

CRITIQUE

Australian Labour and Labour History

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THE STARTING POINT for an examination of labour history in Australia should be an account of Australian labour itself, the subject matter of that history. This can be attempted here only in the briefest outline: a statement of the main periods, the economic and class relationships, the political processes, leading to the working-class and the labour movement. The ideologies of the labour movement receive more attention because they strongly influence the history written within it and they are part of the intellectual and cultural forces which shape the history written about it. Labour history, whilst having dynamics of its own like any other discipline, is a social product so those aspects of society most directly affecting it have to be examined and it has to be placed in wider historiography.

The sketch of Australian labour runs parallel with the review of writings on labour history, taking that term broadly to include both purpose and subject matter — the work of labour-motivated historians and of others writing about labour. The attempt to cover all these themes over more than a century must result in simplification; it will have achieved its purpose if it gives a perspective view which can be debated and which suggests similarities to and differences from other countries.

Australia was a predominantly capitalist country from the mid-nineteenth century. When a generation of prosperity ended suddenly in the early 1890s the trade unions took the lead in forming a Labor Party¹ which quickly became a power in politics and, before World War I, a governing party. This labour

¹ In Australia "labour" is the usual spelling but "Australian Labor Party" became the official title. Hence "labour" is used as the general term, "Labor" referring only to the political party.

movement was pragmatic rather than intellectual, producing no history apart from the memoirs of participants, although from the early twentieth century it aroused the interest of foreign observers who wrote about it. World War I brought the country and the labour movement to a crisis, out of which came the first noteworthy reviews of labour from within Australia.

The stability restored in the 1920s was broken by the depression of the 1930s, the Communist Party grew and influenced a few radicals who were able to publish serious labour history. The period of World War II saw the apogee of the Labor Party and the left, followed from 1949 by 25 years of economic growth and constrictive conservatism. Meanwhile a school of cultural nationalists had propounded a populist view of Australia's past and the Marxism of the day had won converts amongst young intellectuals.

The latter were the founders of the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History and its journal *Labour History* in 1961. The substantial output of labour history dates from this time, the extension of higher education providing its writers and readers. Thus labour history became a significant part of Australian history, which had hitherto been neglected. This history mainly treated the institutions of the labour movement, was accepted as a speciality so long as it observed the current canons of scholarship and was implicitly empiricist in its method.

From 1970 these characteristics came under fire from the New Left who demanded more sophisticated marxist theory, a wider study of society, and a socialist purpose. Much of that criticism has been incorporated into recent labour history, as have the themes of women's history and the study of racism. A survey of current research and recent publications reveals the strength of the move towards a wider social history, as well as the volume and variety of output. The adaptation of *Labour History* to these changes has maintained its central position.

A glance at the future suggests that labour history will continue to flourish as a growing part of national history. Its success and heightened ideological conflict within the country are likely to bring forward new debates about purpose.

I

FIRST WE NEED TO DISTINGUISH some of the stages in the history of the Australian colonies. From the European settlement in 1788 until the 1820s they consisted of a few widely separated jails for British convicts, with garrison forces, which were also British shipping bases but scarcely self supporting. In the 1820s a profitable staple export was found in wool for British mills. The import of capital and goods, free labour and institutions, followed. Henceforth the colonies had some value to Britain and new ones were founded by private

entrepreneurs. The nomadic aborigines had no place in this so they were dispossessed and largely destroyed as settlement extended.

From about 1860 Australia became a predominantly capitalist economy despite its distance from the world centres of capitalism and despite the frontiers pioneering which continued the hopes that gold or cheap land would make it a country of independent producers or yeomen farmers. The most profitable industry was still large scale wool growing, the main support of the merchants and financiers who exported primary products to Britain and imported manufactured goods in return. The largest enterprises were British firms, which controlled shipping, banking, and the raising of new capital. The processing of raw materials and the supply of everyday goods was giving rise to some local manufacturing. Transport and distribution, building and construction, were important in the economy, shared between many small businesses and a few large. The cities of Sydney and Melbourne were growing to populations of half a million as centres of this economy.

Over it all in each colony presided governments which were actively involved as sponsors and builders: distributing the land, encouraging the flow of labour and capital, providing the public works, running the railways. This was a colonial economy dependent on Britain, commercial rather than industrial, providing a place for a substantial petty bourgeoisie — tradesmen, small owners, contractors, agents, shopkeepers, farmers. Yet the mode of production was certainly capitalist. A simple measure of this is the census of 1891 which recorded the source of income of all breadwinners. Less than 15 per cent were employees of labour, another 15 per cent were working on their own account, and about 70 per cent were wage or salary earners. This was a picture of capitalist relations of production in which more than two thirds of the income earners were employees, although from the other side almost one third were employers of labour or self-employed, showing a broad rather than narrow top to the class structure.

By 1890 there was a labour movement in Australia. The trade unions, mostly of skilled workers, had for 30 years won improvements in wages, hours, and conditions by direct bargaining with employers. The unions had been successful basically because of the relative shortage of labour in this developing part of the British world economy. They did not confine themselves to simple economism, making their voice heard in public affairs on immigration, the White Australia policy, government works, access to farming land, education, legislation to protect employees.

A generation of prosperity ended suddenly in the early 1890s with a severe and prolonged depression. The trade unions were greatly reduced, though not destroyed, after a series of bitter strikes and lockouts. Turning to direct political action they launched the class-conscious, mass movement which created the Labor Party. The programme of the Labor Party, as it was hammered out over ten years or more, had three components: full political democracy, trade union demands for the protection of labour, and Australian nationalism. Later some

social welfare provisions, such as old age pensions, were added and the national policies became more prominent.

The federation of the separate colonies into the Commonwealth of Australia in 1901 recognized the needs of Australian capital for a common market protected even against British imports and fostered by a high degree of government action which continued to build the infrastructure and, by what was for the time an elaborate system of regulation, endeavoured to balance the competing claims of the different segments of capital and labour. In effect the national and urban bourgeoisie benefited and the Labor Party too appeared able to secure gains for its supporters. Australia had acquired a substantial degree of national sovereignty without severing ties with Britain, which was not possible. This relationship did not come under strain until World War I.

Since Australia's European history began as a colony of settlement dependent on Britain in every way, the settlers and their descendants for a long time saw their history as simply a distant extension of the main stream of British history. This view of their own history, or lack of interest in it, reflected their position, local ideologies being one form or other of British. These forms were not transplanted intact nor in their old world relationships — in the new setting some flourished and some withered. Australia in particular never had an aristocracy or a peasantry, its effective settlement post-dating the French Revolution and the industrial revolution. It was peopled by the redundant poor of England, dispossessed Irish, and then by working-class migrants who sought to better themselves. Its bourgeoisie were mainly the petty or would-be middle class of Britain. Mostly this meant that in their view of the past the colonists accepted and took pride in the themes of an expanding British empire and ever-broadening liberties.

By the end of the nineteenth century, Australian national sentiment was challenging attachment to the mother country. But this was not directly in the field of history. The early Australian nationalists did not look to the past for guidance. The new land must overcome its birth pangs, free itself of subservience to Britain, the people must come to terms with the environment. By the 1890s this nationalism, often brash and crude, was being expressed in verse and short stories about the Australian people and their country. It concentrated on distinctively Australian features, seeking its subject matter in the pioneering interior, the "bush" as it was called, and making its hero the bushman, usually the bush worker or small farmer. These types and their habitat became national symbols in Australia although the country was highly urbanized. This nationalist ethos, which continued to be strong in the labour movement until World War II, was populist in its appeal and by romanticizing a passing type weakened its vision of the future.

The labour movement as a whole was non-intellectual. Conventional culture and learning in Australia were British derived, often out of place, and tinged with upper-class pretensions. Popular culture, rough and limited, was rooted in the place even when it did not go much beyond deriding the respecta-

ble. In any case, Australian intellectuals, such as they were, had little to offer the labour movement. Indeed intellectual pursuits were not fundamental to the needs of the Australian bourgeoisie either. In many respects the labour movement as a whole became indifferent to or contemptuous of theory as it outgrew infatuation with Robert Owen, Henry George, and Edward Bellamy and became more confident of its own policies. That is not to say that it did no thinking, for its members widely believed in education, sought self-improvement, and articulated working programmes which were often novel. In this they were concerned with practical matters, not theories.

So the labour movement followed pragmatic policies and was separated from the intelligentsia. One result was that by the time of World War I it had not, despite its strength, produced or sponsored any history beyond personal accounts. The movement had some history to record but history as a study meant little to it. The first writings on labour history were produced by activists and veterans who already by the 1880s could look back with pride on their achievements, especially the winning of the eight-hour day as early as the 1850s by skilled unionists. The massive *History of Capital and Labour* in all lands and ages, something of a curiosity, in 1888 celebrated a centenary (from 1788) with the flamboyant confidence of the time, drawing on American sources under the editorship of a bizarre journalist, John Norton, who used the labour movement in his progress to press baron.

As a labour press came into being reminiscences, memoirs, tributes to stalwarts, stories of struggles, and celebrations of victories were published in its columns. The turmoil and industrial battles of the early 1890s and the formation of the Labor Party in 1891 were subsequently seen as the start of a new era. Some who had taken part wrote their accounts of it, usually to vindicate their roles. The best known, W.G. Spence, delivered his versions in later life, proclaiming the wisdom of the movement in paralleling his own change from strike leader to right-wing Labor Party politician. Julian Stuart, a jailed shearer, is a more authentic voice of the rank and file.

By 1914 the policies and background of Australian labour had attracted the attention of some academic observers — from outside the country. Travellers' tales, of course, are an affliction which any new country has to bear: life amongst the savages, travels in the bush, my adventures on the goldfields. By the late nineteenth century the genre usually combined descriptions of the quaint flora and fauna with some surprise that prospering communities and metropolitan centres had arisen in the Antipodes in forms that were recognizable yet undeniably different from those of the homeland.

From the 1890s a more serious interest emerged alongside the popular. The presence of strong trade unions, the conflicts between capital and labour, and the early formation of a Labor Party which quickly became a force in politics, attracted interest. So too did the policies of the Labor Party, especially state intervention to enforce arbitration of industrial disputes by courts of law. Even before the Labor Party came to power in 1910 it had pressed its liberal allies a

good distance in this direction. These achievements gained Australia an exaggerated reputation as a social laboratory from the early twentieth century. Labour intellectuals and publicists from Britain, Europe, and the United States reported on them and in doing so gave their versions of some parts of Australian labour history.

Pember Reeves is the most important although not typical, being a New Zealander, a leading minister in reforming governments there before becoming Agent-General in London then Director of the London School of Economics. He knew the Australian experience which in many respects followed that of New Zealand. His *State Experiments in Australia and New Zealand* (1902) is a comprehensive account of social policies seen as a justification of the Fabian programme.

Metin and V. S. Clark represent French and American observers. German interest was strong. The German Social Democrats, divided over reform or revolution, closely followed events in Australia, the reformists pointing to the Labor Party as a model. The European debate about Australia was sufficiently important for Lenin to feel impelled to pronounce on it in 1913. Vague on details but firm on fundamentals, he had no hesitation in branding the Labor Party a national-bourgeois party engaged in strengthening the central government. Although these writers included varying amounts of historical background, their purpose was to furnish for their home audience a tract for the times, so their books are useful mainly as contemporary sources for the period, bearing in mind the stances from which they viewed it.²

By 1917 World War I had brought Australia to a crisis. The Labor Party had striven for twenty years, to 1910, before it won office in the Commonwealth and New South Wales parliaments and was accepted as the alternative government in all states, forcing its conservative opponents to combine against it. What was the outcome of this first period of Labor in power? The reforms amounted to some industrial legislation to protect trade unionists, a little social welfare, a more comprehensive arbitration system, a modest land tax on large holdings, and a weak Commonwealth Bank. More fundamentally, there was a strengthening of the national government, accompanied by compulsory military training and an Australian navy. Most of this programme followed on from earlier Liberal governments as Labor became a consensus party. There was not much for the workers, not much to show for twenty years of rank and file devotion to building the party. Deep divisions were already present in the

² Pember Reeves, I think, from his writings and presence is often the inspiration of British and even European accounts. Metin (1901) pre-dating Reeves, combines the depth of the postgraduate scholar with the cleverness of the future politician. Clark reminds us of the similarities and differences which could be seen between Australian and American labour at the time. The German interest is examined in the article by Jurgen Tampke "Pace Setter or Quiet Backwater?" — German Literature on Australia's Labour Movement and Social Policies 1890-1914," *Labour History*, 36 (May 1979).

Labor Party. Outside it the Industrial Workers of the World, declaring the class war, began to win some militant support.

This dissension was submerged in 1914 as Australia entered the war on a wave of patriotism and empire loyalty which provided a flood of recruits for the Army. By 1917 feelings had changed. At home unemployment spread, prices rose, living standards fell, war profiteers flourished, at the front the slaughter mounted with no end in sight. Labor leaders joined with every voice of the ruling class to call for military conscription to reinforce the Australian armies on the western front. In two referendums in 1916 and 1917 conscription was rejected, despite the weight of the whole establishment for it, censorship, intimidation, and prosecution of opponents under the war powers. It was a victory for a mass movement which formed on class lines.

Although the IWW was declared illegal and suppressed, the country had been riven, a large part of the working class had been radicalized. The Labor Party split, expelling its right wing and adopting a hesitant Socialist Objective in 1921. The embittered trade unions were prepared to strike in defiance of arbitration courts and governments. Thus the distant revolutionary wave of 1917 was felt in Australia and with it came a more serious examination of Australian labour by friend and foe.

A few young intellectuals threw in their lot with the labour movement and wrote some history of it. V. Gordon Childe is the most important. A brilliant graduate of Sydney and Oxford universities he became profoundly disillusioned with the Labor Party as private secretary to the Premier of New South Wales, was denied academic employment in Australia, went to Britain to study archaeology, and did not return to his native land until just before his death. His history, *How Labor Governs*, is the first to analyze the movement from a socialist and class conscious viewpoint and to justify the IWW.

Other less committed intellectuals published researches. Sutcliffe's narrative *History of Trade Unionism in Australia*, unavoidably sketchy, was for long the only account of its kind. This and other studies in the social sciences were sponsored by the Workers' Educational Association which at that time of debate drew enquiring minds beyond the genteel self improvers. In Australia, however, adult education remained a poor relation of aloof universities and was not again a bridge to the labour movement except briefly in the Left Book Club days of the 1930s. Labour history was not yet to be written by academics, whom the labour movement continued to distrust; and the exceptions who embraced the cause were debarred from universities.

I have been speaking so far of restricted forms of labour history, centred on the trade unions and political parties, merging into politics and current affairs, often based on personal experience. Meanwhile the sources for a much wider type of labour history had been accumulating from the earliest days of the Australian colonies, which must be amongst the most fully recorded societies of the nineteenth century. The official records are voluminous, collected by governments which saw themselves as promoters and managers of their col-

onies. Scarcely any measurable aspect of society was outside their concern as the regular censuses, statistical registers, yearbooks, and reports show. Nor were they behind Britain in setting up Royal Commissions and Select Committees to enquire into social questions. Their verbatim minutes of evidence remain, whatever may have followed from their reports.

The greatest of the recorders was T.A. (Sir Timothy) Coghlan from New South Wales who left school at fourteen, became a pupil teacher, junior public servant, soon statistician and demographer of world standing, as well as a versatile administrator. He had climbed the colonial heights. Yet he always remained something of an outsider, an uneasy servant for mundane politicians, too big for the local scene. In middle age, in 1905, he became Agent-General in London where he worked for a decade on his monumental four-volume history, *Labour and Industry in Australia* (1918).³

Coghlan was a political economist in the tradition of Adam Smith, examining the three factors of production — labour, industry, and land — the political context in which they operated, and the ordering of society which resulted. He ironically observed that he had excluded those "other matters to which historians usually devote their chief attention." His book was a combination of economic, labour, political, and social history; factual, detached, finding no heroes or panaceas. It was little recognized, though other writers drew on it, until some 40 years later when a re-evaluation of nineteenth-century Australia began seriously.

After World War I conservative politics were reinstated, a determined effort was made in every way to hold to the values of the past. This could not succeed. Britain was no longer the dominant imperialist power, it could not offer prosperity or security to Australia. Local manufacturing grew behind tariff protection; commerce, transport, and communications enlarged their scale with new technology, the primary industries and mining come more under the control of finance capital. The national bourgeoisie was more diversified, less dependent on Britain for capital or migration or even trade. It devised a network of government intervention for its protection and to win popular support. It could only go a certain distance with this: it could not break with dependence as a truly national bourgeoisie, nor provide either welfare or ideals which would bind all classes to it. Politically this was reflected in Australia's status as a self-governing dominion of the British Empire, and in the strength of the Labor Party. Culturally, in a strong strand of Australian national feeling and isolationism side by side with Britishness.

In the depression crisis of the 1930s hopes were shattered as one in three were thrown out of work. All governments, conservative or Labor, were compelled to cut wages and welfare in order to restore profits. In the shock and uncertainty society was violently polarized, the majority certainly accepting

³ For a discussion of the book and its author see E.C. Fry, "Labour and Industry in Australia," *Historical Studies*, 14 (1970).

the conservative answers but a large part of the labour movement rejecting them and moving to the left.

The principal beneficiary of this was the Communist Party, insignificant since its formation in 1920. Now it grew in numbers, finding a base in the unemployed and resentful unionists in defence of standards of living, pursuing a united front for welfare and democracy at home and opposition to fascism abroad. It was able to find Australian foundations and formulate a world view which attracted young men and women outside its working-class core. The Communist Party was beginning to provide a structure of ideas and support for radical intellectuals.

Brian Fitzpatrick was the most notable of these. A graduate of Melbourne University shaped by the aftermath of World War I then the depression, he produced from the late 1930s a series of books which challenged orthodox interpretations of Australia's past. His two economic histories portrayed the conflict of class interests within Australia and Australia itself as a subject to British imperialism. His *Short History of the Australian Labor Movement* (1940), which he described as a sketch, became a guide for a generation on the left. His wider and more idiosyncratic books *The Australian People* (1946) and *The Australian Commonwealth* (1956), celebrated Australian values which he saw as endangered and recounted the hostility of governments to civil liberties.

Fitzpatrick was an unyielding radical and Australian nationalist, influenced by a marxism which emphasized the economic base, yet a humanist and a cultured man who campaigned tirelessly for civil liberties. He was always an independent publicist, supporting himself precariously by journalism, only partly by choice as he was refused university posts. Amidst his vilification as a communist fellow-traveller which continued until his death in 1965 he held cheerfully to his path, showing malice towards none. For his admirers his personal qualities drew affection, as his work commanded respect. For twenty years and more he personified the left in Australian historiography, the first to do so.⁴

By World War II a few other university trained historians had written labour history or wider history from a labour stance. Jauncey, an Australian educated in the United States, in his *Story of Conscription in Australia* (1935), put together an account of the divisive events which had been expunged from orthodox memory. Lloyd Ross, then a young communist, wrote a sympathetic evaluation of William Lane. H. V. Evatt, colleague of Childe, portrayed prudently the life of Holman, ex-Labor leader. This was but a diversion in Evatt's career as barrister, judge, and Labor leader.

The rank and file on the left had little time or means to investigate Australia's past though they were becoming interested in it, feeling that behind the

⁴ Don Watson, *Brian Fitzpatrick: A Radical Life* (1979), is a fine study of the man and his work.

official story they had been taught lay another — a people's history — to be discovered.

For Australia the Pacific war, from the end of 1941, became a united mobilization against the threat from Japan. Within this other sentiments could be subsumed: helping Britain, fighting for democracy, defending the Soviet Union. The conservatives and appeasers of the 1930s were swept out of office, the Labor Party led the nation which, shaken by the fall of Singapore, saw that it must defend itself and depend on the United States for victory. The Communist Party, now vindicated, firmly supported the Labor government.

For a short period after 1945 this united front held. In its programme of postwar reconstruction, the Labor government looked to maintaining controls over the mixed economy to avoid a depression, to ensure full employment, and to provide a measure of social justice. The Communist Party from its position of strength in the unions attempted by industrial struggle to change permanently the balance between capital and labour and to make itself a major political force of the working class. It was decisively defeated by 1949. In that year too the Labor government was ousted by the revived conservatives proclaiming that private enterprise would benefit all. In Australia as elsewhere 1949 was a turning point.

The country was entering on 25 years and more of growth and prosperity comparable to that of the second half of the nineteenth century and with much the same foundations — an influx of capital and migrants, a strong demand for its exports, now particularly minerals. The capital came from the United States and Japan rather than Britain, the migrants were European as well as British, the markets were world wide with Japan's share rising. The scale of industry had grown, methods of production had been transformed, transnational firms were now dominant in the most profitable sectors, and Australia remained a dependent economy integrated into their world strategies.

The labour force was segmented by the diversity of migrants who filled the lowest levels, the opportunities for advancement open to old Australians, and the drawing in of new sections, especially women, in a time of full employment. These changes were accompanied by a relentless offensive against any kind of socialist or social-democratic ideas or indeed any criticism from nationalists or scrupulous liberals. The Cold War was waged at home as well as abroad.

In these respects the times were not propitious for the production of labour history. Yet beneath the surface some opposing forces had been brought into being. From the 1930s parts of the labour movement were developing an interest in its history, particularly the Communist Party which in its training classes and publications saw the Australian working class as a matured proletariat whose experiences could show it the correct revolutionary path for the future. In a number of short works the lessons were drawn this way.⁵ Some-

⁵ E. W. Campbell, *History of the Australian Labor Movement* (1945), and L. L. Shar-

times this sat uneasily with a more populist retrospect of old battles. The Communist Party, for example, called its youth organization the Eureka Youth League in commemoration of the armed rebellion of gold diggers in the 1850s. The evocation of a democratic egalitarian past remained a pervasive influence in popular culture.

In the 1930s groups of cultural nationalists had reasserted the themes of the 1890s in support of a counter culture which attacked the whole conformist tone of society along with its injustices. Of the various forms this protest took the most important for labour history is embodied in the work of Russel Ward who went back to the bush and the bush worker, even the convict, to argue that they represented an egalitarian Australian experience which had always contended with the imported values of the ruling class and which had deeply influenced the mass of the people. So the working class in its native form was worthy of serious study even though Ward gave its virtues the status of legend rather than fact. A folklore interest was growing and most of the folk had belonged to one section or other of a working class.

This was not all which came out of the 1930s and 1940s. The young radicals who were to establish labour history as an accepted study in Australia had their ideas formed in these decades and were to find ways, though not exactly those for which they had hoped, to put their beliefs into practice.

II

THEIR OPPORTUNITY CAME in 1961 when they were able to found the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History which with its journal *Labour History* has become the focus for such work in Australia. This is a convenient date from which to survey the succeeding period without claiming that the event was epoch making, for the progress of the Society has been as much consequence as cause of the development of labour history in the country.

The impulse came from Britain. When Asa Briggs visited Australia in 1960 and spoke about the formation of the Society for the Study of Labour History, he had a message for some of his audience who set about to do the same. Radical scholars in Australia looked for a lead to their counterparts in Britain whose experience and achievements were much greater than their own yet who were part of the same world of discourse, free of imperial connotations. They adopted a similar broad and simple objective: "to encourage study, teaching, research and publication in the field of labour history and . . . the preservation of labour archives." On the British model their Society was independent, not being sponsored by any government agency, foundation, university, political

key, *An Outline History of the Australian Communist Party* (1944), are the most important examples.

party, or trade union, meaning also that its resources were slender. Membership was open to any interested person or body, the members electing the *officers of the Society*. *Thirteen persons attended the inaugural meeting, a fair measure of the active interest in it.*

The founders of the Society were mostly outsiders in the Australian academic world and members of a left-wing minority in Australian society. The leaders, men, had typically been activists in the labour movement, many of them communists in the short period of communist success in Australia, had grown up in the depression of the 1930s, and served in World War II. After tertiary training, perhaps under programmes for returned soldiers, they had found posts in schools and universities as these expanded. They were joined by some younger men and a few women whose experience began in the 1940s and who in the burgeoning times won their way into universities. The driving force came from self-professed marxists whose interest in history was dictated in part by their desire to find socialist answers for the future; and from committed members of the Labor Party who wished it to combine practice with theory in the form of historical knowledge. The two combined with only minor friction because both were wholly convinced of the necessity of agreement for survival, creating an open organization which could not bind its members in any way.

Soon the Society was able to produce a *Bulletin* which became a full scale journal and members of it were publishing books as well as articles. Nearly all this research had its origin in postgraduate theses, a novelty for Australia. Before World War II higher degrees had little place in the small Australian universities which taught professional skills and cultural accomplishments. The Doctor of Philosophy degree was not available although a select group of Australians was able to study in Britain to obtain it. The degree was effectively introduced in the 1950s especially at the new Australian National University at Canberra. When the journal *Historical Studies* in 1956 published a retrospective list of theses completed in Australian universities it could record only nine doctorates of philosophy in history. By the late 1960s the annual output was into double figures and by the mid-1970s it was running at about twenty per year. A much larger number of masters theses continued to be written. Labour history arrived with university research.

Some books antedated the formation of the Society but were written by its founding members. Notable amongst them was Gollan's *Radical and Working Class Politics* (1960), remaining an indispensable work of information and analysis, which he followed with a history of the coal miners union (1963) and an examination of Australian communism and the labour movement, *Revolutionaries and Reformists* (1975). Gollan, the first president of the Society, was influential too by his supervision and encouragement of many younger scholars and his position as mentor to labour historians. The book by Ebbels (edited by Churchward) on the Australian labour movement 1850-1907 paralleled Gollan's *Radical and Working Class Politics*.

The Labor Party gave rise to a myriad of articles and books merging into

current comment on the one side and texts for the newly established political science departments of universities on the other. It is invidious to single out examples but amongst the more historical works of older scholars Nairn wrote the most thorough account of the Party's origins from a non-socialist standpoint, Crisp applied the same view to the Labor Party in the twentieth century. Turner in his two complementary books made a marxist critique of the Labor Party in the early twentieth century and looked at the persecution of the IWW. The Communist Party was too controversial for academic study until Davidson's history appeared in 1969.

A steady output of histories of trade unions, which had scarcely been attempted before, was written in the form of postgraduate theses some of which were published. Amongst them were Hagan on printers, Sheridan on engineers, Mitchell on school teachers. Previously there was little besides Gollan on coal miners and Buckley on engineers. A few biographies were added to the scant stock of Australian lives. Fitzhardinge's Hughes belonged to traditional political biography rather than labour history. Crisp's Chifley is an adulatory life; O'Farrell is critical of Harry Holland, a militant socialist. Fry's *Tom Barker and the IWW* is a history-memoir.

Thus most of this work was centred on the Labor Party, socialist groups, and trade unions. It was history of institutions, for pressing reasons. With so much to be done in labour history these institutions were the natural starting points, the first step seeming to be at least to establish the outlines of their history. Many of the researchers had been associated with political parties or trade unions and so brought to their subjects first-hand knowledge and sympathy. *This feeling of shared experience often distinguished their work from purely academic studies and was a strength.*

Another powerful influence was a defensive one. Although the labour historians were grudgingly permitted into the academic establishment as it expanded, discrimination against them did not cease during the Cold War period. As well as thinking of themselves, they had to accept that their subject would not be recognized unless it was studied by orthodox methods. The narrow conventions of a Ph.D. thesis, for example, were obligatory, however restrictive the author might find them privately. The institutions of labour could qualify as worthy of examination along with other institutions. By implication labour history was merely a speciality, a research choice (for they could not teach it) of its practitioners. As a suspect field it had to be defended by the most *meticulous observance of canons of scholarship.*

These influences were reinforced by an empirical approach to historical evidence even on the part of those who held to a marxist world view. The unspoken empiricist/positivist philosophy which had long prevailed in Britain and America was equally strong in Australia both by transmission and local growth. In history this meant a narrowness of questions asked, emphasis on fact finding, belief in objectivity, and a neutral style. In Australian universities the poverty of historiography was pronounced, teaching not going beyond a

vogue for Collingwood, a nodding acquaintance with logical positivism, or a recital of American primers. Labour historians seeking further could only take as models Briggs, Thompson, and Hobsbawm. So whilst in the 1960s they made great advances they could not add new theoretical insights.

Labour history was able to force itself forward because it was Australian centred. To understand this we must appreciate the neglected state of Australian history even twenty years ago. It was scarcely taught in universities, confined in schools to a recital of the notable events of British settlement. Educated circles took for granted that the history of Australia was inherently inferior to that of the centres of civilization in Britain and Europe, of which it was a provincial offshoot. The writing of independent history is a slow growth in a colony of settlement, especially so in the Australian colonies which made no sharp break from Britain, which did not become a nation state when they federated in 1901 but remained an integrated part of the British economic empire and intellectual world until World War II. The labour historians, all radical nationalists whatever their political differences, led the movement towards the writing of national history.

Thus in Australia, labour history did not contend with a powerful tradition of national history created over centuries on behalf of the aristocracy and bourgeoisie and engrained in common consciousness. One result was that much labour history accepted populist concepts. In place of an analysis of class it focussed on the "people," who were conceived in national terms and identified with all progressive forces. This lack of clarity was strengthened by the political need for a popular front against fascism, the success of which in the 1930s and 1940s profoundly affected marxists such as Gollan, Turner, and Fry. Others often implied a process of a people moving from cultural Australianism to a more enlightened and advanced class politics. The confusion of populist and class concepts, often unconscious, could lead to a type of history which was as much national as labour and in that sense could rejoin the concerns of conventional historians.

By the end of the 1960s labour history was an accepted and large part of Australian history and had had an effect on the writing of general history of the country, so much so that conservative historians resented its influence and their political allies attacked left-wing domination of university departments — an inversion of the truth. A more fundamental criticism came from the New Left.

The New Left in Australia took many of its conceptions from abroad, directly from debates in Britain, then from Gramsci, Althusser, and other European marxists. In advanced capitalist countries the political failure of old doctrines in changed times was plain. The rejection of them was as much a flood of exasperation as a coherent movement. In Australia the opposition to the Vietnam War from the late 1960s provided something of a mass base for confrontation politics and brought a student left into violent political action for the first time in many years. This gave point to the search for theories of society which would be a guide to action.

A younger generation of students and intellectuals, mainly based in Melbourne, launched their criticisms through the journals *Arena*, *Intervention*, and *Australian Left Review*, engaging in wholesale attacks on the Old Left, as they called them. Their rethinking encompassed the whole range of social theory and practice. In labour history McQueen's *A New Britannia* (1970) is a landmark. Calling for a "revolutionary history," McQueen savagely exposed the preconceptions of nationalism and populism, the ambiguity in class analysis, the neglect of ideological hegemony, and the romanticizing of popular culture which he saw as implicit in the work of older labour historians, leading them to totally erroneous conclusions. Despite all the objections which could be raised to McQueen's polemic, it transformed thinking about labour history by crystallizing the issues.

McQueen was not alone. The extension of these criticisms can be seen in an influential article by Macintyre in 1972 in which he attacked the pervading empiricist/positivist methodology of labour historians, setting the aim of examining social formations in their totality in order to arrive at socialist history and socialist strategies. This new attention to theory was the most lasting effect. Not only had Australian historians been untheoretical but the unhindered study of marxism had been effectively prevented, by law in the 1930s, by taboos from the 1950s, leaving Australian marxists wedded to a mechanical picture of class society and a narrow belief in the inevitability of class struggle. Now they and others were forced to consider much more complex social models. The move towards social history in some form or other was under way.

Another effect was renewed attention to a theme which had been prominent in the writings of Fitzpatrick, the place of Australia in world imperialism. Labour historians, although acutely conscious of the colonial past, had neglected the world picture in their emphasis on the national and political history of Australia as different, separate, and relatively autonomous for the purposes with which they were concerned. Such assumptions by the 1960s plainly ran counter to the fact of Australia's integration into the world capitalist economy, its domination by transnational corporations and its role as a mini-imperialist in the Pacific and South East Asia. International relationships began to receive more scrutiny in political and economic history. The sterility of orthodox economic theory prompted the movement for an opposition political economy which won itself a place against powerful resistance, began to produce a new type of economic history and in doing so added breadth to labour history.

Two other forces entered into labour history in the 1970s — women's history and awareness of racism. Australian feminists had little difficulty in showing that Australian historians, including labour historians, had largely ignored women. They could claim with justification that the concentration on the bush worker, on male mateship, strikes, trade unions, and political parties incorporated a particularly sexist vision of the past. They set about creating a women's history which would demonstrate the oppression of women and explain their roles then and now. Early books of this kind (in the mid-1970s)

were Summers, Kingston, Dixson, who had to begin by turning male dominated history on its head. In output and insights women's history has become one of the most fruitful areas of Australian historical investigation. It has had its impact on labour history both by example and overlap, many feminist historians seeing themselves as sharing common ground in the history of labour and labour historians no longer being able to neglect women. Another side of social history was opened up.

The recognition and denunciation of racism, which followed the dismantling of overt colonial empires as a result of World War II, has been a second influence on contemporary labour history. In Australia it has complex and far reaching connections. It leads directly to aboriginal history, the antithesis of the white conquest of the country and the destruction of aboriginal society, now becoming an arm of the aboriginal rights movement. It gives a new standpoint on race relations, not only with aborigines but with Chinese, Pacific Islanders, and other non-European minorities who lived in Australia. More fundamentally, it has produced a continuing debate on the White Australia policy and the popular ideologies associated with it for 100 years, attitudes which were central to the labour movement. Anti-racists can confess their guilt and depict white Australians as born racists, just as others have claimed them to be inherently egalitarian. Beyond these simplistic assertions recognition of racism and knowledge of Third World situations brings historians back again to study of Australia's imperial as well as its colonial position and its relationship with Asia and the Pacific as an imperial base.

These influences can be seen more strongly in work in progress than in books yet published. They were apparent in 1977, the latest date for which a survey of current research is available. In that year *Labour History* asked its readers to provide information about their current research in Australian labour history. More than 60 replied, citing almost 100 projects, a sufficiently large response to be representative and to reveal trends in geographical areas studied, period, author, and subject.⁶

In area, local and regional history remained important in a country the size of Australia but wider studies dealing with Australia as a whole or general questions were prominent. In period the twentieth century predominated, particularly the 1930s and the years since World War II. Works on the nineteenth century were often a re-evaluation of previous interpretations, looking at class relationships, ruling ideology, labour and women, aborigines, racism. Most of the research was being carried out in universities; candidates for higher degrees comprised one third of the respondents.

In subject most work extended beyond strictly political history. Despite the difficulty of drawing sharp divisions it can be said broadly that about one third of the subjects listed were principally political, two thirds otherwise, mostly social history in some form or another. The long-standing interest in trade

⁶ The replies to the questionnaire were published in *Labour History*, 34 (1978).

unions now took account of the wider framework of class relations and ideology. Ideological subjects included some examining racism. A number of studies in women's history were noted and others would be prepared for journals of the women's movement. A few plainly historiographical projects were recorded.

Research in progress is significant in revealing trends because book publication has always been an uncertain prospect. The bulk of serious work in history remains in the form of theses or journal articles, although in recent years more books in the social sciences have appeared. Australian publishing is dominated by British and American firms which import international products of all kinds which can be standardized; yet they perceive a large enough national market to make local works profitable in the social sciences, directed to school, college, and university courses and the educated general reader. Small publishers, some short lived, also cater to the critical buyer. Sales of books on Australian society and history are now large enough to sustain a varied output, including more labour history than previously.

Only a few can be mentioned here as examples. Studies of the Labor Party continue in every form. This party which has held office in the federal parliament for only three years out of the last thirty remains the other half of Australian politics, *bete noir* or hope of the future. It is constantly the subject of topical commentary, political analysis, and historical examination. A spate of books, for instance, has been written about the dismissal of the Whitlam Labor government in 1975. Two typical histories are Murphy on the Labor Party in each of the Australian states, which systematically uncovers new ground; and Rickard's wider work on class and politics at the turn of the century which shows awareness of debates amongst labour historians.

Now that biography has become popular the lives of further Labor politicians have been written. At one level this popularity meets an easy interest in stories of people; at another a donnish desire to emulate the conventional biographies which have dignified the lives of the personages of British politics; whilst the labour-inclined historians believe there are lessons to be learned from their subjects. Practically, a foundation for biographical research has been accumulated in the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, volumes of which have been appearing since 1966. Robertson on Scullin, Kiernan on Calwell, Murphy on Ryan, present a range of commitment and analysis in studies of Labor leaders. Lloyd Ross's life of Curtin is distinctive in being written by a former trade union official who published a biography of William Lane in the 1930s.

Histories of trade unions continue to be written as theses without many of them appearing in print, although the forthcoming history of the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) by Hagan represents the largest commitment made by a trade-union body to the writing of its history. Edgar Ross's history of the coal miners is a purposeful account by a former communist official of the union. This is one type of work produced outside universities. Journalists contribute most, usually on current subjects with some historical background

showing labour influences. Harris, a building worker, is unusual in having overcome all difficulties to produce a powerful first illustrated history of the labour movement in *The Bitter Fight*. (1970).

The gap between academics and activists is nevertheless being bridged in another way — by the memoirs of participants and by oral history. The flow of both will continue to increase, not only because the tape recorder has made them practicable. People of the generation which suffered in the depression, revived the Labor Party or built the Communist Party, worked or fought in WWII and hoped to change the world after it, are now at an age where they have a life to record and the conviction that they participated in vital events. In the same way earlier generations looked back on the 1890s and World War I. Two substantial biographies are by Gibson and Sedy, both former communist functionaries, covering a somewhat different span of years and contrasting in their assessment of their experiences. Others have appeared and more will follow, with professional historians assisting.

This type of memoir merges into oral history which in Australia as elsewhere is flourishing in all kinds of ways. At the least it provides raw material, a new source, on which historians can work. Potentially it gives scope for the long sought "history from below." At the same time it can enshrine trivia and record personal memories divorced from the social forces which shaped them from outside. Penetrating labour or social history of this kind does not come easily. Lowenstein's *Weevils in the Flour* sets a high standard for the genre by showing how much history and theory can be distilled from the experiences of ordinary people in the depression of the 1930s.

Thus the forms and methods and matter of current labour history are diverse. The strongest innovations are the preoccupation with theory, the aim of examining social formations in their totality, the concern with class formation, relations and hegemony. These characteristics are exemplified in the recent book by Connell and Irving, *Class Structure in Australian History*, an ambitious work which synthesizes many of the trends of the last ten years.⁷

Where does the Society for the Study of Labour History stand in all this? After twenty years its objectives remained unaltered. Its membership (that is, subscribers to *Labour History*) has grown to about 1,000. Most of them are staff and graduate students in history and the social sciences in universities and colleges. Others are schoolteachers and journalists, trade unions and unionists, activists and veterans of the labour movement. Only in Melbourne has a local branch taken root, pursuing its own activities and producing a bulletin. The managers of the Society have been almost entirely academic historians based in Canberra, unable because of distance to draw on other centres in administration. Nevertheless the organizational framework has proved strong enough to handle business and flexible enough to enlist all helpers. The production of *Labour History* has become the central task of the Society, since Australia

⁷ The book is the subject of two review articles in *Labour History*, 40 (1981).

lacked scholarly journals and particularly any in which articles on labour history were welcome.

The original policy of providing a forum open to all views and all aspects of labour history has been reaffirmed. This implied that the Society and its journal would be neutral between contending interpretations. That is not to say that it has been passive: on the contrary it has encouraged as well as reflected novel trends by special publications and by seeking articles for *Labour History* which express current positions. Four special issues of *Labour History* have been published. Each is book length, devoted to a single theme, bringing together established and new authors to contribute chapters towards an integrated volume. The subjects show the advancing areas of study: the impact of the 1930s on Australia (1969); the social context of strikes (1973); the role of women in the labour force and the labour movement (1975); the particular forms of racism which have marked the Australian working class (1978). Others are planned, as special issues of the journal or separate books.⁸

The transition in the contents of *Labour History* itself was signaled in 1981 by the addition of a sub-title: "A Journal of Labour and Social History." Merritt, the editor who had guided the journal through these changes, saw this as probably overdue. Reviewing labour history in Australia since the foundation of the Society he noted the criticism of the New Left, the reinforcement given to this by the development of social history in Britain, and the response of the journal in seeking articles on theory, on "new" social history, and from feminist historians. Pointing to the limitations of the latest social history as well as the older institutional type he stressed the variety of contents which the journal will continue to offer. In fact, *Labour History* has not only become the main medium for publication in its fields; it prints more scholarly articles on Australian history than any other journal and thus has been influential in changing the intellectual milieu within which labour historians operate.

III

WHAT CAN BE FORECAST about the future of labour history in Australia? I do not anticipate any great or sudden changes in it because I see the setting for it as continuing those circumstances which have applied from the mid-1970s.

By the mid-1970s the long period of expansion of world capitalism was coming to an end and there could be no question of Australia being exempt from this decline which was being registered in its economy. The hopes of an investment-led recovery from massive imports of capital into the extractive

⁸ *The Great Depression in Australia*, 17 (1969); *Strikes: Studies in Twentieth Century Australian Social History*, 24 (1973); *Women at Work*, 29 (1975); and *Who Are Our Enemies? Racism and the Australian Working Class*, 35 (1978).

industries, certainly taking place, are exaggerated in that they presuppose a buoyant demand for these products and a favoured position for Australia against its competitors; this wishful thinking also neglects the internal contradictions within the economy which a major redirection of production would accentuate. Australia will continue to be subject to the strategies of transnational corporations economically and to the policies of dominant powers, principally the United States and also Japan, internationally. The situation will sharpen conflicts of interest between different sectors of capital and will bear unevenly on a working class segmented by sex, age, education, skill, ethnic background, and ideology.

Politically the conflict between conservatism and social democracy is likely to become more acute, as elsewhere, whatever compromises, reversals, and confusions accompany the process of polarization. One fact of the present recession, as contrasted to the 1930s, is the entrenched defensive strength of the labour movement. From this base the goals of social democracy are likely to be more firmly, even aggressively, articulated. Socialists will share in this and go beyond it without becoming a major force in the period I am envisaging.

Within the closer context some continuing intellectual and cultural changes can be observed. The extension of higher education in the last 25 years (necessary to the functioning of a post-industrial society) has greatly increased the intelligentsia. Many, perhaps most, of them who have had training in the social sciences do not believe the official ideologies although they may accept them for reasons of advantage or convenience. Intellectual inspiration and leadership is passing away from the ruling establishment. A larger part of intellectuals than at any time since the 1940s are critics of society, many of them influenced by marxism. This situation will continue since young intellectuals will find their lives more precarious and their convictions more at odds with conventional precepts. They will be dissentients in historiography as in other fields.

The radical labour historians are now marxist and theoretical but less abstract than a little while ago. They will certainly be in dispute because no one form of marxism is agreed; probably sectarian because they will still be small groups lacking power and confined to words. Many changes demanded by the New Left have now been accepted because they met a real situation; others have been abandoned by marxists, being in effect varieties of philosophical idealism. The taking up of overseas fashions in marxism is likely to be less common as the experience accumulates to answer Australian problems.

Culturally the most relevant consideration will continue to be the powerful attraction of the history of Australia, which is too deep seated to be reversed or even level off in the near future. It is a consequence of many causes, an intersection of forces which date from earlier nationalism and World War II with those that reflect the confident 1950s and 1960s and the search for a national identity in a changed world. It is sharpened by the contrast with the lack of real national independence so it embodies aspirations as well as interest in the past. The output of Australian history will make available to labour

historians much work which impinges on their own, enabling them to get closer to the ideal of writing the history of society. It will give them more scope and invite them to become more concerned with interpretations and critical reassessment of received explanations.

Some themes are likely to continue to be prominent. The complexities of the processes of class relationships and a recognition of the diversity of the Australian working class at each historical stage is one of them, linked with the formation and operation of ideologies. These will be problems of the future as well as historical phenomena. For these and for other themes it is likely that the concentration on Australia internally, which was necessary to distinguish Australian history as a field of study, will be modified by attention to Australia within world imperialism. Much scope remains for the examination of racism and current concerns will call it forth. There the parameters of the debate are already established. Women's history has an open future both in itself and for integration into wider history of society. The exercise of state power is likely to become more stringent, the existence of deprived and oppressed groups more obvious; so processes of social control and conflict will come under scrutiny. Thus the widening of labour history into social history will continue whilst much of the indiscriminate collection in the name of social history drops into the category of reportage. The ebbing of the voguish element will leave behind a fruitfully broadened field of subject matter and a heightened awareness of social relations.

I have been referring to prospects in academic labour history. I would foresee a fairly spontaneous growth of popular labour history of many types, merging into oral history, arising from shared experiences — political, work, local. This could become common without any strong organization being necessary.

I assume that all the existing types of labour history will continue, as will the pluralist situation in which they coexist. Nothing lasts forever, but I am referring to a period (how long I would not attempt to guess) without dramatic changes politically or ideologically: a period that should witness an extension and strengthening of labour history. That in turn will test existing organizations. There are limits to the central role of *Labour History* and its parent society as the whole labour history scene becomes larger and more diversified. No doubt groups with some degree of cohesion and political commitment will be able to present their own historiography. At the same time labour historians are gaining a larger place in the writing of history as a whole. Both processes will continue.

I am indebted to Dr. John Merritt for making available to me his chapter, "Labour History", in New History, G. Osborne and W.F. Mandle (eds.). I have also drawn on a paper, "Labour History in Australia", by E.C. Fry and A.B. Davidson, presented at a World Forum on Labour History, Paris, 1980.