he blames the “huge and dramatic failure” of the fire service for the 72 deaths: “Everyone knows that cost-cutting is a problem but there was also a problem with the way the Grenfell response was managed,” he writes. “We don’t like to say these things, but events on 14 June [2017] show that, regardless of our affection for them, the professional fire services’ response to the fire at Grenfell Tower was anything but strong.”

O’Hagan ends his essay by recounting the stories of two families who have been successfully re-housed and are beginning to get their lives back on track. While choosing to describe at length these “happy endings,” he neglects to mention that a year on from the fire, more than half of the households made homeless have yet been able to move into permanent accommodation: 72 households continue to live in emergency accommodation, such as hotels, and another 57 are still in temporary homes.

The Tower, in short, disgustingly and disgracefully turns reality on its head, presenting victims as perpetrators and perpetrators as victims.

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