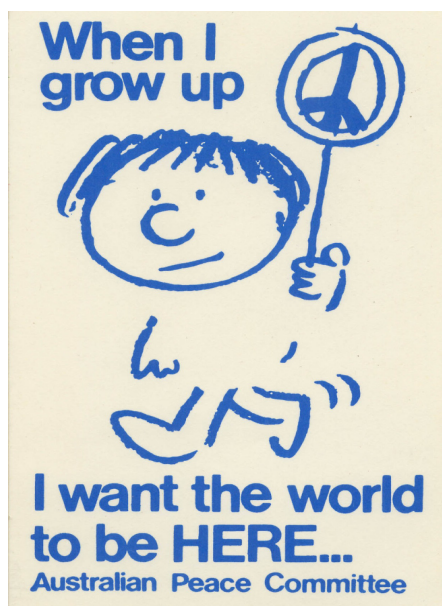


The Queensland Journal of Labour History

No. 42 Winter 2026



Brisbane
Labour
History
Association

The Queensland Journal of Labour History

The biannual radical history journal of the
Brisbane Labour History Association (BLHA)

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**The BLHA is the Brisbane/Meanjin branch of the
Australian Society for the Study of Labour History.**

The BLHA 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.
[//brisbanelabourhistory.org/](http://brisbanelabourhistory.org/)

BLHA President: Craig Buckley

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The Queensland Journal of Labour History (QJLH) is compiled and published twice a year by the Brisbane (Meanjin) Labour History Association (BLHA), the Queensland branch of the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History. The BLHA is a not-for-profit collective of volunteers.

The BLHA seeks to assist rather than merely to document the activities of the working class. Neither is its conception of labour history narrowly academic, spanning, rather, all social aspects of the productive process. How were class relations formed? What was the role of the state and the production process? How does labour relate to race and gender? What were the industrial and political organisations created by workers and what struggles did they fight? What are the cultural expressions of class? How have these people, those who live by their labour, recorded, remembered, and represented their own history?

Although the BLHA has a particular focus on Meanjin/Brisbane and Queensland, we support the study of working-class history in its local, national and transnational settings. We also encourage the study of social movements in which workers have participated or which have affected workers' personal, social, political or economic circumstances.

Material published herein does not necessarily reflect the views of the BLHA or the editorial committee of the *QJLH*.

Notes for contributors

Articles of any length are invited.

First-person accounts of trade union, social movement and progressive political struggles and organisations are particularly welcome. We encourage oral history.

Reports on exhibitions, seminars and research projects are sought, as are book reviews and photo essays.

Contributions can be submitted either as hardcopy (posted to the BLHA) or as an electronic file emailed to qldlabhist@gmail.com or other BLHA email addresses.

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, photographs, maps, drawings, cartoons etc. that might accompany your article.

Contributors receive one-year membership of the BLHA.

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Guest Editorial

The Power to Stop Speaking

Anon

Censored in Queensland

Editorial

The absence of a Guest Editorial in this issue follows a long discussion about the wisdom of writing and publishing an article on the decision by the current LNP Queensland Government to restrict free speech through their *Fighting Antisemitism and Keeping Guns Out of the Hands of Terrorists and Criminals Amendment Act 2026*.

The framing of the legislation leaves it to the police to decide whether proscribed phrases are used “reasonably” in a genuinely excusable way such as an educational or historical context. A Guest Editorial repeating any of the phrases would effectively mean that the editors (and perhaps the BLHA as a collective of individuals) are entering a lottery as to whether charges would be laid.

Whilst we considered printing this journal in New South Wales or some other more democratic territory, we live and work in Queensland. Unfortunately the new law makes distribution as well as publishing a criminal offence so we would be caught that way. As and when the legislation is defeated in court we will write and

publish the Guest Editorial that was planned.

In the last issue of the *QJLH* Ross Gwyther commemorated eighty years of campaigning against nuclear weapons in Australia. The article stemmed from an exhibition organised by Brisbane Just Peace and the national Independent and Peaceful Australia Network (IPAN) at the QCU building in South Brisbane in August 2025.

In this issue *QJLH* editor Allan Gardiner has written a response to Ross’s article, arguing against its focus on the nuclear issue, the effectiveness of the campaigns mentioned, and the role of the Communist Party of Australia within them. Ross was given a right-to-reply, and is considering a response for inclusion in our next issue.

In December 2025 4ZZZ, Brisbane’s independent community radio station, celebrated fifty years since it was initiated as a radical alternative to mainstream radio. Whilst much of this initial history was glossed over in last year’s celebrations, the BLHA invited *Workers Power* host

Bill Storey-Smith to speak at the BLHA AGM in December. Bill described his activity at the station and his involvement within the trade union movement. A summary of Bill's speech is in this issue.

Last year saw the publication of Stephen Stockwell's collection of poems *1975: The Ballads of The Whitlam Dismissal*. Stephen permitted us to reprint his poem 'The Ballad of John Kerr' in this issue. Allan Gardiner provides an introduction and notes on the background to the poem.

In 2020 the BLHA published the memoirs of Salvatore (Ted) D'Urso; *Critical Outlook; Essays on My Political Journey*. This was reviewed by Ken Mansell in issue 31 of this journal, and well referenced in Dan O'Neill's remembrance of Ted in issue 35.

One of the essays contained in the book is 'The Billiard Saloon', a snapshot of working class immigrant, almost entirely male, social and economic life in mid-twentieth century Innisfail. This is a standout essay in the book and is reproduced in its entirety in this issue.

Allan Gardiner wraps up his significant contributions to this issue by continuing with

his biographical articles on socialist painter Ray Dalgarno.

Allan was working alongside Roy on a possible biography at the time of Roy's passing in 2001. His extensive use of Roy's unpublished written memoirs adds personal detail to his biography. In the instalment in this issue Allan relates Dalgarno's time in North Queensland, particularly his time with Noel Wood and Jean Devanney.

Sean Scalmer's 2025 book *A Fair Day's Work: The Quest to Win Back Time* is reviewed by Jeff Rickertt. Jeff commends the book, detailing as it does the historically changing concept of the working week and day within the Australian context. Jeff is a constant contributor and is a former editor and co-editor of this journal.

An obituary we hoped to run in this issue was for Marianne Erhardt who passed in April. It was decided that so much of Marianne's life was revealed at the memorials to her life that a larger article, a celebration of her life, should appear in the next issue. Vale Marianne

Dean Wharton,
Lead Editor, *QJLH*

Reflections on: The Other Side of the Story - Hiroshima - Eighty Years of Resistance by Ross Gwyther

Allan Gardiner

Ross Gwyther's painstaking survey of anti-nuclear war actions after World War II is an impressive and valuable documentation of events and organisations and a worthy tribute to those comrades.¹ The survey is especially welcome since it pays attention to trade unions and to the Queensland perspective, which historians often neglect.

It is wrong to criticise something for not doing something it never set out to do. Ross has provided a chronology and an account, not an analysis and evaluation of the movement. His perspective is to look at anti-nuclear peace activism on the occasion of the 80th anniversary of the Hiroshima bomb. This activism focused on the exceptional nature of these weapons, their existential threat to humanity and even the natural world itself. In consequence, even politically conservative and "hawkish" people could object to weapons that can turn the planet into a glowing hell.

But the more I read this chronology

of events, the more I wished for some critique of the strategies and overall aims. When Ross does offer judgements, he strains too hard to be laudatory of the movement's success. In relation to the French nuclear bomb tests in the 1990s, for example, he claims that "only six of the series of eight tests announced in 1995 were held; arguably because of international protests and boycotts." And in his concluding remarks, Ross says:

The breadth, strength and consistency of the campaigns against nuclear weapons over those eighty years strongly suggests that the peoples' movements have been the real force driving the making of treaties and limiting political and military choices for using the 'nuclear option' ... It is a testament to the strength of working peoples' struggles against the nuclear threat that in the face of voices like the above, nuclear treaties have been signed and nuclear catastrophe has been averted.

Is this declaration of victory justified? I would have thought that the Mutually Assured Destruction calculation made by nuclear-armed states explains their reluctance to use nuclear weapons. On the other hand, various states still amass nuclear weapons because they remain part of the disgusting competition between states. Similarly, treaties seem to be respected or ignored according to the calculations of states, without regard for what peace activists have said or done about them. Even the long struggles to minimise Australia's involvement in nuclear industries meant little to either major political party when they gratefully joined the terrifying AUKUS partnership. Now that nuclear-powered submarines have been ordered, would an Australian government really refuse to arm them with nuclear missiles when the stakes rise? And after all the struggles against US bases like Pine Gap, these essential communications facilities for the Western allies stand ready to assist nuclear strikes if they are ordered.

Looking over Ross's record of the scale and persistence of effort put into peace activism, the question that emerges for me is: *Why has it all been so tragically ineffective?* Of course that is too harsh a judgement. Of course, protests are

always essential. But the questions remain. What actions were effective? Which were not? What were the disagreements and differences of perspective? Which perspectives dominated and went on to determine strategies and practices?

My other criticism is that the anti-nuclear campaign was fought as a separate issue from that of war and the use of military force generally. A focus on nuclear weapons as something exceptional seems arbitrary given that non-nuclear weapons have proved perfectly adequate to create many hells on Earth since the Hiroshima bombing. A particularly jarring example of the odd separateness of the nuclear campaign comes when Ross mentions the anti-Vietnam war movement. This momentous upheaval in political affairs appears as a sort of distraction: "In the late 1960s-early 1970s the Vietnam war and conscription became more prominent issues for unions than nuclear matters."

Notwithstanding the Hiroshima anniversary, no case is put forward as to why resistance to nuclear forms of warfare, rather than war and military violence in general, should be the focus of the narrative. Especially when there are obvious advantages in framing the anti-nuclear movement as a discrete

strand of a wider history of resistance to militarism and war. Such a broader frame would allow, for example, the differences in the politics and tactics of each peace struggle to be teased out and scrutinised.

Most peace struggles proceed on the assumption that the cause of the problem is public ignorance and poor education, or a lack of awareness about the issue, or poor judgements by inept or short-sighted decision makers leading to decisions against the national interest. These typical assumptions lead them to set themselves the goal of changing public opinion and influencing politicians. Their tactics may include public meetings or demonstrations or even vigorous protests. When trade unions participate in these movements, it tends to be because they are seen as one amongst many civil society groups lending their endorsement to campaigns and sending delegates to conferences.

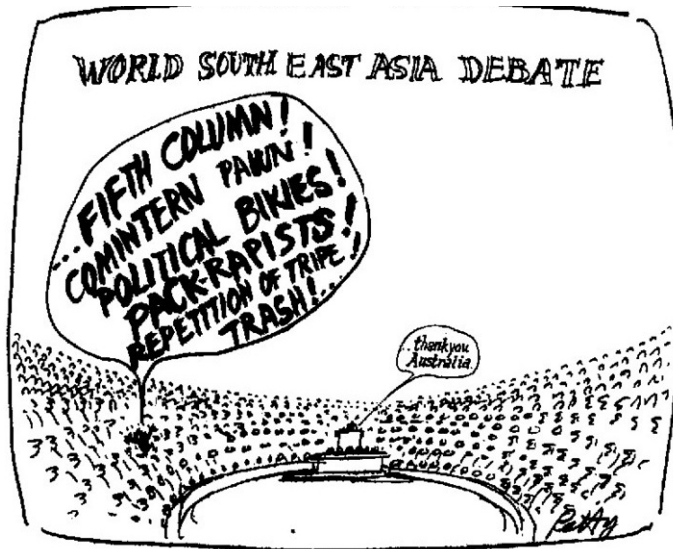
On the other hand, when peace protests extend to disruptive demonstrations and blockades and pickets it is usually because a different sort of political perspective is emerging. The presence of socialist currents alongside moral/religious currents in peace campaigns can be seen at

the very beginning of the 20th century. Bill Gollan puts it this way:

Small peace societies sprang up in Australia before and during World War I. These earliest groups opposed militant [i.e. militarist] and chauvinist views on rational and humanitarian grounds. A radical critique of the social and economic roots of war began to be heard in the anti-conscription campaigns of 1916 and 1917, and was in part an expression of internationalist currents in the Australian labour movement.²

Between the late 1930s and the Vietnam War, peace activism – including the anti-nuclear phase after Hiroshima – was reformist rather than radical, to use shorthand terms. The anti-nuclear movement knew it was vulnerable to anti-communist attacks. Ross refers to how “union peace resolutions were routinely attacked in the mainstream media as communist subversion. Community peace committees were portrayed as communist fronts.”⁴

Ross correctly denies that peace activists were led by the nose by the Communist Party of Australia (CPA);



The cartoon of Bruce Petty's appeared in the Australian on moratorium day (8 May, 1970), the day after the Minister for Labour and National Service, Mr. Snedden, had described the organisers of the protest as 'political bikies who pack rape democracy'. (CPS(H. of R.) Vol. 67, 7.5.70, p. 1783).

*Bruce Petty cartoon with caption from Saunders and Summy
The Australian Peace Movement: A Brief History 1986³*

While the few CPA members in any union workplace or local branch may well have put forward many of the ideas contained in union campaigns and resolutions, they were only adopted as union positions because the much larger workforce, who were not CPA members, supported them.

Perhaps this downplays the role of the CPA. After all, the CPA put much effort behind the Australian Peace Council, one of the main peace organisations in the 1950s.

The APC had some elements of being a front, but not because the Party was trying to make unsuspecting members part of a subversive conspiracy.⁵ The interventions by the CPA in this period would not have been particularly "communistic" anyway, as the Party was in a conservative phase. When the late 1960s student movement erupted, the old Communists tended to disapprove rather than welcome this resurgence of radical thought.⁶

But a change was underway. The Communist Party of Australia was

challenged to become less centred on Moscow by the "Eurocommunist" movement and by those who supported the Chinese Communists in the emerging Sino-Soviet split. At this point in history, with the US military rampant in the region, China had nothing to lose by encouraging its western friends to become militant.

My own first awareness of anti-war activism was as a 10-year-old watching the grainy black and white TV broadcasts of the visit of US President Lyndon Johnson to Australia in October 1966. In my memory, the smarmy narrator sneers as a few shots of demonstrators are allowed to appear on screen. But the images tell the story: those brave demonstrators really meant business.⁷

As Ken Mansell makes clear, the anti-Vietnam war campaign was heavily influenced by Maoism.⁸ Maoism encouraged worker-student alliances. Suddenly, peace activism could take on new forms. Instead of limited criticism of specific unjust or imprudent war measures, it was now possible to indict a whole system that not only caused the war, but caused many other social evils. Instead of petitions and education campaigns, it was now possible to mount

student demonstrations that disrupted war-related activities. Instead of unions giving formal endorsement, they could become the source of politicised workers willing to strike for demands.

No doubt I have simplified the contrast between the anti-nuclear movement and the anti-Vietnam war movement. I have done so to try to make two points. First 'Peace is union business' has taken different forms at different times. Rank and file worker activism can be more powerful than asking the upper levels of trade union officialdom to endorse a demand or make a donation. Yet today, even minimal and symbolic support by most trade union officials for social movement groups has dried up. This is the era where official unions present unionism as narrowly economic and suppress political activity other than campaigning for an increasingly right-wing ALP.

By contrast, Alex Macdonald was one Communist who did not look askance at the new student radicals. He was keen to expose trade union members to progressive ideas.⁹ Ross actually says as much himself:

The annual congress of the Queensland Trades and Labour Council was [a] venue through the 1950s and



*Grahame Garner Protestors with Banner, Moratorium March, Brisbane 1970
Graham Garner collection Fryer Library F3400 Folder 19 item 14*

1960s when Alex Macdonald was Secretary. The agenda of each of these congresses included issues such as free speech, international peace and disarmament, atomic weapons, international affairs and anti-colonial struggles.

Rank and file workers should and could be the power behind peace movements, just as they could and should be the power behind all progressive movements.

The second point I want to make is a precondition for accepting my first point. I would like to see a

return to a path that was beginning to be established in the late 1960s and early 1970s, where groups opposing different social and political evils were more likely to see their causes as linked and to combine their efforts. But this means allowing socialist ideas and socialist groups to at least be heard in peace organisations. Will this lead to right-wing attacks? Of course. Will it lead to losing strategies? Let me reply by posing a different question: Which campaigns were more successful in arousing a popular desire and hope for an end to war and a better society – the anti-nuclear movement or the anti-Vietnam war movement?

References

- ¹ Ross Gwyther, “The Other Side of the Story - Hiroshima - Eighty Years of Resistance,” *Queensland Journal of Labour History* No. 41 (Summer 2025) 28-53.
- ² Bill Gollan, ‘The Australian Peace Movement: Its Early Years,’ *The Australian Journal of Social Issues*, December 1986 <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1839-4655.1986.tb00828.x>
- ³ Malcolm Saunders and Ralph Summy, *The Australian Peace Movement: A Short History* Peace Research Centre, Australian National University, 1986, 67.
- ⁴ Gwyther, 39.
- ⁵ A recent book by Gabriel Rockhill documents many such rightwing fronts, although he idealises “actually existing Communism” and sounds like a conspiracy theorist: Gabriel Rockhill, *Who Paid the Pipers of Western Marxism?* New York, Monthly Review Press, 2025.
- ⁶ So too many trade union officials. In 1970, Jack Egerton threatened to use police to force young radicals out of the Brisbane May Day march. See also Jon Piccini, ‘A Group of Misguided Way Out Individuals’: the Old Left and the Student Movement in Brisbane, 1966-1980” *The Queensland Journal of Labour History* Issue 12, March 2011
- ⁷ Lots of digging on the internet reveals a couple of newsreel videos, e.g. <https://youtu.be/OU7KoGzAQw?t=359> <https://www.abc.net.au/education/hindsight-fighting-conscription-1966/13798542> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Thm03IUj6U>
- ⁸ Ken Mansell, ‘The Gloves Come Off – The 1970 Moratorium and the Limits of Tolerance,’ Australian Society for the Study of Labour History (Melbourne Branch), (2020). <https://labourhistorymelbourne.org/2020/09/21/the-gloves-come-off-the-1970-moratorium-and-the-limits-of-tolerance/>
- ⁹ See Lyn Trad, “Alex Macdonald: Personal and Public,” BLHA Blog post 2026, <https://brisbanelabourhistory.org/blog>

Dr Allan Gardiner is a retired public servant. He is co-editor of *The Queensland Journal of Labour History*

Broadcasting the Power of Workers: BLHA 2025 AGM Lecture

Bill Storey-Smith



*Bill Storey-Smith
(Workers Power Facebook page)*

Introduction

Thank you for the honour of being your guest speaker here in this place of gathering, learning and truth-telling on Yuggerah and Turabul country. I pay respects to elders past and present. I would particularly like to acknowledge any First Nation comrades with us today.

Standing in solidarity with First Nations people in their struggles for recognition, reparations and land rights is the first step to paying the rent.

Comrades, family and friends call me Bill and I use the he/him

pronouns. You may know me from *Workers Power* on 4ZZZ 102.1FM Tuesdays 10am till noon. I am also the Queensland Organiser for the Retail and Fast Food Workers Union (RAFFWU).

I have always had great admiration for Brisbane Labour History Association and its members.

My History

My journey is a great way to tell a story of the role that 4ZZZ plays in our community and how someone can end up host of a radio show about the struggles of workers. Even though some say the reason is simply that I have a great face for radio.

I am not from so-called Queensland. My partner, Laura and our kids Molly (4), Emily (2) and Billy (2) arrived in Ipswich for a new life on 10 January 2011. It was my 38th birthday and the beginning of the great flood.

Ipswich is a great place to bring up a family. Not so welcoming for two progressives from Newtown, Sydney, though. That said we are all now doing really well. Molly is into her third year of studying Science at The University of Queensland (something to do with physics). The twins are in the Year 12 Dux Class

and Laura is their teacher after studying during the years I was at Coles. And of course you are hearing my story now.

Working at Coles

Once we settled in, I just wanted a low stress job that would pay the bills and give me a bit of beer money. We were quite privileged for a working-class family. I would have been happy with a minimum wage in a job close to home. I ended up at the local Coles, delivering groceries and things went well for a while. I even worked every Saturday night for three years. 156 in a row.

When I started at Coles I was the only one out of five workers that didn't sign up to the Shop, Distributive and Allied Employees' Association (SDA). That said, after six months in the job I was the only one left.

I knew little of the union movement since it was decimated by Workchoices and the Fair Work Act in 2009 but I did know that the SDA was a yellow union. I knew it was them that stopped Gillard introducing Marriage Equality in 2013. Furthermore, I knew they would take my money and use it to campaign against the rights of my partner, daughters and co-workers with their anti-abortion stand.

In 2015 things got even worse at Coles. Due to health reasons, I could no longer drive for a living. They were very reluctant, but I forced them to give me a job in store. Looking back, I probably could have sued them for a retirement. Anyhow, once I was in store, I realised how terribly they treated their workers. Then I also discovered that we were getting paid less than the Award and SDA were complicit.

What I call the Duncan Hart Agreement (Coles 2015 EBA) was terrible. Not only did it continue to have no penalty rates for Saturdays and after 6pm weekdays but they were removing shift work.

And they used it straight away. My store was introducing 'Dawn Fill' They wanted us to work 2am till 6am and we would get the same rate of pay as day shift.

The way they did the Agreement vote was contemptuous. I repeatedly asked for a copy of the Agreement from both management and the SDA. It was not provided and everyone in the store knew. I would say a good proportion of the small No vote would have come from my store.

During the campaign I was approached by the SDA rep to be the delegate for the store. I wasn't

even a member. I had to decline under the threat of being kicked out by my family if I joined an organisation that campaigns against women's rights.

It was fantastic to hear of the result to terminate the Duncan Hart Agreement but I was fully pissed when Coles threw the toys out of the cot and reverted to the 2011 EBA. We were going backwards.

I joined the Coles 2011 EBA termination that had been taken on by Coles worker Penny Vickers. (the agreement was challenged and ultimately found to not pass the Better Off Overall Test (BOOT)). Penny was a lot like myself. A worker who wanted to stand up for our co-workers. She ended up joining RAFFWU, organising her workplace, becoming a delegate, leading her co-workers during industrial action and is now an Organiser for United Workers Union (UWU). I am proud to have been a part of her journey.

Becoming an Applicant in a FWC Major Case

The challenge became a Major Case in the Fair Work Commission. There was Penny and I taking on the might of Coles, with their \$40k a day King's (Queen's at the time) Counsel (who became the Commissioner into

the CFMEU Inquiry). One aspect I cannot forget is that the SDA and the Australian Workers Union were on the same side of the bench as Coles. Shame on them for opposing two workers getting paid less than the Award.

In the end, Coles realised they were screwed and they rushed through a new Agreement that was one-cent above the award on a three hour shift. The hourly rate was 42 cents above the award. Meaning the minimum shift of three hours was paid \$1.26 above the award without the Laundry Allowance of \$1.25. With the support of the SDA, Coles then went about setting up a business model based on three hour shifts.

4ZZZ Inspiration

Through being an activist I learnt about the existence of 4ZZZ. I subscribed and would listen in the car.

We were at a party and I asked a comrade, Feargal McGovern, who was starting to be a part of 4ZZZ, if there was a show about working-class struggle. Feargal said no, then another comrade in attendance said, "You should do it".

The night had a particular atmosphere and through joyful discussion an idea was born. A

show about workers rights that plays Rage Against the Machine and other 90's music and discusses workers' rights. It would be called 'The Flannel Hour'. It was refined to 'The Workers Hour' and we went about organising it.

It seemed like fate when I discovered that 4ZZZ's ethos is agitate, educate, organise.

4ZZZ Introduction

Feargal organised a meeting with the Station Manager, Grace Louise. I knew that most shows start on the graveyard shifts or 4ZZZ Digital. We explained the idea and we asked what they wanted from us so that we could skip that stage and be on during the day when workers could be listening.

We then worked hard to get trained up and ready to start. They supported us the whole way. There were many in the community who went out of their way to support us for success. Not only were we accepted into the community straight away, we were having an immediate influence with an increase in the use of the word 'comrade' that had not been seen in over 30 years in the building. 4ZZZ Tower is the former home of the Queensland branch of the Communist Party of Australia.

Getting started

One of our first hurdles was our own limitations regarding 4ZZZ's quotas. How could an old stoner/grunge/blues rock and roller be expected to achieve quotas? Fifty percent of music must have a woman or non-binary, thirty percent current, thirty percent Australian, thirty percent local and five percent First Nation. The 4ZZZ system is set up perfectly for this. Artists submit their music and a team of volunteers download it and put it in easily accessible folders. In recent years we have been able to listen to the new music at home so we can have most of the music decided before we even get to the studio.

The first six months went so well we asked to move to a two-hour slot. That was very well received. In fact, our two-hour 'magazine' style show has influenced other shows in the same time slot. Our neighbours, *Tranzmission*, who were on 9-10am, have moved to a similar format on Mondays.

If we follow quotas, include language warnings and adhere to the Community Broadcasting Association of Australia standards, (these are just common things like don't slander or defame and avoid sensationalism), we have total freedom on what we have on our

show. We decide the music and what we talk about. For example, we have played N.W.A.'s *Fuck tha Police* on many occasions. Including when the local cuntstabulary treated our comrade Jeff Rickertt inappropriately during one of the refugee solidarity actions at Kangaroo Point.

Workers Influence

We also suggested 4ZZZ should do a live broadcast of the Labour Day Rally. This has been heavily supported by the station and is now part of the calendar at 4ZZZ.

Labour history has always been important to us at *Workers Power*. There is much to be learnt from the struggles of the past. We have had numerous BLHA members come on air to share the history of labour. We were also approached by the Common Social Change Library to be a part of their network. This includes the monthly *Tiny Sparks* and *Turning Points* - which talks about 'This month in Labour History'.

Even though *Workers Power* has been a small part (two hours a week for six years) in the 50 years of progressive radio at 4ZZZ, their commitment and support to our idea is testament to the history of the station's commitment to agitate, educate, organise

Longevity

There is already organising in motion to ensure that *Workers Power* continues on 4ZZZ well into the future. I intend to move into more of the production side of things. We have Jaxom who is keen to be a part of the team for the long term. Cal and Sophie will join us when available and we have 4ZZZ announcer stalwart, Dani Nash, who will provide support with production and music. Although I have been an anchor for the last six years it has always been a team effort. Whether that is on air or in the background.

Subscribe

Just like unions, 4ZZZ is a member organisation. We use the term subscribers. Each year there is an election where subscribers vote for the board. It is run on a shoestring by a small team of staff and a mass of dedicated volunteers. If you are not a subscriber you should be. For as little as \$40 for concessions (we don't check), \$80 full time, \$130 Passionate or a \$500 super sub you can be a part of greatest radio

station in the universe. There are also great rates for artists, organisations and companies to sponsor the station and get great exposure in return.

Head on over to 4zzz.org.au and remember that all subscriptions include the warm inner glow that comes with being a part of 4ZZZ.



<https://www.4zzzfm.org.au/program/workers-power>

Every Tuesday 10 am–12 pm on 4ZZZ 102.1FM.

The Ballad of John Kerr

Stephen Stockwell

With introduction and notes by *Allan Gardiner*

“The ballad of John Kerr” is from Stephen Stockwell’s recent publication *1975: The Ballads of the Whitlam Dismissal*. This book of poems and an essay was published last year and is available at Avid Reader, Brisbane.

Stephen’s poetry reflects the DIY spirit of punk: why not have a go? It should be remembered, however, that he has some literary experience, having written a lot of lyrics for the band The Black Assassins. In his book he adapts the satirical style he used in the Assassins’ songs to the ballad form, and while his scansion and sentence inversion might be questioned, I can confirm that he sticks to the rhyme scheme!

Stephen Stockwell is Professor Emeritus in Journalism and Communication at Griffith University. His career began in the newsroom at community radio station 4ZZZ when it was located at the University of Queensland. During Expo ‘88 he made an independent film about how that event crushed working class

communities in the South Brisbane area. His broadcasting continued with radio JJJ and other ABC programmes.

The Ballad of John Kerr

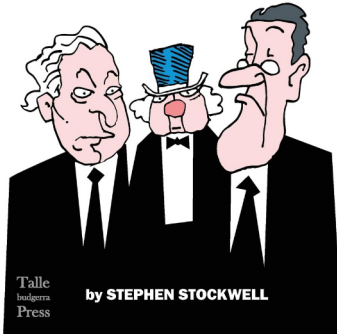
John Kerr was born in old Balmain
Grew up in poverty
From early years he felt he had
A date with destiny.
He sought out influential friends
Doing law at uni
And got a reputation as
The pretentious lefty.

At war Kerr served in Alf Conlon’s
Research Directorate
That made wild plans for Borneo
and kept maps up to date¹
While undermining modernism
With Ern Malley the bait.²
In Washington pre-CIA
He is their spooky mate.

After the war Kerr’s back in law,
Left unions he now spurned,
He works for Santamaria’s groups
Where a hot fever burned:
Against the Commos and the left,
The Labor Party churned.³

1975

THE BALLADS OF THE WHITLAM DISMISSAL



Gough argued with Kerr on TV
But no lesson was learnt.⁴

When Labor splits, Kerr soon
sought out
Liberal Party embrace,
At Quadrant and then LawAsia⁵
He's in CIA space.
Libs appoint him to federal court,
He's their fair-minded face
But sends Clarrie O'Shea to jail
In penal sanctions case.⁶

Kerr befriends jolly John Atwill,
Liberal power broker
Who gets premier Bob Askin,
Very corrupt joker,
To make Kerr New South Wales
Chief Judge,
His talents mediocre
But Gough picks this shyster to be
GG⁷ and fete opener.

The governor general has one job
It is to say "yes sir"
When the PM advises him,
But Kerr did not concur.
He perused the Constitution
And his old heart did stir,
He saw the PM held his job
At the GG's pleasure.

John Kerr told anyone he met
His powers over Gough
And when he told Rupert Murdoch
The Yanks knew soon enough.⁸
Kerr needs an opportunity
Then the Liberals get tough,
Elect Malcolm Fraser leader,
He's ready to play rough.

Kerr's first step is to get support
From his judicial friends,
Mason confirms Kerr has powers,
Advice Kerr gladly bends
Then Chief Justice Garfield
Barwick
His written advice sends
Though they may referee this case
If in High Court it ends.

Kerr sees his chance to make his
mark
This is his destiny,
He pleas to Buckingham Palace,
Bugs Charles in PNG,
Back me to sack Gough if he tries
To first of all sack me.
This all without advice from
Gough,
Unconstitutionally.

The Palace Letters⁹ are quite clear,
 A right royal plot they trace,
 The Queen's man encourages Kerr:
 Ignore Gough to his face,
 Your reserve powers are so strong,
 Read this old Canadian case.
 But that GG played politics
 And found, like Kerr, disgrace.

References

¹ The Directorate of Research and Civil Affairs was a think tank pretending they were directing the imperialist plans for the southeast Asian region. Kerr did more of this after the war, hence the later reference to Washington.

² Two conservative poets, while working with Kerr in another Alf Conlon sinecure, embarrassed a poetry journal by revealing the modernist poems by "Ern Malley" that the journal published were their own pastiches.

³ Bob Santamaria's Catholic movement was an extremely effectively part of Australian Cold War anti-communism. It undermined trade unionism and ensured the ALP stayed out of power for generations.

⁴ I guess Stephen means Whitlam had no excuse for having anything to do with Kerr. Maybe Whitlam cared a lot about not threatening the ruling class and its servants?

⁵ Right wing journals.

⁶ Clarrie O'Shea was secretary of the

Victoria tram and bus union who was jailed in 1969 by Kerr for not paying the fines intended to crush the union. The response to the jailing was Australia's largest post-war national strike. (Again, why did Whitlam have anything to do with Kerr?)

⁷ Governor General.

⁸ It will be seen from this poem and others in the book that Stephen is one of those who were outraged to learn about US intelligence dirty tricks in the Whitlam dismissal. Stockwell's instinct as an investigative journalist has led him to investigate this involvement more seriously than most. Stephen Stockwell, "1975: The Whitlam dismissal's smoking gun," Pearls and Irritations

August 18, 2025. <https://johnmenadue.com/post/2025/08/1975-the-whitlam-dismissals-smoking-gun/>

⁹ Jenny Hocking, *The Palace Letters: The Queen, the Governor-General, and the plot to dismiss Gough Whitlam*, Brunswick, Vic., Scribe, 2020.

The Billiard Saloon

Ted D'Urso

In his early 30s, after 15 seasons of cutting green sugar cane, a mysterious illness was sapping my father's physical strength. He had migrated in 1920, aged 16 years, from Riposto on Sicily's eastern coast, with no skills. He had had only three years of half-day schooling and when this ended at the age of ten, his working life began. Alfio had made a reputation in the Innisfail district as a 'gun' cutter and the 'ganger' or leader of a gang of fellow Sicilian cutters. It was this reputation which won him and his men cutting contracts in the grim times of the Depression in the face of employment preference for British cutters. The domestic skills of my mother, Luciana, helped equally in keeping the wolf from the door of our little dwelling. When the cutting season drew to a close at the end of the year, the struggle for survival in the 'slack' – the following six months to the beginning of the next cutting season – became a harder one to endure. In these tough months of unemployment, my father resorted to his skill as a card-player in gambling games to meet his family's financial needs.

The illness that drained Alfio's vitality was misdiagnosed by local

doctors for a couple of years in the course of which he underwent treatments and surgical operations which were not only ineffectual but plunged the family into debt. It was not until he and Lucy, in final desperation, sought specialist attention in Brisbane where X-rays taken in Innisfail were correctly read for the first time, that the source of the trouble was identified. An ensuing operation restored Alfio's health. He did not return to cane-cutting which he suspected was the occupational cause of his ailment.

For a little time he managed a card players' club in Innisfail's 'Chinatown', mostly patronised by Mediterranean workers: Italians, Spaniards, Greeks and Maltese. He could not make a living from it. When his brother-in-law, Antonio Saraceni (married to Rosa Rizzo), planned the erection of a building in the centre of Edith Street, the town's main street, Alfio and a second brother-in-law, Antonino Passalacqua (married to Anna Rizzo), agreed to rent it in partnership. Nino would open a 'barber's shop' while behind it in a much larger floor area with a passage way access to the main street, Alfio would establish a billiard saloon. Alfio also controlled

the upstairs floor, reached only by a portable ladder to its stairway, where again, he intended to manage a card-playing venue.

The billiard saloon opened for business in September 1937 and served its recreational purpose continuously until Alfio's retirement at the age of 70 years in 1973, frequented over these years by generations of Innisfail male youths in a sugar town that offered them no other indoors recreational facilities. Alf's saloon was to play a unique role in the history of Innisfail's social amenities.

The billiards tables were made to specifications to permit their installation in the available space. One was about three quarters the size of the standard measurements while the other was half-size, later replaced by one of the larger size when more careful calculation disclosed it could be accommodated.

I was nine years old when I first took up a cue. I recall developing my first skills with it through practice on the smaller table. My father didn't raise any objection to my 'hanging around'; occasionally he corrected my stance at the table or instructed me where I should hit the ball to produce desired effects. Through this largely informal learning and within the limitations of my physical size, I

made rapid progress as a player of billiards and later, snooker. The billiards room became very accessible in 1940 when we shifted from the family dwelling in Grace Street to the flat in my grandfather's building, Rizzo Building, which my mother occupies to this day, 54 years later. Indeed, as I was to learn later, accessibility to the billiards room from the flat – about 20 yards down the street – was Alfio's prevailing argument for moving into the town centre.

I believe that the modest offerings from the tables in the first few years barely sufficed to sustain the continuation of the business. The partnership with Nino Passalacqua was terminated since his returns were greater than those of the billiards saloon. Clearly risking detection of running a gaming house, Alfio was driven to managing poker sessions on the floor above, particularly on pay weeks when canecutters gambled their wages throughout the night hours into the early daylight. I have memories of Alfio importing trays of sandwiches from the Greek cafe across the road to sustain the players in their marathon sessions and of the smell of the fetid air of the gaming room after weary players had departed red-eyed from sleeplessness, and of my father perspiring in a Jackie Howe singlet cleaning up the ashtrays, the leftover



Edith Street, Innisfail c1958

<https://www.queenslandplaces.com.au/exhibit/postcard-folder/pc0477>

bits of food, the dregs of coffee cups and the empty beer bottles. I minded Alfio's caution to divulge to nobody that I knew about the upstairs poker games, and to be alert to any prowling detectives.

Vestiges of the Great Depression remained into the late 1930s. Moreover, in sugar cane towns like Innisfail, the availability of work was also seasonally related. I remember young unemployed men in the slack being 'on susso' – sustenance or the dole – which amounted to 17 shillings and sixpence (\$1.75) per week. Youths on susso frequented the saloon, playing snooker when they could afford it and putting it 'on tick' when they couldn't. They

indulged in the nuisance behaviour of idleness: cadging cigarettes, mutual tauntings and minor horseplay. Their language was limited and mostly foul. They were at loose ends and if inebriated, prone to menace and hostility. These saloon 'flies' irritated my father and when he could no longer suffer their foul-mouthed bickering, he would clear the room of the offenders.

Most of the players frequenting the saloon regarded billiards or snooker as a casually enjoyable game, played to while away a little time agreeably with a friend in a masculine environment. There were a few, however, who displayed a serious attitude to their game playing it

‘professionally’, thoughtfully and with a sense of artistry. They made a high score at each turn at the table. A contest between two players so devoted to excellent play gave me, a watching child, an indefinable pleasure, and demonstrations of skill which I was keen to emulate. When a table was idle, I often used it to practise different shots. Sometimes Alfio would instruct me how to play better: the correct stance, closer alignment of the eye along the cue, the appropriate spot on the cue ball to achieve the desired ‘side’, and so on.

My father was a superb player of both billiards and snooker, but particularly the former, in which he was very rarely beaten. There were only one or two opponents in his class and a series of games between these ‘professionals’ silenced the room to a tense and appreciative watchfulness. These outstanding players were also ‘stylists’ in their performances, each in his own way. Their focus on the game would be intense as if their will were commanding the movement of the balls. I suspect – as I was to discover in my own play some years later – that ‘being at one with the game’ in effortless ‘flow’ gave a sense of transcendence, an escape from the everyday familiarities. The billiards saloon provided me with examples of excellence of effort; the first examples, and it may have been that

I was indelibly impressed by them to strive for high standards in my later academic inclinations.

As well as learning the rules and skills of games, I came to know from observing Alfio's methods how to maintain carefully the ‘playability’ of the tables. They needed to be regularly brushed to rid the cloth of dust and dirt. Sometimes, as it was demanded, the cloth was then ironed. Alfio heated the heavy iron on a primus kept on the floor above the room and with a rag wrapped around its handle hurriedly brought it down the stairs to press the waiting felt of the tables. When the dampness of the Innisfail rains rendered the cues sticky, each was dried with a cloth soaked in methylated spirits. When their tips became hard and shiny, they were made rough and soft by applying sandpaper to them. Cue chalks dangling on each end of the tables were replaced before becoming too hollowed and breaking into pieces. And each day there was the unpleasant job of sweeping the floor of the saloon strewn with cigarette butts, match sticks and other bits of refuse. Once or twice a year the floor, covered by heavy rubber mats, was scrubbed and mopped.

Alfio kept long hours in his humble business. It was open every day of the week except Sunday from about

half past eight in the morning to the legal closing time of 11pm unless lack of custom made for earlier closure. The only public holidays, as with hotels, were Good Friday and Christmas Day. 'Quiet' times of the week induced the boredom of waiting for players to come along. There was little that could be done to lessen the tedium of such periods other than reading *The Cairns Post* delivered to Innisfail by mid-morning, and engaging in conversation with paisano friends – Sicilian countrymen – who might be passing by. Occasionally when business was slow on Saturday afternoons, I was left in charge of the room for a couple of hours while Alfio took an afternoon rest or 'spell' in readiness for the busier night hours. I retain memories of those dull afternoons when the mantle radio in a far corner of the saloon was tuned through the Townsville regional relay station to the stream of horse-racing broadcasts by the ABC from southern capitals. These broadcasts were only briefly interspersed by the perfect tempo of Victor Sylvester's Dance Band. The continual blare of race descriptions and commentaries in a nearly deserted saloon filled me with an unforgettable sense of childish misery. It marked the beginning of my loathing of all sports broadcasts to the present day.

When the Japanese advance into

New Guinea in early 1942 appeared to threaten North Queensland and state schools remained closed for the new school year, Lucy took me to begin my secondary education at All Souls, the Anglican boarding school in Charters Towers. Soon afterwards I received news that Alfio, along with many other Italian-born men, was consigned for internment in South Australia, and that with the reopening of the schools, I was to return to Innisfail. The summary arrest of these innocent citizens was a disgraceful act of the then Attorney General of the Curtin Labor government, H. V. Evatt. Having found the boarding school a miserable purgatory, I was overjoyed at my impending release from it to rejoin my family. It was March and I was almost 14 years old. In my father's absence – he was not released until early 1944 – my daily experience in part-management of the saloon provided a special dimension to my early adolescence.

No government assistance was provided for families whose breadwinners were so arbitrarily removed into internment. In many instances, farmers' womenfolk were compelled to do arduous field work of bringing in the harvest of sugar cane and planting the next crop. Under the wartime direction of 'Manpower', hired labour was very difficult to find. Moreover, farm

tractors were requisitioned for use in the construction of military airfields. We were fortunate to have found a reliable and trustworthy manager for the saloon following Alfio's incarceration. He was Mr James, a Sri Lankan retiree of quiet demeanour, invariably dressed in a white shirt buttoned at the neck, black serge trousers, grey felt hat with a flat top, and polished black shoes. A straight-stemmed pipe always hung from his lips, the source of a malodorous breath if one approached him too closely. Mr James's liquid black eyes peered through rimless spectacles. I assisted James – as he was more commonly known, without any sense of belittlement – on Saturday, a very busy time, and each evening when he returned home for tea, I took his place. On closing the saloon at night, he brought the day's takings to my mother where they were counted on the kitchen table and recorded in an accounts book. He received his wages which varied in a generous percentage of the week's earnings, on Saturday night. James' contribution to our survival in my father's enforced absence was keenly understood and appreciated. Without it, a forced closure of the saloon would have been unavoidable, unless I were withdrawn from high school to keep it open.

My most vivid memories of the

billiards saloon stem from the years 1942-43 when Alfio was absent. Not only did this absence lead to my more frequent presence in the saloon, it also provided the freedom to develop my adolescent need for competence and responsibility in an adult environment. The economy of Innisfail and its everyday atmospherics were energised by wartime conditions. Once the fear of a Japanese invasion and the flight from the town had passed, and military movement through and around it had brought a quickened pulse to Innisfail, the insecurities of the preceding decade seemed to vanish. The war, quite simply, meant an end to unemployment. There now appeared an acute scarcity of workers. Money could be made, sometimes easily, through black marketing in almost anything. I myself sold a few bottles of 'hair oil' in the saloon made from paraffin oil and some added left-over eau de Cologne while a soldier from a nearby camp offered condoms for sale to young men around the tables.

From opening to closing times the saloon was a roaring business packed with patrons in the evenings and on Saturday, when work was finished for the day or week. Tables were booked by waiting players and those on them were not allowed another game. Time at the tables had to be rationed to ensure fair access. I

revelled in the vibrant atmosphere, helping James and indeed often taking over from him when his slowness of age prevented energetic responses to the demands of players. This occurred when players demanded the group game of Kelly's Pool which was admirably suited to side-bets gambling on the throws of alleys – numbered wooden marbles from 1 to 15 matching the numbered balls – which on first throw determined the order of players and on the second, the ball of corresponding number to be potted to win the jackpot sum. Managing the game – collecting each player's money for the jackpot, giving the right change, identifying players, fixing the set, casting the alleys swiftly, ensuring they were all returned before the beginning of the next round, paying the winner at the end of each round (less the percentage for the house) – all of these activities required very quick thinking amidst the shouting and clouds of cigarette smoke.

When the fever of gambling ran high, there was little interest in the game but rather in the rapidity with which its rounds increased the opportunities for betting on alleys. The higher alley won the bet. The gambling, of course, was illegal but it was impossible to prevent it. The more frequent the rounds, the more frequent was the house percentage

from the jackpot. As though drugged, the gamblers seemed to be oblivious to the passage of time. Only the sudden but very occasional appearance of a detective at the scene magically stopped the placing of bets and quietened the commotion around the table and the foul language.

Running a big Kelly's Pool game released my flow of adrenalin. Managing it with speed and precision, utterly absorbed in its process, was exhilarating. When the day was done and the saloon closed, there was a pleasurable tiredness and keen anticipation of counting the day's takings with my mother on the kitchen table. As well as becoming skilled in managing a noisy and crowded saloon in its busiest periods, I also became highly skilled at billiards and snooker although I only played these games when a table was not in use and I was challenged to play. Alfio insisted that paying customers were always given preference at the tables. Equally, the rule was to accept a challenge to play if a table were not in use, for a defeated challenger meant revenue for the house. If a table were available in a quiet time, I took the opportunity to engage in practising the finer points of the games.

Watching the techniques of better players was essential to improving one's game. One I remember as a

superbly artistic player was an early-middle-age soldier, 'Griffo', who for a time was stationed at an army camp on the outskirts of the town. He had himself been the proprietor of a billiards room in Geelong. He won any game he chose to win. Being so fine a player and also a gentleman, he conceded games from time to time to lesser opponents through 'careless' shots to avoid their demoralisation. He could also retrieve a win from seemingly hopeless situations. Grizzly in appearance, broad-faced with thinning hair, dressed in army greens, and always good natured, he never failed to attract appreciative onlookers when he took to the table. Sensing that one of the tables was not running the balls truly, he arranged to correct the level on a Sunday morning. Griffo was a professional in performance and demeanour. I remember him with warmth.

The years of Alfio's internment corresponded with my junior secondary education, at the end of which I secured six As and two Cs for my academic course of study. Involvement in the saloon had not interfered with my school work; indeed, it provided relaxation from it with the benefits I have already described, of becoming a confident, competent and responsible young adult (the term, teenager, was unknown at that time). I succeeded very well in two disparate

dimensions of my life possibly because I was driven by a force to excel in whatever I undertook. Alfio was released in early 1944 and was at home once more when my Public Examination results were published. He was greatly pleased that all had gone so well with saloon and family in his enforced absence.

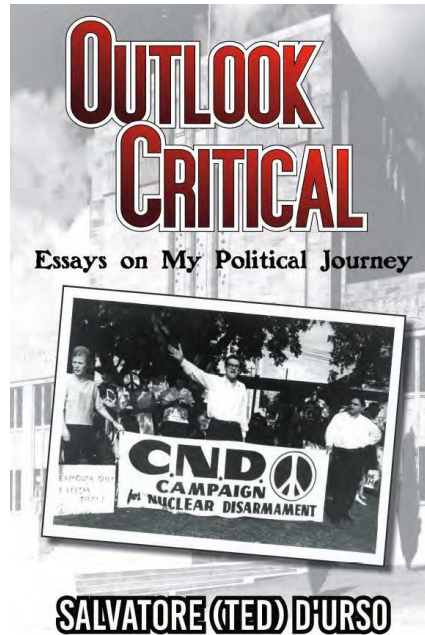
The prosperity of the saloon seemed to surprise my father who now resumed control. James and I performed only light and occasional supervision of the tables, Alfio took charge of the 'heavy' sessions of Kelly's Pool which I have described. He also demonstrated again his great skills in billiards which led him quite commonly to make breaks of 70 and higher. Being some years older since I had last witnessed his playing ability, I was now swept with admiration of his command of the game. His control of the cue ball and sense of pace and position combined to give his performances great beauty. I wondered who would have won a contest between him and Griffo. I doubt it could have been called.

Alfio sought to improve the tone of the saloon. He became disgusted from time to time by the use of foul language and the habit of players spitting on the floor after clearing their throat. He asked me to frame two statements which might be

painted on the walls of the room in large lettering to curb swearing and spitting. Alfio wanted lofty language and after some differences between us on suitable expression, he accepted, approvingly, 'He who swears demeans himself', and 'Do not expectorate on the floor'. I was doubtful that the vocabulary of the saloon's habitués extended to the terms 'demean' and 'expectorate' or, indeed, that they would cease their filthy practices even if they were sufficiently literate. However, Alfio had the signs put in place where they remained for the following 30 years until the closure of the saloon, an oddly amusing feature in a working-class billiards hall in a North Queensland sugar town.

Alfio had sought to improve the attractiveness of his business by offering prizes for the highest snooker breaks scored by players in a given time of the competition. The idea was well received. It had the indirect result of fostering higher standards of playing the game. The three highest scores were placed on a blackboard on a wall and altered as they were bettered.

The end of 1944 was also the end of my close association with the billiards room. I left home in early 1945, never to return permanently. I did return regularly to spend my vacations with my family in all the



years after 1944 until I married in 1962. When the postwar flush of prosperity had disappeared, the business of the saloon accordingly diminished, but it returned sufficient income for the now reduced family demands on Alfio. In 1956 he bought his first motor car, the box-like Holden of the time. I offered my time in the saloon on vacations, permitting my father to rest and play cards at a local club. In 1975, at the age of 72, Alfio closed the doors on the saloon, bringing to an end a source of family livelihood and a landmark of working-class social life in that small North Queensland sugar town.

Roy Dalgarno in Queensland: Part Two

Allan Gardiner

My previous article ended with Roy Dalgarno leaving Brisbane early in 1939 to paint in north Queensland with the artist Noel Wood.¹ An exciting adventure is what his memoirs suggest he expected. He was still a young man, but he had worked as a graphic artist in the advertising industry since his teens and had moved to Brisbane with a young family. Roy and Nadine were partly estranged. Neither Roy's painting nor Nadine's Communist Party work seem to have been much encumbered by childcare problems. About a year into his trip, their son, Lynn, was sent to Melbourne – probably in the care of Roy's mother.² If their second son, Lowan, had been born already, it seems some sort of care must have been provided for him too.

So a free, even hedonistic life as a painter beckoned to him. It might be expected that this romantic plan would be crushed by the reality of economic depression, security police harassment and approaching war. But, as it happened, the plan seemed to work.

Dalgarno had met Noel Wood at an art college he attended when he was

in Adelaide to set up a lithographic workshop for advertising work. He says Noel remembered him

because I was the only student who, instead of walking through the gate to Art School, leaped over the hedge. He heard that I was in Brisbane, wrote and invited me to come up and join him on his island. I jumped at it. I had heard from many friends who were 'on the track' what it would be like up north: the cane fields, the Islanders and Cairns.

'On the track' meant enforced tramping from place to place to find work or use sustenance chits ("susso") which were only redeemable by going elsewhere. Dalgarno's verandah became a place these men knew they could doss. The tales they told of North Queensland added to what he had heard from his Communist Party comrades active in the union struggles there. Even his work on the advertising campaign for the Qantas service between Oodnadatta and Darwin had roused his curiosity. Wood's invitation to stay with him



Roy Dalgarno 1935

on Bedarra Island near Dunk Island, made this adventure possible, as did the money Dalgarno raised by selling a batch of drawings and paintings to Dr James Duhig.

Noel Wood was a devotee of E.J. Banfield, whose *Confessions of a Beachcomber* (1907) and subsequent writing about his life on Dunk Island inspired many to idealise a life of self-sufficiency away from civilisation. Banfield was an early conservationist and an admirer of Henry D. Thoreau. Wood had come to Bedarra Island – which, along with Dunk, was one of the The Family Island Group off Tully,

between Cairns and Townsville – to incorporate his art into that lifestyle. The idea of a two-man artist commune on Bedarra Island fitted Dalgarno’s dream of freedom.

Noel Wood met me at the Tully Station. I hadn’t seen him for years. He was tall, dark, striking to look at, and very sunburnt. He bought supplies and we had a few drinks while waiting for one of the trading boats. It took only an hour or so to cross from Tully to the long, sandy beach of Bedarra. There is no jetty there so we jumped over the sides with our supplies and waded ashore. We had to walk for about half a mile along the beach in the shallow water and sand through mangrove roots until I saw the most beautiful, idyllic thing: the little cove which was his domain.

Dalgarno’s memories of Wood vary from the public record.³ In Dalgarno’s mind, Wood was a lone recluse squatting on his land. In fact, Wood’s wife Eleanor had bought his fifteen acres in 1936. Eleanor was very much a co-builder of Wood’s home and vegetable gardens and she and their daughters Virginia and Ann only left the shaky marriage around the time that Dalgarno arrived.

Wood may have been sincere about the “simple life” ideal, but he was also a drinker and something of a philanderer. Wood also still travelled around, including to the artist commune at Montselvat in Victoria, and to Brisbane for art sales. On these trips he had also invited to his island the artist John Busst and the journalist Guy Morrison and his family.

These arrangements had ended in acrimony. In his book about his family’s stay with Noel, Guy Morrison describes a number of other inhabitants of the islands. In Morrison’s description, relationships were often “bitchy” (sic). Money, especially for alcohol and tobacco, was a “touchy subject”, and vegetable gardens were “hard work”. Morrison concludes that “freedom is not an individual achievement but a social one.”⁴

Nevertheless, Roy’s own sojourn with Wood seems to have been more successful.

I don't know how we got on so well together. We did, I suppose, mainly because I was away a lot on the mainland. I wasn't in any way a bother to him. He enjoyed me coming back every so often. I also had some new ideas about painting that he

was interested in and he no doubt found my wild enthusiasm for drawing refreshing and a stimulus to himself, as his idyllic island life made him lazy, so he considered. I found his approach refreshingly new.

At least in Dalgarno’s memory, the neighbours on Bedarra were no problem. He mentions John Busst as “a Meldrumite” (a painter in the “tonal realism” style taught by Sydney artist Max Meldrum) but seems to suggest Busst was no longer there. He also mentions that

a gay couple, two English sahib types, lived in a bungalow near where the boat had dropped us. Noel called them Hip and Hooray because they were inseparable.

The “hooray” pun was surely based on the name of Frenchman, Pierre Huret. His partner was Englishman, Dick Greatrix. During their eight years on the island, they used their wealth to make a decorative garden.⁵

Dunk Island, about three miles north of Bedarra, was owned by an English aristocrat, Hugo Brassey. Brassey took over E. J. Banfield’s old house and started on plans for exclusive resort developments. He and Wood were close and so, when



Noel Wood 'The pathway to Banfield's old home (Dunk Island) c.1940 / Oil on canvas on composition board / 46 x 59.8cm / Purchased 1940 / Accession No: 1:0283 / Collection: Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art / © QAGOMA / Cited at <https://collection.qagoma.qld.gov.au/objects/13478> on 09/06/2026

Brassey returned to England for some years, Dalgarno and Wood had the run of his posh home (and wine collection). Noel later followed Brassey around on European jaunts. Wood's daughter, the artist Ann Grocott, says that Brassey told Noel

he was a great painter and didn't need a family dragging him down. Brassey, of course, had several wives and did not treat them well. Dad told me that when he stayed with Brassey in the U.K., "I couldn't go anywhere. Hugo didn't seem to realize; I had no money."⁶

Getting friendly with the rich and famous was a pattern in Wood's life. He may have criticised civilisation, but not from any left political position. He later befriended Harold

Holt (Liberal Prime Minister 1966-1967) and his wife/widow Zara. John Busst, who had bickered with Wood and eventually moved to Ninny Rise opposite the islands, was even closer to Holt, whose holiday home was nearby Busst's residence.⁷



Yvonne Cohen (1912-2004) 'The straw hat (self-portrait) 1946 / oil on canvas on board 43.6 x 39.3 cm / Purchased 2002, Rockhampton Art Gallery Collection

Between Bedarra and Dunk, on Timana Island lived the Cohen sisters, Valerie and Yvonne (Val and Von).⁸

The Cohen girls were also painters, and also got involved in tapestry making there. Their atoll had no spring for a supply of water. They installed a tank but they still had to have water delivered periodically from Noel's spring at the foot of the hill above his shack. They had

a small motor boat which would bring them over and often we would visit them. Noel didn't have a boat of his own.

Today, a room for one night on Bedarra Island costs \$2,000. By contrast, Dalgarno's stay did not stretch his small budget.

Noel had built this magnificent shack by himself: posts that he'd cut down from the wood at the top of the hill and a sort of thatched roof. This shack was open on two sides to the vegetation and the sea. Everything was perfect for an island home. Our beds were camp-stretchers, and there was a kerosene stove in the centre. Noel knew all about the Pacific Island food and lifestyle. Our diet was yams, pawpaws, bananas and coconut.

We'd walk down ten yards from the shack to his small, half-moon shaped cove [Doorilla Cove] which had an outer reef - a coral reef ringing the cove so that sharks didn't come in. The water was clear, as it was all along the Reef islands. In one corner, the deep part which was under the shade of a small cliff

twenty feet high from the water, he had the fish trap dangling in the deep water. Even that was built in the same manner as Robinson Crusoe would have built it with cane. We never had to wait for fish at all. Any day we went there, there were always two or three fish in the trap - we would just pick the size we needed.

We made our own sarongs which we designed and printed by silk-screen our own designs. I made a silk-screen contraption from an old picture frame and we did our own design on it and squeezed the ink through the organdie silk stretched over the frame and so printed it onto cotton. Once a week. Friday, the island boat would come over with supplies from Tully and we'd wade around to pick up our supplies. Usually of course we wore nothing at all.

Giving perhaps too much information, Dalgarno goes on:

We'd sometimes have visitors from the mainland or Melbourne, Sydney and Adelaide, but Noel's strict rule was no clothes for anyone who

visited for more than a day. This included women; we sometimes had women friends coming over as well as the two Cohen girls.

Dalgarno remembers helping Wood to make a start on an art studio near their shack, but

it was a stiff walk up to the top through the tangle of trees to fell our logs for the posts of the studio. It was never finished during the eighteen months I was there. We did our painting in the open while we were building the studio. We'd work on it for two or three hours a day and have one afternoon for painting. And we read a lot. I took a lot of books up there with me and we would each have our favourites, poetry or adventure things like that. Noel was fascinated with the practical, how-to-do-it sort of book.

In Stephen Moline's historical novel, *Red*, Roy Dalgarno is fictionalised as a simple soul who just wants "to be on my own to think ... where it's safe ... on Noel's island."⁹ But it is hard to imagine this enthusiastic and gregarious man wanting safety or

spending a long period in solitude. His artistic work ethic was another reason why he made frequent excursions off the island to various parts of north Queensland. His experiences in Cairns were particularly vivid.

When I first went up there I was immediately drawn into the life of the coloured people. Alligator Creek was a conglomeration of islanders from the Loyalty group, Thursday Islands, and so on. They were engaged in fishing and gathering Trochas shells. Trochas shell was used for making mother-of-pearl buttons. These they would sell in bulk to traders. They lived in shacks built on stilts in the shallow water of the mangrove swamps.

It would be wrong to think that Cairns in 1940 was happy about this non-white community on its outskirts, even though it was the city's own apartheid policies that created it at the turn of the century. Plans were already underway in 1941 to drain the creek and flatten the houses but the war intervened. Finally in 1948 the *Townsville Daily Bulletin* proudly announced that

Malay Town, for half a century a blot on the Cairns



*Alligator Creek, Malaytown
Cairns Historical Society photograph (Facebook)*

landscape, has been eliminated. The old area has been absorbed In a reclamation scheme of the Cairns Harbour Board (...) Malays, who were in larger numbers in North Queensland than they are today, congregated at this spot in its heyday. Malay Town must have about 30 homes of varying descriptions. This is part of what is known as the Alligator Creek reclamation

(...) Before obliterating the dwelling places of the last few Inmates of the town, the Harbour Board made arrangements for their transference to the Pensioners' Reserve. As soon as the land is reclaimed, it will be devoted to oil depots and also for any industrial purposes.

Maybe they should have been careful what they wished for. A year later, the nearby residents complained of a disgusting stench from the area. The *Cairns Post* reported that the former Alligator Creek was now a cesspool of discharges from glue containers and other waste. "Two years ago," said Ald. Chataway, 'one could see fishing boats moored in Alligator Creek and lads swimming there. This was no longer the case.'"¹⁰

Back in 1940, Roy was befriended by this community, especially two prominent families, the Pitts and the Sailors.

I remember there were some special occasions I would be invited to a meal at night or a celebration along with one or two people who were also liked by the Pitts and the Sailors. The islanders of

Alligator Creek ate Malay food. They would prepare it on hot stones covered with banana leaves. The meals were usually pigs cooked in the blood with taro, and very rich.

The Pitts and Sailors were Christians, but their women showed obeisance towards the males. The men would eat first and the women wouldn't pass the men standing up, they'd bend down. It was the first time I'd seen this but I've seen it many times since then in India.

Dalgarno does not record meeting the artist Donald Friend but knew he had frequented the place since the early 1930s and was also friendly with these families.¹¹ He does not mention any knowledge of Friend's now-infamous pederasty, but it seems Friend's preying on very young brown-skinned boys started early.

Dalgarno's descriptions of the physical features of the Pitts and Sailors sound gauche today, but evidence from his life and memoirs show he was no racist. Furthermore, he seems to have seen women as equals, even though he could be called a libertine. He was certainly open to the sexual element of the



*Dulcie Pitt (right) posing with Wally and Heather
Source: Australian Jazz Museum*

dream of tropical adventure. He conducted a love affair with Dulcie Pitt which he describes as an erotic obsession.

I fell in love with Dulcie. I learned to play the guitar from her brother [Wally] and she taught me songs in her language about Thursday Island and translated them into English which I copied down in my sketch book. I also bought a book by Bobbie Breen with easy lessons on how to play the ukulele.

I don't know how much her family knew about this, but like most such situations, it was kept fairly secret. This love affair developed; it became very strong. Sexually it was exciting for both of us I

think. We used to have sex on the sand. It was a truly romantic experience.

This dream of tropical escape derived from racially-charged popular culture stereotypes generated after the USA annexation of Hawaii. More of the same sort of tropes were added following the US military presence in southern Pacific islands during World War II.

The life of Dulcie Lyra Rumia Pitt (1922–2010) is outlined on the Australian Jazz Museum website.

Her mother, Myra Kemple-Hopkins, was of Scottish, Afghan and Aboriginal Kalkodoon descent. Her father, Douglas Pitt Junior, was born in the Torres Strait region, while his parents originated from the West Indies and Loyalty Island, New Caledonia. Dulcie and her siblings grew up within a musical family, who would perform to crowds at their home in Cairns. The Pitt siblings formed the Harmony Sisters.¹²

Although her musical career began singing American jazz to US troops during the war, she toured internationally under her stage name of Georgia Lee and became the



second female artist in Australia to release an LP record.¹³

Dalgarno remembers painting Dulcie, as well as sketching Charlie and many others during his visits to Alligator Creek.

I would end up sketching all the time. This was a habit I developed when I was quite young. I would draw in cafes and restaurants, in libraries and at parties. When everyone else was getting pissed I would be doing a drawing. Apart from being a compulsive activity it was a deliberate way of developing a facility which is a different sort of thing to the method of many painters, who paint mostly directly from models



Above image
Mama Sailor, wife of Charlie Sailor, mending fishing nets.
Roy Dalgarno, c.1939, Authors possession

Below Image
From the Joseph Lebovic Gallery Collectors List 1997 No.64



in the studio or on the spot, as many landscape painters do. I would usually work from sketches. I did a tremendous amount of sketching in pen. Literally dozens I still have in my folder.

The Communist writer, Jean Devanny, was also a frequent guest at Alligator Creek.

She was very friendly with Charlie Sailor, often went out on his Trochas lugger. In fact it was Jean who introduced me to them, and she described to me how idyllic it was making love to Charlie on the deck of his lugger under the tropical sun. She had a mystic approach – I can only describe it as similar to what D H Lawrence had toward love and the sun. She was that sort of woman. She would go into raptures about this.

Carole Ferrier's biography of Jean has her tell about an occasion when Roy spoke about his ideas on modern art aesthetics at Alligator Creek.¹⁴ In Jean's account, Roy divides current art practices into the popular, the romantic and the architectural. Populists are sentimentalists, not original or "holistic." Romantics are not progressive. Architectural artists, on

the other hand, use emotion for truth rather than sentimental effect. They include Picasso, Diego Rivera and his contemporary, José Clemente Orozco. These artists provide images of social struggle which retain beauty and interest beyond topicality. Roy was bemused when I showed him the passage of his reported speech in 1999, but he thought it could have happened in some form, no doubt with Jean's embroidery added. It does have similarities with the WEA essay by Roy which I described in the first part of my account of Dalgarno in Queensland in No. 41 of this journal.

Roy had met Jean Devanny in Sydney. When he was preparing to leave Brisbane he was told to look up Jean by his comrades – "The Party was like a bush telegraph."

I admired her tremendously. I had been warned by the Party to be wary of her from the point of view that she was a very liberal sort of a Communist. But Jean always remained tremendously popular with the working people and with writers in Melbourne and Sydney.

The Party's negative attitude to Jean and her good relations with workers at this time is explained in Carole Ferrier's biography.

It was Jean who found Roy a room opposite hers in a boarding house on the Cairns sea front. Since Jean had been very active in union militancy in the north since 1934, she was well watched by the security police. The police raided both Jean's and Roy's room. Their visits were mainly to confiscate books and to intimidate. Devanney, a decade or so older than Roy and a much more hardened revolutionary, came between him and the spooks like a protective mother and gave them as good as she got verbally.

Another incident in Cairns occurred when some other cops drove next to Roy as he walked along the street.

One leaned over the car door and said, "Hey, over here, you!"

"Not on your life, who the hell do you think I am?"

"You'd better come over. Come on Roy, you know us, we're D's."

"I'm over here if you want to talk to me," I replied. And so they got out and said, "How's your wife, how's Nadine eh?" "You probably open our letters, you probably know more about her whereabouts than I do."

Then, as they got back into their car, I said, as a parting shot, "I suppose that someone

higher up than you probably reads your mail too."

They were suggesting Nadine was vulnerable back in Brisbane and they knew where to find her. They did indeed raid Nadine's house in Brisbane, took books and sniffed out nosey neighbours for dirt about her. The cops also probably really did want information on Nadine as she was, much more than Roy, a committed political activist.

Active police harassment of Communists was common in the 1930s. At the beginning of that decade the Comintern encouraged western Parties to lead militant struggles especially in unions. The sugar cane cutters in North Queensland had fought especially bitter strikes and the weakness of their official union, the Australian Workers Union (AWU), left a vacuum of leadership actively filled by Communists such as the Queensland CPA Secretary, Jack Henry, who Dalgarno admired despite objecting to his ideological narrowness. Devanney was involved in the cane strikes, which are the subject of her novel *Sugar Heaven*.

In the later 1930s there was less cause for police attention. With Hitler forming anti-Soviet pacts, Communists focused on building broad Popular Fronts against



*Jack Henry by Roy Dalgarno c 1942
From Joseph Lebovic Gallery Collectors' List 1997 No.64*

fascism. But by the time Dalgarno was in North Queensland the tension was again on the rise. The Soviet Union signed a pact with Germany in August 1939 in the hope of postponing invasion. As a result the Comintern required a pivot to opposing the government's war preparations. This time, the CPA was explicitly declared illegal in June 1940 by the Menzies government, which was in power from 1939–1941.

Nevertheless, Dalgarno continued on his painting safari without too much trouble:

By this time I had made a lot of connections up and down the coast. Someone would put me on to the owner or the

manager of a cane field and I would be invited to go up and draw there. I would be given a bed on the veranda of a house, or put up at a nearby pub. I had a number of acquaintances, many of whom were Communists or sympathisers. The easiest way to get around was by truck. There weren't many people who had their own cars up there, particularly among the working stiff.

I didn't really love landscapes as such. On Bedarra I painted the mangroves and pandanas, the white, sandy beach and the sea, hibiscus bushes and casuarina trees. They were very interesting visually to my city eyes. But I didn't concentrate much on landscapes on the mainland, only insofar as they were backgrounds for the people I painted: cane-cutters and people in the unemployed camps scattered around Cairns. These camps were mostly built up of hessian and old iron – you know, just 'humpies'.

There were permanent communities of old timers, Depression types, who would read and quote Henry Lawson



Roy Dalgarno, *The Camp*
Reproduced from the Artnet auction site

or Steele Rudd, who knew all the early Australian writers and particularly the poets. I did lots of drawings of them and the pub scenes and things like that.

I was fascinated with types – I did lots of studies of hands, old knobbly hands and close-ups of boots on the floor, and the old beds on the verandas of canefield pubs, those metal beds with an old mattress thrown over their busted springs. I remember now this bloke, a cane-cutter. lying on a

bent, old iron bed, his feet hanging over the end. I did a similar drawing of Charlie Sailor – his huge feet hanging over the ends, his hat over his face.

After his mainland excursions, Roy would return to Bedarra Island.

I would keep in touch with Noel by letter, telling him of my movements, and we'd meet at the Tully Hotel when he came over to Tully for stores. I would return to Bedarra laden with masses of

drawings, sticky paintings and sketch books. Noel and I would have a terrific time spreading the work on the ground, comparing notes, what we'd both been doing. Well, Noel didn't seem to do as much as I did. I think he was so in love with his island life that he only painted sporadically,

Finally, Dalgarno and Wood were ready to stage an exhibition of about 72 paintings. Roy did the organising.

I went down south to arrange for framing and a place to exhibit. An old friend of my family from Melbourne, Arthur Prince, offered me this place, Princes Ballroom, in exchange for one of my paintings.¹⁵ Another friend, John Cooper, was interested in managing the show. He was just starting out as an art dealer, selling paintings privately from his residence.

In the introduction for the show, titled *Tropical Paintings*, Dalgarno said:

We think the north the most beautiful spot in Australia. It is so gloriously fertile. Take the canefields with their vivid and varied shades of green,

the cutters burnt almost black in some cases, the farms and houses. We have painted men at work in the fields, at home in the yards and drinking in hotel bars. Mostly they are Britishers, but there are now Italians and a percentage of Yugoslavs, the last being silent, handsome men.¹⁶

As we have seen, however, it was Dalgarno, not Wood, who was interested in painting workers. Wood was a different sort of artist. From an early age he found painting easy and made money as a portraitist, but he had no interest in this as a career. When he settled on Bedarra he mainly painted landscapes. There is no doubt he admired the British painter Augustus John whom he later travelled to meet. Wood is often credited as an early modernist – “early” in the relative context of Australia. But his paintings rarely explore any ideas beyond recording the visual experience of a scene, albeit in the post-impressionist colours that convey lush vegetation lit by a tropical sun. He painted enough to continue his life on the island but otherwise did not seem to focus much on developing as an artist. If his later paintings sometimes look more sketchy, this may be due more to declining interest than a move toward abstraction.



Mr. Roy Dalgarno and Mr. John Cooper hanging the pictures.

*The Telegraph (Brisbane), 04 December 1940
(The painting Smoko is at the bottom)*

Dalgarno, on the other hand, was driven to find ways to become a professional fine art painter. Three paintings from the show can serve to show his early solutions. The first, *Smoko*, was discussed in my previous article. It could form a triptych with *Men at work*, and *Canecutting*.¹⁷ These show how Dalgarno translated his agitprop graphic figures, the common motifs of leftist graphic artists, into serious painting. He found a way to show, not “The Worker” as a type, but specific workers in actual life. Just as much as the agitprop figures, however, his workers are full of presence and dynamism. Unlike Wood’s art, Dalgarno’s changed throughout his career as he sought different ways to explore his themes.

Press write-ups for *Tropical*

Paintings were glowing, and interest was intense.

It must have gone to John Cooper's head a little. He suggested that both Noel and I come to the opening of the show wearing our own hand-printed sarongs. I was quite prepared to go along with John's extravagant promotional ideas because I was more flamboyant. But Noel wouldn't have anything to do with it.

We sold practically everything anyway. Jimmy Duhig officially opened the exhibition. His uncle, the Catholic Archbishop, came too, and everyone bought our work. Colin Clarke, the



Above
Roy Dalgarno, Canecutting, 1939, Museum of Brisbane

statistician in the Forgan Smith government, bought two or three paintings. Years later, his son told me at a party in Sydney that all his life he had been sleeping in a room with one of my paintings above his head, a painting named 'Honey Child' – one of the Pitt girls, Dulcie's sister.

Archbishop Duhig also bought two of my paintings but I couldn't get him to pay up. Eventually I had to put a lawyer onto it. I thought he shouldn't get away with this

just on account of being the Archbishop. Jimmy Duhig didn't care much for him either. He said, "Go for it Roy." After a couple of the solicitor's letters I was invited to his office. When his male secretary paid up he intimated that "His Grace" normally expected artists to donate such things to the church.

Dalgarno's plan to become a full time professional artist had paid off. But he still intended to return north and continue to work from Bedarra Island. It was only when he was again met by



Above

Roy Dalgarno, *Men at Work*, UQ Art Gallery c 1939. Gift of Dr James Vincent Dubig, 1941

Noel Wood at Tully train station that he got the bad news. The looming war with Germany was causing big changes, especially up north. Not only had Hugo Brassey returned to England to join the navy but Dunk Island itself was to be occupied by the Australian Air Force for an airstrip and radar station.¹⁸ The Tully Police, presumably on instructions from the security services, made it clear to Wood that if he wanted to keep his precious lifestyle he was to start supplying military personnel with food and, more importantly, to make sure that Dalgarno never returned to the islands.

I never saw Noel after that. We never corresponded, although I had left my art books and many personal things, some preliminary sketches, and clothes, on Bedarra Island. I was so disgusted and depressed about the whole affair that I returned to Brisbane that same evening after a few farewell drinks at the Tully pub; a most uncomfortable farewell for both of us. Noel was completely apolitical so it would not have occurred to him to take a political stand.

So much for the Garden of Eden.

But the story of Roy Dalgarno in Queensland was not yet over. His tendency to land on his feet continued. The Communist Party, this illegal and vilified organisation, was soon to become widely popular.

In June 1941, the Hitler-Stalin pact was smashed as Germany invaded the Soviet Union. Rather than agitating against war preparations, Western Communist parties were required to support what they now called the “war of democratic peoples.” Although the CPA remained illegal until 1942, the heat was easing off. Australia entered the war in September 1941 and the Party encouraged members to enlist in the armed forces. These events once again turned out to suit Dalgarno very well, albeit in an unusual way.

In the meantime, Dalgarno’s new success and standing as an artist in Brisbane meant he was able to play an important and eventful role in what was still a small, parochial cultural establishment. In the 1920s and 30s it had been so small that it seems to have relied pretty heavily on injections of funds from an anti-communist foundation associated with a US millionaire. But these stories will need to wait for the next instalment.

References

¹ “Roy Dalgarno in Queensland,” *Queensland Journal of Labour History* No. 41 Summer 2025/2026, 54-61.

My main source for Dalgarno is an unpublished draft of a memoir called *The Winking of An Eye*.

I have taken the liberty of presenting Dalgarno’s anecdotes as coherent and organised, even though, in the typescript of his interviews with the unknown people who typed them, these monologues are haphazardly begun, interrupted, repeated, continued and contradicted. I have checked and corrected his mis-remembered facts. I have tried not to misrepresent his ideas.

Ken Grey and Stephen Moline quote from this memoir too, but they have different versions and other sources. See Ken Grey, *Artists of the Islands volume 1: Noel Wood* (Mission Beach Historical Society, 2023); Stephen Moline, *Red* (Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2017).

Moline includes Dalgarno as a character in his semi-fictional novel. He discusses the chapter relevant to Bedarra Island on his blog post: “Red the Book. 1940, The Ds,”

[//redthebook.blog/1940-%E2%80%A2-copy-the-ds/](http://redthebook.blog/1940-%E2%80%A2-copy-the-ds/)

² “Four Year Old Traveller on Flying Boat,” *Telegraph*, 14 March 1940.

Four-year-old Lynn Dalgarno, of Ashgrove, who left Brisbane for Sydney by flying boat unattended, will resume his journey to Melbourne tomorrow. In Melbourne he will visit his grandmother and later will enter a pre-school College.

³ These details are from Ken Grey’s biography of Wood mentioned earlier and also the second volume: *Artists of the islands Volume 2: The Cohen Sisters: Val & Von* (Mission Beach Historical Society, 2023). [//mbhs.com.au/index.php/our-people/art/159-artists-of-the-islands-volume-1-noel-wood#_ftn17](http://mbhs.com.au/index.php/our-people/art/159-artists-of-the-islands-volume-1-noel-wood#_ftn17)

Steve Meacham, “Noel Wood, Australian art’s Robinson Crusoe gets a rare airing” *The Financial Review*, May 5, 2017. Screen Australia distributes an ABC documentary about Wood: *The Island And The Painter*, (1987).

⁴ Guy Morrison, *We Shared an Island*, London : Phoenix House, 1951.

⁵ From the website of the Bedarra Beach House:
<https://www.bedarrabeachhouse.com.au/location/history/#:~:text=Later%20in%201940%20two%20rich,forest%20beauty%20of%20the%20island>.

⁶ Grey, p40.

⁷ Ann Jones and Gregg Borschmann, "Harold Holt, the poet and 'the bastard from Bingil Bay': How reef conservation began," ABC news website, Saturday 11 August 2018.
<https://www.abc.net.au/news/science/2018-08-11/great-barrier-reef-conservation-harold-holt-and-bingil-bay/10057716>

Busst is credited with getting Holt to assist in the fight to save the Barrier Reef from Premier Bjelke-Petersen's ravages, although the trade union contribution to reef conservation is usually ignored. See Alison Stewart, "Blue Bans: How Unions Saved the Great Barrier Reef," *Queensland Journal of Labour History*, No. 36 Winter 2023.

⁸ For the Cohen sisters see Shane Fitzgerald, *To the Islands : exploring works created by artists on Dunk, Bedarra, and Timana Islands between the 1930s and 1990s* Townsville: Gallery Services, Townsville City Council, 2013 and See above, Ken Grey, *Artists of the Islands* Volume 2.

⁹ *Red*, p146.

¹⁰ Information on Malaytown is available from audio interviews with former residents are available to see via James Cook University <https://nqheritage.jcu.edu.au/729/> and the ABC Earshot programme from 15 September 2015 <https://www.abc.net.au/listen/programs/earshot/malaytown/6746408>

¹¹ An Instagram post by the Cairns Art Gallery states that Friend visited in 1932.

https://www.instagram.com/p/DBTA_ydz0gc/
The Queensland Art Gallery has Malaytown pictures by Friend dated 1940-41.

¹² See the museum's website:

https://www.ajm.org.au/?page_id=13292

¹³ Brenda Gifford, notes on the 1962 LP Georgia Lee Sings the Blues Down Under.

<https://www.nfsa.gov.au/collection/item/georgia-lee-sings-blues-down-under-georgia-lee>

¹⁴ Carole Ferrier, *Jean Devanny, Romantic Revolutionary*, Carlton, Vic.: Melbourne University Press, 1999.

¹⁵ Princes Ballroom was in the Old Courier Building on the corner of Queen and Edward Streets also had a swanky restaurant and was frequented by US and Australian officers during the war. See March 30, 2025 post on the Facebook group "Clubbed Out - 50 years of Nightclubbing in Brisbane, 1950-2000," <https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100066765589394>

¹⁶ From a newspaper clipping quoted in *Thorns & Petals, 100 years of the Queensland Art Society* (1988), by Keith Bradbury & Glenn R. Cooke, 91.

¹⁷ *Men at Work* was bought by Dalgarno's patron, J.V. Duhig, and donated to the Darnell collection, which later became the University of Queensland Art Museum. *Canecutting* was bought by the Museum of Brisbane in 1987 from the Philip Bacon Galleries.

¹⁸ See Ken Grey's very badly titled, "Our own Gatsby." https://mbhs.com.au/images/tourism/H002-Our_Own_Gatsby/H002.pdf

Brassy joined the Australian Navy but returned to England in December 1939 to become an officer in the Royal Navy.

Dr Allan Gardiner is a retired public servant. He is a co-editor of *The Queensland Journal of Labour History*. Allan met Roy Dalgarno on the recommendation of Carole Ferrier, who had interviewed him when researching her book *Jean Devanny: Romantic Revolutionary* (1999).

Dalgarno's death cut short Allan's attempt to help him finish his memoirs.

Book Review

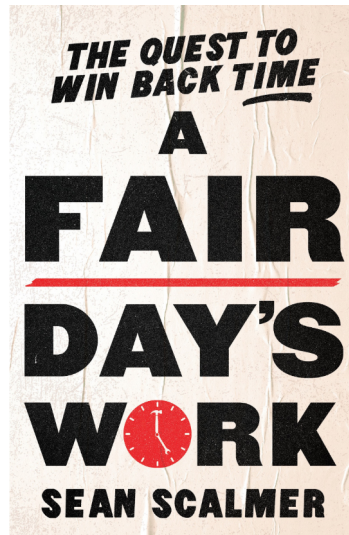
A Fair Day's Work: The Quest to Win Back Time

By Sean Scalmer

Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2025

Reviewed by Jeff Rickertt

The amount of time workers spend at their paid jobs each day and week is a defining aspect of the employment experience and one of the most structurally entrenched sources of friction between labour and capital. It comes as a surprise, then, to realise how seldom our struggles to reduce work-time have been treated as a single subject of historical inquiry. Our knowledge tends to be fragmentary; most unionists know something of the 19th Century battles by stonemasons for an eight-hour day, we might have a vague grasp of the winning of the 44 and then 40-hour weeks in the 20th Century, older workers would understand that since the mid-1980s the very notion of a standard working week has slipped away. But as a movement we have neglected to produce an overall picture of the topic. We have failed to understand the struggles over work-time systematically. In writing *A Fair Day's Work: The Quest to Win Back Time*, Sean Scalmer has done our



cause a great service by addressing this shortcoming.

A Fair Day's Work begins with the stonemasons and ends with the current regimes of labour, both paid and unpaid. Along the way there is a chapter on management attempts from the late 19th Century to co-opt the discourse on working hours, transforming it from a question of

human rights and liberation to one of productivity and economics. A chapter is devoted to the messy but ultimately successful struggle to “win the weekend” by reducing the working week to a standard 40 hours, thereby freeing Saturdays from the demands of paid toil. This is followed by a chapter tackling the long period of stagnation and reversal from the late 1940s, culminating in the sobering disclosure that,

from the 1980s, standard full-time hours began to increase: to an average of 41.2 hours per week in 1988 and to 43.0 hours by 1994. Though falling back unevenly in the years afterward, they remain above the levels that prevailed four decades ago. On average Australians work 5.4 hours of unpaid overtime every week. (p.131)

Scalmer’s meticulous research has brought to light many details of the overall story that readers may not know. He tells us, for example, that even in the late 19th Century less than three per cent of Australians were able to sit down at their work, underlining how important a reduction of hours was for sheer physical relief. (p.17) He explains how labour activists in that era did not rely only on their industrial

power to win reduced hours; they also exploited aspiring parliamentarians and parliamentary processes to further their claims. Indeed, the expansion of political citizenship was itself invoked as a rationale for more time away from paid employment. “Shorter hours,” Scalmer writes, “were ... presented as the corollary of manhood suffrage, and a means of enabling the working classes to exercise their franchise independently.” (p.30) He also wryly observes that the loftier benefits the proponents of shorter hours ascribed to their claims did not always materialise once the boon was won:

Those who enjoyed a reduced day of toil devoted their liberated time less to self-improvement and more to the pleasures of recreation and conviviality. There was no artistic renaissance on the southern continent; the cities of the antipodes did not come to constitute an Athens reborn. Rather, male tradesmen and labourers enjoyed the sunshine and took to the sporting field. (pp.74-5)

Turning to 20th Century struggles, Scalmer explains that organised labour looked increasingly to the new Commonwealth Arbitration Court, with mixed results. Early

gains were made while the court was led by Justice Henry Higgins, only to be undone by Higgins' successors. Queensland readers may be surprised to learn of the range of workers who took up the cause of the 40-hour week in this state. The building trades were there, of course, but so were the furniture workers and the makers of musical instruments, Venetian blinds and bedsteads; the engineers, glassworkers, meatworkers and ironmoulders, among others, were also in the fight. (p.108)

The emphasis here on manufacturing labour reflected a broader shift. "The movement for shorter hours," Scalmer observes, began to more directly reflect the experiences of the industrial age." (p.97) The arguments unionists deployed changed accordingly. Unions asserted that technology-enabled speed-ups made work more arduous, that the increased division of labour and monotonous repetition created new strains on body and mind, that workers should share in the productivity benefits of new machines. On each of these grounds, it was argued, a shorter working week was warranted.

Scalmer makes the important observation that our understanding of the gains of the 20th Century is generally far hazier than our

knowledge of the much earlier eight-hour-day campaigns. "Whereas the winning of the eight-hour-day – in practice, a forty-eight hour week – elicited a rich memorial culture, the winning of the weekend attracted no such commemoration." (p.104) The difference can be explained by the fact that the eight-hour victories were foundational for Australian unionism. Furthermore, they were framed by a rights-based rubric that was more amenable to folkloric representation than the later victories that drew heavily on technocratic arguments about health and productivity sharing.

Scalmer's biggest achievement in *A Fair Day's Work* lies in his ability to weave this history around a cogent analysis of the strengths and limitations of the movement. It is at this level that the book delivers 'lessons' for us today. On the deficit side, Scalmer highlights the consistently racialised and gendered character of organised labour's quest to reduce hours. The eight-hour day, he points out, was intentionally a gain reserved for white males. Chinese workers were depicted as enemies of the standard, Pacific Islanders were excluded, and Aboriginal workers were not considered deserving of it. "The vital and creative character of white labour was a recurrent theme of eight-hour propaganda, but its

inverse was a frequent denial of the willingness or capacity of Aboriginal people to work.” (p.64) For women, the eight-hour campaign left unanswered the question of the labour of the home. If an eight-hour day liberated workers to enjoy eight hours of recreation and eight hours of rest, who, Scalmer asks, “would cook the dinner, sweep the floor, wash the clothes, or nurse the baby?” (p.67) For women in paid employment, there were further limitations. More often than not, any reduction in their hours was regarded not as an assertion of rights but as an affirmation of gender normative arguments about female vulnerability and dependence. (p.66)

Scalmer returns to questions of structural sexism in his final chapter, entitled ‘Reimagining Work: An Incomplete Revolution’. Here he provides a more expansive critique of the male-bias in historical visions of work and working hours, and outlines how feminists have challenged this bias by calling for a renegotiation of the relationship between paid and unpaid labour. But, he observes, since the 1980s the length of the standard working week has largely been absent from that discussion, and reductions in work-time have not occurred. Indeed, “they have not even been seriously

pursued.” Rather, the quest for a fair day’s work has been expressed in more contained forms: the right to work ‘flexibility’ and the provision of parental leave. (p.169)

On the positive side, Scalmer foregrounds the agency and tactical creativity of unionists, showing how they adapted to new situations by pursuing different tactics, from industrial action to the use of arbitration, appeals for public sympathy, and the direct application of pressure on parliamentary representatives. More than one option was often employed simultaneously. While usually seen as competing alternatives, Scalmer suggests that no one approach was uniformly successful or unsuccessful, and that gains in one arena aided the struggles pursued elsewhere. (p.124) Along the way, his close examination of the various campaigns disrupts some folklore. The winning of a 40-hour week in Queensland, for example, was mythologised as a victory delivered by a zealously reformist Labor government. In reality, Scalmer notes, it was won by unions and party members, with Labor’s parliamentarians “plagued by hesitancy and reluctance.” (p.120)

Overall the history falls into two halves: major reductions in work-time won and then normalised over

the course of a century from the 1850s to the 1940s, followed by over 70 years of truncated progress and systematic losses. The last major improvement was the 38-hour week, secured by the manufacturing unions in 1981 as a compromise in its campaign for 35 hours. (p.143)

The book offers a view on the reasons for organised labour's failure to advance in recent decades:

Unions have been the primary protagonists of the quest for a 'fair day's work'. The great reversal in working time maps directly onto their relative neglect of this matter along with their declining collective strength. The state has also long acted to support union claims, though that support has been inconstant and unreliable. In recent decades, the agents of the Australian state have been unwilling to consider new regulations to reflect shifting experiences and urgent needs. (p.148)

This predicament, Scalmer explains, is an outcome of the ALP's embrace of neoliberalism, the Communist Party's dismissal of reduced hours as a merely economic measure, and a union movement decimated by industrial defeats, deregulation and

economic restructuring. As these processes unfolded, two key principles were eroded: that enhanced productivity should be shared with employees in the form of greater leisure time, and that reductions won by some workers should become the common possession of all.

Scalmer contends that the forfeiture of these principles "has proceeded unevenly, in a series of tactical accommodations, more by omission than by overt decision." (p.153) Greater clarity would have been helpful here. Who specifically is he referring to? I cannot help feel that the ambiguity on this point obscures the culpability of Hawke, Keating, Keltz, Carmichael and many of their associates and successors. The forfeiting of principles and of union strength, which Scalmer rightly identifies, occurred on their watch, and it occurred not as a result of tactical concessions but mainly as the outcome of their purposeful acts of commission. When the Communist leadership of the manufacturing unions declared in early 1982 that wage rises and reductions in work-time were no longer priorities, they were opening the door to a series of major and unforced concessions to employers. Announcing that the new priority was an improvement in the 'social wage', Communist union leaders

worked with the ACTU and the Labor Party to impose wage restraint and curtail other demands. Their collaboration culminated in the Prices and Income Accord and, through it, Enterprise Bargaining. These arrangements massively weakened workers' industrial power and eroded the principle of collective equality.

I would make only one other critical comment about the book, although it is more of an observation than a criticism. I think it is relevant to note that another important element of the work-time question is the battle over control of time on the job. Often neglected by union leaders habituated not to encroach on managerial prerogative, the struggle over labour intensity during the working day is an enduring although commonly masked and informal aspect of the quest to win back time. Although Scalmer touches upon speedups and other forms of work pressure, it is always in the context of unions seeking fewer hours as the remedy. The on-the-job aspect of the subject is largely left unexamined, an omission he flags in the introduction:

Workers, unsurprisingly, at first resisted the new forms of time discipline: refusing to turn up at allocated times, insisting upon the

maintenance of traditional holidays, absconding from work, going slow. Increasingly, however, they launched a struggle over time: accepting that the day would be ruled by the measurement of hours and minutes, but seeking to limit their time at work. (pp.1-2)

Union leaders certainly were inclined to accept the capitalist work discipline imposed on their members but I think it is debatable whether workers ever have. To be fair, though, the struggle over job control is a distinct and complicated topic, probably best tackled in a volume of its own.

A Fair Day's Work is a fine work of history. It is simultaneously partisan and above the fray, allowing the author to tease out the patterns and assumptions of the movement and subject them to constructive scrutiny. The book's importance lies not only in its linking up of the discrete histories in the quest for reduced work-time, but also in the insights it offers on workers' agency and strategy at various moments in the struggle. Most importantly, by illuminating the flaws in our previous efforts, the book allows us to imagine how we might reinvigorate that struggle with even greater purpose and effect in the future.

From the Ashes of the Old

<https://brisbanelabourhistory.org/blog>

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Eighty Years of Resistance by Ross Gwyther
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**Broadcasting the Power of Workers
Bill Storey-Smith**

**The Ballad of John Kerr
Stephen Stockwell**

**The Billiard Room
Ted D'Urso**

**Roy Dalgrano in Queensland part two
Allan Gardiner**

A Fair Days Work: The Quest to Win Back Time
by Sean Scalmer
Reviewed by **Jeff Rickertt**

