

The Queensland Journal of Labour History

*No. 29
Spring/Summer 2019*



The Brisbane Labour History Association

\$5.00



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Printed by Cost Less Copies, 654 Ipswich Rd, Annerley

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Ted Riethmuller 1937–2019. Ted Riethmuller private collection.

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ISSN 1832-9926

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LABOUR HISTORY

A Journal of Labour and Social History

Labour History is an internationally recognised journal published in November and May by Liverpool University Press for the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History.



Number 117 November 2019

WORKING WOMEN AND GENDERED LABOUR

*Edited by Emma Robertson and
Glenda Strachan*

From Making Do to Making Home: Gender
and Housewifery on the Victorian Goldfields
Katrina Dernelley

Pioneer Girls and Flappers: Australia's Early
Female Ammunition Workers
Katie Wood

"When Women Do the Work of Men":
Representations of Gendered Occupational
Identities on British Railways in World War I
Cartoons

Emma Robertson and Lee-Ann Monk

"These Labourers in the Field of Public Work": Librarians, Discrimination and the Meaning of Equal Pay
Diane Kirkby and Caroline Jordan

"Armed with Glamour and Collection Tins": Femininity and Voluntary Work in Wartime South Australia,
1939–45
Rachel Harris

Called to Serve, Shunned as Citizens: How the Australian Women's Land Army Was Recruited and
Abandoned by the Labor Government
Heather Gartshore

Class, Gender and Cold War Politics: The Union of Australian Women and the Campaign for Equal Pay,
1950–66
Katherine Keirs

Changing the Unions' Agenda: Women's Activism in Australian Trade Unions in the 1970s and 1980s
Glenda Strachan

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Subscriptions: <<https://online.liverpooluniversitypress.co.uk/loi/labourhistory>>

Editorial

Dean Wharton

We lead this issue with a tribute to Ted Riethmuller who was key to the continuing existence of the Brisbane Labour History Association during the 2000s. In more recent years he often attended our events and produced rich reflections of working life for this journal.

The BLHA is currently organising to publish a book of Ted's reflections. Ted's family are currently fundraising to publish a novel by Ted and details are in this issue. Also, they need financial assistance to digitise Ted's extensive labour history related images and film recordings. This can be done at:

www.gofundme.com/f/8mm-activism-film-preservation

The videos they have already digitised and added to Youtube, of a March for Peace in Brisbane in 1963 and a march in Brisbane on Hiroshima Day 1967, can be accessed via the BLHA Facebook page.

Ted's obituary is written by his long-term friend and comrade Humphrey McQueen. We follow his personal recollections with a previously unpublished gem from Ted, a humorous view of the hazardous nature of activism in the 1960s/70s. How little changes.

In June the annual Alex Macdonald lecture was delivered by Ray Evans on the Red Flag Riots of 1919. Plenty has been written about the riots in this anniversary year. The transcript of Ray's lecture makes plain that no-one can link the events of 100 years ago to subsequent events in Brisbane more succinctly than the original and primary researcher on the riots.

This year also marks the 50th anniversary of the passing of Alex Macdonald and we publish a commemoration of his life. Research currently being undertaken on Alex was initiated following a call for assistance by Lyn Trad and Margaret Liessi, Alex's daughters, at the BLHA's 2016 Alex Macdonald Lecture, and in the pages of this journal in issue No.23. Any assistance with this project would be appreciated.

The article by David Faber introduces the remarkable story of Italian anarchist Francesco Fantin. This takes us from his time fighting against Fascism in North East Italy in the early 1920s to doing the same in Australia; and campaigning alongside the CPA in the sugar cane fields of Far North Queensland. He was assassinated by fascists in South Australia following internment by the Australian Government during the Second World War.

Walking Together is a transcript of a lecture delivered by Elisabeth Gondwe and Auntie Evelyn Parkin at the Australian Museums and Galleries Association National Conference in Alice Springs in May 2019. It describes the process developed by the museum on North Stradbroke Island/Minjerribah to describe "three histories - 25,000 years of First Nations' people; occupation and colonisation; and the shared experiences of 200 years."

This issue's book reviews include Humphrey McQueens's review of *"Tempting Dame Fortune - A Brief History of the Dee Gold Rush, Central Queensland"* by Bruce Heiser, Duncan Hart's review of *"The Far Left in Australia since 1945"* edited by Jon Piccini, Evan Smith and Matthew Worley, and John McCollow's review of *"Bjelke Blues"* edited by Edwina Shaw.

Our obituary of Les Croften is taken from the Autumn 2019 edition of *The Advocate*, the Journal of the Queensland Branch of the Australian Rail, Tram and Bus Union.

To commemorate the life of Ron Monaghan, a memorial and celebration took place in July 2019. Our thanks go to the QCU for supplying us with the speech delivered by Ros McLennan at that event, which we feature in memoriam to Ron.

Howard Guille and Ross Gwyther interviewed Ron at length in issue 22 of the QJLH. Issue 22 is available in full on the BLHA website.

Future issues

In July the BLHA co-hosted an event with the Union Co-operative Society to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the Brisbane Co-op. The presentations given at the event will form part of a series of articles on the Co-op movement which we hope to include in our next issue. We would be interested to hear from anyone who could contribute to this.

Some time ago the BLHA received a typed transcript of the memoirs of Vic Slater, a member of the Communist Party of Australia who passed in 2012. Copyright law being what it currently is, we have been trying to contact his next of kin to gain permission to publish the whole memoir on our website, or to use selected edited extracts as articles in our journal. So far, we have had little success which is unfortunate because we believe the memoirs are historically significant and should be published. If anyone can help us with this, please get in touch

President's Report Spring 2019

Greg Mallory

During the months of June, July and August I enjoyed a holiday in Europe and the United Kingdom. As well as visiting the grave of Karl Marx in Highgate cemetery and the Peoples History Museum in Salford, I attended the 200-year anniversary of the Peterloo massacre in Manchester. This was a well-attended rally of over 2000 people who marched from various points in Manchester to the main rallying point in Albert Square. This sought to represent the events of 200 years ago where ordinary people demonstrated over the right for reform of parliamentary representation. It was estimated that there were over 60000 people in attendance in 1819 and they were met with a violent reaction from the cavalry where 18 people were killed and many more were wounded.

This year's annual May Day (Labour Day) march was one of the largest in recent years with 20–30,000 workers marching through Brisbane streets

to the Exhibition ground where union tents, speakers and music and children's rides were held. BLHA held a stall after the march, with information, signing up new members and distributing copies of our BLHA journal.

Our annual Alex Macdonald lecture in June was attended by over 70 people. Well-known historian Prof Raymond Evans talked about the Red Flag riots and the Tumult of 1919.

BLHA members continue to assist with a project to document the history of the Union Cooperative Society, which set up a Union Co-op in inner city Paddington in 1969, with grocery store, petrol sales, white goods buying co-op, and a meeting room which is still run as the Union Co-op centre. The 50-year anniversary project will involve a number of on-going events—the first was a launch of the history project in August. Later events are planned—a website with details of the co-op history, including extensive oral history interviews of those

involved in the Co-op early next year.

The BLHA has launched an oral history project, with a training day for those interested in doing oral history interviews. The first stage of this project will be to document the wide range of memories and views of the SEQEB dispute in Queensland in 1985

A number of BLHA members continue to be involved in the Retired Unionist Network in Brisbane, called "*Vintage Reds*". Members carried a newly painted Vintage Reds banner in the QCU Change the Rules rallies held in Brisbane in the leadup to the Federal election.

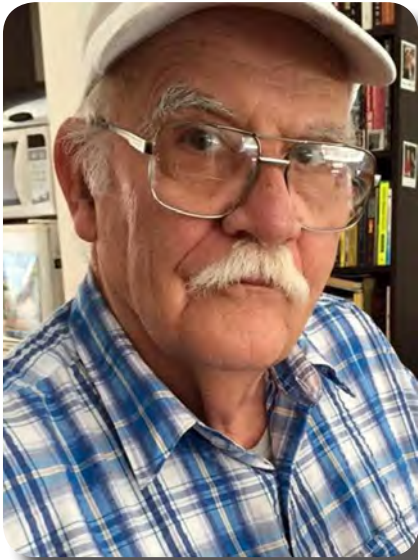
Some young union organizers joined the BLHA committee at our 2018 AGM, and at their suggestion we are investigating the establishment of a regular reading group for BLHA members.

Next year the BLHA intends to hold a seminar on the history of the Australian Communist Party as it will be 100 years since its formation. The Search Foundation intends to hold a two-day seminar at the Mitchell Library in October in Sydney.

On a sadder note I would like to acknowledge the passing of our former Secretary and Life Member Ted Riethmuller. I worked with Ted in his capacity as Secretary for a number of years and I would like to say that Ted put an enormous amount of work into the Association and was responsible for the healthy state it is in today. An obituary from Humphrey McQueen follows.

In Memorium

Some tracks Ted Riethmuller travelled



Lives are lived forward. We zig, we zag, leap and bound, settle and roam by turns, leaving the writers of obituaries at the disadvantage of having to reduce intricacies across decades to a few hundred words in something approximating order, a neatness burnished by the distortions from the retellings that keep our memories fresh. Parts of each life remain unknown, not least to ourselves.

For labour historians, I could limn a life story for Ted Riethmuller by recalling our first encounter and our second last.

Handing out how-to-vote cards for two country by-elections on July 1, 1961 at the polling booth in the Treasury Building was a solitary occasion until Ted strolled by in the early afternoon, stopped to chat long enough for me to encourage him to join Young Labor and come to its weekend school on ‘Can Capitalism Survive?’ He did, bringing Rodney Hall who became a mutual friend.

From the Labor Party, Ted moved into the Communist Party and onto the Socialist Alliance, entertaining a shy hope that the answer to the question ‘Can capitalism survive?’ might yet prove to be ‘no’. His gut never wavered from the conviction that it deserved to perish.

The last public occasion was on May 11, 2018 when his son Max brought Ted to a talk on the 1917 general strike for the Brisbane Labour History Association when I was back in Brisbane for a conference celebrating the 200th anniversary of Marx’s birth.

Those details suggest much about Ted's concerns but only one strand of his life.

For instance, he soon introduced me to Friedrich Nietzsche and Norman Lindsay. His attachment to each spoke of an independence of mind. The conventional wisdom, and not only on the Left, was that an anti-Semitic Nietzsche proclaimed the Nazi Superman. In 1959, Ted had found a paperback of Walter Kaufman's overturning of the distortions inflicted by Nietzsche's sister. *Der Ubermensch* is not the Aryan blond beast but all of humankind liberated from Christian guilt about sex and much more.

As Ted prepared to go overseas in 1963, he offered friends the pick of his books. I chose the Kaufman. He let me take it but admitted it was a volume he had hoped no one would select. I have it still.

Norman Lindsay was another off-key choice for a leftie. Lindsay announced himself as racist, sexist, war-monger, prejudices he exaggerated to shock in rebelling against wowsers and censorship. As much as Ted reveled in Lindsay's Rubensian females, he saw that many of the figures were not human beings, but nymphs and satyrs. His comments as he turned the pages of his volume of drawings and watercolours to explain his responses revealed with how much care he looked.

He brought that watchful yet warm eye to his photography to achieve an objectivity available only to a participant observer, like his admired Cartier-Bresson. Another of Ted's gifts to us are thousands of images from marches, protests, picket lines and rallies.

By 1962, Ted had moved into a two-storied student house at 43 Rosecliffe Street, Dutton Park, overlooking the river to the university, a setting for a fiction, or collective memoir as proposed by Ruth Blair, another mutual friend made there. Ted, however, set his novel, *Take Your Partners*, around West End, a decade later with a central chapter in Nimbin. The leading characters in *Take Your Partners* are the women whose liberation allows us to gain a finer feeling for the author's personality.

A different facet shines from Ted's stories about working life. Ted served his apprenticeship at Bundaberg to qualify as an electrician. a life-long activist with the Electrical Trades Union and on its Honorary Members Committee.

The Brisbane Labour History Association is planning to publish a collection of some of his stories, many of which have appeared in this journal. If far from reportage, the stories never stray far from moments expressive of dignity in a working

life. Often with a first-person narrator, who is rarely the protagonist, Ted observes himself and others making what they can from cooperative labours while they are shadowed by its degradation under the rule of capital. Ted looked to socialism as an escape from being caught between the urgings of foremen to rush a job and union rules against putting in the unpaid time needed to gain the satisfaction from a task done well and truly. That expectation drew on the pleasures he found in his copper-plate hand, by rummaging in the toolbox inherited from his axe man father, and in the lost art of drinking out of a water-bag.

As he drove by places where he had worked, Ted took pride in knowing that he had had a hand in turning on the lights. He came to worry that the Left, in losing touch with place, was losing contact with the people who keep our environments even half-way habitable. "Yes, I'm a patriot and also a proud nationalist. Isn't everyone?" His was a nationalism where anti-imperialism ensures an internationalism that is more than rhetorical. 'I love Australia. How beautiful it is.' As he and Katrina were driving back from Lindsay's Springwood studio through the New England district one autumn, the deciduous trees 'provided a very pleasing display.' Publication of the novel and the stories are to be

collective efforts as he enjoyed at the Realist Writers' group and from Bill Sutton in the People's Bookshop. Ted learned to write with clarity, coherence and conviction from a lifetime of reading, whether a youthful and lasting enthusiasm for du Maupassant or, in his retirement, delights from Alice Munro. Yet, he wrote of 'a gap in my heart' which print could not satisfy in the way that had the Apu trilogy, 'a triumph of humanism and realism. My life has been so much more worth living for having seen it.'

Michel de Montaigne, in seeking to make sense of why he and Etienne de La Boetie had become so close, could do no more than to conclude 'Because he was he and I was I.' Something of the inexplicable plays its part in every lasting relationship. But there is a remark of Ted's that goes to explain his many friendships. When he went to a Socialist Alliance Conference in Melbourne in 2006, I arranged for him to stay with Peter Curtis, whom he had not met. Shortly afterwards, Ted wrote to say that he had not expected to make a new good friend at his age but had done so with Peter. One reason for their immediate and easy regard is that they share principles about how to treat others, whether strangers or intimates. Ted knew that we are not here to take but to give as he did in his years as secretary of The Brisbane Labour History Association, from 2004 to 2007.

Memories of Ted through his manifold works will keep us doing whatever we can to put those decencies into practice—at work and throughout the world, ever encouraged by his maxim that ‘It’s okay not to cope.’

**Humphrey McQueen
Canberra**

(Visit Ted Riethmuller Memorial Page fb.me/tedriethmuller)

FUNDRAISER FOR

Take Your Partners

A Novel By Ted Riethmuller



Ted Riethmuller devoted much of his later retirement to writing a novel, 'Take Your Partners'. Ted had completed the book and was making arrangements to self-publish when he passed away.

His loved ones would like to publish Ted's work as a legacy to his skill as a writer and as a contribution to the rich landscape of the culture of the Brisbane Left and the greater Australian writing tradition.

The funds raised will help cover the costs of publication and marketing and if possible, find a commercial publisher.

For More information about 'Take Your Partners', and to donate to the fundraiser, visit:

<https://www.gofundme.com/f/publish-ted-riethmuller039s-novel>

Alan Doesn't Get Arrested Again

Ted Riethmuller

“It was the time Jimmy Beatson was going to burn his draftcard”, Alan said. “It was in 1965 or 66. It wasn't the first anti-war demonstration in that period. They were getting rough, more confrontational than the sedate protests we used to have in the past. The idea was that he would run out into one of the main intersections in town and burn his draft card before the cops could prevent him. There were quite a few protesters milling around on the street corners but they were well outnumbered by police. There were heaps of uniformed officers, Special Branch Ds, even traffic cops.”

“It was the corner of Queen St and Albert Street. I wasn't there I was overseas but I had heard about it since.” I said. I had left Australia in '63 and came back in 1967. I had left Australia because nothing seemed to happen here.

“Anyway, what with all the police, the paddy wagons and all, the public knew something was up and they contributed to the drama by trying to see what was going on. Office workers had climbed out of the windows and were standing on the roof of the shop awnings—anything for a bit of free entertainment.” Alan continued, “Jimmy, who had an

arm in plaster, all of a sudden raced out into the intersection and it was on. A couple of police grabbed me and started to carry me away to the paddy wagon. On the way there a respectably dressed bystander called out, 'Leave him alone!' So they dropped me on the ground and arrested the public minded citizen instead.”

“So you missed out again?”

“Yes, but they arrested some of the others in addition to Jimmy One of the Rooke boys ended up arrested They broke Jimmy's arm again, I think.”

“You lead a charmed life,” I said. “What about the big civil liberties demo in 1967?”

“I didn't even know that it was on I happened to be in town that day I was at Trades Hall doing some organising for Trade Union Youth Week and I had reason to go down Roma Street way. The next thing I knew there was this big mob of protesters, mainly students, and scores of coppers. They sat down on the road—the protesters, not the police. So I felt I had to join them. The Special Branch was there in force, including Special Branch chief Leo De Lange He pointed his finger at me and I heard him say, 'Grab him, he's

behind all this.’ And so I was grabbed with a lot of others and dragged off the roadway.”

“So you were arrested?”

“No, I was just dumped down and I must have got overlooked in the melee because I just got up and walked away. But what really annoyed me was that I had been wearing a good set of clothes and they were ruined. My strides were all in strips from being dragged along the road, and one sleeve of my shirt was completely torn off. I felt embarrassed when I had to go home on the tram. When I got home Pauline said that next time I should wear my old clothes.”

“The campaign for civil liberties was quite dramatic while it lasted.” I said.

“Yes, I am reminded of one occasion it was decided Brian Laver and I should challenge the ban on speaking in public. But, of course, as soon as we started to spruik the coppers grabbed us. I was being led off by an old uniformed sergeant. When we got away from the scene of the crime a bit he said to me, “Listen Son, I don’t want to arrest you but the law is the law.” Then he gave me a push and said, “Now piss off and get lost.”

“So you missed out on being a martyr again.” I said. “You must have had a charmed life.”

“Yes, I did in some ways, but not all. It helps a lot if you know what to say and what not to say” he said.

I thought there might be another story here, so I said, “What do you mean Alan?”

“Well, I’ll give you an example: Vic Slater and I were doing a paste-up, late one night in town—Adelaide Street actually. I was doing one side and Vic was doing the other and before we knew it a cop car pulled up across the street and a copper crossed the road and accosted me ‘What do you think you’re doing? That’s not allowed.’ he said. And I said, ‘well yes, but I *am* doing it neatly.’ He didn’t know how to reply to that one so he just said, ‘Yeah, well go on, just piss off.’ So I didn’t argue, I made my getaway.”

“So what happened to Vic? Did he get off?”

“No way. You know what a great bush lawyer Vic was. He would have been busy quoting some piece of legislation or some council ordinance or other. The police are not impressed with that sort of thing and the last I saw of him that night as I made myself scarce, was poor old Vic being helped into the back of a police car.”

“So the message is?”

“The police are not interested in matters of law.”

“Yes, people should remember that,” I said as I nodded my head wisely.

Articles

“Hostile whirlwinds swirl above us ...”: The Red Flag Riots and the Tumult of 1919

The Alex Macdonald Memorial Lecture 2019

Raymond Evans

I cannot claim any close, inter-personal connection with Alex Macdonald, the Communist union leader and ironworker whose memory and class contribution we are commemorating here tonight. Yet I was privy to one significant conversation with him that is germane to the substance of this memorial lecture.

This unfolded on another night, also arguably significant to Brisbane’s radical history, when around 80 or so of us young students and workers commandeered the Queen and Albert Street inter-section at peak hour in the cause of anti-conscription during Vietnam Protest Week in March 1966. Twenty-six were arrested during wild melees, considerable police brutality and the successful burning of call-up papers in the middle of the inner-city crossing. Organizer, Jim Beatson, who was roughly arrested with a broken arm, had the slogan STOP VIETNAM CONSCRIPTS emblazoned in red

on his sling. Upon reflection, perhaps that evening might be dubbed The Red Sling Riots.

In any case, later that night, as 50 or 60 of us waited outside the watch-house at North Quay for all the incarcerated to be bailed out, Alex Macdonald came down from Trades Hall and spoke to us with great enthusiasm about what had been accomplished that night. One of his sentences stuck with me so vividly that I afterwards wrote it in my diary. Macdonald told us that “tonight you young people have made the greatest breakthrough for civil liberties in this town for around fifty years”.¹ This sounded most impressive, so I wrote it all down, even though at the time I did not know—in fact, none of us knew—what in the world he meant. For, when it came to an honest and consequential understanding of our collective past, we were all a *tabula rasa*. We knew practically nothing of the historical traditions in which we operated. We

were simply inspired and militant babes in the wood, acting in our own isolated political moment.

But I am sure Macdonald clearly knew, having migrated to Australia and becoming absorbed in working class activism from 1925, when stories of the Great War's home-front struggles would still have been popularly circulating.

Around fifty years earlier than that heady night in 1966, there had been even more spirited demonstrations and wild, riotous moments in Brisbane town over the same issue of anti-conscription. In both 1916 and 1917, anti-conscriptionists had been clashing repeatedly with military recruits and pro-conscriptionists, with police

always firmly in the mix. Many people were carrying guns. At the Domain in lower William Street, a military officer had been shot in one violent encounter, involving many hundreds, fighting with fists and palings. The usually sedate Brisbane School of Arts in Ann Street had hosted Australia's first all-female riot between pacifist and loyalist women; while the Commonwealth Government's draconic suppression of freedom of expression in print and speech had become so acute under the *War Precautions Act* that embryo plans were being laid, both by the trade unions and the Labor Cabinet, to secede forcibly from the Commonwealth.²

And then, of course, 47 years earlier than Macdonald's words, there had been these so-called Red Flag riots



Demonstration against the War Precautions Act, Brisbane Jan 1919 (c/o Undesirable. Captain Zuzenko and the Workers of Australia and the World. Kevin Windle 2012)

... Indeed, on the very same evening as we anti-war activists had gathered disruptively in Albert Street—24 March—around 12,000 maddened Empire loyalists had been rampaging a mere block away in 1919, attacking any suspected Leftist they could get their hands on, before descending upon Bowman House in Edward Street—the premises of the trade union newspaper, the *Daily Standard*—and attacking the building with rocks and gunfire before police and the fire-brigade dispersed them.

On the prior night to this—23 March—exactly where we had waited at North Quay for our watch-house heroes to emerge, around 8,000 well-armed, right-wing loyalists had assembled in a seething mass and then taken off across Victoria Bridge to attack the city's Russian quarter in South Brisbane like an avenging army.

And on the preceding afternoon to that—22 March 1919—several hundred radical marchers, led by Russian revolutionaries, had had the

Russian Society's Headquarters.



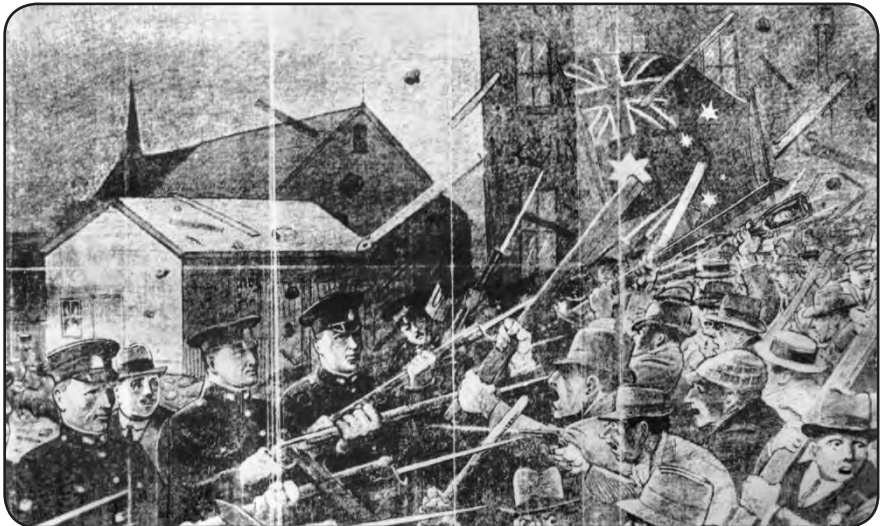
The headquarters of the Russian Association in Merivale-street, South Brisbane, which was the object of the soldiers' attack on Monday night. The picture was taken yesterday morning after the windows and contents of the building had been smashed.

Russian Society's Headquarters. Daily Mail 26th March 1919 (SLQ)

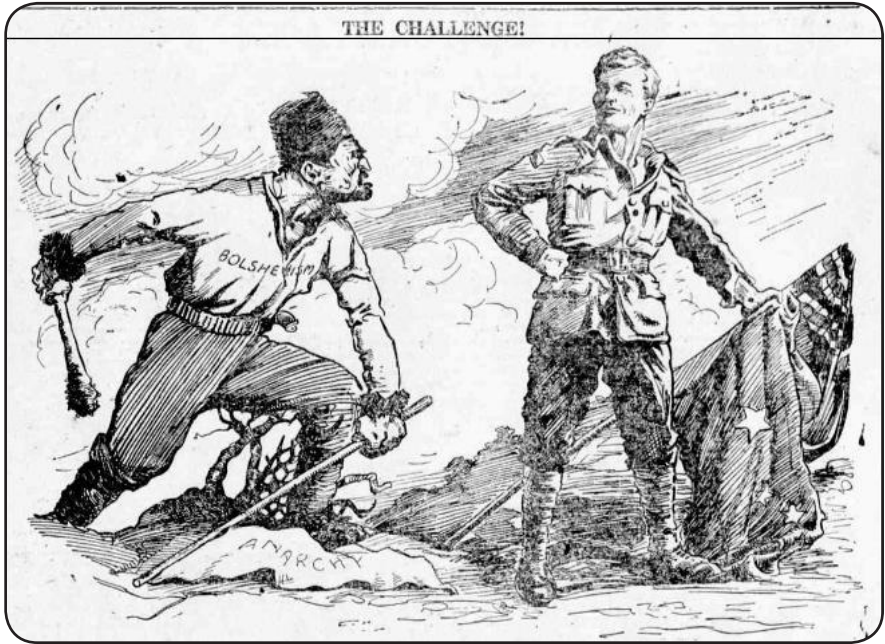
temerity to display prohibited red flags in a small procession, protesting the persistence of the *War Precautions Act* in peace-time; and thus rained down havoc upon their heads from foot and mounted police, and returned soldiers. That night, an IWW-inspired One Big Union meeting was violently attacked, again at North Quay; the large speakers' platform upended and hurled into the river; a Russian who had fronted the afternoon march was stabbed, mauled and almost thrown in too—and then the Russian Hall in Merivale Street was assailed by several hundred veterans. On that first evening of the troubles, the forty to sixty Russians present had successfully defended themselves with revolvers and dispersed the soldiers.³

Incidentally, on that same afternoon in 1966 (22 March), anti-war and anti-conscription activists had descended on the United States Consulate here, marching, singing and chanting “Hey, Hey LBJ! How many kids have you killed today?”—only to be attacked yet again by the Queensland constabulary (although this time un-mounted).⁴

So we young people were both conscious activists and unconscious, blissfully naïve historical actors. I had never heard of the Red Flag riots back then—and when we had been lectured briefly on the conscription struggles in my History class at the University of Queensland, we were told that the campaigns had proceeded, as befitting a sedate Australia—or the ‘Quiet Continent’ as it was then called⁵—



Red Flag Riots. (SLQ)



Returned Soldier - "This is Australia, and here is it's flag. That one you wave at your peril" The Challenge Daily Mail 26th March 1919 (SLQ)

without the slightest hint of violence. It all demonstrates the importance of historical capital in transforming consciousness, and in the 1960's we still had such a long way to go.

The next occasion that I had a brief and quite oblivious brush with the zeitgeist of these riots occurred on my wedding day in 1968. It was an elaborate affair with many guests; and one of these was the great-uncle of my new wife, Kay Saunders—a certain Mr Hubert Sizer. He was having a splendid time at the reception: I have photos of him wearing the pink feather boa of one of the female guests. Speeches were given

and after I had delivered mine, a young Jewish woman named Marta Grech, whose wonderful mother had survived the Nazi concentration camps, rose spontaneously and began singing the Red Flag anthem; and those of us of Leftist leanings joined lustily in. Mr Sizer's face transformed suddenly from tipsy delight to a purplish apoplexy as he rose and stormed out of the reception, never to re-appear in our lives again.

Once more, I had no idea why this had happened until almost a decade later when I arrived, as a researcher, at the 1919 packages of official

correspondence for the Premier's and Home Secretary's Departments at the Queensland State Archives—and unexpectedly discovered these enormous bundles of documentation on the debacle in Merivale Street and elsewhere. For here, I again came across Corporal Hubert Sizer, our erstwhile wedding guest ... A stirring platform speaker, it appeared: a pro-conscriptionist and anti-Bolshevik crusader—one of the first Queenslanders to land at Anzac Cove. Sizer had entered Parliament in the 1918 State election as a soldier candidate for the Returned Soldiers and Patriots National League, a huge right-wing organization that, for a time, eclipsed the RSL in size and was, if anything, more reactionary, militant and xenophobic than the latter organization. Sizer had opened the second pro-conscription campaign in Queensland and had entered parliament wondering if he was in “a British or alien” institution. “The doctrines of Bolshevism” were behind everything that was bad in the State, he believed.⁶

So, even though Sizer was only a bit player in the Red Flag drama, here suddenly was this provenance of the riots cheek-by-jowl, as it were, with my new family—the formerly unknown past now crowding in on the intimate present. This is something of what the historian, Jack Hexter calls “the second record”—that “personal and individual experience” that an author brings to an understanding

of the otherwise “foreignness of the past”; and that draws a person studying history into a more obsessive pursuit of one particular subject area or set of events.⁷

And so it was for me. In my doctoral thesis of 1980, these tumultuous days provided the home-front coda to the Great War. In the volume, *Loyalty and Disloyalty* in 1987, the riots fleshed out a chapter called “We'll Keep the Red Flag *from* Flying Here” and the following year the more well-known volume, *The Red Flag Riots. A Study of Intolerance* was published, with the analysis upgraded and intensified by more research at the Commonwealth Archives and the British Public Records Office. I came back to worry it again from various angles with articles and chapters on the returned soldiers, the Russians, the Anglo-radicals and so on in published pieces with such names as “Some Furious Outbursts of Riot”, “Agitation, Ceaseless Agitation”, “Social Passion”, “Tempest Tossed” and “A Bad Time for Balalaikas”. In 2004, I dealt locationally with the main Merivale Street riot in the book, *Radical Brisbane* and then in a wider context in 2007 with my general study, *A History of Queensland*. In short, in around eight books and three journals I teased out aspects of these wild events, looking at them from most conceivable positions.⁸

There is, however, always more to say. Locally, both Jeff Rickert with

his excellent study of Ernie Lane, *The Conscientious Communist* and Mark Cryle, in some arresting writings on the Queensland war ethos, have added considerably to our understanding of the tensions, passions and uncertainties in the Anglo-Leftist organizations.⁹ Kevin Windle, in a very fine biography of the principal Russian leader, Alexander Mikhailovich Zuzenko, entitled *Undesirable. Captain Zuzenko and the Workers of Australia and the World*, displays all the fascinating primary research he uncovered, working in the archives of the Third International Comintern in Russia—particularly in relation to Australia and especially Queensland. All of this new investigation reveals that, while most of the major outlines and causes of the disturbances remain largely as I had delineated them, both the Russians’ organizations and the local Anglo trade unionists, radicals and revolutionaries—both Bolshevik and Anarchist—were more disparate, unstable and internally disaffected than first considered. Furthermore, Windle posits that Zuzenko—and perhaps other local Russians—may have harboured extensive hopes that their small protest showings could become a spark to ignite some sort of working class uprising in Brisbane that might have then spread across Australia and out over the rest of the British Empire. We do know, at least, that such ambitious thoughts were in Zuzenko’s mind—however misguided they may

now seem—in documents he produced for the Comintern several years later.¹⁰

So, indeed, the plot thickens. And it still remains a rather arresting thought that this small centre of Brisbane, basically a rural supply and branch office town, might have been considered a harbinger and bellwether place to institute such momentous change. For when I first came upon these riots in the 1970’s, everyone was basically operating within a paradigm of placidity and inconsequence when it came to historically envisioning Brisbane—if it was ever to be envisioned historically by anyone at all. It basically never had much of consequence to do in a



Alexander Zuzenko c1920. (c/o *Undesirable. Captain Zuzenko and the Workers of Australia and the World*. Kevin Windle 2012)

wider Australian context where we, as students, were not encouraged to think about the real relationships between war and society, or of class, ethnic and race relations, or of such State impositions as surveillance, censorship and the suppressive manipulation of human rights, or really anything of value about social conflict, violence or revolution. And the Red Flag Riots did make you think seriously of all these things.

I had been part of a trusting generation who initially accepted an antipodean and local past devoid of discord and passion—peaceful settlement and social harmony, hosting inexorable and beneficial progress. Class relations, let alone class conflicts, were never mentioned. Neither were adversarial ideological positions or deep-seated social inequalities—no frontier violence, no ethnic struggles, no gender antipathies, no profound patterns of discrimination and privilege. A land, in short, where nothing problematical happens—but where in actuality the unstated ideologies of liberalism, functionalism, pragmatism and denialism were always at work—courtesy of the Cold War and western capitalism—combining to present a relatively uncontested vision of a nation, a state, a city that was homogeneous, practical, consensual and egalitarian.

The Red Flag Riots do not fit into any of this—and neither did, of course, the

Vietnam War or the Bjelke Petersen years, when all this radical history was first being investigated and re-conceived. But perhaps there was a counter and largely hidden history here to which it all did conform—that made it all seem perfectly sensible—a completely understandable part of a history of tumult and struggle that was both class and ethnically based. It took a long time, lots of hard-grafting empirical research and stubborn counter-thinking to see it. But over many years of work, it became clear that there were many peaks of conflict and activist mobilization by Right and Left wing forces at play in this supposedly sleepy sheep and cattle town on its meandering river.

In fact one can plot, over a thirty-year period preceding 1919 for Brisbane alone, at least fifteen significant peaks of conflict, leading into these riots. Let me quickly enumerate some of the highlights:

- 1888: The worst anti-Chinese rioting on the Eastern seaboard with police standing off and letting it all unfold
- 1889: First successful example of international working class action, initiated by Brisbane Wharfies, raising crucial funds to win the London Dockers strike—the first, major industrial victory in Britain, resulting in the celebratory writing of the Red Flag anthem.
- 1890: The first State Socialist platform promoted for a parliamenta-

- ry party in the West and the first celebration of May Day on 1 May.
- 1890–94: a long series of massive strikes—the Jondaryan wool strike, won on Brisbane docks; the inter-colonial Maritime strike, lost on Brisbane docks. Brisbane then the centre of anti-strike mobilization, using police, special constables, military, strike-breakers and draconian prison sentences against the colony-wide Shearers Strikes of 1892 and 1894: Much violence and a place coming close to civil war.
 - 1892–1902: Long series of unemployment mobilizations and demonstrations during the Great 1890’s Depression and the Federation Drought.
 - 1899–1902: Jingo disturbances and clashes connected with the Boer War when, according to the Brisbane Worker, “a howling rabble ... egged on ... by the brag-gart [Conservative] press” (much like in 1919) attacked pro-Boer or anti-war opponents.¹¹
 - 1899: The only serious rioting in Australia during the Federation campaigns with dozens assaulted and injured, including Australia’s first future Prime Minister, Edmund Barton.
 - 1899: the elevation of the first Labour government in the world—albeit short-lived.
 - 1900: major sectarian rioting, as thousands of irate Irish Australian Catholics attacked assembled members of the Anglo-Protestant establishment—again dozens injured and a heavy police suppression.
 - 1911: Brisbane again central to anti-strike mobilizations against the massively destructive sugar strike to the north—another violent time of “extreme lawlessness” (in the words of the Governor), clashes, riots and incendiarism.¹²
 - 1912: The Brisbane General Strike involving 42 unions—called “the first simultaneous strike in the world” and met with massive State and employer repression using mounted police, special constables, batons, clubs and sabres. The formation of Australia’s first secret army of Boer War veterans to suppress the strikers (similar again to 1919) named the Legion of Frontiersmen. Mass mayhem and once more scores of injuries, including at least 2 deaths; strikers forcibly closing down business premises and employing sabotage tactics along tram-lines using rocks, fog signals, firearms, dynamite and gelignite—and around 500 arrests.¹³
 - 1913–14: Prolonged civil liberties struggle using inventive protest techniques of the British Suffragettes and the American IWW movement to win the right for Sunday political forums—Thousands attend to hear the agitators and watch then being arrested. Po-

litical hunger strikes—the first in Australia—follow.

- 1914–17: sporadic clashes with Germans, pacifists, socialists and anarchists, following war's outbreak; leading into the heightened combative clashes of both the 1916 and 1917 conscription campaigns.

So when we consider such a packed and eventful chronology as this across a relatively short and local timespan, we can immediately see that the Red Flag Riots themselves are no longer so uniquely abrasive and extraordinary. Indeed, one might even suggest that, given this expression of Brisbane as an emphatically unstable repository of raw capitalist exploitation and control on the one hand and of spirited working class, trade union and radical, socialist opposition on the other, the 1919 riots begin to appear as entirely normative. And, further, given this then-known history of dramatic tumult, that Zuzenko's prognosis, based upon his Queensland experiences and knowledge, that

“... the first of all the Anglo-Saxon countries to declare itself a true Workers' Republic will be Australia”—though unduly optimistic to say the least—is, nevertheless, completely understandable. There is certainly much evidence for believing that Brisbane in this era had become “the focal point for radical action in Australia”

by both Left and Right-wing forces.¹⁴

As well as this temporal context, one can further posit a confluence of militant potential and social unease by locating the disturbances within their more immediate spatial and structural matrix. For the terrible novelty of the Great War had created no energized sense of national birth or unification, but rather deep social fissures and a process of dismemberment along class, ethnic, racial, gendered, generational, political, cultural and ideological lines. Following upon the great General Strike of 1917, spreading into Queensland and Victoria from New South Wales, involving over 100 000 workers and taking on clearly insurrectionary aspects as it spread, war's end would also usher in the peak strike wave in Australia's history. In 1919, there were over 150 disputes in Queensland alone, with 770 000 workdays lost.¹⁵

Understandably enough, the vast majority of these were economic in motive due to dire socio-economic disparities and vast inequalities of wealth. Australia was basically a plutocracy, pretending to be egalitarian, for at any point the 5% ruling elite commanded above 70% of the wealth. But the war had suddenly brought on the full catastrophe, making the problems both dramatically worse and more glaringly apparent, with acutely added privations and economic stagnation. There was unprecedented

unemployment (up to 18% of even union labourers), dramatic shortages and rocketing inflation (rising to 44% in Queensland, 1914-16—the highest in Australia) and the plummeting purchasing power of wages (frozen at \$5.30 per week for men and \$2.70 for women).¹⁶

Yet the rapid onset of such conditions due to war engrossment also contained seeds of political discontent, such as the first, tumultuous political strike in Australia over the botched, serial deportation of North Queensland agitator, Paul Freeman (who would later return here from Russia as a Comintern emissary);¹⁷ as well as the explosive Townsville meat strikes of 1918-19, largely grass-roots and IWW-inspired, that adopted—as in NSW in 1917—an insurrectionary direction after panicking police fired directly into a marching throng of 1 000, lustily singing The Red Flag anthem as they advanced on the Townsville lock-up to release imprisoned strike leaders. Between eight and sixteen protesters were shot. Strikers then raided gunshops and armed themselves, while a train carrying 200 police reinforcements north was intercepted by railway workers at Charters Towers and later almost derailed. For a time, the strikers seized the town.¹⁸

Such disputes, among numerous others across Australia, provide a sense of the volatile, incendiary climate at war's

end. As industrial sociologist, Malcolm Waters has remarked:

... as the war dragged on and its economic effects began to bite, and as workers became increasingly aware that employers were using patriotic appeals to resist their claims for representative rights and improvement in conditions, severe industrial conflict emerged ... [Indeed] much of the industrial action ... resulted from grass-roots initiatives and was undertaken in direct contravention of the intention of union leaders.¹⁹

Simultaneously, right-wing forces grew more rampant. Between late 1918 and 1922, there were at least twenty-five serious urban riot events across Australia, involving returned soldiers, sometimes lasting for days, creating many casualties and sometimes deaths, and usually directed at marginalized groups or Leftist targets. With the Armistice, there were attacks on anti-conscriptionists in Toowoomba and pacifists in Maryborough and Bundaberg. There was a spate of state-wide 'Kaiser-burning' demonstrations, whipping up anti-German hatred, as well as arson attacks on Lutheran churches in those same three centres, as the Commonwealth prepared to deport over 6 000 of these 'enemy aliens', being held in internment camps. The Trades Hall in Rockhampton was raided and seized by returning veterans

and Military Intelligence agents hauled down the huge Red Flag over the Brisbane Trades Hall after soldiers had demonstrated there. For, following Prime Minister Hughes' ban on the public display of the flag in September 1918, there had been a spate of attacks on homes and institutions flying the emblem.²⁰

In both Townsville and Ayr, several nights of severe rioting erupted when hundreds and sometimes thousands of Empire loyalists, led by returnees, attacked trade unionists and radicals for singing the Red Flag anthem or waving red pocket-handkerchiefs. At Dalby, a union organizer was almost tarred and feathered for publicly declaring himself 'a rebel', before being driven from the town. Subsequently, groups of Left militants were also expelled from Proserpine and Charleville in agitations of intimidation, rioting and personal violence, fomented by the RSL.²¹

It had been at Hughenden in central Queensland in late 1918 that the mass violence had started. Here, a small strike by female bar-workers over withheld back pay had spiraled into an immense struggle, fomented by employers and government agents against trade union males supporting the striking women. There were six days of protracted mob assaults and weeks of further conflict, where scores were injured and many expelled. One hotel employee wrote of how dozens of men had been "kicked nearly to death"

as loyalist "bloodhounds, half drunk with grog supplied by the squatters and publicans ... hunted in packs of 20 to 30 in search of unionists from house to house." There was next to no police intervention.²²

Yet, when we examine the causative class and institutional pattern of what happened at Hughenden and elsewhere, we can clearly discern the prototype for the Brisbane riots of March 1919. That is, (to quote an earlier me):

"A precise pattern of loyalist coordination, orchestrated by elite citizens, fuelled by the anger of carefully manipulated returned soldiers and led by headstrong Military Intelligence agents and officials of the RSL ... in a military/civilian coordination of class activism, fuelled by anti-radical hysteria and given a State-wide projection."²³

In the principal Merivale Street riot of 23 March, the many thousands of inflamed loyalists, noted the *Brisbane Worker*, rapidly became a volatile, highly mobile "rabble", motivated by white-hot xenophobia and a paranoid anti-Communism. They were equipped with "bricks, bottles, batons, saplings, fence palings ... pronged with ominous ragged nails, revolvers, knives and beer". They contested hundreds of foot police, attempting to protect the Russian Hall, armed with rifles and

fixed bayonets as well as a squad of mounted men, all of whom—as well as their horses—were seriously injured by “bullets, blue metal, bottles, hardwood and pieces of iron”. The *Worker* called the clash “a spectacle of wildest chaos” and the *Daily Standard*: “one of the maddest and most disgraceful scenes ever witnessed in any part of Australia”. The conservative press—the *Brisbane Courier* and the *Daily Mail* that had both orchestrated and sooled on the mayhem—rather like Alan Jones and the Cronulla riots—found the Diggers’ “dinkum stouch” most inspiring—“dramatic and thrilling ... as magnificent as it was altogether spontaneous”.²⁴

Overall scores were injured and the Russian community terrorized en masse for being Russian, whether they were radical or otherwise, in what they described as a “formal pogrom”. Loyalists attacked and wrecked their shops and small businesses and “thrashed” them on the streets. They were dismissed wholesale from employment and evicted from rented premises. The wrecked Russian Club was closed down and their newspaper suppressed. Fifteen radicals were imprisoned for six months and one fined; eleven Russian leaders were deported. Loyalist rioters were hardly touched.²⁵

When we redirect our gaze from the no doubt diverting details of Red Flag street action, however, we can begin

to discern the fuller pattern of right-wing mobilization that lay behind the events, which were anything but “spontaneous”. This extended down from the Governor General’s Office, that sequestered the secret surveillance body, the Special Intelligence Bureau, run by his private secretary, with its sights set mainly on Queensland activists. Equally too, it spiraled out from the Prime Minister’s Office that from 1917 recruited right-wing returned military officers into the newly formed Commonwealth Police, operating as an entirely “anti-Queensland” organization. It had also given a green light (albeit hidden under a bushel) to the formation of a loyalist vigilante body, the Australian Defensive League, modeled directly upon a huge and extreme United States formation, the American Protective League, created officially to suppress disloyalty there with spying, intimidation, raids, arrests and attempted lynchings.²⁶

Thirdly, the Defence Department utilized Military Intelligence and Military Censorship to spy upon, plant agent provocateurs among and generally harass dissidents, suppressing their propaganda. The lists of “dangerous agitators” they drew up with the help of local loyalty leagues were clogged with Queenslanders. These Federal bodies, in turn, were augmented by the State Police Commissioner, an ex-Native Police officer who had subdued the Kalkadoons and was the most avid in Australia in the recruitment

of vigilantes; as well as certain police magistrates and the editors of the conservative press.

The latter gave support to the State Parliamentary Opposition, the National Democratic Council, organized on a single, militant plank of anti-Bolshevism; as well as the formation of a private United Loyalist Executive, a massive populist conglomeration of over 70 000 members—ultra-patriots, anglophiles, royalists and anti-Socialists. This soon renamed itself the King and Empire Alliance, led by the President of the local British Medical Association and the Queensland Club—the grazier's son, Dr Ernest Sandford-Jackson. And using as their attack dogs, the largely ex-soldier membership of the Returned Soldiers and Citizens Political Federation and the Returned Sailors and Soldiers Imperial League, later known as the RSL, with a large and growing number of men, trained and practiced in military violence. All these groups were approaching their organisational apogee in the months and weeks before the Red Flag outbreak.²⁷

So, an eager and muscular band of pro-British, pro-Imperial loyalism “ran like a spinal chord through a vertebral column of official institutions and private organizations, each one single-mindedly dedicated to the eradication of the radical and alien influences they believed were surrounding them”.²⁸ Thus, the impossible disparities of

power are revealed between an active, militant Left in Brisbane and the mobilized, monumental Right. The ethnically marginalized membership of the Union of Russian Workers, isolated by an acute local xenophobia, and the comparatively miniscule showings of the One Big Union Propaganda League, the remnants of the proscribed IWW, were no match for their dedicated opponents.

At their peak, these proto-revolutionary fragments could possibly call upon support from around 1 000 sympathizers at best—and these, a heterogeneous scattering of socialists, pacifists, unionists, anarchists and Bolsheviks, who did not hold together either ideologically or organizationally: “Dotted ... small and fissiparous groups” as Windle calls them.²⁹ Ranged against them were the concentrated military and police forces of the Commonwealth and State, the grand loyalist phalanxes, the persuasive power of a relentless mainstream press and the fractious veterans' associations, trained in the techniques of frontline warfare, who would soon coalesce into a new secret army—the Army to Fight Bolshevism. It was rather like some feisty Leftist ant contesting a hungry Reactionary anteater.

Furthermore, the labour movement itself was fragmenting. Its predominant central and right-wing sectors—the large Australian Workers Union, the various conservative craft unions,

the significant body of Catholic workers, heavily influenced by anti-revolutionary priests and well as the Parliamentary Party, were all pulling determinedly away from the far Left fractions, as alliances uneasily forged to fight off conscription collapsed. As Rickert's work has shown, they were already threadbare by the second conscription campaign.³⁰ So when the axe fell, it was upon the necks of old Wobblies and new Bolsheviks that it came down, with the Labor government providing its police, courts and prisons to facilitate this; and there were very few left—or on the Left—to defend them.

The attitude of the assailed Russians towards other Australian workers was ambivalent and discrepant. Based on his Queensland experiences, Zuzenko would later claim Australia was “the first of democracies” where worker activism could decisively influence “the course of events in England and speed the progress of revolution there”. Both Vladimir Lenin and John Reed, author of *Ten Days That Shook the World*, were impressed by his prognosis. Reed saw Australia as “a strategic colonial country, with a powerful fighting mass of workers, who have some experience of street fighting and are revolutionary in their instincts”.³¹

Yet, in more sober and realistic moments, Queensland's Russians had berated the timidity and apathy of Anglo-Australians, contrasting their

lack of revolutionary zeal unfavorably with their own passionate commitment towards the overthrow of capitalism. Fedor Sergeev (‘Big Tom’ or ‘Artem’), eventually a member of the Bolshevik Central Committee that planned the Russian Revolution, was the first to coin the sardonic term, “The Lucky Country”, due to Australia's widespread belief that it had somehow already transcended wage slavery and class struggle easily and painlessly. Even during Brisbane's General Strike, he noted the comparative “sheepishness and tameness” of the strikers, adding that in Russia “we are all equally as well prepared and armed as the Police ... We make more noise [here] than 10 000 Englishmen.” As the Red Flag march began, Herman Bykov, who carried one of the large emblems beside the towering Zuzenko, noticed the “astonished looks” on the faces of Australian demonstrators as the “free and unfettered” passion of the Russians contrasted with their own “unfeeling phlegmatic souls”. Zuzenko himself would later typify Queensland workers as being lowly educated, “trained by capitalism to be no more than useful slaves ... reading a few lines in the sporting papers.” Just before the Red Flag disturbances began, he had berated local trade unionists in the newspaper, *Knowledge and Unity*:

You have not been strong and alert in the past, comrades of ours. You have sat idle while oppression has stalked this

sunny continent ... Comrades have been goaled—you have passed resolutions. Militant members have been deported. You have read the news uninterestedly and turned to the sporting page.³²

Overall, throughout the struggle, it was the revolutionary Russian workers who made the running. As a consequence, due to the xenophobic and reactionary extremism of the loyalist mass and the contrivances of the State apparatus, they had then been put on the run. These Russians were basically refugees, many being part of a political diaspora of escape from Czarist oppression, with Queensland as their final destination. Like political and religious refugees today, they were isolated and stereotyped by xenophobic hatred for being Russian, whatever their political affiliations (much as the local Germans then were). They were scapegoated, physically attacked, persecuted and terrorized by a combination of public, institutional and private intolerance. Their story merges today with asylum seekers trapped on tropical island gulags and other Muslims and Africans harassed by racism in Australia.

The balance of the forces at play here may be well summarized in a particular incident during the trials of Red Flag protesters at the Brisbane Magistrates Court—as the diminutive Herman Bykov attempted in his halting, broken

English to explain himself and his presence there. He stated:

I am not a criminal but merely a political prisoner of Australian capitalists. I was stabbed and beaten with sticks by ... ignorant and probably drunken soldiers who do not understand what Bolshevism really is. Bolshevism is the section of Socialism which stands for revolutionary socialization of all means of production for the benefit of the producers. I spent seven years in the Czar's dungeons and in exile in Siberia. I was glad to come in prison again for the final victory of the Red Flag. I believe the time will come, and the Socialists and workers of Australia will understand why I and my comrades are fighting for the realization of our Socialistic ideals.

Bykov's appeal, however, was punctuated and overwhelmed by gales of derisive laughter from the packed Brisbane courtroom. He was met by the condescension of the presiding magistrate (who, incidentally, had been bayoneted in the groin in the Merivale Street debacle) and the scorn of the conservative press, depicting him as a dangerous buffoon who needed "to be got rid of". Bykov was imprisoned in Boggo Road and then in Darlinghurst Military Detention Centre, declaring a hunger strike before being deported

from Australia. He later became a teacher in Russia and wrote a history of the Communist movement.³³

As the Red Flag protesters had set out on their fateful route along Turbot Street on Sunday, 22 March 1919, their most glorious moment had been when Zuzenko and Bykov, at the head of the procession, had revealed their billowing red flags, “about the size”, recalled one observer, “of a double-bed quilt” on their eight foot poles. As the flags were unfurled, the Russians had set up a ragged chorus of the *Varshavianka* that in translation reads:

*Hostile whirlwinds swirl above
us.
O'erwhelming forces of
darkness assail.
Still in the fight see advancing
before us
Red Flag of liberty that yet
shall prevail.*³⁴

But that ebullient spectacle—in this place and time—would remain a brief and ephemeral one. More apposite historically is Bykov’s defiant and mocked courtroom moment, alerting us to the gross imbalance of forces at play in Queensland then; of the grim persistence of revolutionary consciousness against overwhelming odds; and, from where we presently stand, the weary accuracy of the old maxim that the more things change here, the more they remain stubbornly the same.

Notes

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- 4 R. Evans, Diary Entry, 23 March 1966.
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- 6 Evans, *Red Flag Riots*, pp. 35, 48, 50.
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 - 10 K. Windle, *Undesirable. Captain Zuzenko and the Workers of Australia and the World*, Melbourne, Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2012.
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 - 12 R. Evans, “Before the War”, Stories from the Archives, Queensland State Archives, 11 September 2014; *A History of Queensland*, pp. 149–50.
 - 13 R. Evans, “Baton Friday 1912” in *Radical Brisbane*, pp. 141–49
 - 14 Windle, *Undesirable*, pp. xxi, 36, 98–99, 103
 - 15 R. Bollard, *In the Shadow of Gallipoli. The Hidden History of Australia in World War One*, Sydney, NewSouth Publishing, 2013; Evans, *Red Flag Riots*, p. 202
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 - 27 Evans, *Red Flag Riots*, pp. 41–72, 186–87
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 - 30 J. Rickertt, *Conscientious Communist*, pp. 154–74; “Sewell v Riordan and the Fracturing of the First World War Anti-Conscription Movement in Queensland”, *The Queensland Journal of Labour History*, no 23, Sept 2016, pp. 56–70
 - 31 Windle, *Undesirable*, pp. 99, 103
 - 32 *ibid.*, pp. 16–19, 52, 59, 69
 - 33 Evans, *Red Flag Riots*, pp. 159–60
 - 34 Windle, *Undesirable*, pp. 62, 75, 77

Alex Macdonald.

1910-1969

Dean Wharton, BLHA Executive



The Brisbane Labour History Association has always held Alex Macdonald (1910–1969) in high regard. Throughout his career he appears to have been a more than capable trade union full time activist involved in collective bargaining and the representation of members. More than this, his Communist Party background led him to extend the role of the positions he held to support causes that were, at the time, outside the traditional trade union role; causes such as indigenous rights, gender equality, student activism and the peace movement. His considerable organisational ability was married to a personable character that allowed

him influence over the organised Left when another person, particularly one with his political background, may have struggled to do so. He retained his role at the heart of labour politics in Queensland despite the attacks on the CPA that occurred throughout this period and from all sides. We have commemorated his role in industrial relations and progressive social movements within Queensland with an annual lecture since 2009. In 1994 we held a public forum on his life to mark the 25th anniversary of his passing¹. With this article we commemorate the 50th anniversary.

Alex Macdonald was an activist in the Queensland labour movement from the mid-1930s. He was a member of the Communist Party of Australia; a Queensland state committee member from 1936; a Central Committee member from 1939. From 1943 to 1951 he was the Secretary of the Queensland branch of the Federated Ironworkers Association (FIA); in 1949 he joined the ACTU national executive. He became the Queensland Trades and Labour

Council Secretary in Brisbane in 1952. He was heavily involved in the major industrial disputes affecting Queensland from the 1940s to the 1960s.

Alex died just over 50 years ago, during

the early hours of Monday 18th August 1969. He was 59. The deterioration in his health was unexpected and sudden; earlier that weekend he had dictated notes in preparation for a week at work as Secretary of the Queensland TLC.²

BLHA proudly brings to Brisbane
The Inaugural Alex Macdonald Memorial Lecture

To be presented by

Professor Margaret Levi

Joint Professor of Politics, United States Study Centre, Sydney University
Bacharach Professor of International Studies, University of Washington
Former Harry Bridges Chair in the Harry Bridges Centre for Labor Studies
(HBCLS), UW



Professor Margaret Levi

For full CV, see <http://faculty.washington.edu/mlevi/>

With introductory talks by: Manfred Cross, Alan Anderson, Hughie Hamilton
Chaired by **Ron Monaghan (QCU General Secretary)**

Alex Macdonald (1910 – 1969) was many things: ironworker, trade union official, Communist, Secretary of T.L.C., negotiator, promoter of youth education and employment, historian, pacifist...To commemorate this remarkable man, the BLHA will hold an annual lecture in his honour.

Thursday 14 May 2009, 6.00pm for 6.30pm, **William Gallagher Auditorium**,
QCU, 16 Peel Street

Enquiries: Greg Mallory: 0407 692 377 gmallory@vtown.com.au.

Inaugural BLHA Alex Macdonald Annual Lecture, May 2009

In a few weeks he expected to attend the ACTU conference at which his friend and colleague, Bob Hawke, was campaigning to be elected President. Hawke visited the TLC in the days before his victory on September 3rd and remarked, “He (Alex) was unquestionably a man who was motivated by a basic determination to do all in his power to improve the lot of the under privileged in this country”.³ Hawke subsequently maintained that his victory was always over-shadowed by the loss of his friend.^{4 5}

Jack Egerton, TLC President and ALP stalwart, worked with Alex for 27 years, “he was jealous of the trade union image and never subscribed to any manoeuvres likely to react against the good name, the high standing and integrity of our movement. Throughout his life (he) spoke well of people, even political and industrial opponents.”^{6 7}

Bill Thieme was industrial correspondent of The Courier Mail. Alex’s relationship with Bill and his newspaper was often acrimonious.⁸ In a letter of condolence to Alex’s widow Molly, Bill wrote, “In all the years of my association with the great industrial movement I found no-one to whom I felt myself more closely drawn nor more deserving of my deepest respect than Alex Macdonald..he was a good man in every sense of the word.”⁹

The Australian Workers Union (AWU) were unaffiliated to the TLC in 1969

but said Alex “was the brains and guiding hand (of the TLC), particularly in matters affecting its approach to the industrial well-being of the workers throughout the state, their wives and families.”¹⁰

Alex was born in Greenock, Scotland, in 1910. His father, a carpenter in the shipbuilding industry, served on the management committee of the Greenock Central Co-operative Society and it was through this socialist organisation that the family were able to obtain housing. At the end of the First World War Glasgow was known



Alex and Molly Macdonald. Boat trip. 1939 (Alex Macdonald family collection)



Alex Macdonald with Ho Chi Minh, North Vietnam 1964 (Alex Macdonald family collection)

as ‘Red Clydeside’ and alongside other cities like Liverpool was filled with the revolutionary fervour that was widespread throughout the world. Greenock may have been affected by events in nearby Glasgow, or Alex may have been exposed to these ideas through the family’s involvement in the Co-op movement.

The revolutionary situation as it was came to naught; a few years later, 15 years of age, without work and with family problems, he became the second of four siblings to leave for Australia.

Alex signed up for a place on the Dreadnought Scheme that saw him in Australia in 1925. During the voyage over he was stranded for several months in South Africa due to a worldwide Seaman’s Strike; he played an active minor role on the side of the strikers. The Dreadnought

Scheme was an ill-thought out plan to use finance earmarked for a battleship to train young British immigrants in agricultural techniques in Australia. Cecily Cameron writes extensively on the scheme in her unfinished biography of Alex¹¹. Alex was trained in Scheyville, west of Sydney for three months, which led to nothing permanent.

He then spent several years travelling throughout Australia looking for work. By the end of the 1920s he was in Perth and considered returning to Scotland. Although he would not see his son again, Alex’s father judged that the economic situation in Scotland was so severe that Alex was better off staying in Australia, “even though it would have broken Grandfather’s heart for him not to go back.”¹² Alex moved back to the Eastern states. “I remember one time I had a map of New South Wales out and I was just amazed that Dad knew almost every town. I think he had a bike at one stage...looking for work during the depression...he remembered that after the dances, the Saturday night dance in the village in the country hall, when they put the scraps of food out in the bins, afterwards they would go and raid the bins, looking for food”¹³

When Kylie Tennant wrote her novel ‘The Battlers’ in 1941 about the travellers during the depression years, she talked of their ‘talent for survival’. Having lived among them she grew to understand their comradeship, their

bonds and ties, essential beliefs also in the labour movement. The characters of Burning Angus and The Dogger organising a trade union for the shearers in opposition to the AWU¹⁴, ‘who hobnobbed with the bosses and drove round in a big car’¹⁵ were probably a synthesis of real people she met on the road. Burning Angus is a fair-haired Scotsman, looking for work cycling around New South Wales, organising while he can. The character could have been based on Alex; if the character wasn’t so obviously a Trot.

Alex was in Queensland by 1932. In Mackay he witnessed the stand-off between the Unemployed Workers Movement (UWM) organised locally by Ted Roach, the later CPA WWF official.¹⁶ Later that year or early in 1933,¹⁷ Alex moved to Brisbane and joined the CPA. Mick Healy pointed out their shared background, “Alex Macdonald was one of the leaders at the Crystal Palace. He was Secretary of the Brisbane Trades and Labour Council after me. We got our early experiences, our convictions, on the track. Very few of the Unemployed leaders had any background of militancy. It was life itself.”¹⁸

By 1936 Alex was living in Berry Street with Claude Jones, Jim Slater (father of Vic Slater) and Jack Henry; all of them were by this time on the State Committee of the CPA. It was this committee that in 1937 defended Fred Paterson and his tactic of working

alongside the left-wing of the ALP, in the face of CPA Central Committee censorship.¹⁹

In 1939 Alex joined that Sydney based Central Committee of the CPA. He also married Molly Neild, an active member of the party and future key figure in the Union of Australian Women (UAW).²⁰ They honeymooned for one week in Scarborough. Molly had grown up alongside her first cousin, Jack Lindsay, author of *The Blood Vote*; his father was Norman Lindsay.

Alex obtained a position as an ironworker at Evans Deakin Shipyards at Kangaroo Point and joined the Federated Ironworkers Association of Australia (FIA). Within two years he was elected Queensland branch secretary.

Following the end of the Second World War the animosity between the ALP and the CPA reached new heights. Whilst the CPA was Marxist and revolutionary, the ALP had always been conservative and reformist. Although it had strongly supported the White Australia Policy and the arbitration system to benefit white male workers, for ideological and electoral purposes the ALP had never seen itself in terms of class. “We have been told that we have come into this House to represent a class. Well that may be, but that class is the class of all classes. It is a class which is as wide as humanity.”²¹ The ALP saw the CPA as atheistic and foreign, it was anti-

capitalist. The CPA were not willing to restrict the operations of the trade unions it controlled to the industrial arena, nor to always rely on arbitration to obtain 'fair' results. In 1938 the ALP in Queensland had implemented the Traffic Act, a proviso of which allowed for the introduction of a state of emergency by the Queensland Government at will. Much of the legal infrastructure that fought the CPA and the wider labour movement for the next half century was established, and often utilised, by the ALP.

During the 14-week long 1946 Meat Workers Strike in which Alex was involved the ALP endorsed the creation of the anti-communist Industrial Groups based on the Catholic Social Studies 'Movement' of BA Santamaria and white-collar unions allied to the AWU; one of the earliest targets of the 'Groupers' was Alex's CPA controlled FIA.

The 1948 Queensland Railway Strike was based on genuine wage injustice but became an anti-communist crusade. The appointment of Alex as the Secretary of the Strike Committee was regarded as 'the real turning point in the direction and leadership of the strike' according to comrade Doug Olive.²² It was during this strike that Fred Paterson was attacked by a Special Branch officer, a beating he suffered the consequences of for the rest of his life. The actions of the Queensland Government pitted the ALP against

the wider labour movement to the extent that by 1949 the ALP refused to attend that year's Labour Day march. Labour Day in 1950 saw the ALP using the police to enforce a ban on TLC affiliated trade unions from marching; unions run by the Groupers were not excluded.²³

The Federated Ironworkers Association had been under the control of the CPA since 1936 with the election of Ernie Thornton to the national leadership²⁴, but The Groupers were successfully using the courts to challenge the validity of elections of CPA officials and increasing their anti-communist strength within the union. The writing was perhaps on the wall regarding Alex's FIA position. As this role was about to be taken from him, he stepped into the vacant position of acting Queensland Trades and Labour Secretary in December 1950. He had been an executive officer of the TLC from 1943 and when Mick Healy, his long-time comrade and the TLC secretary for 10 years, resigned from his role, officially on the grounds of ill-health, Alex was elected Secretary unopposed. The FIA was subsequently taken over by The Groupers and remained under their control until the early 1990s.

The Groupers were exposed as anti-Left, social reactionaries by ALP leader H.V. Evatt in 1954.



*Building Southport Trades Hall, 1960s
(Alex Macdonald family collection)*

With the AWU re-affiliated to the TLC the 9-month long 1956 Shearers Strike was co-ordinated by the Queensland TLC. The anti-union activity of the State Government led to the expulsion of Premier Gair from the ALP in 1957. The State Cabinet supported Gair and formed the Queensland Labor Party, as the CPA had forewarned. This action, reflecting the concurrent split in the Victorian ALP, enabled the Country Party to take power in coalition with the Liberals in Queensland in 1957 and retain power until 1989.

In 1964 Alex stood alongside Pat Mackie and helped run the Mt. Isa Strike. The Strike was as result of take-home pay for workers at the US owned ASARCO mines being less in 1964 than it had been in 1952, despite record

company profits. By January 1965 the Queensland Government had suspended civil liberties, airlifted into the town hundreds of police and imposed a night curfew. Even the Queensland Employers Foundation questioned the State Government's over-reaction and the TLC called for a state-wide stoppage. The Strike ended with a mixed result for all concerned.

From August 1964 anti-Vietnam War demonstrations were initiated at the University of Queensland. Temporarily replacing the CPA as the hate figures of the establishment, the radical student movement grew over the next few years. When Brian Laver, representing the students, and Alan Anderson, a CPA member and plumbers union representative, approached Alex for support in establishing a youth group, the FOCO club, he offered them the use of one floor of the Trades Hall. Headlines proclaiming FOCO as the 'most evil' place in Brisbane ²⁵ divided the leadership of the Trades Hall with Jack Egerton and the ALP hating the group; a fact exacerbated by Alex's decision to employ Brian Laver in Trades Hall in what turned out to be a short-term appointment.

At the time of his death Alex was troubled by the invasion of Czechoslovakia and the decision of the



The Alex Macdonald Memorial Library, QCU, early 1990s (Alex Macdonald family collection)

CPA to censure the Soviet Union.²⁶ Within two years the CPA/SPA split occurred.

Humphrey McQueen has described Alex Macdonald as a “working class intellectual.” It was Alex’s character that kept him in his position as leader of the Queensland Trades and Labour Council and not because of the numbers of votes the CPA could muster in TLC committees. This is reflected by the fact that Alex’s successor as Secretary was an ALP official.²⁷ Following his death the TLCs Equal Pay Committee, set up by Alex to promote gender equality, was wound up.²⁸

As a committed Marxist Alex had a huge interest in the history

of the Queensland labour movement and planned to research this when he eventually retired. Alex’s interest in labour history was well known, and the TLC became the recipient of large quantities of material from various sources across the movement. Today, much of this material forms the basis of the University of Queensland’s Fryer Library TLC collection, some 637 parcels and boxes of items.

In 1986 the TLC dedicated the boardroom and a library to Alex Macdonald. To retain the library to this day would have been a useful resource for the QCU.

Humphrey McQueen suggested that throughout its history the CPA

acted as a ‘sheet anchor’ on the labour movement, reminding the disparate factions of its socialist roots.²⁹ Without it, and the likes of Alex, many have lost sight of its fight for equality.

“Dad used to always say just have a look in your society at the people who are struggling and who are right down here, and the capitalists ideal of those who are right up there, and he said, just have a look at the divide...He used to often say this is capitalism...There is your divide, there is your difference. Keep looking down here. Don’t listen to the people up there. You know, because they’re from the top end of town.”³⁰

Notes

- 1 The audio tapes of the 1994 event have recently been digitised and will be made available on the BLHA website.
- 2 E.A. Bacon, “For Alex Macdonald—Crematorium 20/8/69,” (unpublished).
- 3 Robert Hawke, “Address by Mr. Bob Hawke to Queensland Trades and Labor Council. Held in Brisbane on 3.9.69,” (unpublished).
- 4 Letter of condolence to Molly Macdonald, 18th August 1969.
- 5 Blanche D’Alpuget, *Robert J. Hawke : A Biography* (East Melbourne, Vic. : Schwartz, in conjunction with Lansdowne Press, 1982).
- 6 Jack Egerton, “Jack Egerton—Funeral Oration for Alex Macdonald 20th August 1969,” (unpublished).
- 7 “Oration—Late Alex Macdonald (Given to T.L.C. Meeting—3rd September 1969) by J. Egerton—President,” (unpublished).
- 8 Margaret Liessi/Lynette Trad interview
- 9 Bill Thieme, “Letter of Condolence—Bill Thieme to Molly Macdonald 21/08/1969,” (unpublished).
- 10 AWU, “Obituary—Alex Macdonald,” *The Worker* 30th August 1969.
- 11 Cecily Cameron, “Unfinished Biography of Alex Macdonald,” (undated).
- 12 Lynette Trad and Margaret Liessi, Alex Macdonald’s daughters, interviewed by Dean Wharton 11th July 2019
- 13 Lynette Trad, interviewed with Margaret Liessi by Dean Wharton 11th July 2019
- 14 The CPA organised the Pastoral Workers Industrial Union as an alternative to the AWU between 1930 and 1937
- 15 Kylie Tennant, *The Battlers*, Paperback ed.. ed. (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1973). p216
- 16 Beris Gene Penrose, “The Communist Party and Trade Union Work in Queensland in the Third Period: 1928-1935” (1993). Ted Roach, interviewed by B Penrose in March 1992.
- 17 Geordie Burns, who lived with Alex in Merryvale Street for about a year, says Alex was in Brisbane in 1932 – Cecily Cameron notes
- 18 Wendy Lowenstein, *Weevils in the Flour* (Melbourne: Tradition Books, 1978). p221
- 19 Ross Fitzgerald, *The People’s Champion, Fred Paterson : Australia’s Only Communist Party Member of Parliament* (St. Lucia, Qld. : University of Queensland Press, 1997).
- 20 Pam Young, *Daring to Take a Stand : The Story of the Union of Australian Women in Queensland* (Wavell Heights, Qld. : Pam Young, 1998).
- 21 Brian McKinlay, *Australian Labor History in Documents* (Melbourne: Collins Dove, 1990). Volume 2: The Labor Party. (George Black, Legislative Assembly, NSW 1891, quoted in) p.17
- 22 Doug Olive, *The Queensland Railway Strike February–April 1948* (Brisbane: printed by Coronation Printery, 1948). p11
- 23 Raymond Evans, *A History of Queensland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007). p205
- 24 Stuart Macintyre, *The Reds, The Reds : The Communist Party of Australia from Origins*

- to Illegality (Sydney : Allen & Unwin, 1998). p331
- 25 F. Neilsen and P. Gray, "'Australia's Most Evil and Repugnant Nightspot': The Foco Club, Brisbane, 1968–69," *Labour. Hist.*, no. 105 (2013).
 - 26 Interview of Molly Macdonald by Cecily Cameron 13th March 1984.
 - 27 Humphrey McQueen interviewed by Dean Wharton 11th July 2019
 - 28 Young, *Daring to Take a Stand : The Story of the Union of Australian Women in Queensland*. p47
 - 29 Humphrey McQueen, *A New Britannia : An Argument Concerning the Social Origins of Australian Radicalism and Nationalism*, Rev. and reset ed. ed. (Ringwood, Vic.: Penguin Books, 1986). Afterword to 1986 Edition p286
 - 30 Margaret Liessi, interviewed with Lynette Trad by Dean Wharton 4th July 2019

Frank Fantin in North Queensland 1925–42

David Faber

“We talk of White Australia, and insinuate that Italians are not white...”
Brisbane Courier 30 March 1928

On 16 November 1942, Francesco Fantin, an Italian-born anarchist, was assassinated by fascists in the Loveday internment camp in the South Australian Riverland. Fantin had been arrested in North Queensland as an enemy alien. From the moment he was sent south for preventive detention, he was a marked man, his leadership of the anti-fascist minority amongst internees intolerable to the fascists who held sway over the apolitical majority.

His death drew a veil over a rich life of activism and political initiative, first in Italy, and then for nearly two decades in North Queensland. These were the years when Italian farmers and cane cutters were a significant part of the sugar industry, when anarchism dominated the politics of the Italian diaspora, and Italian workers played a major but largely undocumented role in the great industrial disputes between the wars in the Red North. Like so many proletarian leaders, his contribution to the class struggle was only fleetingly recorded. It deserves to be better known.

In Italia

In November 1924, 23-year-old Francesco Giovanni Fantin boarded the Lloyd Triestino trans-oceanic liner *Re d'Italia*, (King of Italy) at Venezia, bound for Australia. His elder brother, Luigi Francesco Fantin, had emigrated earlier to North Queensland and nominated Francesco, known to his nearest and dearest and closest comrades as ‘Checco’ (pronounced ‘Keko’),¹ to join him and cut sugar cane.

Queensland authorities had made known to Italian emigration authorities their desire for almost ‘white’ ‘Alpine’ labour in the tropics, and the Italian police in the Prefecture of the Province of Vicenza had made this opportunity known to those applying for passport clearance who had no outstanding penal charges or military obligations.² The racist Australian ruling class of the day was content to be cosmopolitan by administrative default where the extraction of profit was concerned, even temporarily forgetting its obsession with ‘foreign agitators’.³

As an anarchist political activist, a proletarian with a cause, Fantin was at



once typical and atypical of his class. His standard of living was of a piece with that of his apolitical peers, and anarchism was relatively endemic to semi-rural Vicenza Province, and to the Veneto region more generally.⁴ In the Italian national political and socioeconomic crisis years of 1919–25, a racially accented Red Scare caused the United States to slam its gates shut under the terms of the 1924 Quota Law. As a result, there was a surge of some 1500 Italian immigrants into Queensland in 1922 alone, which doubled and tripled in size in the years 1924 and 1925. Most of these proletarian migrants gravitated to the North Queensland sugar districts of Ayr, Ingham, Innisfail and Cairns.⁵ This modest ‘Italian invasion’, which

included many Veneti like Fantin,⁶ was sufficient to raise the hackles of local ‘British’ nativists.

1924 had been a seminal year for Italy and Fantin. The failure of parliament to bring Mussolini to book for the brutal assassination of the Veneto Socialist Deputy, Giacomo Matteotti,⁷ had made known to all the collapse of bourgeois liberal resistance to the ‘national regime’ of Mussolini, which had been condoned by the King, Victor Emanuele III. In his personal life, Checco Fantin had only just recovered from a broken heart. His bride of only a year, fellow Schio textile worker and local beauty Maria Zambon, had run off with an older man, remembered by Fantin’s relatives as ‘a Fascist officer’.⁸ The other man may have been a ranking police strike breaker, or a senior ‘squadrista’ in the person of a demobilized military officer on half pay commanding a fascist death squad.

Most of Fantin’s industrial and political comrades from the ‘little industrial city’⁹ of Schio were already in socioeconomic exile in Australia, having been victimized after the failure of the great Italian textile strike of 1921.¹⁰ Fantin was also involved as a teenage paramilitary in the Schio ‘Red Guards’ (a chapter of the national Arditi del Popolo movement or the People’s Shock-troopers) who had supported the strike by guarding striker’s rallies, warning off Catholic scab labour and blowing up electrical installations

which supplied the nationally famous Lanerossi firm's plants with energy.¹¹ After the strike was broken, the firm paid many of the strike leaders half an annual salary to clear out for Australia. Others were socioeconomically deported in this way to the Americas, and to continental Europe beyond the Alps, or elsewhere in the Italian peninsula, so long as they quit Schio and the Val Leogra.¹²

Fantin himself had escaped industrial victimisation, because national military service had detained him from participation in the strike, although during the hated 'naja' ('hard yakka') he had been involved in anti-militarist propaganda in the ranks.

Another consideration for Fantin may have been the fall-out from the attempt by the individualist anarchist terrorists Mariani and Boldrini to kill

the Milanese Chief of Police. This was the largest anarchist terror attack in Italian history. Some 17 people were killed and over a hundred injured in the Chief's timely absence. It seems Fantin may have assisted his mentor, Gaetano Pannizon,¹³ to collect the explosives eventually used by Mariani and Boldrini.¹⁴

So, emotionally, politically and industrially exposed, and after a lost year, Fantin voted with his feet to join his victimized workmates in Australia and follow his elder brother into exile.

Fantin's activities in Australia were more conventionally political and industrial, and involved no paramilitary activities or involvement as an accessory to terrorism. Clearly the political situation in Australia during his sojourn here, however critical, did not require the desperate defensive



measures called for during what may be called the First Italian Civil War of 1919–22.¹⁵ Even in the Liberal era in Italy, decades before Fantin emigrated, industrial conditions were so harsh that the legend of an Australian workers' paradise had circulated in the Schio district.¹⁶

In the Red North

After the *Re d'Italia* docked in Melbourne on 27 December 1924 came the long journey up the eastern seaboard to North Queensland.¹⁷ Later Italian official reports would suggest that he soon translated his political activity from his homeland to his new host society. Fantin's elder brother, Luigi, had emigrated in 1922 in the company of the charismatic anarchist and family friend Francesco Giuseppe Carmignola and Francesco may have been met by Carmignola and another comrade from their native town of San Vito de Leguzzano near Schio; he posed with them for a celebratory photo portrait toasting undying resistance to oppression.¹⁸

In the course of the Fascist Era of 1922–43, some 230-odd 'subversive' Italian Australian 'sovversivi', mostly anarchists and early émigré or anti-fascist 'fuorusciti' (literally 'those who went away' or 'wild geese', to use an Irish term), were monitored by the Rome political police bureau, known as the Direzione Generale Pubblica Sicurezza (DGPS).¹⁹ This repressive

agency processed information from informers managed through the upgraded Italian consular system in Australia, assisted by antipodean branches of the overseas Fasci, the 'Fasci all'Estero'.

Either Fantin, or his elder brother Luigi, or both, were involved in early 1925 in an assault on a Fascist, one Giovanni Marchetti, payback for the intimidation and abuse handed out to anti-fascists (including Fantin) in Italy and a gesture towards enforcement of Carmagnola's direct action campaign to render the Sugar Coast a no-go zone for fascism. These were days of happy hunting for the Carmagnola inspired Italian anti-fascists in North Queensland, such that the semi-official, philo-fascist *Italo-Australian* had cause to lament the intense anti-fascism of most Italians in North Queensland.²⁰ There are reports of an anti-fascist mob, 100–150 strong, pursuing a Fascist in February 1925 at Ingham and another 300 strong following a similar quarry at Halifax in the same month.²¹

Such mobilisations by Carmagnola and Fantin are inconceivable without the transference from Italy of seasoned and battle-ready anti-fascists.²² As time passed, Fantin acquired prestige and seniority as a valued lieutenant to Carmagnola and as an activist in his own right. We have photographic evidence that comrades bicycled to salute and consult him.²³ Fantin was one of a trio including Carmagnola who founded

the anti-fascist Melbourne Matteotti Club in 1927 and was probably already working to promote Italian industrial interests in North Queensland with the Danesi brothers through the Mourilyan Italian Progressive Club.²⁴

Luigi Danesi, the more influential of these two brothers, records the emotional regard in which Fantin was held by his Italian anti-fascist brethren in Australia, parallel to that of Carmagnola. After Fantin's assassination, Danesi reported that he knew him well, as 'beloved by all the anti-fascists', and 'an excellent person and a militant...'.²⁵ Fantin was one of the first Italians in Australia, or even in Italy, subject to fascist political surveillance through the enhanced DGPS in 1927. Historical research established in 1987–8 that the 'subversive' antecedents of the Carmagnola and Fantin parentelas went back some generations, and their fast friendship in their native San Vito was remembered by surviving peers into the 1980s. Fantin's favourite cousin, Maria (aka 'Marigina' or 'Gina') proudly testified that Fantin in Italy was already 'an organiser'.²⁶ Fantin was also recognized by Australian wartime security as being looked up to as a leader of the albeit modest anarchist movement in Australia.²⁷

Thus it was that in North Queensland, 'Checco' became 'Frank' to his new Australian workmates and comrades, and the Sugar Coast became his tropical

base of operations, commuting like a Ray Lawler character from seasonal work, agriculturally preparing cane fields and cutting and processing cane, to textile factory work in Geelong, Victoria. There he stayed in Edol Street with the family of his Schio anarchist mentor Gaetano Panizzon, and being something of a fitness fanatic, thought nothing of bicycling in to Melbourne for a political meeting.²⁸ These employments kept body and soul together and financed and sustained his political and fundraising activities in Queensland and Victoria.

Before further reconstructing Fantin's career in North Queensland, it is necessary to pause on a methodological note. Often, we will need to supplement documentary and oral evidence with probable logical supposition to piece out his sustained political and industrial activities. There is no methodological problem with doing this. To reason from the known and ascertained facts is not to cavalierly speculate; indeed, it is the opposite of doing so. Probable dialectical causal hypotheses, as Collingwood taught, are legitimate in historiography as in other scientific fields, such as theoretical physics, for historiography is an inferential science.²⁹

Such tactics are indispensable to narratives about proletarian subjects, people who sustained activist careers for years at the limits of historical visibility, whose rich lives animated

by ideas and experiences would be impossible to reconstruct otherwise. The record of the historical process is by nature inherently patchy and biased towards the more literate middle and ruling classes, not to mention official and, in the English-speaking world, anglophone sources. Proletarian and immigrant activist lives can only be pieced out by resort to such hypotheses, by reasoning from the established facts.

We should also note that one implication of multiculturalism is that the backstory to much Australian experience in the antipodean New World lies in the homelands of Australia's many diasporas.

Hence, an important key to understanding Frank Fantin lies in his Italian DGPS dossier, now housed in the Rome office of the Italian central State archives, the Archivio Centrale dello Stato. The Italian consular system through which fascist informers were organized was extended into North Queensland amongst other things to contest the early hegemony of anti-fascism there. A dossier was opened on him and his family in 1927 and the process of identification of another 'subversive' ('sovversivo') began.

At first the exact identity of the offending activist was unclear to the Italian authorities and took years to clarify. Initially informers appear to have mangled his surname as 'Frontin' (sic), then confused him with his

elder brother Luigi Francesco, before finally getting it right in June 1928 after months of official effort.³⁰ Even then they still couldn't always tell the brothers apart, so poor and vague were their sources. This problem lingered well into the following decade. By then, Fantin was being flagged by consular informants as 'a convinced anarchist', condescendingly considered capable only of 'disseminating libels'³¹ and 'an inflamed anarchist...disseminating political propaganda', to be kept carefully under surveillance and to remain registered as a 'subversive', although not considered 'dangerous'.³²

This concept of dangerousness was an inherently emotive political notion of the measure of influence of a subject rather than their propensity for violence, although the two terms of this equation were vague and often implicitly confused. A subject's level of intelligence or education for example was commonly considered a criterion of the level of political danger represented. These official notices of Fantin's activities in North Queensland, which represented the baseline monitoring of his anti-fascist activities, reflected the more routine aspects of his interpersonal word of mouth work and distribution of political ephemera, including the Italian language anarchist press in Australia which circulated in North Queensland,³³ but also register his increasing significance.

By 1932 Fantin was being cited in Rome as having repeatedly come under notice as ‘a rabid anarchist... [who] carries out active political propaganda...’. At that time, he was flagged as having sent ‘Anarchist Aid’ of Geneva ‘lire 2000’ [say £200, a large amount in a Depression year] and being a subscriber to the ‘Comitato Antifascista’ of that city.³⁴ When the Spanish Civil War erupted in 1936 Fantin was passionately involved in support work for the Republic in Australia.³⁵

The Italian authorities must have had a high sense of his activities to be so persevering in the work of identification and ongoing surveillance over the better part of two decades. Indeed, the DGPS was acting on a special request from the Royal Italian Consulate in Brisbane. As his career in North Queensland drew to a close, Australian military intelligence noted that Fantin was looked up to as a leader by his peers, albeit of a small following.³⁶ Very likely Carmagnola somewhat outranked Fantin because he was actually paid by his comrades to retire from wage slavery and organise politically and industrially. Perhaps Fantin was only a senior volunteer, but this lesser prominence too would have required the endorsement of his peers, including Carmignola.

In another indication of their seniority as activists, they were Australian correspondents of the prominent

anarchist leader Camillo Berneri. We know this from a notebook filched by fascist agents during the French exile of Berneri, which contained their names and addresses as copied by the DGPS in 1928.³⁷

In February 1934, the I Section of the DGPS wrote to the agency’s Casellario Politico Centrale or CPC (Central Political Case-archives) regarding ‘Organizzazione Comunista in Australia’. Clearly ‘Communist’ was becoming the go to term for ‘subversive’, a measure of the degree of generational and philosophical change by which Italian communism was overtaking anarchists and other socialists in prominence within the Italian anti-fascist constellation. At any rate, a copy of a document generated in late 1933 by the Sydney Royal Italian Consulate General entitled ‘Elenco di Connazionali Maggiormenti Noti Per Le Loro Idee Comuniste (List of Italian Countrymen Most Known For Their Communist Ideas), which nominated Fantin, was placed on his file, yet another marker of seniority in activism. It gave his address as Redlynch, now a suburb of Cairns, and the most northerly point in Queensland where he is known to have cut cane.³⁸

The DGPS dossier records Fantin’s anti-fascist political activities in Australia and most particularly in North Queensland at roughly six-monthly intervals from his arrival until Italy’s entry into WWII in June 1940, when

consular supervision of monitoring of anti-fascists was withdrawn.

There is evidence on his dossier and elsewhere of his association with the Danesi brothers, Luigi and Costante,³⁹ champions of the long running Italian-Australian resistance to 'British Preference', the nativist campaign to restrict Italian and other foreign employment of labour in the sugar industry. This practice was formalized as an agreement between the AWU and cane farming peak bodies in 1930, creating a bone of contention between Italian AWU members such as Fantin and the rest of the union which covered the industry. It was the socialist businessman Luigi Danesi who hired the redoubtable Communist barrister Fred Paterson to argue the unconstitutionality of this discriminatory agreement before a regional sitting of the High Court in 1932. Danesi had been impressed by Paterson's successful defense in 1930 of Carmagnola on a (well-grounded) charge of assault of a fascist Vice Consul. Although the Court did not find in favour of Paterson's arguments, he believed his representations had assisted in galvanizing the resistance of the Italian community and raised his profile and that of his party.⁴⁰ For his part, Paterson believed that his engagement with the anti-fascist struggle in North Queensland was some of the best work of his career. It seems that the paths of Paterson and Fantin would have crossed.

Fantin's union activities have largely yet to be confirmed by historical enquiry. Take for example the seminal 1927 South Johnstone dispute, which began at a Silkwood sugar mill and was extended to the transport sector by a lockout ruthlessly imposed on the state railways by Labor Premier Bill McCormack, who claimed to have saved parliamentary democracy from industrial anarchy. Fantin was resident in nearby Mourilyan, and it is known that Italians were among the most committed striking sugar workers in this dispute.⁴¹ Was Fantin a participant? Was he an active supporter in the wider community? Disinterest in such affairs would have been uncharacteristic of him, but further enquiry is necessary to substantiate his involvement.

Be that as it may, the key moment of Fantin's industrial career was his involvement in the famous Weil's Disease disputes on the Sugar Coast during 1934–5. Carmagnola related in later life that his life-long friend and comrade Francesco Fantin was at his side in the organisation of Italian participation in these health and safety strikes.⁴² Everything we know about the two anarchists and fellow villagers circumstantially confirms this testimony. Their 'inseparability' was remarked upon by a correspondent of Fantin and close relative of another prominent Italian-Australian anarchist, the editor Isidoro Bertazzon, who had fallen out with Carmagnola but not Fantin.⁴³

Not only was Fantin a trusted anarchist comrade of Carmagnola, but he spoke three tongues highly useful for cane-field industrial action. These were Veneto dialect, fair Italian, and ethnic English. It is known that the use of such translators was a feature of strikers' mobilisation of the multilingual cane fields workforce.⁴⁴

The 1934 Ingham strike was organized principally by Carmagnola and the Australian Communist Party's Pat Clancy.⁴⁵ The strike pioneered new and effective measures of mobilisation of community support, including the marshalling of medical opinion, to harness the palpable fear of Weil's Disease sweeping the cane fields. It was successful in widening the practice of burning standing cane to facilitate harvesting, to drive out the rodent vermin who were spreading the bacterial pathogen that caused Weil's Disease in their urine and faeces.

Employer interests succeeded in immediately scaling back these gains in conditions by lawfare in the Queensland industrial tribunals. Thus, the whole matter had to be fought all over again, with the Ingham strikers mobilizing again in a general strike which involved three further cane districts, in the greatest cane-field dispute of all time to 1935, one of the most imposing 'Big Strikes' in the history of a State long given to major industrial disputation.⁴⁶



Although the workers were forced back to work, the employers increasingly adopted the health and safety practices demanded by the 'defeated' strikers for fear of another dispute, and it was endorsed by industrial jurisdictions and health authorities such as Sir Raphael Cilento.⁴⁷

Fantin was interned in February 1942 during the North Queensland phase of the panicky, racist dragnet which followed Japan's barnstorming entry into World War II. The wartime Intelligence Service had decided not to intern him when Italy entered the war in the accurate belief that he had standing amongst anarchists who were

few in number and in any case anti-fascist.⁴⁸

But the legacy of the British Preference controversy over the attempted reservation for nativist labour of the bulk of sugar industry employment eventually caught up with Fantin.⁴⁹ Information alleging anti-British sentiments was laid against ‘the eldest brother’ by one James McCarthy, a strident exponent of the British Preference League. McCarthy maintained that the Fantin in question (Luigi) had declared a preference for employing ‘a Hindoo or an Afghan [rather] than a bloody Britisher’.⁵⁰ While acknowledging the report’s importance, Nursey-Bray has erroneously dismissed the report itself as a racist projection.⁵¹ It can indeed be imagined how significant such an allegation would have been, coming amidst a war fought at the very height of 20th century nationalism, when the touchstone of loyalty adopted by Australian officialdom was to the British ethnic and constitutional structure of the nation at war. That McCarthy was not confabulating can be understood from the testimony of the grand-daughter of Luigi Fantin, Associate Professor Shaneen Fantin, that he was in the habit of attributing variable work ethics to potential employees on the basis of nationality or Italian region.⁵²

By contrast, Frank Fantin was not in a position to speak as an employer after

he sold his share in the property to his brothers in 1933. McCarthy clearly did not know that there were three brothers Fantin, nor that, as we have seen, Luigi Francesco sometimes went by his second name. So, while some Intelligence officers were aware that there appeared to have been a case of mistaken identity,⁵³ superior military echelons preferred the view of local police that the Fantin in question was a dissembler, nothing less than a chameleon fascist communist enemy alien of anti-British persuasion.⁵⁴ Thus McCarthy’s ‘intelligence’ of the Italian community was taken as good. Indeed, though horribly approximate, McCarthy denounced his opportunistic target as fascist rather than a subversive of the left.⁵⁵

Fantin was threatened by fascist internees on the long transit South to Gaythorne,⁵⁶ and then on eventually to indefinite detention at Loveday near Barmera in the South Australian Riverland. At Loveday he was to lead the anti-fascist minority in contesting fascist sway over the apolitical majority of Italian internees in Camp 14A. In November 1942, as Italy was reaping the whirlwind militarily, political antagonism reached fever pitch shortly after El Alamein.

With news of the imminent invasion of Italy by the Allied 8th Army in the air, the fascist push could tolerate his effective leadership no longer, and he was assassinated on 16 November 1942,

in the belief that he was responsible for fund raising amongst internees for the Registered War Charity ‘Sheepskins for Russia’.⁵⁷ His death accelerated the winding down, by Attorney General HV Evatt, of the regime of preventive internment,⁵⁸ eventually closing the worst social disaster in the history of the Italian diaspora in Australia to date, and one of the worst own-goals in national administrative history.

Notes

- 1 Paul Nursey-Bray incorrectly gives this nickname as ‘Chico’ in *Australian Dictionary of Biography; Supplementary Vol.*, (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press 2005):122-3. It is possible that Checco Fantin used the pseudonym ‘Chico Frontin’, as the Italian political police long assumed, more likely that an informer misheard hearsay of an unfamiliar Veneto name.
- 2 See the circular to local governments issued by the Delegazione Provinciale Commissariato Generale d’Emigrazione 29 June 1924. The racist theories of J.R. Lyng, published in 1927 as *Non-Britishers in Australia* and endorsed by influential Melbourne University Professor of History Ernest Scott, remained in vogue during World War II, when Fantin was categorized as ‘Alpine’ on internment documentation. See NAA: BP 242/1 Q30084 Fantin Francesco: ‘Application for Leave to Submit Objections Against Detention 14 October 1942’
- 3 Note the Hughes Immigration Act Amendments of 1920, official rhetoric against the 1925 Seamens’ Strike with the related deportation proceedings against Walsh and Johnson, and the 1926 Latham Crimes Act Section 30L. Fantin and his ‘foreign agitator’ comrades treated the threat of deportation with fine disregard, but were subject to it nonetheless.
- 4 Ezio Maria Simini ‘Gli anarchici vicentini tra otto e novecento’ in Emilio Franzina *La classe, gli uomini e i partiti; Storia del movimento operaio e socialista in una provincia bianca: il Vicentino 1873-1948* (Vicenza: Odeonlibri 1982) Vol.1:345–65
- 5 William A. Douglass ‘Images & Adages: Anglo-Australian perceptions of Italians in Queensland’ Richard Bosworth & Romano Ugolini (eds) *War, Internment & Mass Migration: The Italo-Australian Experience* (Roma: Gruppo Editoriale Internazionale 1992):49
- 6 Diane Menghetti ‘Italians in North Queensland’ in Jupp *The Australian People* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson 1988): 600f
- 7 Christopher Duggan: *The Force of Destiny: A History of Italy since 1796* (London: Penguin 2008):447
- 8 Reported by Fantin’s nephew Valentino Bortoloso: DF San Vito de Leguzzano 14 December 1987
- 9 Fantin’s own characterisation in his internment journal *Pensieri e Ricordi (Thoughts & Memories)*, written about a fortnight before his assassination. See NAA BP 242/1 Q30084: Diary Q7461 Fantin Francesco (deceased).
- 10 Ezio Maria Simini: *Il Nostro Signor Capo* (Vicenza: Odeon Libri 1980):219f
- 11 For details see my doctoral dissertation ‘F.G. Fantin: Life & Times of an Italo-Australian anarchist 1901–42, (Adelaide 2008):121–2
- 12 Archivio Lanerossi Schio, Raccogliatore 15 Interno 8 Operai che si allontanarono da Schio con sussidio dalla Fabbbrica (Workers leaving Schio with Factory Subsidy)
- 13 Pannizon is mentioned and the number of his anonymous associates in Giuseppe Mariani *Memorie di un Ex-Terrorista* (Torino: self-published 1953): 36
- 14 See ACS Roma Mi DGPS CPC Spiller Luigi di Giobatta b.4911: Il Ministro Segretario per gli Affari dell’Interno circa 12 June 1929; refers to dossier H2 Milano f.22277 1929
- 15 This interpretive periodisation brackets together the Biennio Rosso of 1919–20 with

- the Rise of Fascism of 1921–2. Of course, the Italian Intervention of 1915 in the Great War has very credibly been characterized as an act of the authoritarian ruling class Right, an aggression against the Liberals and rising Socialist and labour movements which established a split in the country which persisted in an aggravated form right through Italy's tragic and traumatic involvement. For the second iteration of civil war during the 20th century in Italy, see Claudio Pavone, *A Civil War: A History of the Italian Resistance* (London: Verso 2014)
- 16 For the Australian correspondence of Ingenero (later Deputy) Domenico Piccoli see Franzina ed.cit:45 & Pietro Munari *Un Italiano in Australia* (Milano: Tipografia degli Operai 1897)
 - 17 NAA BP 242/1 Q30084 Fantin Francesco: Report on Internee 23 February 1942
 - 18 Copy in possession of author from the Bortoloso family collection.
 - 19 Statistics based on ACS Roma CPC data in Cresciani 'Refractory Migrants. Fascist Surveillance on Italians in Australia 1922–43: 47–50
 - 20 Gianfranco Cresciani *Fascismo, anti-fascismo e gli italiani in Australia 1922–45* (Roma: Bonacci editore 1989): 92
 - 21 See my doctoral dissertation FG Fantin...1901–42' (Adelaide 2008): 158
 - 22 Clive Morton in his study of the life and death of Fantin overlooks this primary formation, forgetting in practice that Fantin was Italian, and attributes his formation primarily to the vibrant, diverse and fractured oral political culture of North Queensland in those days, doubtless a powerful influence upon Fantin, but inherently secondary. Fantin had graduated from the university of hard knocks of Schio class struggle prior to his arrival in North Queensland. Also, to be rebutted here is the Paul Nursey-Bray contention that Carmagnola and Fantin, fellow working-class political comrades from the same village who spoke the same San Vito di Schio based local dialect, were not peers in every way, because Carmagnola was allegedly a national leader of the Anti-fascist diaspora in this country, whereas Fantin supposedly was not. See Clive Morton 'Francesco Fantin: Wartime Murder & Cover-up' *Journal of the Royal Historical Society of Queensland*, Vol,8 No.6 2003:256–7
 - 23 See Gianfranco Cresciani: *Migrants or Mates: Italian Life in Australia* (Sydney: Knockmore Enterprises 1989):218
 - 24 See photograph so dated Ilma Martinuzzi O'Brien *Australia's Italians 1788–1988* (Melbourne: Italian Historical Society/State Library of Victoria 1988):81
 - 25 NAA A367 C68814 Danesi Costante & Luigi: Typescript translation LG Danesi 4228 stamped 27 April 1943 annotated 'F' [for Fantin?] & 'Original on No.5403'
 - 26 Interview Signora Maria 'Gina' Fantin in Abram: DF, Magre' di Schio, Vicenza, 15 December 1987
 - 27 NAA BP242/1 Q30084 Fantin Francesco Cairns District Police, Edmonton Station 15 December 1939
 - 28 Mr Spartaco Pannizon: DF Geelong May 1989
 - 29 Robin George Collingwood *The Idea of History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1946/80):241 & 252f
 - 30 ACS Roma MI DGPS CPC 20852 Fantin Francesco Giovanni b1948 & CPC J-5 Fantin Luigi Francesco
 - 31 Ibid: Ministero Esteri-Capo Polizia re Consolato Sydney 6 Gennaio 1930
 - 32 Ibid: Vice-Consolato Townsville -CPC 14 Maggio 1930 & idem 23 Ottobre
 - 33 In 1942, attempting to liberate Fantin from internment, Carmagnola asserted that Fantin was a correspondent of the Anti-fascist *La Riscossa* (The Counter-attack). Carmagnola may have been gilding the lily on his beleaguered comrade's behalf, in that no Fantin by-line has been discerned, but Fantin may have been a news source and production assistant as well as a distributor. Several single issue news-sheets of anarchist manufacture circulated in North Queensland during the years of their greatest activity, promoting such themes as the tragic

- sacrifice of Sacco and Vanzetti, giving this international cause celebre regional resonance. See my 'The Italian anarchist Press in Australia between the Wars' *Italian Historical Society Journal* Vol.17 2009
- 34 Ibid: DGPS I—CPC & III 29 November 1932. In being a substantial donor and fundraiser Fantin was also a peer of Carmagnola. See Cresciani 'The Proletarian Migrants: Fascism & Italian anarchists in Australia' *Australian Quarterly* Vol.51 No.1 1979:10
- 35 Commemorative anniversary postcard; copy in possession of author.
- 36 See for example Cairns Police—CIB Brisbane 15 December 1939 in NAA BP 242/1 Q30084
- 37 Ibid: 27 June 1928
- 38 ACS Roma MI DGPS CPC Fantin Francesco Giovanni b1948: 25 January & 9 February 1934
- 39 Ibid: Francesco Frontin (sic) 7 April 1927
- 40 Ross Fitzgerald *Fred Paterson: The People's Champion* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press 1997): 62
- 41 KH Kennedy 'The South Johnstone Strike 1927' in D Murphy (ed) *The Big Strikes Queensland 1889–1965* (St Lucia University of Queensland Press 1983)
- 42 Mr Fabio Cavadini: DF Adelaide 19 February 1985
- 43 NAA BP242/1 Q30084: Chiara (Bertazzon)—F.Fantin 12 November 1941
- 44 Diane Menghetti 'The Weil's Disease Strike 1935' in Dennis Murphy *The Big Strikes, Queensland 1889–1965* (St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press 1983): 207
- 45 Diane Menghetti *ibid*: 206
- 46 See Menghetti *ibid*.
- 47 Fedora Gould Fisher *Raphael Cilento: A Biography* (St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press 1994) gives her subject a little too much credit for resolving the Weil's Disease dispute: 90–93.
- 48 NAA BP 242/1 Q30084 Fantin Francesco: Deputy Director of Security for Queensland-Director General Canberra 24 July 1942
- 49 William A Douglass *From Italy to Ingham* (St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press 1995): :168f
- 50 *Ibid*: 176; James McCarthy-Aliens Registration Central Bureau 13 June 1940 & Australian Military Forces Northern Command Intelligence Section General Staff 18 November 1940 re police confusion of the identities of the brothers Fantin.
- 51 Paul Nursey-Bray *cit*:91.
- 52 Ms Shaneen Fantin: DF 2002
- 53 NAA BP 242/1 Q30084 Fantin Francesco: See AMF IO Cairns—ISGS Northern Command 18 November 1940 & Note Captain Stevens 19 May 1941
- 54 *Ibid*: Precis of file Northern Command Section Australian Intelligence Corp 10 June 1942 & Intelligence Office Cairns-Intelligence Service General Staff Northern Command Luigi Fantin 19 December 1941 Francesco
- 55 *Ibid*: James McCarthy-Aliens Registration Central Bureau 13 June 1940
- 56 Mr Fabio Cavadini: DF *cit*
- 57 Cresciani *Fascismo, antifascismo e gli italiani in Australia 1922–43* (Roma: Bonacci editore 1979): 156
- 58 Cresciani *ibid*:159

The following article includes the text of a presentation given at the Australian Museums and Galleries Association National Conference in Alice Springs in May 2019. Aunty Evelyn Parkin and Elisabeth Gondwe explain the practical tasks of telling an inclusive history, one in which the stories of First Nations' people are not subordinated below colonial ones. It is a history which says there was (and still is) conflict; but also says that First Nations' peoples are still making history some of which is shared with non-Aboriginal people.

The presentation is about the practical steps of one small local museum, the North Stradbroke Island Museum on Minjerribah.

Walking Together: Incorporating Aboriginal and European Perspectives Into Small Museum Processes and Practices

Aunty Evelyn Parkin and Elisabeth Gondwe
North Stradbroke Island Museum on Minjerribah
At the Centre. Australian Museums and Galleries Association National
Conference
13–17 May 2019 Mparntwe, Northern Territory



The authors feel that what they are trying to do has lessons for other museums and for all places and groups who are offering stories of past, present and future to their localities and communities. In particular, we hope to

encourage and support openness about the past, present and future.

The text keeps the style of the verbal presentation rather than the more usual academic format of a journal. We feel

this gives a better expression of the issues and more fully conveys our way of telling and talking about history.

A note on location

The histories we are telling are of Minjerribah/North Stradbroke Island. The buildings of the museum are at Goompi/Dunwich on Minjerribah. The island is the second largest sand in the world (after K'gari/Fraser Island) and forms part of the eastern barrier of Moreton Bay the enclosed waterways which stretches from the Gold Coast through the Brisbane City area to the Sunshine Coast in South East Queensland.

“Quandamooka” is a word from the Jandai language used to describe Moreton Bay and the islands within it. The Quandamooka People are the people of the lands and waters of Moreton Bay including the two Stradbroke Islands (only separated in 1896) and Moorgumpin/Moreton Island. Colonial occupation occurred in the 1820s and was followed by armed conflicts, resistance and clearances. However, Quandamooka people maintain continuous occupation on the Island and currently are around a quarter of the permanent Island population of 2120 persons. There are 329 Aboriginal and Torres Island people (38%) of the 860 population of Goompi.

Quandamooka Peoples’ native title rights and interests over the land and waters on and surrounding Minjerribah and some islands in Moreton Bay were recognised in 2011. Those over Moorgumpin and the mainland littoral are in the legal process. This is the largest body of native title lands and waters close to any metropolitan area in Australia. Quandamooka Yoolooburabee Aboriginal Corporation (QYAC), the prescribed body corporate, is the largest by membership of any in the country.

Minjerribah is also a prime site for colonial history and heritage. The convict causeway at Goompi is the oldest place on the Queensland Heritage Registrar. Around 23,000 inmates were placed in the the Dunwich Benevolent Asylum from 1864 to 1946. It was the state institution for the indigent and poor of the entire colony/state of Queensland. There was also a lazaret at Goopi which was later moved to nearby Peel Island. All of these set up complex relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. For example, the Asylum relied on Aboriginal workers who through industrial and political actions were able to get paid at award rates—equal to non-Aboriginal workers—in 1944. This was well before equal pay was achieved anywhere else in Australia.

The museum has become increasingly aware that it needs to explicitly tell three histories—25,000 years of

First Nations' people; occupation and colonisation and the shared experiences of 200 years. The presentation of Aunty Evelyn Parkin and Elisabeth Gondwe is a record of tentative efforts to walk together. In part, the story is put forward to ask others to say how it could be done better.

Aunty Evelyn Parkin

We acknowledge the Traditional Owners and Custodians of Alice Springs. We acknowledge the Elders of the past, present and the future. We bring the spirit of my Ancestors in harmony and peace.

Yura. Hello. I am a Quandamooka woman from Minjerribah/Stradbroke Island. I am on the Museum Committee and I volunteer there giving cultural history talks to all groups from adults to children. This is my daughter Stephanie. I would like to introduce Elisabeth Gondwe who is the Musarian at the North Stradbroke Island Museum on Minjerribah. We share with you today our *Walking Together* program.

Elisabeth Gondwe

In Queensland the majority of museums are of the 'brave pioneer' variety where colonial narratives are reproduced. If you have been to one, there is little value in going to another. They are filled with the same objects and similar Eurocentric story about discovery

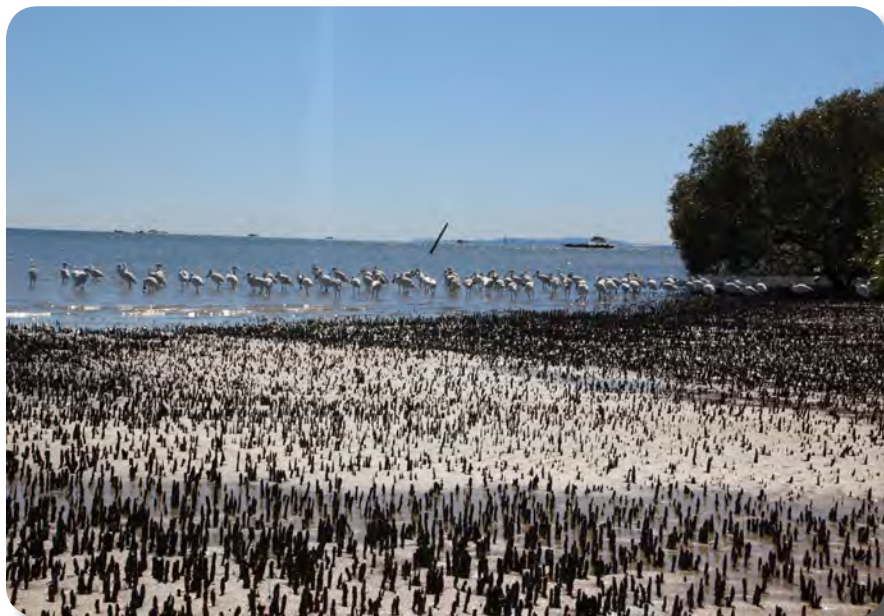
and colonisation, mainly with an agricultural focus. Two exceptions are the Cherbourg Ration Shed Museum and the Yugambah Museum. Museums reflect the volunteers that founded and control them and white Australian stories of the past. The dominant colonial narrative does not allow for other public stories. There is a national crisis in the museums sector. Our *Walking Together* program is our way of addressing this lack of inclusion in our museum.

The Museums biggest challenge is how we go about facilitating First Nation representation, including First Nation ontology and sovereignty, to move beyond a settler colonial national story. We try and explore the lack of visibility of First Nations history and culture.

Aunty Evelyn Parkin

The true Australian story began thousands and thousands of years ago. It is a wonderful story that needs to be told of an Ancient people and Mother Earth living in spiritual harmony. It is a history of a very rich culture of Lore and Order, structure, purpose and identity.

For instance, look at this picture, I am reminded that my Quandamooka Country is known as Yulu-Burri-Ba, the people of the sand and sea. We have many stories about the spirit of the salt water and fresh water and one amazing true story is about a mermaid known as



Warrajamba. The story of Warrajamba has been handed down from one generation to another. Warrajamba is true and a real being. We have names for every animal. Yungan was for dugong and Warrajamba had her own name and is living in our Bay.

Elisabeth Gondwe

Our museum is the North Stradbroke Island Museum on Minjerribah. It is on Quandamooka country—occupied for time immemorial and colonised for under 200 years. It is a volunteer-based not-for-profit organisation. It started in 1987 and employs two part-time professional staff. There is a board of 8 people, representing all

three townships, and different social networks.

As part of trying to express and share different knowledges, the Museum has adopted the use of dual naming. As a first step, in 2017 our name was changed from the *North Stradbroke Island Historical Museum* to the *North Stradbroke Island Museum on Minjerribah*. Going forward, all Museum exhibitions, publications and activities will adopt dual naming.

As noted by Canadian writer Caitlain Gordon-Walker, city (smaller) museums are better placed to engage with the complexities of intercultural interactions as they occur on a local and level rather than reproducing

established national mythologies¹. It is the local stories that break the ground for a new crop of historical paradigms and the creation of new norms. This can happen because smaller museums are not controlled and funded by the State but are only constrained by the understanding of the individuals within. This has been an issue at the NSIMM with some committee members over the past decades strongly rejecting non colonial stories of the past on Minjerribah. People feel their lived experience very strongly and are unsettled when an alternative narrative that is not their lived experience is shared. It threatens the status quo. We need to unsettle to allow space for new stories of the past and not just those of the dominant group in our colonial state. There is a tendency to only tell the story of those who came from the ships, not those from the shore.

Colonial history dominates the Museum's story-telling on the walls.

But it is not enough to just change our displays that visitors look at. We recognised the need to embed First Nation ontology and ways of doing things in our processes. The Museum has instigated a process we call *Walking Together*. This is a deliberate, active process, where the Board dedicates time at each meeting to reflect carefully on our aspiration to properly document and display the shared journey of living together on Minjerribah. *Walking Together* includes governance and

inclusion, meeting procedure and collection management.

Aunty Evelyn Parkin

Governance and Inclusion

The museum has always had Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal community members on the management committee. Non-Aboriginal people have been more numerous. Several Aunties have made lasting contributions to our museum through their involvement as volunteers and on our management committee.

Aunty Eileen O'Loughlin

Aunty Estelle Bertossi

Aunty Rose Borey

Petrina Walker

We honour these ladies for their contribution.

A result of this was the book *Moongalba (Myora) Sitting Down Place* that was compiled and written by Bernice Fischer with assistance from Auntie Rose Borey and Aunty Estelle Bertossi. It was published by the museum in 1997.

At present we have two Quandamooka people on our management committee: Aunty Evelyn Parkin and Karen Rylance. Having Quandamooka people in Governance and decision making of the museum is vital for embedding processes.

Aunty Evelyn Parkin

Meeting Procedure

In recognition of the importance of keeping *Walking Together* as an ongoing process, it has been put as the first item of business on the agenda for our management committee meetings. Aunty Evelyn Parkin who is a Quandamooka Elder and committee member delivers the report and informs the committee of what has been happening during the last month and what is happening in the future. Staff and volunteers also add to the report *Walking Together*.

Elisabeth Gondwe

Collection Management

Most museums in invaded colonial countries are based on Western Materialism. Museums collect, own and control objects. Most museums only collect what they can own and control.

This is the story of the deposit of the *Oodgeroo of the Tribe Noonuccal Custodian of the Land Minjerribah Collection* at the NSIMM. Kath Walker, / Oodgeroo Noonuccal's son Denis Walker and his oldest daughter Petrina Walker approached the museum to see if we could assist with preserving Oodgeroo's collection. This is a collection of National significance² and it was housed at Moongalba on Minjerribah North Stradbroke Island in a tin shed. A portion of Oodgeroo's

papers had been lodged with the University of Queensland Fryer Library prior to Oodgeroo's passing. The bulk of the collection was retained by the family and included all of the handwritten first drafts of poetry, artworks, and correspondence.

"What is the point of a museum that cannot help preserve a collection of national significance and that excludes segments of the community due to rigid culturally subjective rules?" After a lot of talking with the Walker family and the Museum committee and with help of indigenous intellectual property lawyer Terri Janke, the museum negotiated the Oodgeroo of the Tribe Noonuccal Custodian of the Land Minjerribah Management Deed.³

This was an attempt to be more relevant and representative of the community, and to be a model for other Aboriginal families to use the Museum as a safe-keeping place.

Part of the significance of the Oodgeroo Collection—and of great importance to the family—was that it remained on the island and in the community where Oodgeroo lived and belonged to. It is as Caitlin Gordon Walker describes in the Canadian context, it is 'ownership of culture being asserted within ancestral territories.'⁴ The right to own and represent one's own culture does not bring with it an obligation to represent that culture for the benefit of anyone else.

As part of this process, at the request of Dennis Walker, the Museum Committee and volunteers undertook a Cultural Heritage Education Workshop. Many of the committee expected a description of life and customs before colonisation. This is the main way that Aboriginal people have been presented to Australians. Instead the workshop focused on Aboriginal Law and Sovereignty and examined various pieces of British and Australian legislation. It was all about sovereignty and the wish for Australian society to come under Aboriginal structures. It is clear and evidenced what Dennis presented; it is not evidenced what the participants did or not understand.

It was actually a special ceremony.

In more recent years we have reviewed our collection management policies to address Quandamooka community expectations and intellectual property considerations. We have drafted a Cultural Protocol document which is a broad statement of underlying guiding principles. It is not intended to be minutely prescriptive. The principles are based on values and expectations of the community.

Database Language and Display Captions and Text

We have a collection database that has been compiled over the past 32 years mainly by volunteers. The language in the descriptive fields is often ill informed, culturally nuanced and Eurocentric. Our file names for

digitized images are problematic also with volunteers digitizing the images and applying Eurocentric metadata and file names. When items are misnamed, they become unsearchable and invisible in our collection.

The captions and text on the walls flow on from the information that is in our database. We have started getting photographs and taking them to elders and Island organisations to try and put all the names of the people in the images.

Auntyn Evelyn Parkin

On the next page is a photo of Great Grandfather Dick Martin, Great Granny Nuningha and the little boy is my Grandfather Alfred Martin.

A common practice throughout Australian museums are photographs on walls of Aboriginal people without names, whilst you will see non-Aboriginal people with names and descriptions attached to the photos. It is a sad thing to see and we have begun a process of talking with our Elders to correct this. At our museum, a collection of photographs and stories are held and only with the permission of the families can they be accessed. We believe this helps people to contribute their stories and photographs to the Museum, knowing that they will be looked after and only accessed with their permission. Something that I



and my family have experienced as Aboriginal people is photographs of our old people that are in the public domain being used without the permission of the families of those in the photos. Family members feel physically sick over the lack of protocol and the spirit is affected.

Aunty Evelyn Parkin

Contemporary Collecting

Our program of contemporary collecting is often driven by requests from groups in our community. These projects result in Quandamooka and non Quandamooka perspectives being included into our collection. An example is the One Mile Project, with members of the One Mile Aboriginal Community 1942 to current coming together for a morning tea and to talk about their stories of One Mile. We hope for a collaborative book about One Mile as well.

Elisabeth Gondwe

Museum Displays

This is our greatest challenge at the moment. Our displays are relatively unchanged since they were made 32 years ago by the original committee. Many of those people have now passed or are no longer active in the museum. We have an opportunity to change some of the stories that are on our walls and present a less Eurocentric rendition of history. As Aunty Evelyn eloquently explains. “There are two perspectives. Those who came from the ships and those that were here on the shore.”

In 2018 we made a map of Minjerribah with original ancient names over landscape. This is in our foyer as you walk in. Our map is part of this wider process of cracking the Eurocentric laminate that covers our local area. Once it had been done, others follow suit. It becomes accepted. For example,



the new Strad Ferries sign. Our map was an attempt at decolonisation which is an aesthetic strategy to question settler colonialism. Through our map we reveal the shocking to many fact that there are pre-colonial names! We try to use heritage, ie original place names to unpack the complexities of the colonial state.

The inclusion of Quandamooka knowledge requires an open dialogue about history within the local communities. It is an ongoing process which will never be finished.

We do not want our forward going relationships to reproduce existing inequalities.

In Canada they have treaties with first nations and so are further along

the road of addressing colonialism in their museums than we are in Australia. The crux of the argument that Caitlin Gordon-Walker and First Nation thinkers from Canada are making is: When indigenous people assert their right to self-determination by challenging the existing state of Indigenous / colonial settler relations, and it is directed to a non-indigenous audience within the authoritative space of a museum, it becomes legitimized as the new norm. This establishes a new standard or conversation to enact further shifts in mainstream understanding.

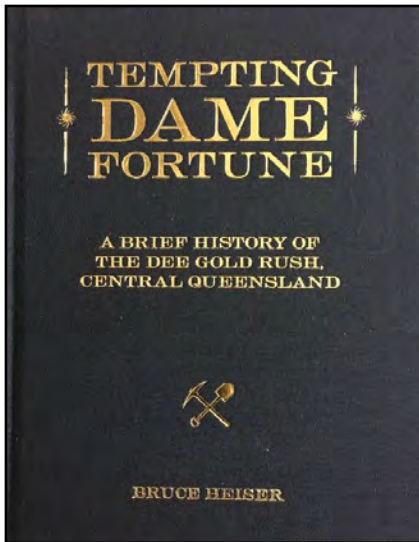
Learning from this, the way forward for our Museum. In the authoritative space of our museum we will create new stories and norms for Australian society.

Notes

- 1 Gordon Walker Caitlin "Beyond Inclusion: Canadian and Indigenous Sovereignties in Mainstream Museums *BC Studies*; Vancouver Iss. 199, (Autumn 2018):129 p.13
- 2 Blake Thom 2010 *North Stradbroke Island Historical Museum Assessment of Significance* Funded by Community Heritage Grant Department of the Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts.
- 3 *The Oodgeroo of the Tribe Noonuccal Custodian of the Land Minjerrabah Collection Management Deed Between the North Stradbroke Island Historical Museum and the Walker Family.* March 2012 Prepared by Terri Janke and Company.
- 4 Gordon Walker Caitlin "Beyond Inclusion: Canadian and Indigenous Sovereignties in Mainstream Museums *BC Studies*; Vancouver Iss. 199, (Autumn 2018):129. p9

**Tempting Dame Fortune, A
Brief History of the Dee
Gold Rush, Central
Queensland.** Bruce Heiser.
Koro Press, PO Box 360,
Annerley, 4103 PRICE \$28.95

**Reviewed by
Humphrey McQueen**



Although the Dee gold rush lasted barely four years from August 1903 in an area under five kilometers, strikes like it kept the rushes from never ending. Slightly to the southwest of Rockhampton, the Dee was overshadowed physically and financially by the Mt Morgan mines, by then under the control of William Knox D'Arcy who sank much of his returns into the search for oil in Persia, one

result being that we once again face the prospect of nuclear strikes.

The widowed Sarah Heiser and four of her children landed in Rockhampton from London in 1884 as bounty migrants. She bought into a drapery and then ran several hotels before her death in 1909. Her eldest child, Sam, arrived with his family in 1889, conducting a succession of businesses but also taking shares in claims on the Stuck Oil gold field where he and his wife, Rose, ran an eponymous hostelry.

Bruce Heiser has produced the best kind of family history, taking sightings from several perspectives to remain even-handed when reporting accusations against his forebears for claim-jumping. Whatever the truth of those matters, he is right to identify anti-Semitism in how the Brisbane *Truth* wrote up the proceedings.

Despite the Eureka rebellion, it is the bush workers following the clip who people the nomad tribes of Russel Ward's *The Australian Legend*. For an article on 'Improvising Nomads' in the *Journal of Australian Colonial History* for the fiftieth anniversary of Ward's classic in 2008, I worked from my research into builders' labourers to track seafarers, shearers and miners as they came and went on construction sites, following 'seasonal work', to wind up by proposing that

... the materials presented above
do not pose mutually exclusive

determinants, neither nomadism versus neighbourliness, cabinet-making against bush carpentry, not builders' labourers in place of pastoral workers. Analysing other segments of the workforce to enrich our apprehension of the Legend invites researchers to emulate the improvising nomads.

Holding a single occupation across a year was less common than today, with bluey-humpers chopping wood for a feed or digging out cesspits for a fiver and bottle of spirits.

The mobility of these regiments in the reserve army of labour deposited a seam through many Australian lives. My father was born in 1899 at Anakie on the gem fields further west, returning to pick up five rubies in 1916 to have them stolen in a Brisbane boarding house. My maternal grandfather and his family were unluckier by far when he died at Mt Morgan of black lung in his late thirties.

Nomadism extended to the built environment. Two Heiser hotels were not the only buildings to follow the money from field to field. Moreover, publicans were accused of seeding fields with nuggets to attract custom. Not all goldfields publicans were as loathed as Bentley over Scobie's murder at the Eureka Hotel yet they were not to be trusted. Hence, in the main street of Mt Morgan stands one

of this country's few monuments to workers, an indifferent statue called 'Running the Cutter'. Before miners sent boys to the pub for ale, they rubbed cheese around the bottoms of the billies to stop the publican leaving too big a head and so got a full measure.

We learn of the motley of people trying their hand, including professional chaps. A miner's widow, aided by her two children, seems to be the only female to work her own claim, though others held shares. There is no sign of a Chinese, not even gardening. The old hands knew to plant cabbages, tomatoes and as soon as they arrived.

Most claims were worked by three or four, for reasons that Blainey lays out, not least for safety. Despite the field's smallness and brevity, the structure of capital versus labour that came with the sinking of deep shafts from Mootna to Bendigo penetrated these gullies. Sam Heiser took hundreds of pounds out of the labour-power he bought. Some wage-slaves set up a branch of the Workers Political Organisation, strengthening Labor's hold on rural electorates.

Lone hands hung about once the Dee rush was over, the likes of Cider Jack, John the Liar, Tom the Bear and Dick the Devil, the latter dying insane. The field witnessed three suicides and one attempt, for which crime the offender was sentenced to one minute's imprisonment. The sole fatality could

have been recorded with the opening line of *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony*: ‘... a man had been buried alive ...’

Regular floods and poor returns saw the State government at last provide subsidies of five shillings a week and a few tools. The happy few kept mum until their nuggets were safe in Rockhampton and they were back on their claims, armed with Winchesters.

Lassiter’s reef in 1930 was not the only glimmer of relief as the second Great Depression hit. At 8 pm on 28 February 1933, Brisbane radio station 4BH presented a thirty-minute feature set to music on ‘the famous Dee Rush.’

Neither Dee nor Struck Oil lingers even as a ghost town as does Coolgardie where an extensive cemetery and a two-storey pub draw film crews seeking atmosphere and ‘location’, and where the streets offer a Post-Modern tourist attraction with photographs as simulacra for the buildings that once stood on those sites.

None of Heiser’s settlements is mentioned in the 1992 *The Cambridge Dictionary of Australian Places*, but neither is Bouldercombe, the name by which Mt Usher appears on maps today. Anyone at work on an equivalent guide to places that used to be, they will be well advised to put it online to keep it up to date as mining communities

shrivel, and not just because of fly-in and fly-out workforces.

Some 120km inland from the Dee, Utah-Mitsubishi developed Blackwater from 1965 to a population of almost 8,000 by the 1991 census. Driving through in July 2016, we saw a motel complex which never opened, boarded-up shops and union posters demanding equal redundancies for miners and managers. That socio-political landscape hardened by nearly twenty years of drought helps us to understand the appeal of Adani. Earlier this year a State Labor Minister told the ABC that unemployed miners could be ‘refitted’ before correcting herself to say ‘re-trained’; they know what she meant and what her kind thinks of them.

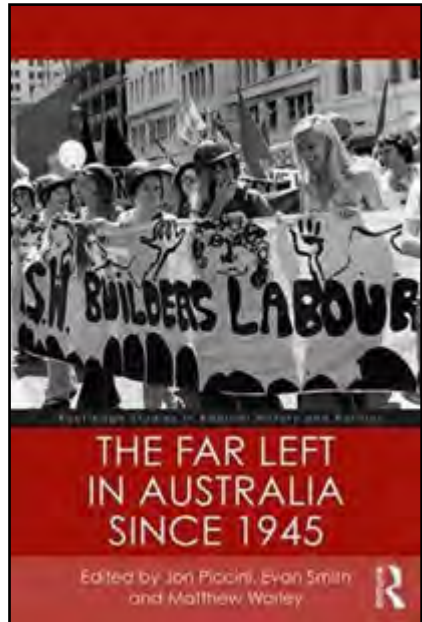
Tempting Dame Fortune is an appropriately handsome volume with gold lettering embossed on black velveteen binding. The story is retold through detailed captions to thirty-one illustrations and four surveyor’s plans. Fourteen pages of notes enrich the thirty-seven pages of text. An index would be the very pineapple of perfection.

A quotable instance for everyone working on any aspect of the period: from sport to a first-hand account of learning to puddle. Rich pickings for geographers, who unearth a lot of pay dirt through which labour historians need to sift.

'Colour' refers to the minute particles from panning; 'specks' weigh up to an ounce, while a 'nugget' is anything bigger, with the largest from the Dee being 182 ounces, then valued at £728, from Sam Heiser's claim. His great-grand son mints all three.

The Far Left in Australia since 1945. Edited by Jon Piccini, Evan Smith and Matthew Worley (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2019), pp. xiv +286, AU\$49.99 (pb).

Reviewed by Duncan Hart



The Far Left in Australia since 1945 is a sprawling book, reflecting the sprawling and variegated strands of far-left politics in Australia in the period under discussion. The book, despite its title, lays no claim to be a definitive history of the far-left, but rather an effort to plug the gaps in existing scholarship and cast a light on neglected histories. In this respect there is a lot to commend it.

The book is divided into four discrete sections: Organisational histories focused on the Communist Party of Australia, the Cold War of the 50's and early 60's, far-left interventions into social issues of the 60's and 70's, and finally a chapter on the "mainstreaming" of the far left.

As befits their influence, the Communist Party of Australia (CPA), which reached its zenith of 20,000 members and one parliamentary seat by the end of World War II, is the subject of much of the work. Three chapters look at the process of splintering and crisis within the CPA as a part of the international crisis of global Stalinism in the aftermath of Khrushchev's "Secret Speech", the USSR invasions of Hungary and Czechoslovakia and the Sino-Soviet Split. These chapters help to complement Tom O'Lincoln's post '45 CPA history, *Into the Mainstream*, by putting more meat on the bones of the issues at stake.

Many of the chapters indicate the manner in which far-left ideas and social movements are inspired by developments internationally. For instance, the chapter by Kyle Harvey on the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament in Australia in the 60's, inspired by its emergence in the United Kingdom, has direct echoes in terms of the recent emergence of Extinction Rebellion, from its tactics to its slogans. This alone should make this chapter

required reading for environment activists.

Many chapters make clear that the far left has always been engaged with political campaigns aiming for social change, ranging from Aboriginal rights, to the student movement against the Vietnam War, to Women's and Gay Liberation. These chapters are hardly an exhaustive account, but provide a fascinating insight into the relationship between, and impact of, far left politics of such issues. These are critical insights, revealing that far left activists often struggled to engage fruitfully within broader social and workers' movements. The chapter by Diana Covell on the Wollongong Jobs for Women Campaign and the damaging involvement of the Socialist Workers Party (predecessor of today's Socialist Alliance and Socialist Alternative) is a good example of how even non-Stalinist politics were no magic bullet that guaranteed the right approach in all circumstances. Lewis D'Avigdor's history of the largely forgotten Action Conference on Racism and Education held at the University of Queensland in 1972 provides a similar example of how the left grappled with strengthening demands for "Aboriginal control of Aboriginal Affairs" as ideas of Black Power took root amongst indigenous activists.

A theme which winds through many of the chapters and sections, without being a dedicated element of any, is the

influence nationalism had on the far left, particularly the CPA and its offshoots. Whether it's Elizabeth Humphrey's perceptive analysis that the CPA-led AMWU's "left" nationalism led them down a political trajectory which embraced class collaboration through the Price and Incomes Accord, the CPA (Marxist-Leninist)'s effort to articulate an "anti-imperialist" Australian nationalism, or the legacy of a large body of CPA-inspired left nationalist cultural production as outlined by Lisa Milner, nationalism was clearly a touchstone.

That nationalism was a poisoned chalice is revealed in Piccini and Smith's chapter on opposition to the "White Australia Policy" by the CPA. While the CPA took up the tradition of internationalism in the Australian workers' movement, and hence that tradition's principled opposition to racially discriminatory immigration restrictions, the chapter argues that it was only after 1945 that the CPA began to articulate a worked-out critique of White Australia. By this time, after adopting the politics of the Popular Front and support for Australia's war-effort, the CPA was not so much arguing for internationalism but calling for a more inclusive Australian nationalism. This hamstrung the CPA's critique, leading them to castigate migrants from Eastern Europe as reactionary "balts" fleeing the progressive Eastern Bloc states, an epithet later used against Vietnamese refugees.

This review cannot adequately do justice to the sheer diversity of topics represented in the book but has hopefully whetted the appetite. It provides a range of valuable insights for left-wing activists and scholars today who want to understand history in order to challenge capitalism and its morbid symptoms in the present.

**Bjelke Blues: Stories of
Repression and Resistance
in Joh Bjelke-Petersen's
Queensland, 1969–1987,**
edited by Edwina Shaw.
Andalso Books, Queensland,
2019.

Reviewed by John McCollow



It is now over thirty years since the demise of the long political career of Joh Bjelke-Petersen and nearly fifteen years since his death, the latter controversially marked by a state funeral. *Bjelke Blues*, as its subtitle states, is a collection of “stories” about life during the Joh era in Queensland. There are over 40 contributions; most take the form of reminiscences, though

some are works of “creative non-fiction” or fiction, and a few are more akin to reportage. The contributors include some well-known and some lesser known social and political activists, academics, writers and artists. Many of them are, as Matthew Condon points out in his *Foreword*, ‘men and women who were at the end of police batons and tossed into police paddy wagons, who were at the front line fighting for justice and decency when Queensland was a thoroughly indecent place’ (p. 9).

The stories paint a vivid picture of the corruption, the misuse of the power of the state, the disregard for democratic principles, and the racism, sexism and xenophobia that marked the Joh era. They depict the contempt, harassment, victimisation and violence visited on those whose culture, values or politics were deemed to be out of line with the prevailing ethos of the Joh regime. But they also tell of a resistance movement that persevered, and of a vibrant alternative arts scene, which included theatrical productions by a variety of groups, including the Popular Theatre Troupe, La Boite, the TN! Ensemble and the Streets Arts Community Theatre Company; the political cartoons of Matt Mawson; and the pulsating, defiant beat of punk rock provided by 4ZZZ and a variety of local bands. Anne Jones observes,

There’s a reason punk rock emerged simultaneously in

three cities in the world—New York, London and Brisbane. In New York and London, musicians invented punk to reject commercial music. In Brisbane, we were rejecting Joh Bjelke-Petersen and police harassment, but more than that we were imagining a future where we could create our own culture. (p. 157)

As Condon notes, many of the stories bring back into our awareness events that were under-reported at the time and perspectives that were dismissed or ridiculed by the powers that be. Some of the stories are amusing retellings of incidents that demonstrate the absurdity of the then prevailing practices and circumstances (e.g. Glenn Davies’s account, p. 56, of the illegal street march down a quiet, rural street at 2.45 am by Bundaberg dentist Henry Akers and his dog); some are wistfully sad, recalling injustices that can never be made right and the legacy of which cannot be extinguished (e.g. Melissa Lucashenko’s telling, pp. 200–209, of the treatment of Boggo Road inmate, Gary Gray); some contributors have maintained their rage:

I’m glad he’s dead. The Lutheran. He was disgusting. I hated his moral superiority, the whiff of manifest destiny. I hated the way his henchmen stomped the sweetest kids in town. Kids who were born different, chose different, whatever, and became

the punching bags for those rednecks. So good riddance. May we never see their like again. (John Willsteed, p. 192)

From the perspective of an historian, the book presents some difficulties. The “story-telling” format makes for accessible and evocative reading, but with some of the stories it is difficult to judge how “creative” the writer has been, what is factual and what has been embroidered or invented. Further, we get the authors’ personal perspectives, but little in the way of measured, in-depth analysis. Of course, the book is not intended as a scholarly treatise.

Unavoidably, there are a number of key issues and events of the Joh era that receive little or no mention. The SEQEB dispute, the appointment of Albert Field to the Senate, the Cedar Bay raids, the SEMP/MACOS banning and the Joh for PM campaign are some examples.¹ Only two of the 43 contributions are specifically about environmental protests. Most of the contributions deal with events and personalities in south-east Queensland, other areas of the state (including remote Indigenous communities) could be better represented. Some attention could also be paid to trade unions, the Labor Party and other potential, but chronically ineffective, sources of opposition to the government. Finally, (putting aside the iniquitous effects of the gerrymander) the majority of Queenslanders voted for conservative,

non-Labor parties in each of the seven state elections in which Joh Bjelke-Petersen was returned as Premier.² In this volume, most of the writers focus on protesters, oppressed groups, politicians and/or police, that is, those on the front line of the political struggle. Attention to life among the mostly politically uninvolved, but conservative voting, majority is warranted.

The good news is that all these areas provide ample potential material for a second volume of *Bjelke Blues*.

Bjelke Blues should take its place as required reading for Queenslanders alongside the works of Matthew Condon and others who have documented the history of the Joh era. For those of us who lived in and through that era, it serves as a useful reminder of what we should never forget. But there is now a generation of Queenslanders who are well into their adulthood and have no direct experience or knowledge of the Joh years. The book may prove an even more important read for them. Its stories show, on the one hand, how prejudice, misinformation and authoritarianism can be marshalled for political success (over a prolonged period of time). On the other hand, they also show that hope, courage and decency cannot be extinguished.

These remain important insights in the current political situation.

Notes

- 1 Police corruption has been already well covered in Matthew Condon's series of books: *Three Crooked Kings*, 2013; *Jacks and Jokers*, 2014; *All Fall Down*, 2015; *The Night Dragon*, 2019.
- 2 In 1969 and 1972, "conservative, non-Labor" parties includes the DLP, Liberal and Country Parties. In 1974, 1977, 1980, 1983 and 1986, they include the Nationals and Liberals.

Obituaries

Vale Les Crofton

Les was a great supporter of the BLHA who attended most meetings of the Association and made many suggestions for various projects. Les once told me that he was a member of the CPA when he was a young man in Mackay. The following is an obituary taken from the RTBU journal, *The Advocate*, Autumn 2019.

Greg Mallory

Vale Les Crofton. A true custodian of our Union



The RTBU is stronger today for Les Crofton's staunch commitment to workers and our industries.

The former State Secretary of the Australian Rail Union/Rail, Tram and

Bus Union, Les Crofton, passed away on 3rd November 2018 at the age of 81.

Les became a widower at a young age after the death of his beloved wife Carmel. Les never remarried. He dedicated his life to his children, his union, and his mates.

With the passing of Les, the RTBU has lost one of its most widely-respected retired members and former officials. Les was the Queensland State Secretary of the RTBU (and one of its predecessors the ARU) from February 1991 to December 2001. Prior to that he worked as the ARU Industrial Officer.

Trevor Campbell was President of the ARU and RTBU for 26 years, and a good friend of Les Crofton.

“Les was a clerk in the railways at Toowoomba. And his father was an engine driver. His father knew my father when they both worked at Longreach. Les wanted to be a teacher but that didn't work out. Not sure why because he was a pretty clever bugger,” said Trevor.

“During all my time working with Les we only had one minor exchange—that's how good he was to work with.”

**Ron Monaghan.
A Tribute delivered by
Ros McLennan at the
memorial/life celebration
for Ron
held at South Leagues
Club on 13th July 2019**



My sincere condolences to Vicki and the Monaghan family, because you will be feeling Ron's loss the deepest.

Thank you to the Premier for your kind words on our great friend and comrade, Ron Monaghan.

I say "friend and comrade" because for Ron Monaghan those two terms went together hand in glove.

If you were a friend, it was likely that you had been together in the trenches of industrial relations, fighting for fairness in workplaces and communities across Queensland and the nation.

You were a comrade-in-arms, bound together by a shared commitment to the value of a fair go.

It's a mantra that "Mono" stood by his whole life, no matter where or when.

His union life in Queensland began in 1989, escaping the rat race of Sydney with his young family.

Fortunately the Missos were big enough to overlook his connection to NSW, and took him on as an Organiser.

He came to Queensland in a time of great change. The Nationals were on the way out under a cloud of corruption and the Goss Labor government was ready in waiting.

It was a good time to enter the union movement in Queensland, and people like Ron only made it better.

He excelled in his role at the Missos—now known as United Voice—contributing to improved outcomes for workers, particularly in the cleaning and brewing industries, and he was branch secretary by 1999.

By then his attachment and commitment to Queensland was growing almost as quickly as his family!

His influence grew in the union movement as he showed workers, politicians and other union leaders that he would not back down if he had the support of his members, no matter what the battle.

His involvement in the Labor Party also grew stronger over this time, and

he was a key player—and opponent—in many of my early experiences in the Party.

He was prepared to listen respectfully but always took his opportunity to speak up, especially when it was on behalf of workers, and the members he represented.

It was these qualities—evident to friends and comrades and opponents alike—that would shine brightest in some of the challenging times ahead.

Ron was elected General Secretary of the Queensland Council of Unions in 2007, succeeding now Minister for Industrial Relations Grace Grace.

He came to the Gen Sec position as Australian Labor surfed into government on the wave of public anger generated by the Your Rights at Work campaign.

He was one of the many union leaders and members who played their part in ridding Australia of John Howard and his insidious anti-worker “WorkChoices” regime.

But “Mono” soon realised there was no time for victory laps or to rest on laurels ... our movement needed a clear strategy for growth and building influence in the industrial, political and social issues of Queensland.

He and the QCU set about developing a new strategic direction for the Council, shifting to a campaigning focus that could deliver not simply the commitment to deliver real change for Queenslanders, but the capacity to actually do something about it.

This capacity to deliver soon became evident when the Bligh Government moved to privatise rail, road, port and forestry assets shortly after its election in 2009.

Put simply, these were stormy times across the movement. We were fortunate that Ron’s calm, steady hand was on the helm.

As the asset sales plans of the Bligh government emerged, Ron kept constant counsel with other union leaders and the Executive, and ultimately signed off on a campaign aimed at reversing the government’s unpopular decision.

It was a public campaign like no other the QCU had ever run.

He commissioned television ads featuring a man answering his granddaughter’s killer question: “Grand-dad, who owns Queensland?”

He engaged expert economists to demonstrate how the “sugar hit” of public asset sales would only deliver economic pain and lost jobs.

He stood and spoke at mass rallies with other union leaders from the RTBU, the ETU, the AMWU and the Services Union.

He personally debated the issue with then Treasurer Andrew Fraser, who later described the late-night economic conversation as “cruel and unusual punishment”.

It was clearly a difficult time for the movement but I think Ron’s integrity, commitment and foresight stood out clearly in those days.

He later said of those times:

“Unions will always stand up for things that we—and the community—believe in no matter which side of politics is in power.

“These assets belong to the people of Queensland and the ongoing revenue they generate should be used to build a better future for the state.”

Ron believed that a critical part of the Queensland Not 4 Sale campaign was to make privatisation of public assets so toxic that it would poison any government that tried it on again, no matter what colour.

Well he was right!

The Queensland union movement may not have won that privatisation battle in

2012 but we damn well won the asset sales war against Newman in 2015, and Mono should be proud of leading the Queensland Union movement into those battles.

Under his leadership, the union movement refreshed its commitment to a shared vision for Queensland.

The significance of Labour Day was enhanced and elevated by Ron’s determination to maintain its role in our historic and social calendar, despite the LNP’s desperate attempts to undermine it.

He was a tireless fighter for reparation of the Stolen Wages, supporting the indigenous community in their long fight for wages stolen from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers over many decades. A final resolution now appears closer in this long battle, and much credit must go to Ron for his efforts in this struggle.

Ron supported and strengthened the QCU’s branch network, in what is Australia’s most decentralised state, and this network continues to provide a valuable framework to connect with workers in regional communities.

He absolutely believed that all workers should come home safe after a day’s work. He was committed to improving safety in the workplace and was a fearless advocate in the QCU’s

ongoing and steadfast campaign for safer workplaces over many years.

He fought to his very final days for others, campaigning for Labor's improved cancer care package in the federal election. He also worked hard fundraising for research into men's health issues, so others might benefit. (There's a flyer on your tables that gives details on how to help Ron's efforts for Movember)

He relished the chance to build links with international unions, particularly enjoying his time in China as a guest in QCU delegations.

Former QCU President John Battams gives an insight into Mono's generous nature, when on an overnight train trip in Mongolia, Ron left his seat to go to the toilet. He came back to find a toothless old Chinese woman had stolen his pillow and was fast asleep on it. He didn't have the heart to ask for it back!

I guess that reflects the unique qualities of Ron Monaghan.

As a man, he always had the time and capacity for a thoughtful answer or generous gesture no matter how much was going on around him.

His energy and integrity were always prominent, but his love for Vicki, his family and friends and working comrades towered above all.

His dedication, commitment and belief has given strength to many in this room, including me.

We in the union movement are privileged to have worked and spent time with our friend and comrade Ron, and we will miss him greatly.

He will remain an enduring bright light in many lives.

Vale Mono.

Contributors

Raymond Evans is a widely published social historian, specialising in conflict studies, race relations, war and society study and popular culture. Understanding the Red Flag Riots has been a preoccupation across many years. He now also writes poetry and memoir.

Dr David Faber is currently Adjunct Research Fellow in the College of Humanities, Arts & Social Sciences at Flinders University & Vice President of the Labour History Society SA. This paper is an advance on the ongoing writing of the forthcoming critical biography “An Anarchist Life: FG Fantin 1901–42”

Elisabeth Gondwe graduated with a Master of Arts in Cultural Heritage Studies in Anthropology and Archaeology in 1999. Since that time, she has worked recording community histories mainly using oral history. She has been associated with the North Stradbroke Island Museum on Minjerribah since moving to the Island in 2000. She is currently employed at the Museum as a Musarian/Researcher. She is President of Oral History Queensland.

Duncan Hart is a member of Socialist Alternative and unionist, currently studying History (Honours) at the University of Queensland.

Dr John McCollow has been a teacher and a long-time union officer. He is a life member of the Australian Education Union and the Queensland Teachers’ Union. His research interests include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education, the funding of education, vocational education and training, and teacher unions.

Humphrey McQueen is a Canberra based activist and freelance historian. His most recently published books are “We Built This Country” (2011), about builders’ labourers and their unions 1871 to the future; and “Framework of Flesh” (2009) on the battle of builders’ labourers for health and safety. His writings over the past 50 years can be accessed at www.surplusvalue.org.au/McQueen/index.htm

Aunty Evelyn Parkin is a Quandamooka Elder of Minjerribah / North Stradbroke Island. She is a member of the National Aboriginal and Islander Catholic Council and Murri Ministry of Brisbane. She was invited to be on the North Stradbroke Island Museum on Minjerribah Committee four years ago. She has enjoyed her time immensely while contributing to her own true history of the island and making her community a place for visitors to come and learn about Truth and Reconciliation.

Ted Riethmuller was a retired electrician who was very keen that the experiences of everyday workers be documented as well as the work processes, material and equipment they use—especially now in a period of rapid change. He encouraged workers to document their lives and tell their stories. No one else can.

Dean Wharton is joint editor of the QJLH. He qualified as a radiation therapist in the UK and was active in the Society of Radiographers, becoming a regional branch secretary and subsequently the National Council member for Yorkshire. Following a move to the UNISON trade union he was elected as a health branch secretary and seconded from the NHS on a full time basis. In Australia he has been an active member of HSU (Vic) and United Voice (Qld). He is currently researching Alex Macdonald and the CPA in Queensland as part of a MPhil at the University of Queensland.



Queensland Comrades Speak

There are valuable lessons all of us who are active in the labour movement can learn from those who travelled the road before us.

This project was supported with funding from a Roger Coates Labour History Research Grant, under the auspices of SEARCH Foundation.

Interviews were conducted by Ross Gwyther, from the Brisbane Labour History Association



Website:

<http://www.qld-comrades-speak.org.au>

Audio interviews and transcripts available

This website contains interviews with former members and supporters of the Communist Party of Australia who were active in Queensland in the 1940s and 1950s. The interviews were based around a discussion of the organising strategies and methods which Party members used during those years. All of those who were interviewed were very keen that their stories might play a small part in labour movement struggles of the coming years.

The interviews were conducted during 2013, mostly in Brisbane and Townsville.

The Brisbane Labour History Association

The Brisbane Labour History Association was formed in 1990 to encourage and promote the study, teaching, research and publication of labour history and the preservation of labour archives. There are no limits on the study of labour history and the diverse membership reflects many different areas of concern.

The BLHA is the Brisbane branch of the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History. The Association organises seminars, lectures, meetings, conferences and publications on themes of labour history. Membership is open to all individuals and organisations who subscribe to the Association's objectives.

Editorial Policy

The *Queensland Journal of Labour History* is a journal of labour and social history with a emphasis on Queensland history. The history of labour, the classic social movement, is central to our concerns, as are the histories of newer social movements. This journal is committed to the view that history has a social purpose. It publishes articles which, in Ian Turner's words, engage our sympathies, affect present circumstances and suggest answers to present problems. In the words of the Association's slogan, 'The Past is Always with Us'. Material published herein does not necessarily reflect the views of the Association or the Editors. The Journal's Editorial Board is a committee of the BLHA, chaired by the President.

Notes for Contributors

The Journal is published in Spring and Autumn each year. Articles of any length are invited; shorter contributions are encouraged.

First person accounts of trade union, social movement and progressive political struggles and organisations are particularly welcome. Reports on exhibitions, seminars and research projects are sought, as are book reviews and photo essays.

Contributions can be submitted either as hard copy (posted to The Secretary) or as an electronic file, emailed to qldlabhist@gmail.com. Please use Styles rather than character formatting from your article as it interferes with the laying out of the journal. Please ensure that your name, any relevant organisational affiliation, and all contact details are included in the article itself, as well as in the covering email.

Please also send details of any graphics, photos, maps, drawings, cartoons etc that might accompany your article.

The Queensland Journal Of Labour History

No. 29, Spring/Summer 2019
ISSN 1832-9926

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