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Abstract

Eric Fry, one of the founders of the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History (ASSLH), wrote about radical history in the 'Introduction' to his neglected *Rebels & Radicals* (1983). The book is not listed in Greg Patmore's comprehensive listing of labour history publications (1991), receives no mention in the 1992 tribute to Fry's work edited by Jim Hagan and Andrew Wells, and receives only brief mentions in the Labour History tribute issue to Eric Fry and fellow ASSLH pioneer Bob Gollan (2008). Arguably with good reason, since the book was exploring a different way of writing dissident history, one not in accord with the traditional practice of academic labour history as it developed in Australia, but in accord with the "broadness of scope and orientation" of labour history envisaged by Fry and Gollan as early as 1961 in the early days of the ASSLH.

“Never Neutral”: On Labour History/ Radical History*

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Eric Fry, one of the founders of the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History (ASSLH), wrote about radical history in the ‘Introduction’ to his neglected *Rebels & Radicals* (1983). [1] The book is not listed in Greg Patmore’s comprehensive listing of labour history publications (1991), rates no mention in the 1992 tribute to Fry’s work edited by Jim Hagan and Andrew Wells, and receives only brief mentions in the *Labour History* tribute issue to Eric Fry and fellow ASSLH pioneer Bob Gollan (2008). [2] Arguably with good reason, since the book was exploring a different way of writing dissident history, one not in accord with the traditional practice of academic labour history as it developed in Australia, but in accord with the “broadness of scope and orientation” of labour history envisaged by Fry and Gollan as early as 1961 in the early days of the ASSLH. [3]

Rebels & Radicals is an edited collection of twelve biographical essays. In selecting the lives essayed, Fry cast his net widely, bringing together “Aborigines and convicts, democrats and republicans, women who demanded equal rights for their sex, socialists and revolutionaries”. The threads linking the twelve lives were not the traditional hallmarks of labour history, not their membership of labour movement institutions, not their advocacy of working class principles, but, as Fry explained in his ‘Introduction’, all of them were “little known”, their lives having “to be pieced together from fragments”, and they all “stood against the dominant beliefs and policies of their times”. [4] For Fry in this book, the writing of history was about dominant classes, hegemony, the exercise of political power, contesting power, contesting the ideas that were part and parcel

of this power, and the role of rebels and radicals, and sometimes violence, in this process. *Rebels & Radicals* was about conflict, and about historians being on the side of the rebels.

“The Australia in which we live is made up of social classes differing greatly in wealth and power. Dominant ideas suit the dominant class. In effect the rulers write history, aware that the way we view the world today is shaped by our conceptions of the past. They need not do so consciously, since they can simply take their own values for granted and their own self-interest as being the national interest. Nor do they need to do it themselves. Professional historians lay the foundations in research and scholarly books; journalists, novelists, the media and teachers broaden and popularise the original version, again usually without having to consider what view of society they are endorsing. History is never neutral.

“This book shows another side, turning away from rulers to the ruled, from victors to victims. These rebels and radicals confronted the powerful authorities of their day. Some resisted with force and were hanged or shot, others were jailed, many led tragic lives and all suffered from persecution or discrimination. So were they simply losers, not worth remembering? No. They and the people for whom they stood had their effect on the shaping of Australia, for the dominant classes are always restricted by the forces opposing them. They do not rule untrammelled, their power is always constrained by a web of conflicts. Fortunes ebb and flow, changes may be long delayed, but out of the resolution of one struggle another is born. Once we recognise that our past, like the present, is a process of contradictory forces we can see that the rebels and radicals are the other side of the coin and an indispensable part of our history.” [5]

Fry was not alone in radical experimentation. For example earlier, in 1982, a Sydney-based collective of historians, referring to themselves as the Sydney Labour History Group, published a collection of ten essays titled *What Rough Beast?* Broad in approach and content, the essays variously explored the concept of the state in Australian history. Interdisciplinary, adventurous and stimulating, the essays were modestly termed

“excursions into historical analysis”, the state conceived not as a “monolithic functional entity operating for maximum social order” but as a formation of institutions that change/d over time, far from cohesive, sometimes characterized by disorder and indecision, a site of diverse and multi-faceted conflict, contradictions, and change. [6]

Fry’s short pointed sentence about history never being neutral would have been a new consideration for some of his readers; for others, a reminder. For Fry it was his starting point. When the contemporary Australian incarnation of labour history was conceived in the late 1950s, early 1960s by Bob Gollan, Fry and others as an organisation (the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History-ASSLH) based at the Australian National University (Canberra) with a journal (*Labour History*), relying both on academic and non-academic practitioners, the Cold War was in full swing. Australia was ‘another country’: the Australian Labor Party (ALP) had been in the Federal political wilderness since late 1949; the Communist Party of Australia (CPA) had power and influence amongst trade unionists and intellectuals. The trade union movement represented a peak of 61/62 per cent of employees in the mid 1950s, and held on to over 50 per cent of employees through to 1980. The ALP still had its famous socialisation objective printed on its membership tickets. For people on the Left, working class militancy “was the great engine of change”. [7]

Something else was blowing in the wind....the Vietnam War was around the corner and social protest was about to be rediscovered as a tool of the powerless, with social protest movements proliferating in the decade 1965–1975; the first of the baby boomers were about to enter a tertiary system expanded especially for them; traditional subject disciplines were about to be agonisingly challenged and changed by new disciplines and ways of looking at the world.

The ASSLH pioneers were on the threshold of a new world, in many ways beyond their ken, but they did so politically and courageously, as radical intellectual warriors, part of the power struggle against the conservative hegemony of their day, participants in an intellectual/cultural struggle between radicals and conservatives to control “the agenda of ideas in Australia”. [8] It took courage to make this stand in

academia at the time; leftist and former leftist academics held real fears for their jobs and their futures as academics; the case of the failure of leftist historian Russel Ward in 1955 to secure a lectureship at the new University of Technology, Sydney (later the University of New South Wales) due to political intervention, crystallised their fears. [9]

Gollan and Fry were amongst a number of historians inside and outside the academy, people like Brian Fitzpatrick, Lloyd Churchward, Noel Ebbels, Ian Turner, Russel Ward, for whom the “writing of history and engagement in political struggle were understood as bedfellows”. [10] So far as the ASSLH founders were concerned, labour history as a specialisation and as an organisation would help the ALP and the labour movement generally gain the historical recognition due to significant historical movers and shakers, a recognition denied at the time; further, in a utilitarian sense, the past was there to be learned from, and it was intended that lessons learned would help in the political power struggles ahead.

The ASSLH concept of labour history grew out of the experiences of its founders during the 1930s, the Second World War, and post-war, with an eye on both left historical debate and initiatives in the United Kingdom, and on a body of Australian labour history writing and analysis that went back to the late 1880s. The formulators were also part of a creative radical-nationalist intellectual cohort, including writers, artists, poets, musicians, actors, folk revivalists, who, as Drew Cottle has explained, found strength in the collectivism and anti-authoritarianism of the common people, “an alternative to the individualism, consumerism and conformity” which characterised the developing Cold War Australia of the Menzies era. [11] In part, too, the ASSLH constituted a flexing of muscles by relatively newly minted academics in an expanding and malleable tertiary sector, articulating their conception of *academics* as people who consciously and deliberately operated both inside and outside the academy. They also understood there were intellectuals outside, and unrecognised by, the academy, a situation they sought to address by including them as equal participants and contributors to intellectual/historical debate, research and writing. The Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) recognised the political threat,

hence the watch it mounted on the infant ASSLH, and the spoiling operations directed against it. [12]

Since those Cold War days, the powerbase to which the ASSLH warriors attached/aligned their hopes, aspirations and strategies dramatically changed. The fortunes of the CPA declined to the extent the party wound itself up in 1991. Trade union density declined until by 2000 only 28 per cent of the workforce was unionised. The ALP broke with its socialist traditions and became more firmly embedded in the capitalist system than hitherto, and, in office during the 1980s, acted as a midwife for neoliberalism. [13]

Reflecting these broad and profound changes, the original counter hegemonic intent and impetus of labour history was either lost or forgotten. Instead there emerged a genre of historical research and writing more concerned with academic credentialing and advancement than having a political purpose. Arguably, the notion of labour history became a constraining, limiting concept, inhibiting researchers driven to be published academically in an available space that was narrowly focused, isolating them from subjects and styles more in tune with their preferred political-historical visions and true-selves; research undertaken at times 'to fill in the gaps' in the record, or simply because there was a body of 'unfurrowed' archival material available.

As the tertiary world expanded and as scholarship/teaching became increasingly susceptible to the commodifying demands of purse-strings, accountants, and market forces, there was a worrying and increasing tendency for academic labour historians to be 'disappeared', variously gathered under the umbrellas of Departments of Management/Employment/Business or Whatever studies, creating environments and futures where the pursuit of counter-hegemonic agendas were/will be increasingly remote.

Of course there were notable forays that resisted the apolitical trend, most recently, for example, books by Meredith and Verity Burgmann, and by Greg Mallory, which embraced the original political intent of labour history, and variously explored the concept of trade union renewal and social responsibility; Sean Scalmer's concise history of Australian trade unions and their contribution to the shaping of the Australian nation,

aimed at a mass audience and written in the context of intense anti-union campaigning by the Commonwealth government and much of the mass media; Tom Bramble's account of the declining fortunes of the Australian trade union movement since the 1960s, and strategies for revival and renewal; Humphrey McQueen's account of Australia's building labourers, a history that seamlessly blended labour, Capital, and social history with a confronting detailing of working conditions reminiscent of Upton Sinclair's 1906 exposure of Chicago's meatpacking plants. [14]

It is relevant here to recall Noam Chomsky's 1977 analysis regarding intellectuals in capitalist democracies. He argued that while intellectuals are generally held to be "fiercely independent" and "'antagonistic' to the establishment", they were in fact shaped, moulded, contained by the state. The capitalist democratic state does not "stake out a position to which all must conform", but it does work "to determine and limit the entire spectrum of thought", establishing both the official doctrine and the tolerated extreme, creating a spectrum of thought in which "fundamental assumptions are insinuated, though rarely expressed ... presupposed, but not asserted"; it is a hegemonic system in which criticism takes place, but within "narrow bounds". Chomsky's analysis is still relevant, even more so as Australian universities struggle both internally and against each other to develop corporate links, establish capitalist enterprises, and develop close relationships with the apparatus of the state merely to survive, let alone thrive. Arguably much research undertaken by academics is shaped and led by funding which reflect corporate and state agendas. [15]

A consensus view of the past dominates the orthodox histories that shape Australian culture. Along with the noble passage of arms and the shedding of blood across the globe, from the veldts of South Africa to the mountain wastes of Afghanistan, the nation got to where it is because of mateship, good sense, talking things out, agreement, the institutionalised mannered combat of the two-party system and so on. Industrial disputation was contained within the Arbitration system, except during breakouts like the 1949 Coal Strike – undesirable, alien blips on the otherwise clear-radar-screen, and not indicative of

something deeper, like class struggle for instance. All so benign: sport, mateship, unquestioned service to the nation in time of war, and sticking together in time of cyclone, flood and bushfire are what the nation was, and is, all about. It is a view of the past that glosses over an often calamitous past, one of significant struggle and conflict.

What we have here is a process akin to fascist monism. In his 1997 discussion of fascism, Michael Parenti points out that fascist doctrine stresses monistic values:

“The people are no longer to be concerned with class divisions but must see themselves as part of a harmonious whole, rich and poor as one, a view that supports the economic status quo by cloaking the ongoing system of class exploitation. This is in contrast to a left agenda that advocates the articulation of popular demands and a sharpened awareness of social injustice and class struggle.” [16]

Keith Windschuttle’s strident, aggressive, robust assault against the ‘Bloody Frontier’ version of the Australian past was in part successful because it meshed comfortably with the world-view propounded by the post-Hanson neo-con Howard government (1996–2007), and with its conservative political/social agenda. The mass media variously agreed with Windschuttle, and/or enjoyed the attack by a non-specialist outsider against experts and the way he pointed to ‘flaws’ in their methodologies and facts. Also contributing to the assaults’ success was the way in which the ‘Bloody Frontier’ account had stained a triumphalist post-1788 colonial-settler account of the Australian past, a stain for which Windschuttle provided the detergent.

Similarly, the 1998 War on the Waterfront stood in historical isolation. Few accounts drew parallels with the past: the conservative desire since the early Cold War days to cripple the union movement by destroying the maritime unions; the twenty-year neo-con thug tactic of employing American style union busters as part of IR normalcy; the clandestine involvement of the military as a feature of Australian industrial relations going back to the 1923 Melbourne Police strike at least, longer when the conflict of 1890 Maritime Strike is taken

into account; the collusion, yet again, between government and big business in planning/aiding/abetting attacks on the union movement. [17]

A more expansive historical approach is needed, one in which the traditional Labour history subject area exists alongside, for example, Capital history, historical examinations of Right wing thought and conservative ideology, accounts of social protest movements which cross social class, alongside also histories of the anti-war and peace movements. I have in mind the sort of expansive inclusiveness evident in Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States* (1980, 2001), and locally in the 1988 four-volume project edited by Verity Burgmann and Jenny Lee, *A People's History of Australia since 1788*. [18]

In today's world the labour movement in all its manifestations is too narrow a focus for historians seeking a world in which social justice and equity are maximised, a society and world in which human beings can live in harmony with other humans and their cultures, other species, and nature in general.

Many people with leftist outlooks look to solutions beyond the labour movement and the ALP. [19] What was radical in the late 1950s, early 60s, is not necessarily radical now. If we want to use history with a leftist consciousness to understand, confront and challenge the conservative hegemony of today, as the labour history pioneers did in their day, then a more inclusive, wider history, beyond the trade unions, the ALP, beyond a fixation on industrial capitalism of the 19th and 20th centuries, albeit with forays into gender and race, has to be opened to radical investigation and analysis.

Which is where radical history, in the spirit of the project enunciated by Fry in *Rebels & Radicals*, comes in. Radical history has an emancipatory dimension, the power to move people to act, and there is a sense in which radical historians are present-minded. By studying the past, and movements and people over time, it can show that change is possible, that apparently powerless or humble organisations and people can overcome apparently insurmountable odds; it can heighten perceptions and understandings, enhancing the desire for change; it can show not what is inevitable, but what could and might be. The political reality is that personal discontent and

senses of wrongness in the present are of little account without access to ideas, dissenting traditions, and outfits/organisations that knew/know how to protest and challenge. It is important to not feel alone, to not have to invent the wheel all over again, even though the point of reference and identification is in the past, and may no longer *be*.

The mission of radical historians is to confront and contest the Consensus view of the Australian past and its ideological underpinnings. And part of the way it attempts to do this is by returning to historical discussion and analysis, ideas, events, people, themes, that have been variously sidelined, ignored, 'forgotten' by the Consensus process. We need to keep in mind the observation of Walter Benjamin that "every image of the past that is not recognised by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably". [20] This 'irretrievable disappearance' is the ongoing political/social threat posed by Consensus historians; in effect they not only manufacture a past pervaded by consensus, but also help manufacture a present in which dissent and dissidence are limited, curtailed, a *present* heading for a future in which these are increasingly proscribed, if not eliminated.

There is no end to History. Thus it was a mistake to think that the gains and advances made in the wake of the 1960s upsurge of social movements, the gains for example of women, Aborigines, the environment, and for social justice and compassion generally, were permanent, ongoing. The resolve, dedication, and ruthlessness of those who would have it otherwise was underestimated. No matter what direction the wind is blowing historically, radical historians need that toughness of mind and spirit Albert Camus was indicating as he ended his metaphoric novel *The Plague*: "the plague bacillus never dies or disappears for good; (it) can lie dormant for years and years ... and perhaps the day would come when ... it roused up its rats again and sent them forth to die in a happy city". On one hand the plague symbolised Nazism and the Occupation of France, but more generally, anti-democratic/authoritarian pestilences full stop. [21] Radical historians address the Camus metaphor, and if unable to eradicate the plague bacillus, at least work to keep it at bay.

- * During the writing of *Radical Sydney: Places, Portraits and Unruly Episodes*, UNSW Press, Sydney, 2010, Terry Irving and I gave thought to the concept of 'radical history' in the context of the writing and 'telling' of Australian history. Our preliminary responses to these deliberations were this essay, and 'Rediscovering Radical History' by Terry Irving. We posted these essays on our blog about the book at <http://radicalsydney.blogspot.com> during May/June 2010.

Notes

- 1 Eric Fry, (editor), *Rebels & Radicals*, Allen & Unwin, North Sydney, 1983. pp.x–xv.
- 2 Greg Patmore, *Australian Labour History*, Longman Cheshire, Melbourne, 1991, pp. 211–232; Jim Hagan and Andrew Wells (editors), *The Maritime Strike: A Centennial Retrospective. Essays in Honour of E. C. Fry*, Five Islands Press and the University of Wollongong Labour History Research Group, Wollongong, 1992; Verity Burgmann, "A Greater Concentration of Purpose": The Intellectual Legacy of Eric Fry and Robin Gollan', *Labour History*, Number 94, May 2008, p. 27. Peter Love, "Eric Fry (1921–2007)", *Labour History*, Number 94, May 2008, p. 5.
- 3 Burgmann, *loc. cit.*, p. 36.
- 4 Eric Fry, (editor), *op.cit.*, p. x.
- 5 *Ibid.*, pp. x–xi.
- 6 Sydney Labour History Group, *What Rough Beast? The State and Social Order in Australian History*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1982, pp. 11–12. See also the discussion of this book in Verity Burgmann, *loc. cit.*, p. 38.
- 7 Raewyn Connell, 'Bread and Waratahs', *Overland* 198, 2010, p. 17.
- 8 John McLaren, *Writing in Hope and Fear: Literature as Politics in Postwar Australia*, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 1996, p. 112.
- 9 David McKnight, *Australia's Spies and Their Secrets*, Allen & Unwin, St. Leonards, 1994, pp. 153–154.
- 10 Drew Cottle, 'A Bowyang Historian in the Cold War Antipodes; Russel Ward and the Making of *The Australian Legend*', *Journal of Australian Colonial History*, Volume 10, Issue 2, 2008, p. 186.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 179.
- 12 The ASSLH was established in 1961; it was based at the Australian National University, and the inaugural president was

- scholar Robin Gollan. For the origins of the ASSLH see Greg Patmore, *op. cit.*, pp. 5–7. See also the memoir by Eric Fry, one of the founders of the ASSLH, 'The Labour History Society (ASSLH): A Memoir of its First Twenty Years', *Labour History*, Number 77, November 1999, pp. 83–96. For ASIO and the infant ASSLH see Terry Irving, 'ASIO and the Labour History Society: an Incident in 1964', *The Hummer*, Vol. 4, No.1, Summer 2003–2004, pp. 25–35.
- 13 For a useful discussion of the post-1970s changes to the ALP see the Joint Social Sciences Public Lecture, Australian National University, 8 June 2007, by Tom Bramble and Rick Kuhn, 'The Transformation of the Australian Labor Party', <<http://dspace.anu.au/bitstream/1885/45410/1/Bramble%20and%20Kuhn%20Transformation%20of%20the%20ALP%20web.pdf>>, accessed 26 April 2010. The endnotes to this lecture also provide useful access points to relevant literature and debate.
 - 14 Meredith and Verity Burgmann, *Green Bans, Red Union: Environmental Activism and the New South Wales Builders Labourers' Federation*, UNSW Press, Sydney, 1998; Greg Mallory, *Uncharted Waters: Social Responsibility in Australian Trade Unions*, Greg Mallory, Brisbane, 2005; Sean Scalmer, *The Little History of Australian Unionism*, The Vulgar Press, Carlton North, 2006; Tom Bramble, *Trade Unionism in Australia: A History From Flood to Ebb Tide*, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 2008; Humphrey McQueen, *Framework of Flesh: Builders' Labourers Battle for Health & Safety*, Ginninderra Press, Adelaide, 2009; Upton Sinclair, *The Jungle*, Harper & Rowe, New York, 1951.
 - 15 Noam Chomsky, 'Intellectuals and the State' (1977), p.12, <http://www.ditext.com/chomsky/is.html> (accessed 16 July 2009). For discussion of the efforts, and tactics employed, by the Australian neo-liberal government of Prime Minister John Howard (1996–2007) to silence criticism by independent experts, commentators, academics, public servants, NGOs, see Clive Hamilton and Sarah Maddison, editors, *Silencing Dissent*, Allen & Unwin, 2007.
 - 16 Michael Parenti, *Blackshirts & Reds. Rational Fascism and the Overthrow of Communism*, City Lights Books, San Francisco, 1997, p. 12.
 - 17 An example of an exception here was the pamphlet by Tom Bramble, *War on the Waterfront*, Brisbane Defend Our Unions Committee, October 1998 <http://www.takver.com/wharfie/wotw.htm>, accessed 20 March 2010.
 - 18 Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States, 1492 – Present*, HarperCollins, New York, 2001. Verity Burgmann and Jenny Lee (editors): *A Most Valuable Acquisition; Making A Life;*

Staining The Wattle; Constructing A Culture, McPhee Gribble/
Penguin Books, Fitzroy, 1988.

- 19 See for example the personal, heart-felt explanation of this political position by Andrew Milner, 'Shock! Horror! Chattering Classes Vote Green!', *Overland*, No. 166, 2002, pp. 95-97.
- 20 Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations. Essays and Reflections*, Schocken Books, New York, 1969, p.255.
- 21 Albert Camus, *The Plague*, Penguin Modern Classics edition, 1960, p. 252.