

Alex Macdonald



1910 - 1969



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## *President's foreword*

Alex Macdonald was a stalwart of the labour movement in Queensland. Arriving in Australia from Scotland at the age of 15, Alex worked in New South Wales and Western Australia before landing in Queensland as the Depression deepened its grip on the nation.

Alex's commitment to the union movement started in earnest at that point, becoming involved in the Unemployed Workers' Movement. He became a member of the Communist Party, and later full-time secretary of the Federated Ironworkers' Association. Importantly, he was active throughout much of his life in the broader labour movement — including the Metal Trades Federation, Trades and Labour Council of Queensland, Australian Council of Trade Unions and the Queensland Peace Committee — and earned the respect of various factions through his tolerance, understanding and 'sense of humanity'.

It is fitting that the Brisbane Labour History Association should commemorate the life and work of Alex through the presentation of the annual Alex Macdonald Memorial Lecture. The inaugural lecture in 2009 was presented by Professor Margaret Levi (University of Washington, Seattle and University of Sydney, NSW).

Alex's family was represented at the lecture by his daughters, Lynette, who spoke on behalf of the family, and Margaret. This association is deeply grateful for their participation in, and endorsement of, this annual event in honour of their father. A number of other speakers also shared their personal insight into the life and influence of Alex Macdonald, including Alan Anderson, Hugh Hamilton and Ted Reithmuller (on behalf of Manfred Cross). This book includes two of these talks.

I commend this book to you.

Greg Mallory  
President  
BLHA

## Australian Dictionary of Biography



**MACDONALD, ALEXANDER** (1910–1969), ironworker and trade union official, was born on 21 May 1910 at Greenock, Renfrewshire, Scotland, third of five children of Alexander Macdonald, sawmill foreman, and his first wife Sybil, née Smith. Alexander senior worked for Scotts' Shipbuilding & Engineering Co. and presided over the Greenock Central Co-operative Society.

Young Alex attended Homescroft School until the age of thirteen. He worked at the shipyard for a short time, but was unable to find permanent employment in Scotland. His mother had died when he was six, and his father remarried in 1920. When relations between the children and their stepmother deteriorated, Alex followed his elder sister Anna to Australia. Emigrating under the 'Dreadnought scheme' — which aimed to train British youths to work on Australian farms — he sailed from England in the *Sophocles* on 13 August 1925. The ship was delayed at Cape Town for almost six weeks due to a worldwide seamen's strike; during this time, Alex carried messages to the sailors in the *Sophocles*.

After landing in Sydney, Macdonald spent three months at a training farm at Scheyville, then worked on properties in the mid-west of New South Wales. He made his way to Western Australia with the intention of returning to Scotland, but his father dissuaded him because unemployment had risen at home. Alex 'humped his bluey' and reached Queensland in June 1932. The Depression deepened and labourers' wages were cut. He refused the ten shillings a week then being offered on small farms, preferring to take seasonal work around the state. Involved in the Unemployed Workers' Movement, he was present when the jobless clashed with the Mackay City Council in January 1933 over the issue of their shelter shed. He learned much from this experience, and was soon committed to the UWM, and to organising and educating the unemployed.

Moving to Brisbane, Macdonald laboured on government relief

projects and lived in one of many camps for those 'on the dole' — a disused tobacco factory in South Brisbane known as the 'Crystal Palace'. Late in 1933, he attended a conference of the unemployed at the Trades Hall. About this time he joined the Communist Party of Australia. Elected to the party's state committee in 1936, he became Brisbane district branch secretary in 1937 and was subsequently elected to the party's central committee. As a communist candidate, he was defeated for the Legislative Assembly seat of Kurilpa in the 1938 elections, and for the Senate in 1949 and 1951.

At the general registry office, Brisbane, on 11 August 1939 he married Molly Cassandra Neild, a 32-year-old nurse. They lived at West End.

Macdonald was employed (from 1940) as an ironworker at the Evans Deakin shipyard. A member of the Federated Ironworkers Association of Australia, he was elected full-time secretary of the Queensland branch in January 1943. He took an active role in the wider trade union movement as secretary of the Metal Trades Federation, of the central disputes committee in the Queensland railway strike (February–April 1948), and of the Labor Day committee of the Trades and Labor Council of Queensland (1943–48). In addition, he belonged (1949–69) to the interstate executive of the Australian Council of Trade Unions, and later worked to secure the presidency for R.J.L. Hawke.

Although he lost the secretaryship of the FIA in a court-controlled ballot in 1951, Macdonald was elected secretary of the Queensland TLC in January 1952.

He spoke quietly, rarely raised his voice and seldom showed anger; he was also tolerant and understanding, and a good listener. The united front he built up involved many shades of militancy and political outlook, and his judgment earned the respect of various factions. His strength lay in negotiation.

Macdonald played a leading role in several major disputes, among them the Queensland meat strike (1946), the shearers' strike (1956) and the Mount Isa conflict (1964–65). When he spoke at demonstrations and meetings, he presented a well-researched and logical case. Conscious of the good name of the trade union movement, he was careful in

handling and recording money received.

Macdonald prepared cases for basic wage and equal pay claims in the State Industrial Court, promoted youth education and employment, advocated the extension of the basic wage to Aboriginal workers, and tried to improve annual, long service and sick leave benefits, minimum wages, restricted hours, safety laws and pensions. From November 1968, he represented the 40 unions affiliated with the TLC before the State Industrial Conciliation and Arbitration Commission. He tried to establish a liaison with university students and admitted them to the Trades Hall. Passionately interested in history, he collected, preserved and indexed union records. He was a member and vice-president of the Queensland Peace Committee.

Five ft 11 ins (180 cm) tall, solidly built, with brown eyes and brown hair, Macdonald smoked heavily, enjoyed a social drink, and was interested in music, theatre, art and reading. He was a devoted husband and father, and had a host of friends. At heart he was an internationalist and a humanitarian.

Survived by his wife and two daughters, he died of myocardial infarction on 18 August 1969 at Princess Alexandra Hospital, South Brisbane, and was cremated. His death shocked the union movement: thousands of mourners attended his funeral at which a piper played the lament of the clan Macdonald.

### **Cecily Cameron and Greg Mallory**

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L to R: Harold Evans, Eric Inge, Tom Cowton, Frank Corrie, Jim Petersen, Bob Anderson and Alex Macdonald. Photo courtesy Fryer Library (UQFL118 Box 288)

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**Print publication details:** Cecily Cameron, Greg Mallory, 'Macdonald, Alexander (Alex) (1910–1969)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Volume 15, [Melbourne University Press](http://www.melbourneuniversitypress.com.au), 2000, pp 184–185.



Alan Anderson

Speech – Alex Macdonald Memorial Lecture 2009

*Alan, who is now retired, started work as a plumber before becoming a Research Officer for the AMIEU (Federal), and later an Industrial Officer for the Australian Services Union. He is proud of having been President of the Foco Club.*

I first met Alex Macdonald in early 1965. I already knew of his reputation as Secretary of the Queensland Trades and Labour Council. In fact, he was well known throughout the Australian labour movement.

My arrival in Brisbane coincided with the tumultuous Mt Isa dispute in which he, along with others, was heavily involved. There was little opportunity to meet him on a personal level. However, many times later in 1965 and after I experienced his warmth of personality and empathy with young people seeking to involve themselves in the trade union movement and the wider labour movement.

As a plumber and a member of the Plumbers Union, the relatively small size of Brisbane allowed me an opportunity to rub shoulders with many luminaries of the Queensland movement; men such as Alex himself, Gerry Dawson, Ted Bacon, Jack Hanson, Cyril Boland, Hugh Hamilton

and many others. His friendship and mentoring meant a lot to me and helped me expand my role in the labour movement. In fact, my life in general was made the better for it.



*'When he spoke at demonstrations and meetings, he presented a well-researched and logical case.' Photo courtesy Fryer Library (UQFL118 Box 288)*

It is worth remembering that there were few young people at that time who were active in the trade union movement or even interested in becoming involved. Perhaps that is still the case. It was vital that people like Alex showed an encouraging interest in young activists, because so often they were faced with indifference or even hostility by folk who gained a start in the sharper and more acute political period of the Depression and the Second World War.

I experienced this at the Queensland Trade Union Congress in 1965 as the delegate representing the Plumbers Union. The President of the TLC was one Jack Egerton (later Sir John), who attacked me verbally as being ‘wet behind the ears’ because in my speech I had the temerity to make the mild observation that the labour movement, and the unions in particular, displayed little interest in creating an atmosphere where young people could identify with the aims of our movement. Believe me, it was a blistering attack which had greater impact when he brought to the attention of delegates the fact that I was not even from Queensland, but indeed from Victoria — almost an alien. To put it mildly, I was devastated by the tone of these attacks and the parochialism and ageism.

Sometime later, Alex took me aside, and with his characteristic warmth, gave me many friendly tips on what to say and when to say it, while making it crystal clear that what I said was correct and needed to be said. I can tell you I appreciated that!

In the 1960s, under the umbrella of the ACTU, each year a Trade Union Youth Week was held. That year I was involved, as I had been in Victoria. Trade Union Youth Week was a well intentioned attempt to project a youthful image during that week, but after that it was business as usual.

Although not obvious to everyone then, the ‘times were a-changing’. Conscription, the Vietnam War, and the events in Paris and Prague and throughout the world were politicising new people, mostly middle-class students, and not the types usually associated with unions.

Alex had recognised what was happening and made the facilities of the Trades Hall available to these new forces, because he saw that they embraced many of the causes that had been for many decades the sole domain of the left wing of the unions, the Communist Party, the Peace movement, the movement for Aborigine Rights and other humanist groups, including some churches.

It was during that time that a large civil liberties march started from the Queensland University led by people like Brian Laver, Dan O'Neill, Mitch Thompson and others. Marchers were attacked by the police in Roma Street. The police were encouraged by a repressive Liberal–Country Party government now led by a newly appointed Premier, Joh Bjelke-Petersen.

Alex took a bold stand in support of the students and staff of the university and called a hastily organised 24-hour stoppage of affiliated unions in support of civil liberties. It was a success and it opened up new avenues of cooperation between the unions and these new social forces that had not existed before.

In this new environment, it was agreed that Brian Laver be appointed as a research assistant at the Labour Council. Again, this was a bold step, and it must have taken much consultation to obtain support on the Labour Council. Clearly the union movement as a whole had reservations about this situation, but such was Alex's standing and the respect people had for him, this initiative and others were accepted.

One of these initiatives was the formation of the Foco Club. This club was run by, and organised by, the students involved in demonstrations on and off the campus, and by young students and workers who were members of the Young Socialist League (formerly the Eureka Youth League). The venue, the Trades Hall, was a drab old building, but it occupied a prime location and had a large ballroom and adjacent meeting rooms, ideal for the activities planned. These included entertainment, disco, folk songs and political discussion. Above all, it was a venue that could attract many young people looking for something new and radical. From Alex and his supporters' perspective,

*'Marchers were attacked by the police in Roma Street.' Photo: Semper Floreat, 17 March 1967, courtesy Fryer Library*



Foco made it easier for youth to identify with the trade union movement.

Remembering my criticism of the indifference of many affiliated unions of the Labour Council to the opening up of Trades Hall, Alex had to use all his negotiating skills to keep the Trades Hall open to Foco. And although we, the organisers of Foco, paid rent, without Alex we would not have got through the front door.

That Foco was a success was an understatement. Indeed, since our opening night on 3 March 1968, overall there would have been thousands of young men and women who converged on the Trades Hall for Foco's programs. All the various cultural entertainments and political discussions were held at the same venue, and sometimes at the same time.

One would have thought the affiliates would have been pleased that the Trades Hall was once more the scene of youthful activity. Although some welcomed Foco, many more barely tolerated our presence. It was Alex's generosity of spirit and support that allowed Foco to continue.

Alex died in 1969. He was not old, only fifty-nine, but he had achieved much. He was a person rare in the labour movement in that he was warm, approachable and empathetic. He was someone to model oneself on. I certainly tried to model myself on him and I am proud to say so.

Hugh Hamilton AM

*A Tribute to Alex Macdonald 1910 - 1969*

Alex Macdonald was a member of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Australia, Secretary of the Trades and Labor Council Qld and ACTU Executive Officer. Alex's greatest attribute was that he projected friendship and understanding to all who came to know him. Alex had the skills, the temperament and the ability to listen, and had a strong sense of humanity along with the capacity to communicate at all levels. This made him a valuable comrade in the building of a united front with the Labor Party, which was central to the CPA strategy.

He had a friendly personal and working relationship with union leaders who belonged to the ALP and other organisations — even those with tags that plagued the movement at the time (and some still do), e.g. right-wingers, groupers and others.

During Alex's tenure, the prevailing political climate of the Qld parliamentary Labor Party, and later the Country Party government, was very conservative and anti-communists in the extreme — they were parties of the same ilk.

An example of Alex's strength in bringing different factions together was the Mount Isa strike of 1964–65. Most of the workers were members of the Australian Workers Union, whose leadership was rejected and distrusted by the rank and file.

The TLC affiliated unions had significant members involved in the strike. There were also the workers who were supporters of the rank and file group led by Pat Mackie. The AWU and the rank and file group resisted coming together to a central collective body in the struggle against this powerful employer, Mount Isa Mines, but Alex's skills, with the help of others in the struggle who saw unity was critical, were successful in bringing the AWU and the Pat Mackie force under the collective leadership of the TLC. The AWU affiliated (paid its fees) with the TLC, but as soon as the strike was over, the AWU disaffiliated,

and did not re-affiliate for another 20 years plus.

Alex was aware of and understood the broader issues that were confronting Australia and other countries. He was an advocate and an activist in the movement for world peace, an initial member of the Vietnam Moratorium committee, and a beacon in the struggle for Aboriginal rights. He established union action committees for equal pay and was a strong supporter of the women's movement.

Of course he was an internationalist first and foremost — he understood that poverty, exploitation, peace and justice were worldwide issues.

During Alex's tenure on the ACTU Executive, he championed support of the union movement in the Pacific countries and in South Africa against apartheid. This work was subsequently recognised with the establishment of APHEDA — Australian People for Health, Education and Development Abroad, that now provides aid and training to the union movement in these countries.

Alex's world vision, like most communists and many left political thinkers at that time, had hopes that mankind could be free and that poverty and exploitation would be abolished with the coming of a socialist state. The Soviet Union and the Peoples Republic of China seemed to most of us to be the way forward for the liberation of mankind. (Those of us who outlived Alex and experienced the next 40 years witnessed these countries as totalitarian states with

*'A highlight of Alex's life was his visit to the Chinese Peoples Republic in 1956.' Photo courtesy Fryer Library (UQFL118 Box 288)*



shameful records in human rights.) Notwithstanding this, a highlight of Alex's life was his visit to the Chinese Peoples Republic in 1956. He returned from this visit in awe of what he saw and was told. Somewhere in the archives of the Fryer Library there are reams of paper Alex wrote about his visit to China.

During Alex's tenure with the TLC, there was a significant number of other communist party officials in unions affiliated to the Council. The most prominent were Gerry Dawson and Jack Hanson, both TLC Executive members. Indeed, Gerry Dawson was the TLC Honorary President for many years, also basic wage advocate for the TLC — a job he liked very much. But the three of them were never a monolithic group — they were never close. Hanson and Gerry were distant to each other and did not provide the help they could have to Alex.

Another point of interest — Gerry Dawson never ever came to terms with his removal from the office of TLC President to make way for Jack Egerton as full-time President. He was not alone.

In political terms, the decision to promote Egerton was a CPA and Left Labor union decision. The times had changed. The Parliamentary Labor and the Labor Party machine were not going to allow the central trade union movement's top position to be held by a Communist for much longer. The compromise top job had to be shared. The full-time President position was created and Jack Egerton got the job. If that decision had not been taken, it was possible Alex's position would have been challenged by the Labor Party machine.

Jack and Alex worked reasonably well together despite Jack using the position to elevate himself on the national stage of the ALP. He was really going places — but alas, his ego brought him unstuck. Winning favour with Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser to become 'Sir John' brought about his immediate sacking from the TLC and all his positions in the ALP. The reason was not so much Egerton's knighthood, but that Fraser colluded with the Governor General in the dismissal of the Gough Whitlam Labor government and the installation of the Fraser government six months earlier. The Labor movement saw Egerton's acceptance of the gong under these circumstances as

treachery. Alex did not live to see this — it was six years after he died.

Alex became secretary of the TLC of Qld in 1952. He replaced another well known and well liked communist, Mick Healy.

The worldwide political environment at the time of Alex becoming Secretary was one of fear and hysteria that Communist China would attack Australia and other countries of South East Asia (the Domino Theory). The Korean War was raging, and Australian troops were fighting and dying in this war. The Cold War was the breath of anti-communism in every land. This period saw the rise of Catholic Action in Australia, and the powerful Industrial Groups led by AB Santamaria — a movement that broke the Labor Party, but whose main task was to rid the trade union movement of communists and their so-called ‘fellow travellers’. Three years prior (1949) had seen the Menzies conservative government come to power and introduce the Communist Party Dissolution Bill and subsequent referendum to ban the party. To the credit of the Australian people, it was defeated, but ironically, the Queensland electorate voted for it.

Alex was an ironworker. He joined the union in the late thirties about the same time as another communist, Laurie Short. Laurie was soon to become disenchanted with the Communist Party and specifically the Ironworkers national communist leadership. He became an anti-communist warrior. In 1949, the Communist national leadership of the Ironworkers Union conducted a national ballot for the election of officers. All the communist candidates were elected. Laurie Short’s team was defeated. Laurie Short would not accept the decision and challenged it in the courts. In 1951, the court ruled the 1949 union ballot was rigged, dismissed the incumbents and installed Laurie Short’s team. This decision opened the door for court-controlled ballots in all unions. Alex Macdonald lost his job as the secretary of the Queensland Branch of the Ironworkers. Eight months later, Alex was Secretary of the TLC Qld, replacing Mick Healy. I do not know the circumstances of why or how, but the Communist Party would have been involved in the process. Mick Healy went to work on the waterfront.

During the 1960s, my wife Judy and I were on Alex’s TLC staff. Judy was an office worker along with Cecily Cameron. After Alex’s death,



Cecily researched his life's work in preparation for a book. This material is in the Fryer Library. My association with Alex was through my membership of the CPA and BWIU. On the occasion of Jack Egerton becoming President, Alex employed me to refurbish the TLC office to provide an office for Jack Egerton and revamp Room 9 the Executive Room. I came to know Jack and Alex quite well during that period.

1968–69 were the years that saw the eruption of great social movements — the women's movement, the anti-war movement, a rebellious youth movement and a revolution in music. Alex supported them all. The Queensland University campus gave birth to leaders like Dan O'Neill, Brian Laver, Mitch Thompson, Carol Ferrier and many others. Alex Macdonald wanted to bring this movement closer to the trade unions. The most charismatic figure was Brian Laver.

Alex persuaded Jack Egerton to employ Brian Laver as a youth worker. Egerton was reluctant, but agreed. The affiliated unions, most of whom were conservative, did not like the idea. Brian established a youth entertainment centre/meeting house in the ballroom on the third floor of the Trades Hall. It was known as Foco, and it was a rip-roaring success. It attracted hundreds of young people, but there were rumours of drugs, boys and girls behaving badly, and outspoken youth politics, which were not the flavour of the month with any part of the establishment — neither the current Country/Liberal Party government or the ALP.

Foco was short-lived. This experiment showed Alex how divorced the trade union movement was from the changes that were taking



*Brian Laver being prevented from speaking at the Moratorium Rally in Brisbane. Photo from political leaflet, courtesy Fryer Library*

place in society, and how these changes were bringing with them new organisations that were determined to have a say. The problem was that the vision of the young people, the women's movement and others in the social movement for change here and worldwide challenging the status quo was too much for the conservative forces of the trade union movement. There was also pressure from the Labor machine to disengage and distance Labor from the new democratic youth movement at the universities, and the new socialist youth organisations which were becoming very vocal. Foco was a long way in front of the trade union movement of that time, and particularly of Jack Egerton. Foco had to go, so too did Brian Laver.

Sad, but true, Alex lost support of several colleagues over Foco. He had to rebuild his relations with Egerton and other officials. Alex learned that a lot of work lay ahead to unite the unions with the social movement. The best example of the union's participation in the social movement was the BLF's Green Bans and the united decisive role the unions played with the community to save the Sydney Rocks precincts and other national treasures.

During most of the time Alex was Secretary of the TLC, he was a member of the Central Committee of the CPA and the ACTU Executive, working with Harold Souter and Albert Monk, who were Secretary and President respectively, and the most conservative of men. He respected them, and in return they respected him, and they had a good working relationship.

As to Alex's personal history — he was a Scotsman who came to Australia with his sister in 1925 at the age of 15. The Australian Government paid his fare under the 'Dreadnought Scheme'. Arriving in Australia, he was to be trained as a farmer, but this didn't happen. His destiny lay elsewhere.

Alex was married to Mollie and had two daughters — Lynette and Margaret. They lived in a house in Victoria Street, West End, and he was a devoted husband and father.

We are celebrating Alex's contribution to life 40 years after his death.

**We** can look back over these 40 years since he died. I certainly can. I wonder how he would have observed and responded to the events of the past 40 years, some of these events being:

- the China he saw as a vision for the future becoming a totalitarian capitalist market economy — no signs of socialism
- the winding up of the Communist Party of Australia
- the collapse of the Soviet Union and a return to capitalism
- the winning of the Vietnam War by the communists, but with real signs of a socialist state
- the stain on our state and the nation that was Bjelke-Petersen, and then Pauline Hanson and One Nation.

This past 40 years has also seen the occupation of Afghanistan by the Soviet Union, followed by two other wars involving Australia. We also bore witness to the killing fields of Cambodia, the follies of Nixon, Reagan, Thatcher, Howard and Blair's new Labor, the coalition of the willing-sponsored Iraq War, the apartheid practised by Israel, the power of Islam, the ticking clock of greenhouse gas emission, nuclear power and much more.

I have dwelt on the negative, but there has been much that has been positive in these 40 years. But it is the negative that will concern humanity and the planet into the future. The struggle is still there to be won. If he had not died at the age of 59, Alex and his comrades would still be participants in the struggle.

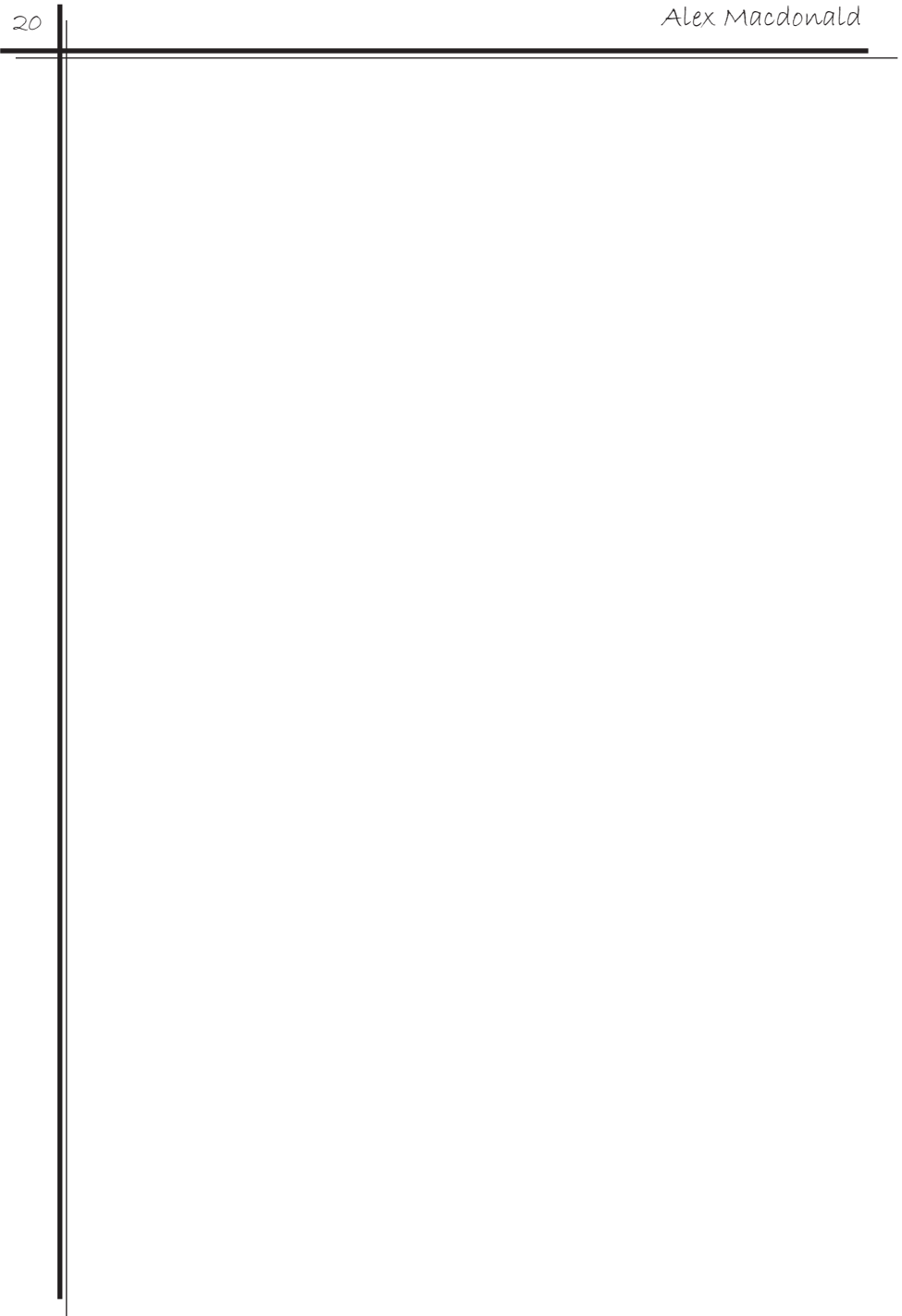
In summary, I have tried to give a picture of the status of the wider environment which was the environment in which Alex applied himself as a communist and a leader of the trade union movement. It depends upon the time and place one is positioned in the historical timeline. I think these are the circumstances that judge all public figures. Alex Macdonald did well very well indeed, and his methodology and his humanity have brushed many that knew him. Alex made a small but significant contribution to make the world a better place. On this occasion of the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his death, we acknowledge his valuable contribution.

*'Alex made a small but significant  
contribution to make the world a better place.'*  
*Photo courtesy Fryer Library (UQFL118  
Box 288)*



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*Note: Alex's old adversary Laurie Short died on 26 March 2009 at the age of 93.*





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