RESEARCH ONLINE

Illawarra Unity - Journal of the Illawarra Branch of the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History

Volume 7
Issue 1 *Illawarra Unity*

Article 11

10-1-2007

Review: The Southern Tree of Liberty - the Democratic Movement in New South Wales before 1856

Jim Hagan
University of Wollongong

Follow this and additional works at: http://ro.uow.edu.au/unity

Recommended Citation
Hagan, Jim, Review: The Southern Tree of Liberty - the Democratic Movement in New South Wales before 1856, *Illawarra Unity - Journal of the Illawarra Branch of the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History*, 7(1), 2007, 58-59.
Available at:http://ro.uow.edu.au/unity/vol7/iss1/11

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library: research-pubs@uow.edu.au

RESEARCH ONLINE

Review: The Southern Tree of Liberty - the Democratic Movement in New South Wales before 1856

Abstract
Professor Angela Woollacott, the newly-appointed Professor of Modern History at Macquarie University, gave the opening address at the Australian Historical Association's Annual Conference at Armidale in September. According to the Abstract of Papers, Professor Woollacott is an exponent of 'a new research area exploring cultural understandings of the political changes in mid-nineteenth century Australia in an Imperial context.' The argument of her address seems to have been that in the 1830s and the 1840s, the frontier was a violent place, and the violence became an essential part of 'masculinity'. This characteristic was transferred to Sydney, where it 'became built into colonial culture and politics', and 'may have shaped ideas of masculinity [and] colonial conceptions of political authority' which led on to the establishment of responsible government in 1856.

This journal article is available in Illawarra Unity - Journal of the Illawarra Branch of the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History: http://ro.uow.edu.au/unity/vol7/iss1/11

Terry Irving, *The Southern Tree of Liberty: the Democratic Movement in New South Wales Before 1856,* The Federation Press, Leichhardt, 2006. pp.x + 290, $59.95, cloth.

Review: Jim Hagan, University of Wollongong

Professor Angela Woollacott, the newly-appointed Professor of Modern History at Macquarie University, gave the opening address at the Australian Historical Association's Annual Conference at Armidale in September. According to the Abstract of Papers, Professor Woollacott is an exponent of 'a new research area exploring cultural understandings of the political changes in mid-nineteenth century Australia in an Imperial context.' The argument of her address seems to have been that in the 1830s and the 1840s, the frontier was a violent place, and the violence became an essential part of 'masculinity'. This characteristic was transferred to Sydney, where it 'became built into colonial culture and politics', and 'may have shaped ideas of masculinity [and] colonial conceptions of political authority' which led on to the establishment of responsible government in 1856.

In *The Southern Tree of Liberty* Terry Irving offers a very different explanation for the arrival of responsible government. Violence plays a part, but it is not a mindless violence; it is violence with a basis of 'deep class and political resentment' (p. 165). Moreover, it did not have to be imported from the frontier. It was part of the tradition of political protest which arrived with the veterans of Chartist, Luddite, machine smashing, bread riots and other insurrectionary movements - reinforced from time to time by crews from sailing ships who were domiciled temporarily at The Rocks.

The 'lower orders' did not have a monopoly of violence. Often it was manipulated by their principal opponents, the landed would-be gentry. Most self-proclaimed patriots among the squattocracy controlled violence at a distance, but some, like W.C. Wentworth, got into the business of crowd incitement personally. The stakes for them were very high: control of a legislature with the powers of responsible government would give them legal possession of the land they had taken as squatters. It would also allow them to control immigration, and flood the labour market to keep wages down - by importation of coolie and convict labour if necessary.

The squatters were the natural and traditional enemies of the labouring classes, especially those among the latter with bitter memories of aristocratic oppression in rural Britain. The trade depression and unemployment of the 1840s created

a poverty and a hunger that sharpened those memories, and immigration was a burning issue. The Legislative Council, in which those without substantial property had no representation, appointed nine select committees on immigration between 1835 and 1847. Each of them provided an occasion for mass meeting and demonstration, as did attempts to reintroduce the transportation of convicts.

The organisation of these protests came not only from the labouring classes. They did have their own trade organisations, but particularly in the early phase of the movement, radical thinkers and Sydney businessmen supplied leadership, newspaper propaganda, and premises. The businessmen had their own good reasons for not wanting to be excluded from the kind of legislature that would result if the would-be 'Bunyip Aristocracy' got their way with Her Majesty's Government. One of the great strengths of the book is the way in which Irving traces the subtle and changing relationship between the groups of Sydney businessmen and operatives.

Irving's explanation of the timing and form of responsible government is based firmly on the political economy of the period as it was experienced and interpreted by the people of Sydney in the thirties, forties and fifties. The evidence he presents is exhaustive, and carefully documented and interpreted. The argument that results is forceful and compelling. There is no need for the extra assumptions made by Professor Woollacott to link frontier violence to a masculinity which in turn inspired the political movement towards responsible government in Sydney.

Jim Hagan (editor), *People & Politics in Regional New South Wales,* Volume 1, 1856 to the 1950s, 350 pp.; Volume 2, the 1950s to 2006, 336 pp. The Federation Press, Annandale, 2006. $54.95 (Set).

Reviewed by Rowan Cahill

Histories of Australian towns and local areas abound, usually the work of enthusiastic local residents distributed through community based museum and historical society networks. Aimed at local audiences, these histories tend to be triumphalist, cataloguing 'progress' in terms of population changes and infrastructure growth. There is little in the way of explanation or analysis; local identities appear as a 'cast of characters' rather than as flesh and blood historical agents; politics is noticeably absent.