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'To Revolutionise Australia'—The Surprising History of Early Working-Class Politics

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Abstract

Imagine a place of political violence and naked class rule. Riots are commonplace and people are killed or injured during them, some as a result of policemen and soldiers firing into the crowd. The government bans party processions and even the right of political organisations to hold meetings in pubs. From their headquarters, known as the Red House, the radicals organise the resistance. Revolutionary flags are flown, and effigies of the leading politician are burnt in the street. Agitators tell the crowd to rise up against their oppressors. Police stations are attacked and prisoners released. In the harbour, naval ships train their guns on a huge protest meeting on the waterfront. This is New South Wales in the 1840s and early 1850s, with a history of class conflict of a kind many of us never thought existed in Australia. But first, a moment to reflect on why we are told to imagine Australia's history as 'relaxed and comfortable'.

‘To Revolutionise Australia’—The Surprising History of Early Working-Class Politics

Terry Irving¹

Imagine a place of political violence and naked class rule. Riots are commonplace and people are killed or injured during them, some as a result of policemen and soldiers firing into the crowd. The government bans party processions and even the right of political organisations to hold meetings in pubs. From their headquarters, known as the Red House, the radicals organise the resistance. Revolutionary flags are flown, and effigies of the leading politician are burnt in the street. Agitators tell the crowd to rise up against their oppressors. Police stations are attacked and prisoners released. In the harbour, naval ships train their guns on a huge protest meeting on the waterfront. This is New South Wales in the 1840s and early 1850s, with a history of class conflict of a kind many of us never thought existed in Australia. But first, a moment to reflect on why we are told to imagine Australia’s history as ‘relaxed and comfortable’.²

Is it not curious the way the so-called ‘history wars’ of the last decade have displaced issues of class and power from the discussion of the uses of history? On one side, Prime Minister Howard wants historical writing to focus on our nation’s ‘heroic achievements’, as an antidote to the so-called ‘black armband’ practice of ‘apportioning blame and guilt for historic wrongs’. On the other side, historians such as Mark McKenna defend ‘the new “critical” histories’, by which he means those that have taken up the issues of the new social movements concerned with race, gender, and ethnicity.³ It is as if both sides are happy to have historical writing completely oriented around questions of achievement and status on the one side, and of recognition of difference and justice on the other, while ignoring the central questions of labour history, questions about the distribution of power, unequal life chances, economic exploitation, and about the politics of struggle by working people to overcome these

disadvantages. Recognition of difference and differentiation, and the politics they give rise to in the working class and across classes, are not ignored by labour historians, but in our field they add complexity instead of heralding a new paradigm.

Amid the 2006 celebrations of 150 years of responsible government in New South Wales, I heard no one say that, if the working men and women of the 1850s had not created the spectre of popular sovereignty, the system of parliamentary representation would have been even less democratic than it was. Nor did anyone explain why the notorious ‘Wentworth constitution’ of 1853 was so reactionary that the British government had to liberalise it. I think the main reason these questions were not asked is that they make the idea of democracy problematic, reminding people that democracy is more than representative government; that it also encompasses ‘people power’, or popular participation in politics; that democracy should mean popular sovereignty. Moreover, if we had to explain why, as Wentworth said, the constitution aimed to prevent ‘the seeds of democracy’ from growing in the colony, we would have had to acknowledge a history in which class and power must be among the basic tools for understanding it.

My book, *The Southern Tree of Liberty—the democratic movement in New South Wales before 1856*, is the first to examine the origins of working class politics in Australia.⁴ It argues that this was a period of political violence, and that it began long before the discovery of gold. It recovers the existence of a democratic movement, organised by the trades societies and radical intellectuals, with widespread support from working men and women, who were among the key players in public life. It shows that ‘the southern tree of liberty’ was planted during a struggle between a colonial ruling class—dead scared that a revolution was brewing in New South Wales—and a popular democratic movement. The aims of this movement were indeed revolutionary. It wanted to redistribute the lands of the colony to working people, protect wages and jobs from the competition of unfree labour, give working people the right to elect people like themselves as their representatives, and to mobilise working people to control those representatives through popular pressure. Wollongong was caught up in this turbulent situation. On 28 July 1843 about 50 rural and urban workers besieged Coulson’s Hotel.⁵ A general election had just been held and there was a dinner in progress for the local supporters of one of the candidates, Charles Cowper, who was described as ‘a starched Episcopalian Exclusive’—i.e. a representative of the

land-owning, would-be aristocrats and their church. He had lost the election, because the Illawarra section of the electorate, where there were many small farmers of Irish descent, had voted for his opponent, a liberal-minded Catholic from Ireland, whose supporters were now rubbing salt into the wound. There was much jeering and threatening behaviour from the crowd. As the mood got uglier, the conservatives sent a message asking for assistance from the local police magistrate. However, he too was an Irishman, so when the diners left the hotel they had to dodge the shillelaghs of their opponents with not a constable in sight.

Was this attack just a sectarian quarrel? Well, think of Belfast and Derry in recent times; the Wollongong attack was also about class oppression and political rights. The workers with the shillelaghs were not able to vote, so their only way to participate in the elections of 1843 was by taking to the streets. Other groups of workers during the elections did this in Sydney, Melbourne, Windsor, Campbelltown, and Paterson in the Hunter valley: taunting supporters of the rival candidates, intimidating the wealthy, destroying their property, and attacking the police and military forces. Violence was intrinsic to the situation, and in these 1843 elections two people were killed, victims of rioting whose root cause was working-class anger.

The sources of this anger are not hard to find. Unemployment was running at about 25% in Sydney, rents were high, and tradesmen who had left Britain expecting to acquire land felt cheated. They had been promised good wages and cheap land, but instead they were unemployed and confronted by land policies aimed at consolidating pastoral empires for British capital. Their anger was palpable. The followers of the democratic candidates, Robert Cooper and Maurice O'Connell, taking control of the streets, struck terror into the hearts of Sydney's rich upper class by spearing loaves of bread on the poles of their banners. Since the French revolution, when the sans culottes demonstrated with loaves dipped in blood on their pikes, this was the symbol of vengeance used by the poor wherever they were roused to mass action. The colonial working class were determined to get their rights.

There was more election rioting in Sydney in 1848, when mobs burnt down two polling booths and broke into the St James watch house (the police station next to the Supreme Court on Elizabeth Street) before the military imposed order in the city. But the worst rioting usually began outside the political sphere. In 1841, Claude Burrows, a young shoemaker, was killed by a police bullet when he stepped out to buy some

cannabis in the middle of a riot that went on for two days. This riot began when the police attacked a group of naval seamen who were bonneting respectable patrons of the Victoria Theatre in Pitt Street. Another riot occurred on New Year's Day 1844, when crowds fought the police for over twelve hours. The climax came when a crowd gathered outside the Hyde Park barracks and incited the convicts inside to rebel. Just a few weeks earlier the city had waited anxiously while the military put down a rebellion by these convicts. Perhaps this time they would break out of the barracks, join the radical working men, and precipitate a revolutionary uprising. The threat was so serious that the Governor was called to the scene. When he appealed to the crowd to return to their homes a voice cried bitterly, 'What should we go to our homes for, we've got nothing to eat!' Thereupon, the Governor ordered the military to clear the square with rifles and fixed bayonets. But the crowd regrouped and returned. Revolutionary agitators addressed the crowd, including Edward Phelan, who told them: 'although you cheer well, you ought to go further, and do as the Canadians did!' This was a reference to the revolt of the Canadians in 1837 against British rule. But in Sydney, nature conspired with the state: as the military charged a second time, a fierce Brickfielder (a hot, dry, dust-filled wind) helped to dispel the crowd.

Between 1840 and 1850 there were 14 riots of this nature in Sydney. Beginning outside the political sphere they soon became political, by exposing to the public gaze the oppressive behaviour of the police and military, and the hatred of the common people for the authorities and the wealthy colonists they protected. In the same period there were 14 occasions of political tumult, when crowds took over meetings, marched on Government House or the Legislative Council, or intimidated supporters of rival candidates during elections. These were occasions of premeditated use or threat of violence in a political setting. There were a further six spontaneous political incidents of actual or potential violence at meetings, law courts, or public appearances by the Governor. This adds up to 34 such events in eleven years. And our calculation ends before the gold rushes and the turbulence on the diggings, culminating in the 'revolt on the Turon' (1852-53). The ground-breaking assessment of my book is that violence was part of the standard repertoire of politics in the 1840s and 1850s.

If violence was an every day aspect of politics, what did it hope to achieve? What was the social and ideological content of the politics that it promoted? Well, some of it was reactionary. The strategy of wedge politics, which appeared in Australia at

this moment, encouraged the use of violence for populist ends. In election campaigns and public meetings, W.C. Wentworth, a slum landlord as well as a ‘cormorant’ squatter, shamelessly provoked his followers, many of whom would have been his tenants or employees, to attack ‘immigrants’ and support ‘native-born’ leaders. These aggressive rowdies were known as Wentworth’s ‘cabbage tree hat boys’. Wentworth hated the free immigrants who flooded into the colony at the end of the 1830s and the beginning of the 1840s because they were from working class families who had been politicised by Chartism, the great British mass movement for democracy.

But populist wedging aside, the main impact of political violence was progressive. It subverted the aristocratic model of authority, and strengthened the idea of popular sovereignty—the central political idea of Chartism. Moreover, although working class activists and radical intellectuals were ambivalent about the violence and social disorder they nonetheless recognised that it put the ruling class on the defensive and thus facilitated progressive campaigns for policies that would assist working people. Since the late 1830s there were always ten or twelve trades societies operating in Sydney, and periodically the ‘delegates of the trades’ met to plan campaigns. The delegates formed an alliance with radical intellectuals whose main effort went into producing a radical newspaper press. Although Sydney was a small place, with a population of about forty to fifty thousand, it could always provide its readers with one or two weekly radical papers, and between 1843 and 1847 there was also a dedicated working-class press addressed to the members of the trades societies. In 1843/44, when these forces came together to form the Mutual Protection Association, it was responsible for one of these newspapers, *The Guardian*. During the lifetime of this, the first working-class political organisation, four riots and twelve incidents of political disorder occurred. In other words, while the unorganised workers were rioting the radical intellectuals and trades delegates were organising an alternative public for ‘the labouring classes’, with its own press, political societies, traditions of public deliberation, and meeting places. If the violence-prone labourers could be attracted into this democratic sphere of organised public life, the radicals would have a capacity to bring enormous force—a ‘physical force’ as the Chartists called it—to bear on their opponents.

In this revolutionary age, moreover, it was as impossible for the intellectual champions of reason to ignore the fascination of revolutionary iconography as it was for the street-fighters. A Scots slater hoisted the tricolour over the house of a candidate

with Irish republican connections in 1843. The green on the ribbons and banners of the workers, for whom street fighting was a surrogate for voting, connected them with the militant struggle (led by Daniel O'Connell) for Repeal in Ireland. Their banner poles represented the pikes of the vengeful European poor. The headquarters of a string of radical organisations at the top of King Street in the 1850s was known as 'the Red House'. It was outside this building (just down from Elizabeth Street on the southern side) that the leaders of the Democratic Association formed up to lead a march to a protest meeting. On their banner was a representation of the tree of liberty and the cap of liberty (as worn by the sans-culottes in Paris in 1789). The leaders wore cabbage tree hats to symbolise their identification with the working-people of the colony, but around the hats they wound the tricolour ribbon to show their solidarity with revolutionary struggles abroad. At a public meeting, when France was referred to, the cry went up from the audience, of 'Long Live the Republic'. Crowds of disaffected workers burned effigies of Wentworth, hissed and insulted the Governor in public, and bonneted the black hats of the elite. A stonemason at a meeting of the trades societies called the British flag the flag of slavery. Meetings were held to show solidarity with political prisoners sent to the colony from French Canada and Ireland. These were signs that moderation among the radicals had to coexist with a working-class revolutionary spirit, but were they the precursors of revolution?

How to deal with the violence in colonial politics was the main strategic question facing the radicals and trades delegates in the early 1840s. The answer given by Charles Harpur, the colony's first native-born democratic poet, was that the struggle would be won by moral force. In 1844 he wrote a poem for *The Guardian* called 'The War Song of the Nineteenth Century'. This is how it ended:

The march of knowledge hasten!
Charge onward and be free!
Before are mercy, justice, truth,
Our standard-bearers three ...

But on! Huzza for freedom!
Behold our puny foes!
Crowns, stars, and ribband-wearers they,
And such as worship those!

They see us wield no weapon;
 But in our front shall find,
 The artillery of the intellect,
 The thunder of the mind.

Then Harpur changed his mind. A decade later, he told *The People's Advocate* that moral force was no longer effective. Democrats could not rely on it; they should not hold physical force in reserve, because Britain 'would never resign this land ... without bloodshed'. He went further: 'Besides, there should be some fighting at the heel of the movement, and it should even be provoked if possible. It were not well that our noble country [he meant Australia] should be too tamely baptised into her Independence'. Thus the radical poet told his comrades: pick up the gun. So, to nullify his poem's image of the weaponless radical, he added a new final stanza:

Such was my Muse's war cry,
 Intent on bloodless weal,
 When Daniel's great, but cloudy, soul
 Was storming for Repeal;
 But unarmed right aye withers
 In wrong's all-blasting breath—
 Then, on ye Red Republicans,
 To Freedom or to Death.

What had happened in the intervening decade was that the bad breath of the colonial ruling class had been blasting upon the faces of the democrats. The history books are silent about this sustained offensive against the emerging movement for popular rule, so it is important to underline it by giving some of the instances dealt with in my book. In 1846, and again in 1849, the Legislative Council passed laws to ban political processions and political societies. Also in 1849 they sneaked into a licensing bill for public houses a clause that would deny a liquor licence to pubs where political societies held their meetings. Earlier in 1844, they tried to gaol one of the leaders of the democrats, Henry Macdermott, for an alleged breach of parliamentary privilege, but had to retreat in the face of public outcry organised by the radicals. In 1849, the Governor trained naval guns on the protest meeting at Circular Quay against the resumption of transportation, and deployed armed soldiers to block the crowd when it attempted to march to Government House. In 1850 Wentworth and James Martin were behind a move to punish editors for contempt of the legislature. A few

months later, James Martin tried to prohibit demonstrations on Macquarie Street in front of the legislative chamber. In 1851, having been forced by the home government to accept a lower franchise than they wanted, the squatter-dominated Legislative Council shamelessly gerrymandered the electoral boundaries, so that a Sydney member represented about 13,000 people while in the pastoral districts (one third of the total electorates) a member represented just 3,300 people.

And the liberal middle classes were complicit in this attack on popular rule. In 1853, when the new constitution was under consideration, the liberal middle class had formed an organisation whose object was to prevent concessions to democracy. Hence the reactionary provisions of the 'Wentworth constitution': the liberal politicians divided the extra-parliamentary democratic movement while mounting a derisory opposition in the legislature. The radicals concluded that pastoral and urban wealth would always collude against them. In 1854 the Council passed a bill setting up a voluntary military corps, whose ostensible object was to defend us against the Russians, but as a democratic stonemason said at a workers' meeting, the corps would actually be used, to defend 'millionaires' against people like them if an invasion occurred.

Edward Hawksley, the editor of *The People's Advocate*, was even more explicit about what would happen if the Russians came. The people will not defend the government if they do not feel free, he said, but will either melt away, letting the invader take over, or they will turn first against their local oppressors, destroying their property, before defeating the Russians and establishing popular rule.⁶ His was not a lone voice. A few weeks later, John Dunmore Lang told a cheering Sydney meeting of 600 workers, mostly labourers, that if Britain was involved in a European war, they should expect that France or Russia would attack Australia to assist the colonists in their struggle for independence.⁷ 'To revolutionise Australia' was the phrase used by Hawksley at that time to describe the strategy of the radicals.⁸ At the end of the year, when the Victorian diggers raised the flag of revolt at Eureka, many radicals believed the revolution had begun. The liberal component of the ruling class, however, was more realistic about the power of the state to suppress any uprising by force or concessions. Charles Cowper told Henry Parkes how to manage the story in his newspaper: deplore the loss of life, and legitimise representative government by arguing for a reform of the electoral law that would make it popular and so reduce the pressure for revolution.

Perhaps it was Cowper's advice that was decisive, for there was no general uprising. Cowper was wrong, however, about revolution. Although the radical leadership was not preparing for an uprising it thought of its strategy—of educating and mobilising the working people—as creating a revolutionary form of power. The 'irrepressible force of common sentiment', Hawksley called it. My book argues that for two decades the colonial radicals had been developing a way to practice politics so that this power could be liberated. This power had three main characteristics. First, the radicals fought for deliberation in public, that is, in properly advertised and conducted public meetings. This would break with the custom of taking decisions behind closed doors, in suspicious 'hole and corner meetings', or in a legislative chamber from which the public felt remote. Public meetings at this time were numerous and well-attended, rivalling the official legislature as the main forum for political debate. Second, if certain members of the audience were authorised to take further action, they were to be regarded as delegates, with a responsibility to report back to another meeting. Delegation, not representation, was the radical idea of governance. The radicals hoped to extend this principle of delegation to members of municipal and colonial legislatures, but this proved more difficult to achieve. But at election times they certainly raised it. Third, when the inevitable disagreements arose over policies they were to be settled by conciliation and compromise, in public, not by class legislation favouring the pastoral and urban business oligarchy. Taken together, these principles promoted an active engagement by working-class citizens with politics. They restricted elite manoeuvrings. They opened the door to popular sovereignty, and in that sense they were revolutionary.

It would be nice if this story had an unproblematic ending, but it doesn't. On the one hand, there is no doubt that because of the pressure of the democratic movement the middle-class liberals were able to defeat the first conservative ministries and democratise representative government by introducing manhood suffrage, equal electoral districts, and vote by ballot in 1858. Their pressure was also crucial to the introduction of 'free selection before survey' in land policy a few years later. Moreover, during these years the trades societies' campaign for the eight hour day was gaining ground, to such an extent that liberal politicians such as Henry Parkes had to support it publicly. And similar coalitions between liberals and radicals were having democratic effects in Victoria and South Australia. In short, for the first time in our history, middle-class

governments were forced to defer to the power of the populace, and restrict the power of property. However, on the other hand, it was pastoral property, not urban business, that was restricted, and the land reforms ultimately benefited wealthy investors rather than workers seeking a family farm. However, and more pertinent to the fate of the democratic movement was the insidious system of political patronage which grew along side parliamentary government. The liberal faction chiefs (especially Cowper) after 1858 were able to build a system of parliamentary support by dispensing minor jobs to thousands of men and women in the electorates.⁹ Hawksley for example received (from Cowper) a job at the Government Printing Office. Ideologically the implication of political patronage was profound, because it created an alternative focus for democratic loyalty. As the organising principle of radical politics, the state came to rival the mass movement in importance, and democrats had to learn to juggle activism and service to central government. Let Charles Harpur have the final word. In 1847, this son of convict parents, a casual labourer since entering the workforce, wrote these verses, for the democratic movement:

We'll plant the Tree of Liberty
In the centre of the Land,
And round it ranged as guardians be
A vowed and trusty band;
And sages bold and mighty-souled
Shall dress it day by day—
But woe unto the traitor who
Would break one branch away.

Then sing the Tree of Liberty
For the vow that we have made!
May it so flourish that when we
Are buried in its shade,
Fair Womanhood, and Love and Good,
All pilgrims pure, shall go
Its growth to bless for happiness—
O may it flourish so.

Till felled by gold, as Bards have told,
In the Old World once it grew,
But there its fruits were ever sold,
And only to the Few;
But here at last, whate're his caste,
Each man at nature's call,

Shall pluck as well what none may sell,
The fruit that blooms for All.

Then sing the Tree of Liberty,
And the men who shall defend
Its glorious future righteously,
For this all-righteous end:
That happiness each man to bless
Out with it growth may grow—
Our Southern Tree of Liberty
Should—shall ev'n flourish so!

Harpur called this poem, 'The Southern Tree of Liberty (A Song for the Future)',¹⁰

Endnotes

- 1 Terry Irving is a former editor of *Labour History* and an Honorary Associate in the Faculty of Economic and Business at the University of Sydney. This paper is based on a presentation made to the Illawarra Branch of the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History on 10 April 2007.
- 2 We should recall that when John Howard used this phrase in a 'Four Corners' interview in 1996 he did so to describe how Australians feel about their history as well their present and future.
- 3 Mark McKenna, 'Different Perspectives on Black Armband History', Parliamentary Library, Parliament of Australia, Research Paper 5, 1997–98, 3 and 9.
- 4 Terry Irving, *The Southern Tree of Liberty—The Democratic Movement in New South Wales before 1856*, Federation Press, Annandale NSW, 2006. Only the sources for material not cited in the book are given endnote references in this article.
- 5 James Maclehole, *New South Wales and Port Phillip General Post Office Directory for 1839*, Sydney 1839, on p. 35 lists Samuel Coulston [sic] as a publican in Wollongong.
- 6 *People's Advocate*, 7 January 1854.
- 7 *Freeman's Journal*, 21 January 1854, report of 'Dr Lang's Lecture'.
- 8 *People's Advocate*, 22 April 1854, 'Australia Liberata'.
- 9 Hilary Golder, *Politics, Patronage and Public Works—The Administration of New South Wales, volume 1, 1842–1900*, UNSW Press, Sydney, 2005, chapters 7 to 9.
- 10 Reprinted from Michael Ackland (ed.), *Charles Harpur—Selected Poetry and Prose*, Penguin Books Australia, Ringwood, Vic., 1986, 21–22.