VALE JOHN BUTTON

Photograph by Susan Gordon-Brown, 2004. Copyright held by the State Library of Victoria.

JOHN BUTTON – LAWYER, POLITICAL ACTIVIST, DISSIDENT AND MODERNISER

The following is based on notes written and delivered by Hon. John Cain for his wonderful eulogy of John Button.

There are people in this society who share a set of values, tastes and characteristics that set them apart. There are many of them here today. They are people who love the arts, literature, the cinema, the cafe society and sport this city nurtures: Melbourne people. They enjoy conversation, social commentary, and the contest of ideas, and yet are good listeners. They see education and access to it as the key to greater equality of opportunity. They are fierce advocates of human rights, liberty and democracy. They are not materialistic and never boring. They believe political involvement is a duty of citizenship. And finally, their sympathies are with the underdogs of society – instinctively so.

John was one of these people when I first met him fifty years ago, and remained one until his death.

In recent days, much has been said and written of the many parts of his life. He would be pleased because he did not want to be seen as a one-dimensional politician, Labor senate leader and minister, and nothing else. And as tributes in recent days show, there was so much more. A substantial part of his early life, before election to public office in 1974, was about the internal Labor Party machinations. That is why I am here. He asked me to tell you something of it today. To tell you of the many sides of John Button: the Labor/industrial lawyer at Maurice Blackburn; the party activist; the party dissident; the party reformer and the years that he spent doing this: 1960-70.

Victoria in the early 1960s was bad for Labor people. Many forget just how bad. Many others choose to forget.

During this period John, a young lawyer, was a key figure in a Labor law firm, Maurice Blackburn. He was an advocate in this large industrial practice, with traditional links to Labor and some unions. His commitment to Labor was strong and he saw the ALP as the political expression of those values I mentioned at the outset. This was not easy at a time following the Party Split in 1955 and after. The damage was most evident in the Victorian Branch – the Party was engulfed in extremist out-pourings associated with the Cold War and religious sectarianism. Each of the protagonists was as bad as the other, and they deserved each other. The separation of Church and State meant nothing to them. A few left-wing
trade unions ran the party and members had no say: power over the party was an end in itself. And political success and serving the needs of Labor people was not relevant. Political impotence was a badge worn proudly. It was a shabby time in the party's history. ...

By the early 1960s a small group of members, of whom John was one, resolved to combine and provide organised opposition. They believed that without change in Victoria, Labor could not win elections, neither State nor Federal. And so they determined to be active in party branches and councils; to contest party elections, despite certain defeat; to advocate in Victoria and nationally for reform of the Victorian Branch to make it responsive to members. The ‘Participants’ group was formed.

John brought to that group attributes that were critical to its ultimate success in 1970. I mention two of these. First, his formal education and role as a senior partner with Maurice Blackburn – the Labor law firm – at a time when Labor men who did not have formal education started to see the importance of education. John used his education to do good things in his law firm. He was self assured, but never cocky; always modest and understated in advice and counsel. And he gave the ‘Participants’ access to some unions and knowledge of what those unions were thinking. After all, they did run the party then. In Kennelly dictum, they had the ‘numbers’. And John could put a case together, orally and in written form. Indeed, his writing was direct, analytical and humorous. As one publisher noted, he ‘wrote like an angel’ [fortunately, the genes have passed on]. We all contributed to the Labor journal, Labor Comment – but John excelled.

In the mid 1960s an ally emerged - Arthur Cartwright. John’s often mischievous Delphic ways meant few knew who he was. He was John’s alter ego ... in the 1960s Arthur Cartwright wrote for Nation Review, and with some effect. A tough, incisive critic and often defamatory – to the factional controllers, Arthur Cartwright was not in the least ‘angelic’. Bill Brown, then President with a large majority in a party where ‘numbers mattered’, unsurprisingly expressed his anger at Cartwright’s commentary. Arthur Cartwright had got under his skin. At a conference, he told John what he would do to the mongrel if he could find him.

John’s second strength was his deep understanding of the party and its history. He had been a member before the Split (he was a member of the colourful Carlton branch). He knew how branches, councils and policy machinery worked. John saw how the factions were evolving and the way power alliances in the party played out. He knew that compliance with the wishes of the dominant faction meant preferment. In short, John could see the deals before they were done.

The reform of the Victorian ALP took just on 10 years. It was not until 1970 that a coalition of national party figures moved effectively to replace the people who ran the Victorian party for the previous fifteen years. But the reform was not without its disappointments. There was no help from the other states, except from Gough Whitlam and Kim Beazley Sr. It should be noted that Gough’s addresses to us were inspirational and often fuelled our enthusiasm (although Clyde Cameron was critical at the end).

John Button took great satisfaction in many things: writing a new constitution; ensuring that no faction should have 50.01% and, as a winner, take all; seeing the constitution adopted by the membership; seeing it used as the model for other states; and seeing it contribute to Labor’s historic victory in 1972. John Button, the modernizer, helped to make the Party a truly national one from which it has benefited for the last 30 years. He was not an idealist seeking some earthly utopia, but a practical man who understood the ALP and the polity in which it functioned. He knew what had to be done to advance the cause of Labor people, and he set about doing it.

Clyde Cameron was born not long after the birth of the Australian Labor Party. Although he was a controversial figure both in trade unions and politics, his advocacy on issues which were dear to his heart was immense.

Clyde was the eldest of four sons of a woman who taught her boys that the working class deserved a better deal from society. He left school at fourteen and on the eve of the Great Depression followed his father into the
shearing industry and the Australian Workers’ Union. Throughout the Depression he was able to gain regular work.

In 1938 he was elected an AWU Organiser in Adelaide and in 1941 he was elected Secretary, becoming a very powerful figure in SA. In 1946 he was elected President of the State ALP and for the next thirty years he was the number one power broker in South Australian Labor politics. He nurtured the young Don Dunstan into the state seat of Norwood, who would eventually become the State’s Premier.

In 1949 he was elected to the Federal Parliament as the member for Hindmarsh, retiring in 1980. During his parliamentary career he made many notable contributions both to the development of the nation and the Labor Party.

His crucial role in two party crises for example helped to shape the history of the ALP. Firstly, at the 1955 ALP National Conference in Hobart, he helped to save the party from being taken over by the extreme right wing. The reactionary forces left the ALP and went on to form the Democratic Labor Party (DLP). Secondly, the teaming up with Gough Whitlam in 1970, to help make the ALP a real national political party and more electable by the people. This formidable team persuaded the party’s National Executive to intervene in the affairs of the NSW and Victorian branches of the ALP.

NSW, so it is said, agreed to the intervention, even though there was no major change in the composition of the branch. Whereas the leaders in Victoria objected to the intervention – leading to their own eventual dismissal by the Federal Executive and the installation of a new party constitution and office bearers. This led to a more representative ALP in Victoria, helping to contribute to the election of the Whitlam Labor Government of 1972.

Clyde Cameron was an important member of that Government, with Whitlam acknowledging ‘that Cameron was the principal architect of that victory’. Clyde was appointed Minister for Industrial Relations and amongst his major reforms were equal pay for women, followed by an increase in the female minimum wage and better pay and working conditions for Commonwealth Public Servants.

Cameron had a major fallout with Whitlam in 1975 when he was moved to another ministry. His dislike for Whitlam continued for many years, leading to the story that Cameron threatened to devote a chapter of his memoirs to Whitlam. It is said that Whitlam responded by saying that he would devote a footnote to Cameron.

Cameron also gave his Parliamentary political opponents many a strong tongue lashing leading to his late Liberal Parliamentary colleague, Jim Killen commenting ‘that the softest part of Cameron are his teeth’.

Following his retirement from Parliament he created a new life – as author, oral historian and lecturer. He spent many hours at the National Library recording numerous notable events. Clyde was a member and strong supporter of the Society for the Study of Labour History.

It is worth remembering that even if a person has little formal education, such an individual can make a valuable contribution to making society a better place to live in. This person will need strong convictions and organising skills. These qualities were certainly possessed by Clyde Cameron. We mourn his passing and express our deepest sympathies to his family.

***

An embattled minority: Communists in the Cold War

Liam Brooks

**This reflection on Australian communists in the early Cold War period was written by Liam Brooks, a 4th year undergraduate student at Victoria University. It is an interesting and insightful paper which may be of particular interest to those Recorder readers who lived on the Left during these tense and difficult years.**

In the decade after World War II, communists were marooned behind enemy lines in a newly bipolar world. Their actions and thoughts were dominated by the quickened rhythm of events. The very dichotomy of the Cold War meant their lives were adversarial, their hopes oppositional. This paper will focus on three aspects of these lives and hopes. First, communists’ practical experience will be examined, especially the sacrifices made by members and the camaraderie that developed amongst them. Second, the role of communist ideology will be analysed, focusing on its positive and negative effects on members. Third, the question of how communists dealt with criticism of themselves and the Soviet Union will be discussed, followed by their perspectives on war and repression: in a period of threatened war, the true allegiance of party members assumed special significance. This question of allegiance will hinge on the application of Cominform policy in trade unions and the party hierarchy. The paper concludes that to be a communist during this time meant throwing oneself into practical and ideological combat in an inconclusive battle; one that provided as many questions as answers.

The practical experience of being a communist occurred in a variety of settings and on many different levels. The Cold War frontline was everywhere: in the workplace, the home, the press, the meeting hall, the university, the
party classroom and elsewhere. Such a ubiquitous battle demanded great personal sacrifice from those who were committed to the cause. The most ardent communists eagerly chose to subsume their time, personal relationships, economic well-being, and job security to the goals and needs of the party. The perceived bias of mainstream media had to be countered, so party newspapers were sold door-to-door, usually on Sunday mornings. Workers’ conditions and, more importantly, consciousness had to be raised, so union activity was pivotal. In turn, the efficacy of such activity was founded upon communists having a solid grasp of Marxist literature, so party classes were crucially important. As thoroughly political beings, communists probed international and domestic news - though being habitually cynical about “bourgeois” media - for Marxist perspectives and propitious opportunities for furthering the party. The sheer weight of all this activity often had the effect of engulfing members and those around them. Bernie Taft, who became a full-time CPA organiser in 1949, tells of sacrificing time and money for the perceived betterment of the party:

To be selected to work full-time for the party in those years was regarded by most party members as a rare badge of honour…Party workers received only the basic wage or even less; they were not just nine-to-five workers, and their whole lives belonged to the party...We hardly knew what weekends to ourselves meant.[1]

Because members invested so much of themselves in party activities, an intense sense of camaraderie developed. As the Cold War intensified with communist successes in Eastern Europe and China, international triumphs were contrasted with domestic repression in Australia and the US. Comrades developed a stronger and wider sense of close-knit togetherness, which bordered on the tribal, and took on a dual scope of international and domestic fraternity. This curious interplay between domestic praxis and far-off events allowed western communists to feel simultaneously isolated and ensconced, besieged and empowered. The brinkmanship of the Cold War, especially after Stalin’s acquisition of the atomic bomb in 1949, meant that western governments were unwilling or unable to strike at the Soviet metropole itself. Thus, western communist parties were not only feared as “fifth-columns,” but also utilised as convenient punching bags for governments that were keen to prove their anticommunist credentials. For example, it is arguable that Soviet atomic parity and the “loss” of China helped to prompt witch-hunts in the American State Department and increased surveillance of CPUSA members [2]. Australian communists under the covetous eye of ASIO may have taken some comfort in knowing that their American comrades were enduring and defying similar harassment from the FBI. Furthermore, Australian communists in 1950-51, amidst the dire struggle against Menzies’ bid to dissolve the CPA, might have felt increased empathy and compassion for American comrades who were ducking and weaving in Joseph McCarthy’s crosshairs. Ian Turner, who joined the CPA during World War II, highlights the relationship between domestic and international fraternity: ‘...we were both an embattled minority, huddling together for warmth, and part of a world-wide family within which we found mutual aid and affection.’[3] Moreover, dealing with hostility was part of communist heritage and identity. During the Russian Civil War, international and domestic forces had nearly asphyxiated the Soviet state in its cradle. Furthermore, the Soviet Union had recently staggered from the abyss of Hitler’s war. Also, Marx and Lenin were themselves harried exiles. Relentless harassment was an occupational hazard of the communist.

As communists dealt with sacrifice and harassment, it seems that they drew knowledge, sustenance, and empowerment from Marxist and communist ideology. Through the lens of this worldview, communists sought to decipher the present and clarify the future. The decade after World War II was brimming with seminal events, which could fascinate, terrify, or mobilise concerned people. The rolcall of post-war history reads as a litany of heavy human questions: the Stalinisation of Eastern Europe, the Berlin blockade, atomic parity, Mao Tse-tung’s victory, McCarthyism, the Communist Party Dissolution Bill, the Korean War. It seems that communists were able to navigate through these labyrinthine times with one eye on communist literature and one eye on the future. Keith McEwan, who joined the party in 1947, wrote of the empowerment and cognition of communist ideology: ‘I felt I had found the key to understanding the universe. I could understand now the causes of exploitation of man by man, of wars and poverty.’[4] He added, ‘I was a Marxist. I was not bewildered or lost like most people who felt apprehensive about the future. I knew where mankind was heading and moreover I was consciously helping it get there.’[5] Here, McEwan alludes to the notion of communists as a “vanguard,” using “scientific” laws of historical development to clarify and induce the inevitable communist society.

The leadership of the CPA applied this future-oriented lens to its analysis and involvement in the coal strike of 1949. J.C. Henry told a 1948 central committee meeting: ‘All the conditions are maturing...for a very big break with reformism on the part of the workers.’[6] The Labor Party leadership was regarded by communists as an accomplice to capitalist exploitation, an alternative manager for the same odious, profit-driven agenda. To communists, the ALP was dangerously naïve to believe that capitalism could be reformed, “humanised,” or given a “human face.” When push came to shove, communists asserted, Labor would side with capital and invite the irrevocable hostility of workers. But whilst communists
may have seen the actions of the Arbitration Court or strikebreaking troops as unequivocal proof of a tendentious state, many Australian workers did not share their views. Despite Jack Blake declaring the strike a success because it had ‘exposed reformism on a mass scale,’[7] some communists saw in the coal strike, and other forums of communist activity, the frustrating failure of the communist lens. Communist ideology could be empowering, but it could also be a source of disillusionment, frustration, or self-doubt when it exposed the gap between what should have happened and what did happen. Ian Turner underlined this sentiment when recalling his efforts in the railways union from 1950-52: ‘Maybe I just wasn’t good enough, but I found it almost impossible to use either the party or the union apparatus to enhance the political awareness of the workers on the job.’[8] McEwan reinforced this sense of self-doubt: “How,” I wondered, “could they storm the barricades when the time arrives?”[9] Communist ideology could be a double-edged sword.

In dealing with personal pangs of doubt or public criticism, communists often responded in ways that reflected the prevailing intensity of the epoch. Many members believed that criticism of Stalin or the Soviet Union was not born of humanitarian concern or universal democratic principles, but had more to do with partisan ideological hostility. Queries and diatribes from varying sources were seen as having no independent, intrinsic nature. Rather, they were relative to the ledger of a bipolar world. In 1956, Eugene Dennis, the general secretary of the CPUSA, looked back upon the party’s black and white view of criticism: ‘We too often treated criticism from sincere trade unionists and liberals as though it came from the professional anti-Communist and anti-Soviet baiter.’[10] Criticism of the Soviet Union was nothing new. Communists may have become inured to this “broken record,” and so ignored the cadences and codas of fresh voices. As for attacks on western communists, the establishment had ‘cried wolf’ too many times. McCarthy was all squeeze and little juice. Likewise with the 1949 Lowe Commission in Australia. In the eyes of communists, such experiences further discounted the value and legitimacy of criticism. Indeed, when Nikita Khrushchev denounced Stalin’s crimes in 1956, many communists initially dismissed this coda as the same old anticommunist chorus.

Communists’ often monochrome view of criticism was not only informed by distant memories and recent experiences of repression, it was also bound up with the contemporary threat of thermo-nuclear war. Whatever the supposed shortcomings of the Soviet Union, western communists viewed her as a beacon of hope, a viable and living alternative to capitalist exploitation, the real “light on the hill.” To communists who endured this era of threatened war, her existence was more important than her image. Amirah Inglis, who was a member of the CPA for sixteen years from 1945, recalled that any apprehension was mostly overridden by a desire to stand by the Soviet Union: ‘Some, though no one I knew, left the communist party, affronted by the sudden attack on the Yugoslav communist party and the Czech coup, but the smell of war diverted much criticism.’[11] Such fear for the safety of the Soviet Union was especially acute in the period before August 1949, during which the US enjoyed a monopoly of the atomic bomb and had already signalled a break with isolationism in the Truman Doctrine and Marshall Plan. Communists had little reason or desire to listen to criticism at the best of times; they were especially disinclined to do so while their hearing was focussed on the apparent rattling of sabres and beating drums emanating from Washington.

For communists, the threat of imperialist-led war was real and imminent. Moreover, communists viewed analysis of events and approaches to policy through a Marxist-Leninist prism that presented imperialist aggression as a symptom of terminal capitalism. The bellicose intentions of the west had supposedly been promulgated by Winston Churchill’s “Iron Curtain” speech in March 1946, and unequivocally confirmed by America’s acquisition of the hydrogen bomb in 1952. By this time, pristine visions of Soviet and American troops strolling arm in arm on vanquished German streets now seemed a quaint interregnum between a tamed cataclysm and the approaching apocalypse. Communists viewed international and domestic measures by western governments as proof of the failures of capitalism and bourgeois democracy. To them, the Truman Doctrine, the Marshall Plan, the Berlin Blockade, or the Korean War could appear as futile attempts to interpolate the inexorable march of history. Communism was inherently superior. Therefore, injections of guns to Greece or funds to France and Italy were more than succour; they were life-support measures. Ian Turner explained why communist involvement in the Australian Peace Council went far beyond recruiting opportunities: ‘When communists repeated the party slogan, “the struggle for peace is the struggle for socialism”, they meant it – that is, that peace would enable the example of the Soviet Union to shine, and the revolutionary movements to endow their peoples with freedom.’[12] A similar attitude was taken to domestic measures. Whether it was the establishment of ASIO, the use of troops during the coal strike, the Communist Party Dissolution Bill, or Menzies’ fatalistic rhetoric about impending war, communists drew from such events systemic conclusions about the state’s inclination to fascistic tendencies. Amirah Inglis highlighted that particular events in 1949, namely the trial of Ken Miller and the Lowe Commission, were seen as microcosms of wider historical developments: ‘The frame-up of Ken Miller and theLowe Commission, affronted by the sudden attack on the Yugoslav communist party and the Czech coup, but the smell of war diverted much criticism.’[13]
This “intensification” reached unchartered territory when the CPA was briefly outlawed in October 1950. Members had been preparing a clandestine party apparatus, as well as making their own individual contingencies, such as secreting literature. Perhaps these comrades felt a curious mixture of vindication and foreboding. Those very books forewarned of the eventual draconian dispositions of capitalism in its death throes. Now those very tomes of prophecy, which in Germany had been fodder for Nazi bonfires, were being hidden as their assertions apparently came to life.

The assumed threat of war highlighted another important feature of what it meant to be a communist: the reframing of traditional, nation-based allegiance.[14] Western communists adhered to an international and universal body of ideology, but they also shared a symbiotic relationship with the country that claimed to be the first embodiment of that ideology. Their allegiance to Moscow often led them to adopt policies that were not necessarily conducive to local conditions. In reconciling Soviet policy with domestic circumstances, western communists endured vitriolic propaganda, setbacks in the union movement, and friction within their own parties. In September 1947, the Cominform sharpened the demarcations of allegiance by promulgating a tougher stance against reformism. The communist line was to be inviolable against compromises with “bourgeois nationalism”, “class collaboration,” or “economism” in trade unions. This reframing of loyalty was evident in comments made by the general secretary of the CPA, Lance Sharkey, in March 1949. He stated, ‘If in the pursuit of aggressors, the Soviet troops came to Australia, the Australian working class would welcome them.’[15] Sharkey suffered eighteen months jail and the party suffered a self-inflicted public relations disaster.

The policy of confrontation was carried out with particular fervour in the “natural habitat” of communists: the trade union movement. Western communists bore heavy costs for the new Cominform directives. By 1949-50, American members who had been so prominent in the birth of the Congress of Industrial Organizations found themselves expelled from that body. In Australia, communists approached the 1949 coal strike as a seminal confrontation that would expose the ALP and the state as capitalist attack dogs. It was a mistaken strategy in which the CPA leadership overestimated its capacity for winning workers’ allegiances. In the aftermath of the strike, communists became increasingly sidelined by the growing strength of the Industrial Groupers. CPA members in the trade unions became so weakened that they retreated into “unity tickets” alongside reformist and ALP candidates. Such compromises were ideologically unpalatable, but amidst attacks by the Groupers and Menzies’ push to ban the CPA, were necessary to preserve the party’s relevance in its most cherished and vital battleground.

Even though the aftermath of the coal strike showed the CPA’s flexibility and responsiveness in dealing with local developments in the union movement, the top-down structure of the party itself was inhospitable towards ideological suppleness. Some members chafed under authoritarianism, becoming disillusioned or cleansing themselves through self-criticism. The party was modelled under the Soviet rubric of democratic centralism. Adherence to party directives and disciplined obedience to the leadership were exalted as bedrock qualities of the ideal comrade. The writ of the leadership ran so deep that its orders were obeyed when it directed members to seek employment in propitious industries. Ian Turner, who was university-educated, donned overalls and worked on the railways. He recalled, ‘I did not doubt that the Party had the right to direct me.’[16] After all, members saw their organisation as the vanguard of the working class, with their particularly enlightened leaders at the helm. For Bernie Taft his instinctive dislike of authoritarianism was blunted by loyalty and doses of self-criticism. By 1952, he had become ‘uncomfortable with the authoritarian style and undemocratic methods of work that prevailed in the party’, but still ‘accepted the authority of the party leaders’[17].

The CPA’s strong emphasis on discipline was entwined with events of the era. Unity of direction and purpose became even more important as the attractive wartime image of the CPA began to wane and five minute wonders melted away from the membership. It was given even further prominence in 1949, after the establishment of ASIO and the Cecil Sharpley affair. In an increasingly hostile environment, communists were reluctant to rock the boat.

Being a communist during the early Cold War involved immersing oneself into ideologically-informed activism in an era when history seemed to be breathing faster. Party members were selfless and ascetic in their devotion to party activities in a variety of forums. Shared experiences of sacrifice and harassment led members to seek camaraderie in a family that was also part of a worldwide tribe. This global movement enjoyed a common strand of ideology, from which it extracted knowledge, sought direction, and envisioned the future. However, this worldview could also frustrate and confound when the view from the ground revealed a different vista. Indeed, different “vistas” were constantly presented to communists by their critics, but these views were given scant regard because their clarity had too often been exposed as cloudy, or blurred by the fog of war. Communists once again sought the lens of Marxism-Leninism when they viewed war and repression as historical developments that reaffirmed their beliefs and
alluded to their eventual triumph. The Soviet Union was seen as the primary vehicle for achieving eventual victory. Western communists drew inspiration and tutelage from Moscow, but they were still capable of amending prescriptions to better suit local conditions. Inside the party, however, the Soviet blueprint for hierarchical authority was carried out to the letter. As attacks on communist parties increased, so did their emphasis on discipline. To be a communist in such an intense epoch meant constant engagement with the swirling world around you. Everyone was becoming, no one was.

[12] Turner, p.34.

Ruth Frow

Seconding the toast to Ruth Frow

Val Noone

Peter Love’s entirely apt tribute to Ruth Frow (1922-2008) in the February issue of Recorder drew attention to the extraordinary Working Class Movement Library that she and her late husband Eddie established in Salford near Manchester, UK.

Ten years ago, Recorder also published a good short tribute to Eddie in the February 1998 issue, announcing his death and pointing out his outstanding role in the Unemployed Workers’ Movement of the 1930s in England.

I would like to second Peter’s remarks about Ruth by adding a few paragraphs and some photographs from my 30 March 1995 visit to the Working Class Movement Library. I went at the suggestion of Jeff Walsh and Carole Byrne, friends from Manchester with whom I had corresponded on the history of the movements against the Vietnam War and with whom I was staying.

As any of our members who have visited the library (it’s a museum too) will know, it is as Peter Love said “one of the most treasured collections of material for labour historians” in the world.

So a guided tour by Ruth and Eddie, plus looking at the banners, posters, leaflets and books, was for me a wonderful short course in many new and diverse aspects of labour history.

The collection’s forte is, as you would expect, English working-class struggles. Within that they have a room on the Vietnam issue but a big surprise for me was to find that they hold Tony Coughlan’s wonderful collection of radical and other books about Irish labour and national history. There is a whole room devoted to Irish matters.

Overall I was struck by the central place the library gives to the memorabilia of Tom Paine and his writings on human rights. Another big lesson from the collection is how much can be done for labour history by two people

The Crescent, Salford, UK: the Working Class Movement Library

Val Noone and Ruth Frow at the museum – A bronze of Ruth and Eddie is on the wall

There is a room devoted to the struggle against the Vietnam War

Trade union banners are featured in the museum
putting their minds and hands to a focused and crucial task. Like Sam Merrifield, as Peter said.

EP. Thompson wrote eloquently of the way that the spirit of the people who were killed or maimed by soldiers at the 1819 Peterloo Massacre of trade unionists in Manchester lived on in the subsequent working-class movements. Visitors can get in touch with that spirit in a special way via the Frow collection at nearby Salford. Let's raise a toast to two great working-class activists: Eddie and Ruth Frow.

**Book Review: The Coalminers of QLD**

*The Coalminers of Queensland, Vol. 2: The Pete Thomas Essays*

Reviewed by Kevin Healy

The history of the coal unions is a history of continual struggle. It is an expose of the neo-liberal lie that class struggle is dead: some antiquated chimera perpetuated by a rump whose time has passed and a refusal to accept the realities of a benign global economy. The communities here live class struggle by the day and would find it difficult to see the benign in the Australian and global capital profiteering from their labours.

Prominent communist, Pete Thomas, emerged from mainstream journalism in Western Australia to become a prolific writer in the left media, from the Queensland Guardian and Tribune to a long stint as editor of the Miners’ Federation’s Common Cause.

He wrote the first volume of this history, and in this, the second volume, prominent Labour History member Greg Mallory has put together a series of essays from unfinished manuscripts Pete left when he died in 1988. He has done an excellent job. Greg plans a third volume to complete the history from the mid-1980s, where this book concludes.

Let’s get the negatives out of the way. Lists of activists, state and branch officials at various stages of struggles, women involved in organising communities during disputes, and the backgrounds of these people in the industry are an essential part of the history, essential for the record. They are probably even of interest to those who have been involved. But to the ‘outside’ reader they are the union history version of the phone book. Thankfully we can skip over them, concentrate on the men and women on those lists maintaining the courageous struggle for their dignity as workers and communities against a relentless enemy. Whether that enemy was US-based like Utah, or local, like the ‘big Australian’ BHP, the recalcitrance and small-mindedness of the employer was constant – a rebuttal to those who sometimes suggest an Australian capitalist is somehow better than an overseas based company.

From the luxury of their urban boardrooms they displayed no empathy with the harshness of those who produced their massive profits. ‘I will decide what’s safe in my mine,’ a BHP manager says at one stage, rejecting complaints about safety in arguably the most dangerous of industries. Major ‘accidents’, death and injury are a constant theme.

The old adage ‘a picture is worth a thousand words’ is reinforced: the harshness of life bursts from the pictures of the participants in these stories. Many of the disputes were around that harshness, the sub-human conditions miners and their families had to endure, often forced into crowded caravan parks (for which the companies charged rent); crowded single men’s quarters; mud, slush, lack of hygiene and sanitary facilities, snakes and isolation; often impassable roads, lack of basic services including medical services, and inflated prices for essentials.

The companies fought any attempts to ameliorate living conditions until protracted industrial action forced some improvements. They then had the audacity to turn their spin doctors loose advertising the services they provided in their company towns.

Thomas’ long narrative of the 1978 Utah strike at Blackwater, and subsequent industrial action when BHP took over the mine, are gripping examples of the organisation, discipline and moral and financial support the unions engendered. For those interested in the history of working class struggle the book is worth it for these chapters alone. A preamble chapter, ‘The Utah years – battling the ugly American’, almost racy depicts the inhuman greed of huge corporations.

Yet the scepticism, healthy disrespect and humour the miners maintained against all the odds were exhibited during a 1977 dispute at Collinsvale. After Mount Isa Mines had taken over the operation, and its chair, Sir James Foots (doubtless honoured for his invaluable contribution to the exploitation of workers), imposed his hardline attitude on negotiations. ‘The first document they produced we tore up,’ branch president Peter Neilson stated. ‘That document was marked document A. They very quickly produced a second one which they had obviously had ready for when we knocked back document A. This second one was document B, so we...
asked them to save us all a lot of time by skipping straight to document Z.’

Class struggle seeps through every page and through some interesting reflections. For instance, during the lengthy dispute over the Fraser government’s attempts to tax the rental subsidy workers received as compensation for their harsh and isolated conditions, the villain was then treasurer Howard. As small minded and anti-union as ever, he refused to budge even though the cost to the economy he supported far outweighed any income from the tax.

And when then ACTU president Hawke was suggested as a negotiator the workers unanimously rejected the kind offer, pointing out they wanted no compromise. When Hawke was injected into the Utah dispute (Thomas hints at the behest of the Liberal government and the company) his overtures of doing a deal were instantly rejected, and he was told to achieve what the workers wanted or else. Their suspicions were aroused (or confirmed) when in his first meeting with officials Hawke told them their action was damaging the national economy.

Just a sobering note to finish on. If the workers’ fights for their rights that Thomas describes were repeated today under the post-Reith 1996 legislation and the essentially retained WorkChoices legislation, most of them would have ended up in gaol with their property confiscated. This book can encourage us to continue the fight against that injustice!

### The Condition of the Urban Wage Earning Class

After 50 years Eric Fry’s PhD thesis is widely available. Verity Burgmann has photographed Eric’s 1956 doctoral thesis: The Condition of the Urban Wage Earning Class in Australia in the 1880’s and has made it available via the Reason in Revolt website. It is accessible at:


Eric Fry’s doctoral thesis was a pioneering work of labour history and was one of the first Australian History PhDs awarded in Australia. However, it was never published. For a study of its significance, see Andrew Wells, ‘From Workshop to Factory: Eric Fry’s doctoral thesis’ in Jim Hagan and Andrew Wells (eds), The Maritime Strike: A Centennial Retrospective. Essays in Honour of E. C. Fry, Five Islands Press, Wollongong, 1992, pp. 1-12. This copy of the principal volume belonged to Eric’s friend at the University of New England, Don Atkinson. It was kindly made available for the Reason in Revolt website by Don Atkinson’s daughter, Berenice Nyland, and her husband Chris Nyland. The second volume is Appendices, and that is not on the website. If anyone out there has a copy of the second volume could they please contact Verity Burgmann, Reason in Revolt or Labour History.

### The Hungry Mile and other poems

**by Ernest Antony**

Published by The Maritime Union of Australia ISBN 978-0-646-48924-7

The Hungry Mile and other poems was originally published in 1930. Its author was Ernest Antony (1894-1960), itinerant worker, trade unionist, and working class poet. During his life he travelled throughout Australia seeking work. He variously laboured on the wharves and in the cane fields, drove mule and camel teams, cut timber, helped build bridges and wharves, and prospected for tin and gold. During the 1920s and 1930s Antony contributed poems about political and industrial issues to labour movement publications.

His poem ‘The Hungry Mile’, about the 1920s Depression-era Sydney waterfront, became legendary. It took on a life of its own, separated from its author and was variously recited, performed, quoted, recorded, reprinted. The poem was attributed to ‘anonymous’, or to a collective ‘folk’ creative process, and Ernest Antony largely disappeared into the dust heap of the history of Australian literature.

Republication by the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) of The Hungry Mile and other poems, Antony’s collection of thirty-three poems about working life and capitalism, introduces modern readers to the impressive output of this ‘forgotten’ working class poet, with its rebelliousness, humour, satire, irony, anger, and philosophical reflections. A significant Introduction by historian Rowan Cahill (University of Wollongong) provides little known biographical details about Antony and discusses his poetry in the context of Australian working class literature between World Wars I and II.

There are historical links between this book and the MUA. The Hungry Mile is a former Sydney industrial worksite well-known to generations of maritime unionists; Antony worked on the Sydney, Port Kembla, and Melbourne waterfronts.

The book (64 pages, paperback) is available from the MUA, Level 2, 365 Sussex Street, Sydney 2000, for $20 per copy, including postage.
11th NATIONAL LABOUR HISTORY CONFERENCE

CALL FOR PAPERS
The Australian Society for the Study of Labour History, Perth Branch, is hosting the

LABOUR HISTORY
IN THE NEW CENTURY
CONFERENCE 2009
PERTH WESTERN AUSTRALIA

8–10 July 2009
The State School Teachers Union of WA [Inc],
150–152 Adelaide Terrace, Perth, WA.

The Perth Branch welcomes papers on any topic relevant to labour history, but in particular, the themes below. They especially welcome papers from post-graduate students, early career researchers, and activists, and papers with an international perspective. Themes include:

- Labour and the sea
- Indigenous Labour
- Comparative labour histories (including paired papers from different parts of Australia/the world).
- Representations of work
- Indian Ocean labour history
- Anti-labour history
- Employers
- Conformity or exceptionalism
- Industrial history and heritage
- Forced labour
- Oral history
- New approaches to labour history
- Internationalism and the labour movement
- The road from Work Choices
- Labour and the environment
- Labour history in literature and song.

All intending contributors should send an abstract of not more than 500 words to the Convenor by 30 September 2008. Papers, maximum length 3,000 words, submitted for formal, academic refereeing must reach us by 31 January 2009. Presentations will be 20 minutes each with 10 minutes for questions. Contributors wishing to present a display, film, performance or panel discussion should contact us with a brief proposal by 31 December 2008.

Convenor: Dr Bobbie Oliver, Department of Social Sciences, Curtin University of Technology, GPO BOX U1987, PERTH WA 6845.
Tel: +61 8 9266 3215. Fax: +61 8 9266 3166
Email: bobbie.oliver@curtin.edu.au
Website: http://www.asslh.org.au/perth

Melbourne branch ASSLH contacts and meeting place

Meetings of the society are held in Meeting Room 1 in the Trades Hall. Enter Trades Hall through the Victoria Street entrance.

CONTACTS

President
Peter Love
51 Blanche St
St Kilda 3182
Tel: 9534 2445

Secretary
Brian Smiddy
7 The Crest
Watsonia 3087
Tel: 9435 5145

Treasurer
Phillip Deery
19 Withers St
Albert Park 3206
Tel: 9636 0051

Website: http://www.asslh.org.au/melbourne

Please send all submissions and research questions/notes for inclusion in Recorder to the editor, Julie Kimber (juliekimber@unswalumni.com)