Wilfred Burchett

By Phillip Deery

The controversies surrounding the life, reputation and legacy of the famous Australian reporter and journalist, Wilfred Burchett, would be well known to many Recorder readers. One central allegation, on which much ink has been split, is that he was an ‘agent of influence’ for the KGB. This claim was first raised in the scholarly literature by Robert Manne in his ‘The Fortunes of Wilfred Burchett: A New Assessment’, *Quadrant* 29:8 (August 1985), 7-15. This article was expanded into *Agent of Influence: The Life and Times of Wilfred Burchett* (Toronto: The Mackenzie Institute, 1989) and reprinted as ‘He Chose Stalin: The Case of Wilfred Burchett’ in *The Shadow of 1917: Cold War Conflict in Australia* (Melbourne; Text, 1994). More recently, Manne published ‘Agent of Influence: Reassessing Wilfred Burchett’, *The Monthly* 35 (June 2008).


The point of revisiting this literature is that the personal recollection published below gives an entirely different perspective. It was written by Rupert Lockwood (1908-1997), one of Australia’s best-known Cold War communists. He lived in Burchett’s apartment during the three years in the 1960s when he was the Moscow correspondent for *Tribune*, the Communist Party’s weekly paper.

The recollection, provided by Penny Lockwood for publication in *Recorder*, reveals that Burchett’s relationship with the KGB, and more generally with Soviet officialdom, was highly fractious; by 1965 he was persona non grata. This has been overlooked by both detractor and supporter.
Wilfred Burchett’s farewell to Moscow in his 9th floor apartment in the Vissotni Dom, one of Stalin’s ‘wedding cake’ buildings in the shadow of the Kremlin and at the confluence of the Moskva and Yauza Rivers, was the most stressful party I had ever attended. Host Wilfred dialed busily on his tapped phone, dashed in and out, returning occasionally in a futile effort to entertain his guests. The first autumn chills of September 1965 could not keep the sweat from his brow.

Wilfred, his Bulgarian wife Vessa, and their young children, all born under Communist regimes, were due to catch an Aeroflot plane from Moscow early next morning for Cairo, there to connect with a Czechoslovak Airlines flight to Phnom Penh, Cambodia. AVIR, the Moscow visa office, KGB supervised, was refusing to stamp Burchett’s family passports with exit visa permits.

Intourist, the Soviet travel monopoly, had already visited upon him that tanglefooted bureaucratic treatment in which Russians are amongst world leaders. Intourist had ruled that Burchett, born in Melbourne, could pay the air fare in roubles, but that wife Vessa, born in East Europe, and children, born in Beijing and Hanoi, must pay in US dollars.

Although he earned foreign currency royalties for his books and articles, Burchett was hard-pressed to rustle up the dollars (he suffered no shortage of roubles). He had sold his British-made station wagon and other items, got transfers of dollars from a bank abroad, and surprised Intourist by meeting its demands. This put AVIR in a difficult position.

Burchett had picked up tickets to Cairo and Phnom Penh that day. An Intourist official told him in frozen tones: ’It’s no use you expecting a seat at Cairo for Phnom Penh. All the planes are booked out for months.’ That did not deter Wilfred – he was experienced in overcoming difficult travel problems and he knew he must leave Moscow.

During the party he rang influential friends and then rushed to the home of a Foreign Office official, and to an AVIR contact. He was back at the Vissotni Dom party at about 10.30pm, still without an exit visa. It was just after 11pm that the fateful phone call drew a strained host away once more from his guests. Those green-helmeted guards would have the exit visas for him at Sheremetyevo airport before the Aeroflot flight to Cairo the next morning. Wilfred’s guests gave him an ironic cheer. They included writers, actors, scientists, university professors and Foreign Office officials prepared to take the risk. They knew Wilfred was being ‘unpersonned’.

Whatever had Wilfred done to incur Soviet wrath? The Stalin witch-hunters would have found nothing to criticize in his writings on Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union.

His book, The People’s Democracies, was one of the most outrageously historical distortions in a field where competition was severe. The carefully detailed conspiracy web in which Hungarian Foreign Minister Lazlo Rajk and Yugoslavia’s Tito were alleged to be key operatives, as faithfully portrayed by Wilfred in his report on the Budapest trial, demoted John Le Carre and Ian Fleming to Boys’ Own Paper class. Rajk, he related, ‘worked all over Europe as a police spy – for Yugoslav, British and Franco Spanish Intelligence, for the Gestapo and the CIA’. Rajk in fact fought in the Spanish Civil War International Brigade and was gaolled several times by Hungarian dictator Horthy’s police, the last time in 1944-45.

Wilfred Burchett was also in the Sofia court in December 1949 to hear charges against Bulgarian Deputy Premier Traicho Kostov, a man of intellect and courage. Kostov stood up to arrogant Soviet representatives. He objected to paying low prices for Bulgarian produce and selling it abroad at handsome profit. ‘Bargaining with the Soviet Union’ was ‘nationalist deviation’.

On the evidence Burchett saw Kostov as a collaborator in a ‘Yugoslav plan every whit as diabolical and bloodthirsty as that for Hungary.’ Wilfred Burchett did note that Kostov in court repudiated the ‘confession’ (later shown to be extracted under torture). He was taken away for a few hours, ‘re-confessed’ and was speedily hanged.

Wilfred Burchett at least tried to make amends for his acceptance of Stalinist falsities. He made special trips to Hungary and Bulgaria to apologise to the widow
Rajk and the relatives of Kostov. This may have been far short of just reparation, but it was at least more than the Soviet ‘teachers’ who supervised the East European police were prepared to do.

Burchett was, in fact, already under suspicion at KGB or NKVD headquarters, and these suspicions were being whispered around before his apologies, which drew no Soviet plaudits at the time. As the second wave of the Great Terror under Brezhnev cramped and destroyed lives from Kamchatka to the Elbe, Wilfred obviously began to have doubts. Being an outgoing journalist, he talked about them and was no doubt informed upon.

Even in the 1950s journalists employed by the Tass news-agency in London warned me that ‘Czech Intelligence’ had listed Wilfred Burchett as ‘an American agent’. Soon after, the same warning came to my ears from some of the shady group then staffing the Czechoslovak Foreign Office in Prague. In Sofia, a Greek Communist refugee from the failed Leftist rebellion in Greece sympathised with me for having an Australian colleague, Wilfred Burchett, who ‘was spying for the Americans’. The Greek Communist was certain Burchett was ‘seriously implicated’. Who would have told him?

Later I mentioned these absurd charges to Burchett. He already knew about the tales being circulated, and offered one consoling thought: ‘If I’d been working for the Americans you can be sure I would have been caught long ago. The Americans are not very good at protecting their agents!’ Wilfred forgot to say: one did not have to be ‘caught’. Slanderous denunciations were usually followed by arrests and ‘confessions’.

Wilfred, with good reason, began to spend more time in China after the success of Mao Tse-tung’s October 1949 Revolution. He wrote enthusiastically and copiously on post-revolutionary China. After the Korean war outbreak in 1950, he was busily engaged as a defender of North Korea. Next, his name was in the headlines for his reportage in the Vietnam conflict.

I met and talked with Wilfred Burchett in Moscow in 1961, during the Khrushchev era. He was not very impressed with Khrushchev. When Marshal Voroshilov, wartime defender of Leningrad, turned up to take his place on the rostrum in Red Square for the November 7 anniversary, Khrushchev had him shunted off as a Stalin collaborator. Burchett thought this was pretty lousy, as Khrushchev himself had been an ardent Stalinist until the dictator’s death.

Wilfred did not hesitate to express his criticisms of Stalin’s faithful servants who tried to blame all on the dictator and ‘the cult of the individual’, and neglected to apologise for their own complicity.

Marriage may have provided another entry in Burchett’s KGB dossier. Vessa worked in the Bulgarian Foreign Office, then little more than an annexe of the Soviet Foreign Office. A notice appeared on the office board, denouncing Vessa for ideological deviations and faulty work. In those hair-trigger days the pasted-up denunciation could have led to a ‘strict regime’ labour camp. She was quickly in touch with Wilfred. He made firm representations to surviving contacts in Sofia and Moscow. His pleas – and marriage to Vessa – saved her.

They both moved into the Vissotni Dom apartment on the Moscow River embankment, apartment 25, Kotenicheskaya Naberezhnaya. It was no ‘luxury KGB flat’ as some of Burchett’s denigrators charged. The Foreign Office Press Department controlled it, as other foreign correspondents’ flats, and the Diplomatic Supply Service (UPDK), a corrupt body, serviced it. Luxurious it was, but not a KGB apartment. Floor space was enough to house a dozen or more Soviet citizens – lounge, work study, three bedrooms, kitchen, bathroom and back landing storage area.

The Lockwood family arrived in Moscow in April 1965, settling into an apartment on Prospekt Mira. I was to be Moscow correspondent for the Communist Tribune for three years, and the third Australian in that post. The first, Rex Chiplin, got off the plane at Kingsford Smith Airport, took a taxi to the Communist Party headquarters then in Market Street, Sydney, and shouted at a Central Committee functionary, as he flung his party membership card down on the table, ‘If that’s socialism, you can shove it up your arse!’ Contact was established with the Burchetts at the first press conference I attended in East Berlin. Vessa was there to represent Bulgarian papers. The conference was for the twentieth anniversary of the Red Army’s capture of Berlin. The two Red Army soldiers seen in an historic photo climbing the ruined Reichstag dome to plant the Soviet flag were the stars of the conference.

Through Vessa I made contact with Wilfred, whom I had known in Australia. I visited his apartment often. My wife and daughters got to know him. When they heard that Wilfred was leaving Moscow for Cambodia, they promptly put the word on him to allow us to move into his Vissotni Dom apartment when he vacated.

Inside the apartment were Wilfred and Vessa’s abandoned possessions. They could not take them to Cambodia in their hasty retreat. Consigned to our care were the Burchett’s accumulations of Chinese and Vietnamese furniture and artefacts, a valuable library, TV and radio, warm Mongolian blankets, and stocks of food and condiments that Vessa had purchased abroad with their foreign currency earnings.

The greatest joy on entering the Burchett apartment was a view I thought was without equal in the world. The scene outside of the Moscow River and the Kremlin was so distractingly enchanting that I often could not do much work. I used to sit and stare at this...
peerless panorama from the Burchett balcony. Why ever would Wilfred swap all this for a modest pad in Phnom Penh?

Here in this fabulous setting Wilfred Burchett and family seemed to have been comfortably settled for life. He could converse with both Soviet and visiting academics, writers, artists, statesmen, and visiting VIPs. He could mix with varied nationalities: he spoke Russian, French and German fluently, could get around in Vietnamese and had smatterings of Chinese and East European languages. Why then was he so desperate to get exit permits to catch that Aeroflot flight from Sheremetyevo airport and look down on Moscow for the last time. In Sydney, when he came for his ill-fated libel case hearing, he told me: ‘I got out of Moscow by the skin of my teeth’.

Burchett’s deviations from Moscow-sanctioned conduct were manifold. He refused to go along with the Soviet’s anti-Chinese line: he had deep affection for the Chinese people and their culture. The Vietnamese were using him as a kind of international diplomatic spokesman – a role that brought him an invitation to breakfast with US State Secretary Henry Kissinger, who delivered to Burchett, as if he were a Vietnamese ambassador, instructions and threats to be passed on to ‘your friends in Hanoi’. The Russians began to regard Burchett, the Australian journalist, as some kind of usurper in the international diplomatic field.

Burchett was also too close to Prince Sihanouk and the Cambodians. Western correspondents in Moscow admitted to me that the Cambodian Embassy in Moscow had been leaking information to them about this.

Soviet spite and displeasure were evident after Burchett’s final departure. Any mention of Wilfred’s achievements and vast store of knowledge of world affairs brought stony stares from Soviet officials. American correspondents visiting Moscow, unaware of Wilfred’s exit, kept ringing on the tapped phone in the Vissotni Dom apartment. Burchett was held in great respect by many international journalists. These contacts with Western journalists would have added a few pages in indelible ink to the file in the KGB’s Lubianka headquarters on Dzerzhinsky Square.

In 1967 Wilfred Burchett was invited to speak and show his latest Vietnam film to a conference of the International Organisation of Journalists, a Soviet-endorsed body, in East Berlin. Wilfred duly made the long and difficult journey from Vietnam to the East Berlin conference, ready with film and prepared speech. I was there as an observer. Wilfred waited, I waited, for the film and speech as the conference days wore on. No speech was made, no film shown. Delegates did not have to ask why. A Soviet veto on Burchett was obeyed by the East German organisers of the conference. Burchett began to look depressed at not being allowed to screen the premiere of his film on the latest fighting, personally shot at the battlefronts and in bombed towns. Alan Winnington, British Communist Morning Star correspondent in East Berlin, had the courage to demand an explanation of the conference organisers. He got none.

While I was thrilling to the view of the river and those gold-leafed domes from the ninth floor balcony of the Vissotni Dom, Wilfred Burchett and family were landing from an Aeroflot flight in the heat and desert dust of Cairo airport, and without delay on to Phnom Penh. Thanks to Prince Sihanouk’s help, Wilfred and family moved into their new accommodation in Phnom Penh, a handy base for forays into Vietnam battle zones.

Wilfred and Vessa found no peace in Cambodia, which US leaders had started to bomb into the stone age. The CIA organised the overthrow by the Lon Nol US puppets of the legitimate Prince Sihanouk, thus opening the gates to the Khmer Rouge. Burchett at least made it clear that this was a mistake. Unlike those in the West, he was no Khmer Rouge supporter. He could just muster enough foreign currency to move to Paris.

At that stage it seems that he had nowhere to go in the Communist world: East Germany’s acceptance of the Soviet veto on Burchett at the International Journalists’ Conference would have served notice that he was persona non grata in Moscow. By 1972 he was declared persona non grata in Bulgaria – he had been denounced as a British spy. And to add to this a mountain of legal costs stood against his name after his disastrous libel suit in Australia. Although the accusations against him were rejected as slanderous by a NSW court in 1973, and charges against him could not be sustained, that did not yield him damages.

Burchett’s health was failing. He died in his wife’s home city, Sofia, in 1983, suffering fragility and perhaps bitterness. Perhaps as the years pass and documents are dusted off, Burchett will, like so many of his generation, be rehabilitated long after he was consigned to a distant grave.

[Note: this recollection, which was provided by the author’s daughter, Penny Lockwood, has been edited by Recorder. A fuller version can be found on the Radical Sydney/Radical History website hosted by Rowan Cahill and Terry Irving. Rowan has just completed his doctorate on Rupert Lockwood: http://radicalsydney.blogspot.com.au/p/wilred-burchetts-treatfrom-moscow.html]
Arthur Calwell. The man who almost became Prime Minister

By Lyle Allan

Arthur Augustus Calwell (1896-1973) was a great orator, described by Bob Hawke as one of the greats of the Labor movement. This is a sympathetic biography, with the inclusion of previously private material, including 51 photographs that greatly enhance the book's value.

Calwell is generally remembered as Australia’s first Immigration Minister, and a former federal leader of the Australian Labor Party (ALP). Calwell led the party at three federal elections, in 1961, 1963 and 1966. At the first election in 1961 the result was so close (a two seat win for the Menzies led Coalition government) that any number of factors may have influenced the final result. The 1963 and 1966 elections were clear Coalition victories.

Mary Elizabeth refers to the erroneous but widely held belief that Communist preferences directed to the Liberal candidate Jim Killen in the Queensland electorate of Moreton almost certainly prevented Calwell from becoming Prime Minister after the 1961 federal election. Killen won by 130 votes. The Communist candidate, Max Julius, received 676 primary votes. Of these, only 93 directed preferences to Killen, which helped but did not decide the matter. Rather, it was the preferences from the Queensland Labor Party (later to merge with the DLP), as well as the so-called ‘donkey vote’ that determined Killen’s 1961 electoral success, and the fate of the Menzies government.

Although Calwell didn’t enter federal parliament until 1940 he played a large role in the ALP’s internal politics in Victoria, serving on the Melbourne City Council and in his backing of the Dunstan Country Party government ‘with Labor support’ in Victoria in the 1930s. Calwell was an opponent of Jack Lang in NSW and an anti-conscriptionist in both world wars. He opposed the moderate conscription of the Curtin government that led to the use of so-called ‘chocos’ or chocolate soldiers, as conscripts were termed, in New Guinea against the Japanese.

Calwell became Minister for Information in the Curtin government after the 1943 election, being elected by Caucus. Appointed Australia’s first Minister for Immigration by Prime Minister Chifley in 1945, Calwell is credited with the creation of Australia’s immigration program after the end of WWII. Mary Elizabeth defends her father’s policy on immigration, arguing that he was not personally in favour of racially discriminatory policies. She argues that on this matter he followed party policy, ensuring additionally that public opinion was able to cope with the masses of new settlers arriving in Australia. Mary Elizabeth points out that Harold Holt, Minister for Immigration in the Menzies Coalition government after 1949, substantially followed Calwell’s policies.

Calwell was also a major player in the question of communism, which dominated Australian politics for the two decades following WWII. While Calwell was never sympathetic to the communist cause, he declined to support an outright ban on the party, as some in the ALP, such as the federal member for Yarra Stan Keon, favoured. Calwell actively opposed the attempt by referendum to ban the Communist Party in 1951.

Mary Elizabeth is at her best in describing her father’s reactions to the Santamaria Movement. Calwell supported the right to criticise the Catholic Hierarchy, and opposed the attempt of some bishops, such as Arthur Fox, to intrude officially into politics. Calwell, according to Mary Elizabeth, had warned of the dangers of Movement political influence for fifteen years before the formation of the breakaway DLP.

The Catholic Church itself was divided over support for the Movement. Archbishop Beovich of Adelaide, who had gone to school with Calwell in West Melbourne, together with Cardinal Gilroy in Sydney, did not give their support, certainly after the ALP split. In Victoria, however, the Hierarchy substantially supported the DLP, and many Catholics, including Calwell, were ostracised for remaining in the ALP, and they would have to attend Mass at St Francis’ Church in Elizabeth St, Melbourne, rather than their local Catholic Church. Calwell called it the ‘Church of the Catholic political refugee.’

Calwell was subject to much criticism throughout his political career. In the space of one week he was criticised by the Movement publication News Weekly, the anti-Catholic Sydney publication The Rock, Jack Lang’s Century, and the Sydney Communist newspaper Tribune.

Mary Elizabeth reminds us that Calwell was a man of principle, and his opposition to Australian involvement in the Vietnam War before such opposition became politically popular is a case in point. Whitlam replaced Calwell as leader of the Federal Parliamentary Labor Party in 1967, but Calwell remained in parliament until he retired before the 1972 election, just eight months before his death.

Historians will treasure much in this book that has not been previously published. Mary Elizabeth is to be congratulated on this superb biography. Her father would certainly be very pleased, and it is a great tribute to him.
Book Review: I am Bound to be True

By Kevin Healy

'Some might suggest a daughter should not write a study on her father because of potential bias,' the author reflects in *I Am Bound To Be True*’s introduction. 'However a biography is enhanced through awareness of nuances of events. I have the advantage of being often an observer, participant or confidante.' Possibly, but in this case Mary Elizabeth Calwell has failed to avoid converting the loving daughter’s uncritical admiration into a hagiography; inappropriate even though this biography is a study of the role that Calwell’s catholicism and spirituality played in his public life.

I must admit a bias. I was looking forward to reading of the important events in his life, WW1 and the conscription struggle, the Vietnam anti-war movement, his momentous immigration program, a Labor government sending the troops into the mines and the related emanation of the Movement and the Labor split. All but the coal strike (in which he was an actor) are covered, but the emphasis is more on his religious and spiritual motivations than the political meat some readers might prefer. I could have done with less detail of papal encyclicals, of local and international church politics, and of Arthur’s relationships with church figures. Less theology, more politics.

That's my bias, and in fairness Mary Elizabeth, who has a doctorate of theology, might argue those influences were critical to his public life and/or simply that she chose to emphasise that perspective. Let's get the other negatives out of the way. There are anecdotal references seemingly gleaned from private papers or sources with little relevance to a broader context. The regular use of initials rather than first names might indicate a failure to research more information, but on some occasions she uses initials when the person's name is well known. Kim Beazley Snr, for instance, in eight references is K E Beazley on six occasions, and Kim Beazley on two. And the numerous quotes praising Calwell only add to the hagiographical feel. Some could be justified, but many are no more than the platitudes delivered as a matter of course when some person is being honoured. There is risible bathos in a section about his honorary PhD from Melbourne (ironically conferred by the then chancellor Menzies) describing the congratulations he received, and concluding ‘radio station 3UZ awarded him his nicest listener award’. It awarded a nicest listener every day. Maybe she meant it to be funny.

Calwell was 44 when elected to federal parliament in 1940. Yet his pre-parliamentary life is reduced to just 24 pages, a life involving ALP branch secretary at 18 years, a career in the public service and the union, a Melbourne City Councillor, and of course the First World War and the conscription debate, and later the Depression. Interestingly he was in the cadets and applied for overseas service in 1914, rejected because of poor eyesight, and just as well, for by 1915 ‘he realised that the war was between two capitalist groups each seeking domination, and opposed conscription’.

The positives. Mary Elizabeth covers comprehensively his well documented role in post-war development as immigration minister, the impact of the split on the party, the country and the church, and later the Vietnam anti-war movement and his courageous stand as leader, particularly in the 1966 election. The positives of Calwell’s role in post-war immigration cannot be discussed without reference to his ‘two Wongs don’t make a White’ comment and whether he was racist. In his defence Mary Elizabeth stresses his relationship with Asian communities, particularly the Chinese community in Australia, his learning some Mandarin, and his support for Indigenous people. She argues that in answering a question in parliament about a Mr Wong he made the statement in response to an interjection by opposition MP Thomas White, that a joke was misinterpreted by being printed without White's W in capitals. He believed and put into practice that we had a responsibility to accept refugees; if only his parliamentary counterparts today could share the same belief. She quotes Calwell citing Tunku Abdul Rahman that 'the white Australia policy as it is called is not racial discrimination', cites her father’s view that 'new Australians' ought to be able to assimilate, but he also supported their right to retain their cultural and national heritage.

In other words he was an enigma, a passionate believer in democratic socialism and the ALP’s then socialist objective, a harsh critic of capitalist exploitation (his beliefs rooted in papal encyclicals such as rerum novarum) and yet fervently anti-communist. At Archbishop Mannix’s request in 1942 he agreed to seek exemption from military service for Santamaria and two other Groupers, and a year later, again approached by Mannix, he helped obtain newsprint for a new paper, Freedom, which was to become News Weekly. At that time he commended the Movement for its campaign against communist activities in unions.

His later vehement opposition to the Movement was driven by a firm commitment to the separation of church and state. Mary Elizabeth details the numerous struggles that divided not only the ALP but the church, the bitterness that forced him to avoid his local parish and attend St Francis in the city. This was exemplified by the congratulatory messages he received when elected parliamentary leader in 1960 by a News Weekly comment ‘the year of the pig ended and the year of the rat began’. When he received his papal knighthood the Catholic Tribune disparaged ‘the honour to this man is an insult to the numerous Catholics who have sacrificed their time, labour and money trying to stem the onslaught of communism’.
As a related aside, in my matriculation year in 1960 at a Catholic college a former school captain, by then a fulltime apparatchik for the National Civic Council, lectured us first period every Friday in ‘christian doctrine’ accompanied by a huge map with red arrows zooming down from China. The brainwashing led to my continued opposition to state aid, including while on the ALP state executive in the next decade.

Calwell came within one seat of government in 1961, and he stood tall in 1966 when he campaigned against the ‘dirty unwinnable war’ in Vietnam. Labor was heavily defeated, not helped by the comment from his deputy Whitlam five days before the election that an ALP government may not withdraw troops. If, like today’s ALP, Calwell had been poll-driven he would never have maintained that principled position. Whitlam supported the war until it became pragmatic to oppose it, and economist Kenneth Davidson would later write ‘Arthur Calwell’s principled stand became the platform for Gough Whitlam’s victory in 1972.’

The book mentions a related anecdote in which I played a part. ‘At the 1969 Victorian ALP conference Calwell moved a motion that the conference reconvene outside Pentridge prison to support John Zarb, a conscientious objector, and addressed delegates there.’ That idea came from a number of then young delegates - Zarb was the first draft resister to be gaoled - and we thought if I moved the motion as a young upstart it may not get carried, I approached Arthur and asked him to move it, with my seconding. He accepted enthusiastically.

I served with him on the state executive that year, until he resigned at the 1970 state conference, the year of federal intervention, so I can say I knew him as an acquaintance. *I Am Bound To Be True* provides insights into and perspectives of seminal issues, and while the theological debates and inter-church manoeuvrings didn’t particularly interest me there are obviously readers who would find them interesting and valuable.

Arthur Calwell was an important and enigmatic figure. He was a man of principle. The most pertinent lesson comes from his own memoirs, *Be Just and Fear Not*, quoted by Mary Elizabeth. ‘Many believed parliamentarians should not be subject to direction and control by state and federal executives drawn mostly from unions. That was thinly disguised Liberalism leading to political disaster. The Labor Party should be committed to socialism’. He had warned caucus that Labor would either be a socialist party or finish up as a ‘muddle-minded, middle class, petit-bourgeois, status seeking party.’ How clairvoyant!

Shortly after he died (in 1973) the ALP went to Terrigal and removed the socialist objective altogether.

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**The unfortunate case of the Northcote Library Apology Committee**

By Ainsley Symons

Kevin Rudd made apologies de rigueur. The apology to Australia’s Indigenous inhabitants was appropriate, if late. A little known organisation in the Melbourne working-class suburb of Northcote (now part of the City of Darebin) made a similar demand for an apology over the actions of certain Australian Labor Party (ALP) endorsed local councillors in the 1950s and 1960s, and of the City Librarian at the major local council-run library. Specifically the apology demand was about discrimination against Northcote residents under the age of 14, who were denied use of the Council’s ‘adult’ library. Though it was not successful it is a reminder of the strictures of Australian childhood in 1950s and 1960s.

Many municipal libraries in Victoria still have an ‘adult’ library and a separate library for ‘children,’ normally in the one building, but barriers have largely broken down. Some libraries have ceased using the term ‘adult,’ for in the language of today the word refers to books about sex, but in the 1950s it encompassed all books not specifically written for children.

Books about sex, euphemistically called marriage manuals, and not meant to be read by the unmarried, were then kept behind the counter and had to be specifically asked for. A relative of the writer who lived in Northcote at the time remembers a young lady in her late teens asking the City Librarian, Miss Myrtle Fletcher, for ‘a book about marriage by a Dutchman.’ Miss Fletcher produced the book *Ideal Marriage: Its Physiology and Technique*, published in London in 1926 by Dutch gynaecologist Theodor Hendrik van de Velde. Miss Fletcher, who played the piano at Northcote’s St Joseph’s Catholic Church, may not have known that the book was placed on the Index Librorum Prohibitorum by the Catholic Church in 1931.

But marriage manuals aside, gaining access to the wide and rich literary world not written for children was only possible through the adult library. In the Northcote of that period library books featured a statement that the adult library was available for ratepayers or accredited persons (meaning tenants or children living with their parents) over the age of 14. The then City Librarian interpreted this as meaning that children over the age of 14 could not use the ‘adult’ section of the library.

One prodigious writer for *Recorder* was denied access to the adult library by Miss Fletcher as a ten year old in 1954, and has been complaining ever since. Another Northcote resident at the time, Grazziella D’Amico, also criticised the library management and with a view to changing these anachronistic practices formed the Northcote Library Apology Committee.
Though unsuccessful in gaining an apology for the practice, it did succeed in changing the blanket ban on children accessing the library to requiring ‘parental permission’ to borrow ‘grown-up’ books.

In an article in the electoral newsletter of Deputy Prime Minister, Brian Howe, in June 1994 she argued that councillors who had supported the ban on children’s access should have been charged before the ALP Disputes Tribunal. Tellingly, she wrote of an exchange with one councillor who allegedly argued that only immigrants, Communists and homosexuals (the exact words used were ‘dagos’, ‘commos’ and ‘poofers’) read books. If children wanted to read books, the councillor went on to say, there were plenty of Noddy and Biggles books in the children’s section.

Many ALP members of the Northcote Council who refused to support the Apology Committee were also members of the Northcote Lions Club. In 1998 the Club refused to respond after a letter drew previous comments by D’Amico to its attention. One former Councillor at a Lions Club directors’ meeting moved that the letter be placed under the table. Another director, believed to be a Liberal Party member, incorrectly claimed that Grazziella D’Amico’s views did not deserve to be commented on because she was the sister of Helen D’Amico, the streaker at the 1982 Victorian Football League Grand Final between Carlton and Richmond.

The Northcote Library Apology Committee ceased to exist after the Kennett government Council amalgamations in 1994, but its activities have been commented on in several academic papers. It is unlikely the Darebin City Council, the successor to the Northcote City Council, will apologise. It is also unlikely an educated electorate in the area would tolerate today the actions of library staff in the 1950s and 1960s towards their children. But we do well to remember some of the more claustrophobic attitudes in Australia in the mid twentieth century.

The author would like to thank Lyle Allan for his kind assistance in finding references for this article. References to the Northcote Library Apology Committee and the role of Grazziella D’Amico can be found at:


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### Vale Albert Bonser

**Victorian Printers Operative Union**

**By Brian Smiddy**

Many former delegates to the Thursday night weekly meetings of the Victorian Trades Hall Council, in the period 1960 to the early 1990s, may recall the name of Alby Bonser, Secretary of the Victorian Printers Operative Union (VPOU).

A death notice appeared in the daily newspapers on Wednesday 27th February, stating that Alby died on the 24th February 2013.

Alby gave years of service to his members, who mainly worked in the metropolitan daily newspapers as printing machinists, clerical workers and drivers of vehicles delivering newspapers to the newsagents.

After a number of years of service Alby resigned to become Manager of the Herald Sun Credit Union Cooperative, a position he held for some time.

In the early 1990s the VPOU amalgamated with the Printing and Kindred Industries Union (PKIU). The PKIU subsequently amalgamated with the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU).

To the family of Alby we express our sorrow at his passing.

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### Vale Jack Ellis

**Operative Painters and Decorators Union**

**By Brian Smiddy**

In the daily newspapers of 30th April, a notice appeared stating that Jack Ellis had died.

Jack was a former State and Federal Secretary of the Operative Painters and Decorators Union. He also served a term as President of the Victorian Trades Hall Council.

Jack was a highly respected trade union official and for those unionists who worked with him, it was a privilege. Jack always had a smile and a word of encouragement for unionists who may have been doing it tough.

To Jack’s family, we extend our deepest sympathies.
Vale Max Oldmeadow

3 August 1924 – 21 March 2013

By Brian Smiddy

Max Oldmeadow, teacher, author and Member of Parliament, died on 21st March after a lifetime of service to his local community.

In 2004, Barry Jones paid a tribute to Max describing him as ‘an inspiring and emphatic history teacher, and I learnt a great deal from him’.

Max became a member of Gough Whitlam’s Labor Government from 1972–75 as the member for the Federal seat of Holt. He later became a High School Principal.

In addition he had a wide range of interests, including involvement with the local Uniting Church, to becoming the author of several significant educational publications.

To his family we extend our deepest sympathies.

Vale Joan Child

3 August 1921 – 23 February 2013

Joan Child's death in February this year saw an outpouring of tributes for this remarkable woman. Born in Yackandandah in 1921, Joan went on to marry and have five boys. Widowed in her early forties, and with her boys aged 7 to 17, Joan re-made herself and, in the process, Australian history.

After working with Dr Jim Cairns, Joan contested the seat of Henty, losing in 1972 by a couple of hundred votes. She won the seat a year later. She was only the fourth woman to make it to the House of Representatives, but her hold on her seat was swept away in the bitter catharsis of 1975. She regained Henty in 1980 and held it until her retirement in 1990. Throughout this time Joan demonstrated a formidable political capacity. Her most famous position, that of Speaker of the House under the Hawke Labor Government, solidified her position in our collective memories. At her funeral Prime Minister Julia Gillard noted that women like Joan ‘didn’t have a guide book. They wrote it,’ and in the process ‘opened the door’ for many other women in Australian political life.

Joan was in the speaker’s chair on the last sitting in old Parliament House and on the first in the new. It is a fitting image and reminder of the many sacrifices made by women bridging the changes in our society. To her family we extend our sympathies and appreciation.

13th Biennial National Labour History Conference


From the Organising Committee, ASSLH

The Australian Society for the Study of Labour History, together with its partners, the Business and Labour History Group at the University of Sydney, and Unions NSW, is delighted to announce our international keynote speaker, Maurice Glasman. Maurice is a Reader in Political Theory at London Metropolitan University and the author of Unnecessary Suffering: Managing Market Utopia published by Verso. He has been a key figure, along with Jon Cruddas, the head of Labour's policy review and James Purnell, in developing the idea of ‘Blue Labour’, described in April by the New Statesman as ‘the dominant intellectual influence in the Labour Party.’ He describes Blue Labour as the ‘renewal of the Labour tradition based upon the values of reciprocity, responsibility and labour value.’ In 2010 he was elevated to the Lords as a Labour peer by Ed Miliband. Prior to his appointment he worked with London Citizens on their Living Wage campaign and is centrally involved with the reorganisation of the Labour Party with Arnie Graf.

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The 13th Biennial National Labour History Conference will be held 11-13 July 2013 at Unions NSW, Trades Hall, 4-10 Goulburn Street, Sydney. Registrations for the conference are now open. Registrations for the full 3 days costs $250 for waged and $80 for unwaged. Day registrations are available. To book, please go to the conference website: http://web2.econ.usyd.edu.au/bhlg/

In the Shadow of Gallipoli

Robert Bolland’s book In the Shadow of Gallipoli was released in April this year.

A welcome counter to the avalanche of military history being published in the lead up to the one-hundredth anniversary of the outbreak of the First World War, Robert deals instead with the history of the labour movement during this traumatic time in Australian history.

While many Recorder readers will be familiar with the material here, its context and forceful re-telling makes it a must read. A full review will appear in the next edition of Recorder. In the Shadow of Gallipoli is published by New South Press.

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Congratulations Ellen Smiddy!

On the 16th May, 2013, the immense achievements of Ellen Smiddy were celebrated when she was presented with the Bundoora May Day Award by the Hon Daniel Andrews, MP. Ellen has demonstrated how to live a good, meaningful, life through her community involvement and action. Since her retirement Ellen has increased her involvement in her local parish, St Mary’s, Greensborough, particularly in the Social Justice group which works for Asylum Seekers, encouraging support for aid projects, as well as on environment issues.

Ellen grew up in Greensborough, the eldest of five children. She worked with the Young Christian Workers in India for three years before becoming a teacher. Joining the ALP in 1970, she became an active member of the Women Against Uranium Mining group.

Locally, Ellen was a founding member of the Citizens Advice Bureau (now Diamond Valley Community Support), and became increasingly active in the local primary and secondary school councils, serving as President of the Council of the Greensborough Secondary College. Ellen was appointed to the Council of Preston Technical College which grew into the Northern Metropolitan Institute of TAFE, where she was President for four years. Between 1989 and 1992 she worked with John Cain. She went on to work with Harry Jenkins for 12 years.

Like so many other women of the labour movement, Ellen epitomises the spirit of Dorothea in George Eliot’s Middlearth, that ‘the effect of her being on those around her [is] incalculably diffusive … That things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been’ is of course, also a tribute to people like Ellen, who has spent much of the last forty years campaigning, letter boxing and advocating for social justice. Our congratulations on your achievements and our abiding thanks for your dedication and generosity.

Kevin Rudd Strikes Again

The great challenge ‘Where’s Wally’, has taken on a new meaning in the lead up to the federal election. Here, Kevin Rudd is photographed at the NSW State Library picket line, on the 12th June 2013. Our thanks to the photographer, Anthony McLaughlin.

Melbourne Branch News

Our panel of judges (Phillip Deery, Peter Love, Geoffrey Robinson and Judy Smart) announced the winner of the Sam Merrifield Prize on Labour Day, 11 March 2013. Congratulations to Dustin Halse whose article ‘Citizens Who Serve: The Political Rights of Victorian Public Servants, 1856-1916’ won the award. According to the judges, ‘Citizens Who Serve tells an important, largely overlooked, story about white-collar workers. In the process the article makes a valuable and an original contribution to Victorian labour history.’

The judges also congratulated Brendan McGlinn, runner up in the award. Brendan’s article, ‘The Union Carbide Factory Occupation of 1979’, which was ‘an original piece of research, and a highly readable story underpinned by a close examination of previously unexamined sources’. The judges thanked the other entrants for their interest in labour history and congratulate them for the very high quality of their work.

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