

Alex Macdonald: Personal and Public

My father, Alex Macdonald, was born in Greenock on the River Clyde, Scotland, on 21 May 1910, the middle of five children. His parents were Alexander Macdonald and Sybil Smith. His family origins on both parents' sides are in the Isle of Lewis and Harris, in the Outer Hebrides of Scotland.

Dad's mother Sybil died of tuberculosis in early 1917 before he was seven. His father Alexander then cared for the four eldest children in Greenock with the support of relatives and employed housekeepers. The youngest child, Colin, was a baby when their mother died; he was raised by two aunts on the croft where his mother had been born in the village of Leurbost in the Isle of Lewis. He subsequently raised his own family on that croft, where two of his children – my first cousins – live today.

In 1920 when Alex was ten his father married one of the housekeepers – 'Steppie' as the children called her was a cause of family breakup.

Dad left school at the age of twelve; ran away to London after his father's remarriage; left home to live with aunts; and worked in a Greenock shipyard for a short time. He studied a little at night – shorthand, typing and bookkeeping. His formal education was minimal. He was essentially self-taught and learned from life experience. He always valued the opportunities of formal education and regretted his own lack of achievement in that regard.

As the family broke up, the eldest four of the five Macdonald children migrated to Australia in the 1920s. Their father never saw them again, although correspondence between him and his children was regular. Dad applied to the Dreadnought Scheme for sponsored migration as a farm labourer. He left Scotland alone in 1925 at the age of 15 on the ship 'Sophocles', arriving in Australia in October 1925. The ship was delayed in Cape Town for five weeks by a world-wide seamen's strike – that was possibly his first experience of industrial action.

Dad was assigned to the Scheyville training farm west of Sydney for three months, then worked as a farm labourer until he had completed his

obligations under the Dreadnought Scheme. By that time the Great Depression had set in.

Dad began his search for employment in the late 1920s or early 1930s, aged around 20 years. This took him to many parts of Australia: 'humping his bluey' on the track; 'jumping the rattler'.

I recall looking at a map of New South Wales in my primary school atlas with him in the 1950s and my amazement that he had been to so many country towns, often moving around on foot, or sometimes by bicycle, looking for work. In 1962 when my late sister Margaret and I were holidaying with friends in Mareeba, I showed him a photo I had taken of a village hall on the Atherton Tablelands. Recognising the place, he recalled that he and his mates would raid the bins for food when the Saturday night dances had finished.

Dad had wanted to return to Scotland and travelled to Western Australia hoping to leave by ship from there. His father counselled against it because of high unemployment in Scotland in the Depression. I often reflect that this was selfless advice by my grandfather who would dearly have loved to have his son back in Scotland. Instead, Alex arrived in Queensland in 1932, travelling through much of the state picking up seasonal work. He was in Mackay in 1933 and part of a struggle by the unemployed for the erection of a shelter shed for their use.

Alex moved to Brisbane. His experiences on the track, of unemployment, and of solidarity with those in the same situation had had a strong impact on him. He lived in an unemployed workers' camp in a disused tobacco factory at Woolloongabba – the "Crystal Palace" – becoming one of the leaders there. He had itinerant work, and would remind us if we passed the Balmoral Cemetery that he was on a work gang that built the stone wall around the site.

In 1933 Dad attended a meeting at the Trades Hall aimed at establishing an organisation of unemployed workers. The Unemployed Workers' Movement was eventually formed. He spent months in Toowoomba organising the unemployed (where he taught himself to speak Esperanto).

Alex joined the Communist Party in Toowoomba in early 1934. He was elected to the State Committee in 1936, and in 1937 became Secretary of the Brisbane District Committee – a paid job! In 1938 he stood as a Communist Party candidate for the Kurilpa electorate; he also stood for the Senate in 1949 and 1951. His employment in the CPA continued until around mid-1940.

The precise reasons for Alex's joining the CPA are not certain. However, this was undoubtedly a logical progression from his experiences and politicisation during the Depression and activism in the Unemployed Workers' Movement. Very close family friends – whose parents knew Dad well during his time of unemployment in Brisbane in the 1930s – speak of their father's membership of the CPA at that time. Friendships and contacts such as these would also have been influential.

Dad's awareness of political developments in Europe – the rise of Nazism and the earlier establishment of the Soviet Union – presented him with stark political contrasts, and no doubt confirmed his philosophical choice of Communist ideology.

Alex met my mother Molly Neild (a triple-certificate nurse) through the Communist Party. Her friendship with the Julius family at Clayfield (where her mother was Postmistress) was no doubt her pathway into the Party. Their letters to each other prior to their marriage in 1939 (Mum was working in Toowoomba) reflect their shared values and commitment to the Party.

In 1940 Alex was employed as an ironworker in the Evans Deakin Shipyard at Kangaroo Point (where he met his future colleague Jack Egerton). This was to lead to his career in the trade union movement. He joined the Federated Ironworkers' Association of Australia, and in 1943 was elected full-time Secretary of the Queensland branch of that union. He was later defeated for that position in 1951. He was a member of the interstate executive of the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) from 1949 to 1969.

Alex was elected Secretary of the Queensland Trades and Labor Council (QTLC) in January 1952, a position he held until his sudden death at the age of 59 years on 18 August 1969. His office was on the ground floor of the old Trades Hall, in front of the Hall's cavernous library and with a view down

Edward Street. I remember it well. He remained a member of the Communist Party of Australia throughout his tenure at the QTLC.

Molly was an active Party member. Growing up within a Communist Party family in the 1950s and 1960s was a particular experience for my sister Margaret and me. I remember a cottage lecture at our home in 1960 by Harry Pollitt, General Secretary of the Communist Party of Great Britain.

Mum was very involved within the Queensland branch of the Union of Australian Women (UAW). She shared Dad's commitment to social justice and was active in the peace movement, the pursuit of Indigenous rights and numerous other causes. She was for years the international correspondent for the Queensland branch of the UAW. Mum died in 1992.

Alex's union role was all-consuming – frequent nights out at meetings, trips away within Queensland and interstate (such as to Melbourne meetings of the interstate executive of the ACTU). If he attended an evening meeting before we had a car, he would come home for dinner, then catch trams from West End to the city and home again! The only time we could be certain of being together as a family was during the Christmas holidays. Dad could not have given his life so totally to the union movement without Mum's support. She was the main, constant parent to Margaret and me.

Dad was involved in many disputes during his QTLC tenure. I remember the shearers' strike of 1956 (when I was victimised by my Grade Six teacher at West End State School), and the Mt Isa strike of 1964-5 when he played key roles both in fund raising for the support of the striking workers, and in attempting with others to manage and resolve the lengthy dispute.

Alex was fully committed to the welfare and well-being of workers and their families. He regarded the development of a dispute into strike action as failure, a last resort: his preference was always negotiation towards the satisfactory resolution of claims. Despite his modest wage, he always contributed to strike funds from his own pocket.

Dad was also very committed to the principles of and the fight for equal pay. The Equal Pay Committee was sponsored by the QTLC from around 1956. It comprised delegates from unions with female members and

representatives from other organisations including the UAW. Dad was a driving force within the committee which became inactive after he died.

He supported the formation of regional Trades and Labor Councils. I recall him helping with the construction of an office for the TLC at Southport in the 1960s, alongside comrades such as Uncle Bob Anderson.

Alex presented cases for basic wage and equal pay claims in the Queensland State Industrial Court. From 1968 he represented unions affiliated with the QTLC before the State Industrial Conciliation and Arbitration Commission.

Australian trade unions, with other sections of society, were involved in the peace movement from the early post-World War Two years. Alex was committed to the pursuit of world peace throughout his tenure as QTLC Secretary, and during the period from the 1950s to 1969 unions and the QTLC worked with the Australian Peace Committee. The annual QTLC Congress during that period always included issues relating to international peace and disarmament, atomic weapons and international affairs.

In 1962 Alex attended two world peace conferences: the “World Congress for General Disarmament and Peace” in Moscow, and the “Eighth World Conference Against Atomic and Hydrogen Bombs” in Japan.

Dad developed a deep interest in trade union history and would love to have written on the subject; that was his dream for his retirement years, sadly denied by his premature death.

Alex’s vision for the roles and responsibilities of the trade union movement in the community and in society was broad, arguably broader than is the case today. He advocated for the extension of the basic wage to all workers, for improvements in annual, long service and sick leave benefits, minimum wages, equal pay, gender equality, safety laws and pensions: a core focus for trade unions. But he also believed that trade unions must be concerned about improving the rights and conditions of disadvantaged groups across society such as Indigenous Australians, women, youth and students, and migrants. He was an internationalist, concerned about world peace, South

African apartheid, the impacts of colonialism, the plight of disadvantaged communities, and wealth disparities everywhere.

Trade unions, with Alex's involvement, supported the Indigenous political movements of the 1950s and 1960s, in Queensland and nationally. Kath Walker (Oodgeroo Noonuccal) was a close family friend as well as a comrade in the struggles of those times.

Despite the opposition of some unions affiliated with the QTLC Alex extended support to the growing student movement of the 1960s. In 1967 he facilitated the QTLC's industrial action in support of student protests, and in 1968 he ensured that the FOCO Club run by students was given use of space in the Trades Hall.

Dad delivered his last speech just days before his death in August 1969, to the Third National Clergy-Doctor Conference. His speech was titled "The Place of Trade Unions in Care and Healing". Both the nature of the conference itself and the content of Dad's paper are indicative of his extensive conception of the role of trade unions and of the regard in which he was held within the wider community.

The speech demonstrates his depth of thinking and analysis and his expansive view of the role and responsibilities of trade unions in society: that they must adapt to ensure they address the social, economic, political and moral challenges of the times. He covered six areas: Aboriginal People, Social Services, Employment, Global Employment, Technological Change, and Industrial Accidents and their Prevention. His prescience over 56 years ago is interesting: his thoughts about and care for the future; that planning must be good for all sections of society; and that trade unions had an integral role to play.

I recall his concern about the progress of automation and the impact that it would have on workers in various industries. I often wonder what he would think about today's rapid advancements in technology, the advantages and the disadvantages.

Alex and Molly had a keen awareness of injustice and held strong social justice values. Dad's experiences and observations during the Depression

honed his understanding of inequality and sense of responsibility to fight injustice. Our parents' shared commitment to social justice, equity and equality impacted not only Margaret and me but also our children.

Dad was of quiet demeanor and has been described in many complimentary ways: a good negotiator, tolerant and accepting, understanding, a good listener, not aggressive or confrontational, hard working. He liked people and in turn was liked and respected by many – the number and wide range of tributes following his unexpected death are a testament to the man who was my father. He was a loyal Australian and remained a proud Scot all his life!

Lynette Trad

January 2026