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## Shaping histories

Terence H. Irving

*University of Wollongong*, [tirving@uow.edu.au](mailto:tirving@uow.edu.au)

Rowan Cahill

*University of Wollongong*, [rowanc@uow.edu.au](mailto:rowanc@uow.edu.au)

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# Shaping histories

## **Abstract**

During the last few years, a number of researchers have interviewed the authors regarding their politics and practice in relation to 'history'. In reflecting upon their individual 'historiographies', they have put the following together. The authors met at Sydney University in the 1960s; Irving was a post-graduate student and a tutor; Cahill was an undergraduate student. They were two of the five founders of the Sydney Free University (1967-1972).

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## SHAPING HISTORIES by Terry Irving and Rowan Cahill

During the last few years, a number of researchers have interviewed the authors regarding their politics and practice in relation to 'history'. In reflecting upon their individual 'historiographies', they have put the following together. The authors met at Sydney University in the 1960s; Irving was a post-graduate student and a tutor; Cahill was an undergraduate student. They were two of the five founders of the Sydney Free University (1967-1972).



Terry Irving taught history and politics at the University of Sydney (1964-1998). He edited the journal *Labour History*, 1990-1998, and was President of the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History (ASSLH), 1999-2004. In 2003 he received the Annual History Citation awarded by the History Council of New South Wales for his contribution to the study of labour and political history in Australia. His books include the landmark study *Class Structure in Australian History* (with R. W. Connell, 1980, 1992), *Childe and Australia: Archaeology, Politics and Ideas* (edited with Peter Gathercole and Gregory Melleuish, 1995), *Youth in Australia: Policy, Administration and Politics: A History Since World War 11*, (with David Maunders and Geoffrey Sherington with assistance from Janet Sorby, 1995), *The Southern Tree of Liberty* (2006). He is currently Visiting Professorial Fellow at the University of Wollongong. For a more detailed listing of Terry's writings, [see here](#).

Rowan Cahill has worked as a teacher, freelance writer, agricultural labourer, and for the trade union movement as a journalist, historian, and rank and file activist. Currently a part-time teaching academic at the University of Wollongong, he has published extensively in labour movement, radical, and academic publications. His

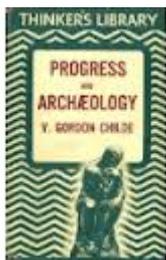
books include *The Seamen's Union of Australia, 1872-1972: A History* (with Brian Fitzpatrick, 1981), *Twentieth Century Australia: Conflict and Consensus* (with David Stewart, 1987), *A Turbulent Decade: Social Protest Movements and the Labour Movement, 1965-1975* (edited with Beverley Symons, 2005). For a more detailed listing of Rowan's writings, [see here](#).

## SHAPING HISTORY 1: TERRY IRVING

In February 2013 I was interviewed by Sadia Schneider, from the University of Melbourne, who was writing a thesis on New Left historians. She sent me a list of six very pertinent questions, and with her permission I have reproduced them below with my answers. Since the interview I have added some more information about my family background and intellectual interests.

### 1. General biographical background (parents, school, uni etc) When did you become involved in the left. How? What about your decision to study history?

My parents were both working class. My father's family came from Cessnock in the coalmining region of the Hunter Valley. His father, John Henry Irving, was a baker in the Co-Op store, and his brother and two brothers-in-law were all underground miners. My father, the youngest child was saved from the pit by his mother, Emily, and by his musical talent (he played the violin); he was apprenticed and in due course became a tradesman - in carpentry, joinery and cabinet making. My mother left school at 14 and by her late twenties she was a trained psychiatric nurse. Unlike her husband, my mother was a great reader, probably something she learnt from her mother and father - Elsie and Sam Spink. Grandmother Spink was a pillar of the local Church of England Mothers' Union while my grandfather was a professional photographer (much of his work is in local, state and national collections), who was educated in a minor 'public' school in England. But by the 1920s theirs was a downwardly mobile family. None of the children of the Spinks (or the Irvings) in my parents' generation had much education.



Sometime in the mid- to late-thirties James Hamilton Irving and Eva May Spink arrived in Sydney from the country and became radicals. They met, married, and in time I was born into a family that was moving from 'progressive' to 'revolutionary'. I can illustrate what that meant by a story about Gordon Childe's *Progress and Archaeology*, which I bought second hand in my first year at university. Published in 1944 under the auspices of the Rationalist Press Association, it was number 102 in The Thinker's Library.

I felt good about the purchase. Although I bought it to study for an ancient history exam, I knew it was the kind of book someone like me ought to own. For one thing it looked familiar. Our bookshelves at home, scant as they were, held other books

in this series - pocket-sized, hardback, cheaply presented - by Darwin, Huxley, Winwood Reade, Wells and so on - books by the scientists and secularists who gave voice to the movement of 'unbelief' - the great late nineteenth and early twentieth century intellectual challenge to religion and conventional wisdom. Their books were meant for autodidacts and rationalists who wanted to be 'broad' - not 'narrow' - thinkers. Narrow: in our house there was no worse epithet for someone. Broad thinkers were 'progressive', which as an accolade was not quite as high as 'Communist', but at least it was better than 'reformist'. It was progressive to believe in birth control, kindergartens, 'new' education, parks, libraries, town planning and bringing art to the people. You were progressive if you understood that history was moving out of the period of economic crises and imperialist wars into a new world of planning, international co-operation and science. You were progressive most obviously if you understood history as progress.

Progressives were the allies of the labour movement, but they had to be organised, which was one of the special tasks of Communists. Progressives had to be shown that, really, they were socialists. This was one of our peculiar (and dangerous) illusions on the left at that time, that we had the running in revealing the meaning of history, and that it was our task to tell everybody else what to do and think.

Childe's book affirmed my belief in history as progress. According to the dust jacket, its aim was 'to describe the progressive tendencies of mankind during the last 50,000 years as revealed by archaeological discoveries.' Wow - not just since 1917! This was certainly my kind of book.

When Japanese submarines attacked Sydney my parents, who were living across the river from the Mortlake gas works, moved to a place of greater safety on the lower North Shore, and a few months later I started school at the local primary. According to the Inspector who reported on the school for the Department of Education, Roseville Practice School had 'a high spiritual and civic tone'. I discovered what he meant at age seven. During the National Anthem at one of the weekly assemblies I was mischievously leading one or two other creative spirits in singing alternative words - probably spontaneously composed. To our surprise a teacher traced the resultant cacophony, and at recess we were told to report to the Headmistress, who gave us each six of the best. Ouch! Thus we learnt that rulers like to enforce their values, painfully if possible. From this experience I must have drawn a pragmatic conclusion, because by sixth class I was happily standing in front of the national flag at every assembly, leading the rest of the boys in pledging that we honoured a god and served a king - neither of which I believed in, but, although unable to articulate the idea of conditional allegiance, I discovered perplexity at least.

After primary school I went to the 'selective' North Sydney Boys High in 1951. I did well at primary school (dux and captain) but not so well at High School, probably because of the rancour and violence in my parents' marriage, which broke down completely as I was starting at North Sydney. We then became very poor. My younger brother and I were often farmed out to live with relatives while my mother took live-in jobs at hospitals and hotels. Nonetheless by my final year at North Sydney I was taking Honours in English and History, and at the end of the

year I was awarded the Treloar Prize in History, and I won two scholarships to Sydney University.

A further reason affecting my high school performance was the impact of the Cold War on our family. My mother was still in the Communist Party and she became somewhat notorious locally when she was arrested for selling the party paper, *Tribune*, at Chatswood railway station and when her picture appeared on the front page of an evening newspaper showing her being evicted from a Sydney Town Hall meeting where Menzies was speaking. Being a 'red' was not easy; being a 'commo kid' was harder, especially for one without adequate family support.

Perhaps this is the place to refer to how my parents became Communists. My father was called up and joined the air-force as a tradesman, and he was recruited to the CPA while serving in the Northern Territory. My mother, left behind in a rented suburban house, was recruited over the back fence by Christina Stead's half-brother, Gilbert, in 1944. We were living on the lower North Shore, so the party's members and supporters were a mixture of tradesmen, white collar workers, middle class professionals, and even a few businessmen - very typical of the area's population generally. They were all earnest talkers and avid readers, at least of 'approved' publications, and they were continually busy on party campaigns. The Communist household was an alternative public space, with cupboards full of party 'literature', and lounge rooms occupied every week by branch meetings, educational classes, cottage lectures and socials. As I became socialised into this way of life I naturally equated politics with ideas, with intellectual activity. (It was a rude shock when I got to Uni and met ALP student politicians.) Under conditions of Cold War surveillance and repression most of this activity had to be done carefully, tactfully and behind the cover of 'front' bodies, and I think I learnt then that persuasion was not the same as pushing one's ideas down people's throats.

I belonged to the Junior Eureka League (the Communist children's organization), and I rose to a leadership position as a 'Pioneer'. I was taught how to address meetings, the importance of organisation and improvisation, the ethical value of collective living and decision-making, and the rudiments of a working class perspective on current affairs and social structure. It was an invaluable training, delivered in what for me was a welcome alternative family.



Curtain Call, New Theatre production of 'Reedy River', 1953.

Commo kids were more likely than others of their age to be budding intellectuals - I recall several of my JEL cohort who like me became academics - and we spent a

lot of time informally discussing left-wing writers and the history of the international left. At this time (the late-forties through to the early-sixties) the CPA's campaign to defend Australian culture and promote the radical view of Australian history and culture was underway. We read *The Realist Writer* and the books published by the Australasian Book Society. My mother was in *Reedy River* and sang in a trade union choir called The Unity Singers. On one occasion blankets were nailed to the walls of the lounge room to convert it into a sound studio for recording radical songs. My mother's friends included folk song collectors and members of the Bushwackers' Band, and in time I was drawn into this counter-hegemonic, rough and ready acting and singing world, running the JEL drama club and appearing in a New Theatre play by Mona Brand. Since then I have often been drawn to radical projects that present as spontaneous, improvised and anti-professional (and been attacked for it!).

I did not 'discover' the study of history; it was just a normal part of this milieu, at least as far as I understood it. I read the pamphlets on Australia's radical past by party intellectuals RD Walshe, and WA Wood; I sang songs about Eureka and the Great Strikes of the 1890s; from comrades who boarded with us I learnt about the anti-eviction wars of the 1930s, the socialist movement in Broken Hill and the bashing of Communist MP Fred Patterson in Brisbane. But exciting as all this was it could not match the intellectual seriousness of the British Communist Party's historical work. I read the books and articles in *Our History* and *Marxism Today* by the British Marxist historians, AL Morton, Dona Torr, Eric Hobsbawm, and other members of the CPGB's Historians Group. I saw that history was argument and scholarship as well as a support for political positions. Taking History Honours at school and university was an almost inevitable result, especially as I found that the historical nature of my left-wing thinking gave me an edge over other students, particularly by its materialist focus on economic and social forces, which to those brought up on the empiricist and idealist works of mainstream history are often mysterious. In time I became an academic, but 'professing history' has always been less vital for me than the (sporadically realized) practice of living history through radical politics.

**2. What was your relationship with the Communist Party of Australia (CPA) (did you ever join/leave, were you involved in joint activities etc.)?**

I started University in 1956, turned 18 at the end of that year and promptly joined the CPA. I was primed to do this by my background but it was also a kind of gift to my mother for her struggles on behalf of my brother and me, and a tribute to her for her steadfast faith. These were years of turmoil in the CP. I was assigned to the (very small) University Branch, which was suspected rightly of 'revisionism', but I retained my membership even as others drifted away. My party responsibility was to lead the University Labour Club, which I did until about 1961. The late fifties were quiet years on campus; my political tasks were to arrange lunch-time meetings for party speakers, to organize united fronts with religious groups to support the peace movement, and to hold the occasional demo downtown against nuclear weapons. It was all very safe and very controlled by party headquarters in the city. It was boring, sectarian (especially in combating 'the Trots') and ultimately futile. Well perhaps not; it might have prepared the way for the

dramatic popular events of the New Left. I am certainly embarrassed now by the puppet-like aspect of that activity, but until the explosion of student (and worker) radicalism in the late sixties, the only alternative was the ALP Club, which was even worse: mindless, factional, and electoral. I was given leave by the CP in 1965 to finish my thesis. Within a few years the political climate had changed, the student radicals did not want or need outside 'leadership', and my marriage had broken down. I never renewed my CP membership.

**3. What about the 'Old Left'? Were there particular Old Left historians you met/read etc. How did you see the Old Left historians (eg. Brian Fitzpatrick, Ian Turner, Robin Gollan, Stephen Murray-Smith, Geoffrey Serle, Russel Ward)?**

I met all of them except Geoffrey Serle, but I need to explain the ambivalent relationship I had with the Old Left historians. When I took up my PhD scholarship Robin Gollan's *Radical and Working Class Politics* had just appeared and I conceived my work on the 1840s and early 50s as a prequel to his. But I was also influenced by the imperial history of John Manning Ward, my supervisor. The power relationships between colony and metropolis - administrative and economic - I thought provided a 'realist' framing for my thesis; Gollan on the other hand was rather opaque about material interests and particularly how class forces worked at the political level. The development of liberal politics (ideas, organisation, policy), the focus of my thesis, could definitely be explained in that framework of the tension between imperial and colonial forces, so I dropped the emphasis that Gollan would have placed on my topic - the transfer of British liberalism to the colony. My thesis explained politics in terms of 'interests' (I had a mentor in the Department of Government who was taken with the current fad in political science, 'group theory', which I understood as prioritizing economic and social 'interests'); so not class analysis in the conventional sense, but it was materialist history. (This materialism was its attraction to Bob Connell; hence our working together on the class structure book a few years later, but I had a lot to learn from him about class analysis as a form of structuralist thinking.)

Looking back at that thesis I realize, and regret, that my adoption of the imperial 'realist' framework meant that I sidelined the emergence of working men's politics and the discursive and material contexts in which it was formed. My *The Southern Tree of Liberty* (2006) was an attempt to repair those absences.

Gollan reacted ambivalently to the class structure book; he saw its contribution to radical history but disliked it because it was grounded in theory. A decade earlier he had been attacked by McQueen as an exponent of labour history, a form of humanitarian writing lacking a revolutionary theory. Correct, but unlike McQueen I think that the Old Left historians, were onto something powerful for radical politics - hence my ambivalence about them. I always honoured their struggles, and joined in their efforts to establish the Labour History Society. What I saw in their efforts was this - and it is often ignored today: while they supposedly 'romanticized' the struggles of the working class past they were continuing a now forgotten tradition of historical writing developed by labour intellectuals as part of the working class's political struggle against ruling class ideas. These earlier movement intellectuals - RS and L Ross, Evatt, Fitzpatrick, Childe, Walshe,

Rawling, Higgins, et al - expected that their history would make its readers want to act. Their arguments were read within labour movement institutions. This is what Gollan, Fry, Turner etc were doing when they set up the Labour History Society - extending the institutional scope of movement intellectual work into the universities. As their careers developed, alas, the cozy assumptions that McQueen criticized overwhelmed the political impulse in their work. They became mainly academic intellectuals. Actually, this process of incorporation was already apparent in Gollan's book: the liberal understanding of democracy, the constitutionalism, and the neglect of anti-parliamentary politics. As I have said elsewhere Gollan's book is not a good example of radical history because it idealizes the capitalist state as liberal and parliamentary.

**4. What were you reading and most influenced by? In particular, did you read Lukács, Gramsci or Althusser? Were there figures in the UK you were inspired by (E.P. Thompson, Perry Anderson, Gareth Stedman Jones, Hobsbawm)?**

I read, with different degrees of seriousness and understanding, all of the above - and also C Wright Mills, William Appleman Williams, Paul Goodman, Ralph Miliband, George Lichtheim, Herbert Marcuse, Stuart Hall, et al. I subscribed to movement journals, *Studies on the Left*, *Socialist Revolution*, *Radical America*, *New Left Review*, *Marxism Today*. I was always more concerned with the progress of the movement rather than the purity of ideas. I subscribed as well to *Nation*, *New Statesman* and *Times Literary Supplement*, and found support for an engaged, materialist history from three non-Marxist sources. In my fourth year I was introduced to the ideas of R.G. Collingwood. A distinguished contributor to philosophical idealism, Collingwood nonetheless attracted me because of his insistence that historians had to work critically (he was famous for his rejection of 'scissors and paste' empiricism in historical studies) and that the object of their study was the creative response of humans to their situation. (Later I would discover that this view of Collingwood's helped Gordon Childe formulate his rejection of the mechanical materialist proposition that there were laws of history.) In the early sixties I discovered Karl Mannheim's sociology of knowledge, which gave me the basis for a critical approach to ideology, and John Dewey's philosophy of pragmatism, with its stress on inquiry as a process aiming at knowledge that is useful for, and validated by, human action. I was also inspired by his commitment to democratic practices in education.

**5. What do you remember as being the defining event of the late 1960s and early 1970s in terms of shaping your worldview? What were your thoughts on the student movement, the anti-war movement, the Clarrie O'Shea strike, developments in China like the cultural revolution and Maoism? What about the defeat of the Labor Party led by Calwell in 1966 or the election of Whitlam.**

This question for me is a bit beside the point, as I was never 'defined' by a particular event in the way that the younger New Left might have been, particularly if they were coming across radical ideas and movements for the first time. But of course I hoped for a Labor victory in 1966 and 1972, I was inspired by the O'Shea general strike, and I protested in the streets when Whitlam was removed by Kerr's coup. The invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 confirmed my

growing belief that Russian Communism was an abomination, and ultimately pointed me to bottom-up ideas of socialism and democracy, as distant as possible from the state apparatus, such as it might be after the revolution.

**6. Did you think of yourself as 'New Left'? What did that mean to you? What would you say you and others of your generation were trying to do? How successful do you think it was? In what ways did it constitute a group or network? Who were you in touch with?**

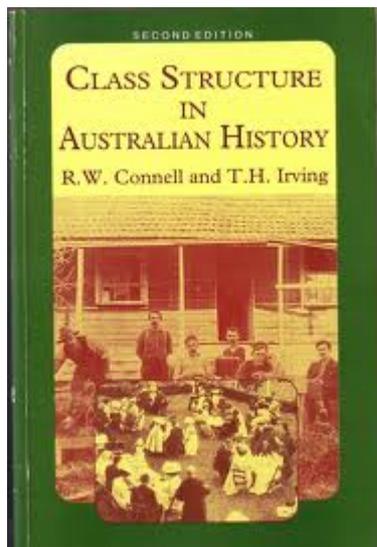
I certainly thought of myself as New Left - that is, First New Left, for I was half a generation in front of the Second New Left. The first New Left was attempting to recover that moment of revolutionary exhilaration following the Russian Revolution when intellectuals and workers could have melded themselves into a single public of Communist idealism, before the barbarities of Stalinism and the indignities of Social-Democratic welfare-statism sucked hope and morality out of the Left.

In the early sixties my wife was involved with Helen Palmer's socialist magazine, *Outlook*, which was read by independent socialists and dissident Communists, while I was involved with *Arena*, a Melbourne-based journal with a similar readership but a stronger interest in theoretical issues, eg the changing composition of the working class, study of elites, impact of automation and higher education on young workers, etc. I organised an *Arena Conference* in Sydney in 1964.

Through the Free University (1967-1971) I came in contact with younger people (mainly students) who were part of what is usually thought of as the New Left. Many of them were introduced to political militancy by the 'student action' movement, whose main movements in Sydney were the 'Freedom Ride' bus tour to racially integrate rural communities, the defence of student rights on campus, the anti-conscription campaigns, and the anti-Viet Nam war moratoria. But Free U was not activist in a militant sense; rather it sought to investigate and analyse, in order to assist action. Typical courses were: Class and Power in Australian Life; Aboriginal History; the Australian Radical Tradition; Drugs; the Brain; etc. In relation to this 'second' New Left, because of my age I was more an advisor than a participant (except of course for the moratoria). In another educative role, I was one of the organizers of the Socialist Scholars Conference in 1970.

Returning from study leave in early 1973 I was caught up in three campaigns at Sydney Uni linking staff-student power and radical knowledge: the Women's Course in Philosophy, the Political Economy struggle in Economics, and the Democratisation of the Government Department (where I was a Senior Lecturer). These campaigns were central to my political activities until at least 1976 - and in 1977 I was elected to the Academic Board and became Acting Head of Department partly as a result of them. In relation to the democratization of the Government department, we succeeded in establishing a dual power situation, in which a Department Committee with equal representation of staff and students acted alongside the two professors, curtailing their powers in matters internal to the Department. The professors in our department wisely refrained from exercising their veto, and the Department Committee elected the Head of Department and submitted their name to the Vice Chancellor, who always accepted the

nomination. Gradually, student representation disappeared but until I retired in 1998 the Department continued as an example of staff power.



Meanwhile, I was one of the main organizers of two Class Analysis Conferences (neither of them on campus) in 1975 and 1976. This was at the time Connell and I were working on the class structure book, and several chapters were circulated in draft form. Although the Class Analysis conferences were meant as a bridge between younger radical academics and the staff and activists of left unions, left parties and independent socialists, the first in 1975 was dominated by the academics. The second in 1976 was better prepared and attended, and as well as scholarly papers there were two workshops with trade union activists. There was a third conference in 1977, but as I disagreed with the rigid, narrowly focused and Marxist theoreticism of the leading activists (who insisted on restricting the conference to certain themes about current class politics) I was sidelined. There were no more CACs, and I suspect the main organizers were then incorporated into the Political Economy movement.

How did my New Left experience affect my historical writing, bearing in mind that my political background had already convinced me of both the need to understand the history of capitalism, and 'history work' as a proper political task for revolutionaries? First, it encouraged it by indicating a new generation of radicals seeking historical awareness. Second, the feeling of political liberation from the CP's bureaucratic control encouraged intellectual liberation, so I discarded economic determinism and its base-superstructure model, discovering a long line of Marxists dating back to the twenties who had done the same - ie the Western Marxist tradition beginning with Lukacs. Third, the New Left's emphasis on democracy as self-government, as a politics apart from the state, reinforced my interest in popular challenges to liberal parliamentary government as a crucial theme in the history of resistance to capitalism. Fourth, as a corollary, I realized that the process of working class formation can be reformulated so as to include elements not centrally associated with the institutional growth of the labour movement (based on male proletarians) - eg women, youth, immigrants, indigenes, criminals, bohemians, rootless intellectuals, etc, because these elements were often the least habituated to the process of representation, and thus less starry-

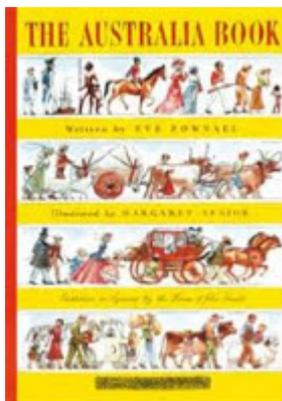
eyed about representative institutions such as unions and governments, or to put that another way, the most likely to employ direct action to improve their lives.

I would later realise that collective direct action is a form of ‘savage democracy’; savage democracy is thus socialism in action, a form of politics *sans doctrine, sans l'état*.

[May 2013]

## SHAPING HISTORY 2: ROWAN CAHILL

I was born in Sydney in 1945, and raised in the north-eastern backblocks of the North Shore. Dad was an insurance clerk, working his way up in a major company; Mum a former secretary in a law office. Their politics were conservative. Dad was very anti-labour, anti-communist, and had been in the fascist New Guard in his youth. For me, childhood was a time of shadows and sunshine. Atomic Bombs and the threat of World War III were ever present in radio news, in newspapers, and in the Saturday Matinee newsreels. Despite these haunting shadows, there was joy, with plenty of bushland nearby, fresh water in the creeks, and a suburban world where remnant dairying and orcharding still took place. For me and my brother and mates, growing-up was largely spent ranging far and wide in that bush, stealing fruit from the orchards, swimming in the creeks and waterholes, camping in caves, fishing in the upper reaches of Middle Harbour. My schooling was through the state system, secondary education taking place in the brand new Normanhurst Boys High School. Apart from peers who went into the private school system, or were streamed off into a very elite ‘selective’ system, and excluding the Catholic kids who were already locked into their apartheid system, male students within a specific radius of miles were in this High School, the well-off kids, the poor kids, the whole range of intellectual abilities, including kids requiring remedial attention.



History appealed virtually from the beginning. Dad taught my brother and me bush survival skills and told stories--about the histories of plants and places, so there was a growing awareness we were part of a present shared by the past. In early childhood, one of my treasured books was a cast-off school history textbook that had belonged to my elder sister. I treated this with wonder, looking at the pictures, struggling with the text, until it was later replaced by the

Christmas gift of a comprehensive encyclopaedia, jam packed with photos and illustrations and digestible chunks of information, marvel and wonder. Eve Pownall's *The Australia Book* (1952) was another Christmas treasure.

**SCHOOLING:** A couple of seminal events intensified my focus on history. Doing a school research assignment about the age of 13/14, and finding out the 1915 Gallipoli campaign was a military disaster, blunder, defeat and retreat, all the time through early childhood having absorbed through compulsory school Anzac Day ceremonies the ideas of glory, success, military triumph. This left me confused and wondering at the time, about false belief and reality, though I did not have the intellectual tools at the time to give this confusion names or understand it. Later, in my mid-teens, I read for enjoyment an adult biography on the life of one of my adolescent heroes, Lawrence of Arabia. It was a critical biography, raising psychological and sexuality issues, revealing a different person behind the romantic image I had formed from populist accounts. It was a revelatory experience as I encountered critical biography and critical historical research; an epiphany.

In senior school my cohort and I were exposed to a new Modern History syllabus, covering European and some Asian history from 1750 until the end of WW2, with emphasis on the social, economic and political, and introducing the notion of social class as a major force in history. At the same time we were taught by a gifted teacher, Ian Vacchini, one of the young people who had entered the teaching industry postwar. He rejected the Dickensian 'Gradgrind' approach of many of his older colleagues, and instead encouraged research, discussion, student initiative, transferring to us his enthusiasm for the subject, constantly demonstrating relationships between the past and present, explaining the nature of historical cause and effect in history. In his class, ideas were not strangers, debate and controversy not alien, and the past and present were related. Further, it was all done in a way that made learning and understanding enjoyable and important. In his class and subject, I was very successful. He had a subversive side too, and in my final school year suggested I give the annual Commonwealth Day student address to the whole school, and let me give my preferred slightly anti-imperial version. This displeased the Principal and some staff members, but delighted many of my peers. Vacchini went on to become a high ranking Department of Education leader in future years. He was also amongst the first teachers in NSW to recommend and use, which he did with us, the innovative student-centred text *The Student's Guide to Modern History* (1962), by former communist intellectual R. D. (Bob) Walshe. An education publishing phenomenon, this influential book stayed in print for nearly three decades. In 1980 I revised and updated the fifth and last edition, and added a chapter on "Revolution".

Generally, the teaching staff at Normanhurst during my time there as a student were interesting. It included the communist actor, intellectual, future award winning writer, Roger Milliss, an English teacher who influenced me; Wal Suchting, future academic Marxist philosopher; Len Flegg, Andersonian and future psychologist. It was Len Flegg who helped my first tentative steps in creative writing, and gradually introduced me to the ideas of libertarian philosopher John Anderson. Len and I remained friends until his death many years later. And there

was my teacher of French, “Froggy”, a retired teacher recalled to the classroom because of the postwar babyboom and the lack of available teachers. He turned out to be an original Gallipoli veteran. Back in the classroom after one particularly jingoistic school Anzac Day ceremony, he wept in front of us as he told us the realities of war. Milliss intervened, came into the class and helped him back to the staffroom, then returned and explained the old man’s distress. It was an event that still lives in my mind.

During secondary schooling I started to grow away from the politics of my parents; an accidental evolution rather than any deliberate separation. Looking back, this had a great deal to do with schooling, with the curriculum we were exposed to, to some of the teachers, and to the sorts of things going on around me....enjoying the first issues of the satirical magazine *Oz* with peers, encountering in senior English the 19<sup>th</sup> century Romantics and being exposed to Byron, Wordsworth, Shelley, Coleridge, learning about the French Revolution in History, its long-term and immediate causes, and from this an inkling that protest, rebellion, revolution were parts of how the world worked, discovering for myself rebellious modern literature.....

**UNIVERSITY:** I went to Sydney University in 1964, the first person in my family to ‘go to university’. I had just turned 18, a middle class rebel-in-waiting, aspiring to be ‘a writer’, with one published poem and an article in *The Phoenix* (the school’s magazine), and some rejection slips from *The Bulletin*, to my credit. Menzies and conscription lit the fuse to what may have otherwise dissipated in a flash of youthful rebellion...

At university, history continued to be something I was good at and enjoyed. It was really nothing else, until after I was conscripted in 1965. The Menzies government had introduced a selective system of conscription without public debate, in 1964. As a tertiary student, I could defer surrendering myself to the government and the Army until I had completed my first degree. I did so, and deferment gave me the luxury of working things out. My initial reaction to being conscripted was a defiant ‘no’, based on the libertarian thinking that had been part of my world for a few years courtesy of Len Flegg. Looking back, I reckon a cranky independent resolve, inherited from my mother, was also part of the mix. When conscription became a feed-line for Australia’s involvement in the Vietnam War not long afterwards, my interest in history began to morph. It morphed as I began to deploy my historical skills, primitive though they were, in finding out about the origins and nature of the Vietnam war, a personal investigation that undermined the version of the war peddled by the Australian and American governments. It was on the basis of this counter-understanding of the history of the war that I became a student activist and prominent in the anti-war movement, the counter-understanding leading and drawing me to like-minded people and groups on campus, and beyond. Along the way I destroyed my call-up notification, and registered as a conscientious objector - which required proving opposition to all war, not a specific war.

So for me, history became less a theoretical terrain, and more an activist one. History was not something you theorised about. It was something you were part of; it was something you did. History was not about squirreling yourself away in a library, researching and writing, and that was it, but about understanding what

had happened, what was happening, and doing something with that. History was not about being part of a passing parade that just drifted along to who knows where, but about getting traction in time, of seeking and having agency.

**HISTORY FROM BELOW:** From 1965 through to 1970, the year I began working as an historian with the Seamen's Union of Australia, I grew as an historian. There was a complexity of influences...honing skills boringly via English Constitutional history, but teaching me to be confident about examining legal/political concepts and institutions, and understanding the ways state power attempted 'legitimation'; exploring dissidence in the ranks of Cromwell's New Army, and encountering Christopher Hill's deliberations on the period; reading the revelation that was E. H. Carr's *What is History?*; understanding nationalism as a political and cultural force in history via Hans Kohn's writings; American history, the early colonial intellectual struggles to conceptualise democracy; enthusiastically encountering the 19<sup>th</sup> century US 'muckraker' journalistic tradition; meeting and being taught by History tutor Terry Irving, a distant, and unknown to me, family relative via marriage; pondering the nature of democracy through the prism of De Tocqueville, and socialism through Durkheim; having much to do personally with Karl Mannheim's one-time associate Professor Ernst Bramsted, a major contributor to my understanding of history, ideas in history, individual morality in history, the conception and nature of utopian thinking in history, and the dynamics of propaganda as an instrument of social/political control; reading Russian history and the varieties of dissent and resistance during the nineteenth century through to 1917, analysing Lenin's *What is to be Done?*, reading Isaac Deutscher on Trotsky, reading John Reed on 1917 and glimpsing the role of *journalist as observer/participant*, a theme of my own later journalistic practice; developing friendship with Terry, and meeting up with R. W. Connell, newly arrived PhD student from Melbourne, and through them coming to understand that *history* was not a stand-alone *subject*, that it should embrace interdisciplinary approaches, an unpopular and largely alien idea at Sydney University at the time; in 1968, the amazing and liberating challenge of Perry Anderson's exegesis in *New Left Review* (1/50, July- August 1968), "Components of the National Culture".....and through all this, increasingly understanding how history was an action at the interface of the past and the present, with a role in shaping the future.

**COMMUNIST PARTY OF AUSTRALIA:** I never joined the Communist Party of Australia (CPA). However, a result of my activism in the student and anti-war movements and articles in a variety of student and left publications, was a roundabout invitation to meet Alec Robertson, editor of *Tribune*, flagship of the CPA. I did so, and in 1968 found myself in a meeting in the Day Street CPA headquarters with Alec, Eric Aarons, Mavis Robertson, Harry Stein, and Malcolm Salmon. By the end of the meeting I had agreed to become the anonymous "special correspondent" covering mounting student activism nationally. Later that year I was commissioned by the party to compile a report on the New Left in Australia, no doubt intended as a briefing on the state of the local student revolt prior to the party figuring out how to relate to it. This was published as a monograph by the Australian Marxist Research Foundation (1969). In 1969, following a secret meeting on the isolated CPA property in the bush backblocks of Minto, I became part of the editorial board of the party's theoretical journal, *Australian Left Review (ALR)*. This brought me into contact with left academics Alastair Davidson, then a pioneer

promoter of Gramsci's work in Australia with the support of *ALR*; Dan O'Neill, a subtle and imaginative analyst of capitalist power and its contestation, influenced by Gramsci and Ivan Illich; John Playford, a political sociologist owing much to C. Wright Mills, attune to the power elite critique and examination of capitalism; and anti-Stalinist CPA activist intellectuals Eric Aarons, Mavis Robertson, Bernie Taft. Over the next few years I became close to Eric, had many discussions with him on revolutionary theory and strategy, and met international radical intellectuals like Robin Blackburn and Roger Garaudy.

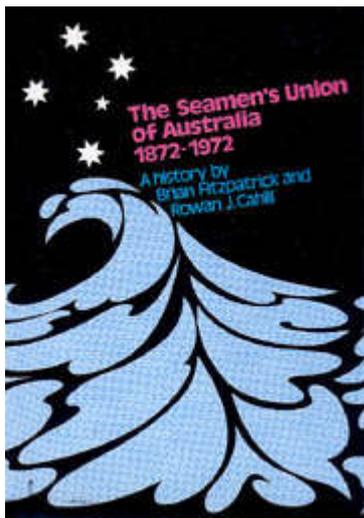


Rupert Lockwood, orating in the Domain, Sydney, early 1960s.

Independent of the party, but related to it, during 1969 via Harry Stein, I met the left journalist Rupert Lockwood (1908-1997). He was on the verge of leaving the CPA. Recently returned from assignment in the USSR, he was looking for a place to live. Harry asked me if I knew of accommodation; the next-door flat was empty in the block where my wife and I rented in Balmain, so Rupert and his wife moved in. Subsequently Rupert and I became friends, and we remained so for the rest of his life. It was a meeting and friendship that had a profound influence on my subsequent personal and historical development. From Rupert I learned much about the less scrutinised by-ways of Australian political history; listening to him, a gifted raconteur, was like listening to a visitor from a parallel universe-Australia; the same Australia that I lived in with the same chronological history, and yet in many ways so very, very different. During the early 1980s I resolved to write Lockwood's biography; I made some inroads, but the telling really had to be done post-mortem, when relevant documentation became available, including his own papers, and Australian Cold War historiography had dramatically changed following the public release of the Venona transcripts by US authorities in 1995. To an extent, the Lockwood story became my albatross, my fixation, from which I did not feel released until the completion of my doctoral dissertation on Rupert in 2013.

**HISTORIAN AT WORK:** As an historian, 1970 was a watershed year. During 1969, after protracted court appearances and complex legal manoeuvrings, I had my status as a conscientious objector recognised, and was involved working at a high level towards the first Moratorium (May 1970). Now, with an Honours degree, and a

Diploma of Education, I owed an immediate substantial Bond repayment to the NSW Department of Education, having gone through university on a Teacher's College scholarship, then refusing to work the Bond out with rural school teaching. Politically I needed to remain in Sydney, was married, and faced considerable jail-time if I failed to successfully defend myself against a significant criminal charge arising from my dissident activities. Simply, money was needed. I managed to tap into three History related income streams. Len Flegg got me a part-time teaching job in the Technical Education system, teaching a crash course in Higher School Certificate (HSC) Modern History to people interested in gaining the HSC and prepared to do the two-year course in one year. In this I found a trio of texts by broadly leftist authors useful: the Walshe *Guide*, Eric Hobsbawm's *The Age of Revolution*, and Jim Hagan's *Modern History and its Themes*. With this teaching, I was thrown in the deep end, teaching longer per period than either schools or universities timetabled, and learning how to *teach* as I went along. Teacher's College had been poor preparation. I drew on 'best practice' as modelled in my past by Flegg, Milliss, and Vacchini, and learned that teaching could be a two-way learning experience, enjoyable, and meaningful. At the same time I accepted the offer of an MA scholarship at Sydney University, under the supervision of the conservative imperial historian Professor John Manning Ward. My thesis, never completed, concerned trade union militancy. While it was tolerated by Ward, he consistently chided and derided labour history and labour historians, regarding his liberal-conservative approach *real* history. My third income source was a two-year contract with the militant Seamen's Union of Australia (SUA) to complete a history of the Union commenced postwar by the late Brian Fitzpatrick, with me picking the story up at World War 2. Publication was intended to coincide with the Union's centenary in 1972, but SUA industrial struggles and the destruction of the letterpress setting of the book in a printery fire, stalled publication until 1981. One significant read during 1970, beginning in May according to a notation in my Penguin edition copy, was E. P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class*.



My time with the SUA was an awakening. I began the task when maritime history had yet to emerge as a scholarly speciality in Australia, at a time when the field tended to be filled with 'shiplover' publications. John Bach's comprehensive *Maritime History of Australia* (1976), and the first issue of the journal *Great Circle* (Australasian Association for Maritime History, 1979) were in the future. The SUA wanted an institutional history. Mixing and talking with

maritime veterans whose experiences went back to World War 1, some of whom had gone to sea under sail, I came to see my task as manifold: to not only write the history of a unique trade union, but to also try to explain the sources of its militancy, to accurately depict the great loss of Australian seamen's lives in peace and in war, to document the union's incredible record supporting causes at home and abroad beyond traditional matters relating to pay and working conditions. When I walked around the Sydney waterfront, for so long the main port-city of the island nation, I saw a simple 'fact': there was no Australia without the sea and ships; the wealth and enterprise symbolised by the Sydney cityscape, emerged through the medium of the sea and the portal of the waterfront, via the sweat and sacrifices of maritime workers. I came to see my job as going some small way towards bringing seamen, absent from mainstream histories, into the recorded history of Australia. A big call. I started the project in part elitist in my thinking, a tertiary trained historian doing a job, and finished humbled in many ways, having met new teachers in those I met along the way. It was an experience that put a wedge between me and the academy, and academic writing. And I did not become part of the academy again until late in life (2007-), after a working life in secondary schools, freelance writing, and agricultural labouring.

After the SUA job, the idea of history as practice continued to grow, and the theoretical concerns of academia largely failed to grip me. Not that I wasn't aware of the debates; having quit the city to live and work, I kept abreast of issues via publications like *New Left Review*, correspondence with comrades variously making their ways through academe, regular visits to university libraries where major local international and local scholastic journals were available. My main point of contact with history was the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History (ASSLH), its various branch publications, and *Labour History*. While some publication of my history related work was in this latter, most of my material was published in non-scholarly outlets--trade union journals, *Overland*, the ASSLH branch publications *Hummer* (Sydney), *Illawarra Unity* (Illawarra), and in the cyber-age, *Workers Online* and *Leftwrit.es*. Other political writing and ruminations on education/teaching related matters were also published in non-scholarly outlets. To the end of 2012, this output amounted to some 600 items in 104 publications □ journalism, articles, book reviews; some of the publications carrying my work only lasted a single issue. While this method of publication did not tend to make me part of academic intellectual debate or to be regarded, except by a few, as a 'scholar/intellectual', it did mean that historians writing social movement/political history, and drawn to Thompsonesque 'history from below' research, eventually placed me in history as a 'participant' with reference to this material. As Thompson classically demonstrated, echoing Gramsci writing much earlier in his fascist prison, away from the hegemonic cultural/political institutions of the metropole was/is a world of discourse, and intellectual activity that tends to miss out on being accorded 'intellectual' status by hegemonic gate keepers.

My association with the SUA led to an ongoing relationship with old time mariners and militants, and subsequently with the Maritime Union of Australia, which formed in 1993 when the SUA and the Waterside Workers Federation amalgamated. Over time, I did a number of history related jobs for these unions. Generally this association, and that with Lockwood, meant that I gained historical insights,

information, contacts that were unique; these I shared with researchers who requested my assistance (some 90 at last count), but not without first doing background checks on bonafides. Beginning in 1965, I had become a target of Australian Security Intelligence Organisation surveillance, and was well aware of the information gathering techniques of spooks. I also encouraged/helped arrange the deposit of significant left historical records and personal papers with archival holdings.

**THE NEW LEFT:** There has been some interest in me as part of the New Left, for example in Alan Barcan's *From New Left to Factional Left* (Australian Scholarly Publishing, Melbourne, 2011). As early as 1969, I had problems with the term, regarding it more as a journalistic device rather than a term with real meaning, a point I made in my *Notes on the New Left in Australia* (Marxist Research Foundation, Sydney, 1969). During the late 1960s, and coming into the 1970s, I was part of the leadership of the Association for International Cooperation and Disarmament (AICD), and helping build the first Moratorium. In those capacities, I had to work with many political tendencies, factions, and organisations involving people who crossed social class divides. My immediate aim was to confront and defeat a war, and the government that supported it, and that could not be achieved by inter-factional political purities and associated internecine battling; a mass movement was the key. It also had to do with the people who I met in those roles, some of whom were communists with backgrounds in united front politics. These latter made sense: great evils like the Vietnam war, and capitalism itself, would not be taken down by factionalised internecine battling, which at times seemed to generate more invective against comrades than against the targeted Leviathans. This carried on into my historical work, and in the long run gave rise to thinking about radical/dissenting traditions that crossed social classes, rather than in specific micro-components, as in 'labour history', which after much thought and deliberation I came to regard as a limiting historical approach. Essentially this was private thinking, but during a three-year stint as an agricultural worker, starting my shift in the pre-dawn hours and labouring alone for much of the time, I did a lot of thinking, and figured it was time to make my position clear. This I did in "Thoughts on Radical History", a paper circulated privately within the Australian labour history community in 2004. Eventually this was published as ["Never Neutral"](#) (*Illawarra Unity*, 2010). This thinking about radicalism was also manifested in *Radical Sydney* (UNSW Press, Sydney, 2010), co-authored with Terry Irving.

[May 2013]