ONE OF THE ASSUMPTIONS pervading the study of Australian history is that the working class and their political correlate the Labor Party were the bearers of what is distinctively Australian. It is perhaps for this reason the history of the Labor Movement is a favorite field of study for Australian historians. *A New Britannia* is essentially a history of the Labor Movement — but with a difference. It is not Humphrey McQueen's primary intention to argue the significance of the strikes of the 1890's; to date with accuracy Labor's intention to enter politics; or to dissect the more notorious strikes of the twentieth century. McQueen refers to these other peaks in the history of the Labor Movement and sometimes records a deviant interpretation. But the central impulse of the book is to locate the Labor Movement in the materialistic, acquisitive perspectives of Australian society as a whole.

McQueen accords more importance to racism as a component of Australian nationalism than any historian heretofore. It is, he says, "the most important single component of Australian nationalism". Racism had an economic origin — the fear that the labor markets would be flooded with cheap colored labor. McQueen sees racism as more than the fear of the Australian worker that he would lose his bargaining power vis a vis his employer — scarcity of labor. He refers to a notion of "pure racism" which was born on the goldfields of the 1850's. Diggers blamed bad luck on the Chinese, anti-Chinese riots occurred, the most well known being at Lambing Flat in 1861. Racism emerges as a psychological phenomenon akin to anti-Semitism. It is not completely reducible to economic fear or to the fear of the diseases and sexual aggressiveness of the Chinese and Kanakas — it has a momentum which survives the destruction of these fortuitous circumstances.

McQueen also identifies racism as an agent of the emergence of a common national identity. He instances the maritime dispute of 1878 which was precipitated by the employment of Chinese labor which was a response to the fear of losing bargaining power in competition with Chinese labor. Racism as economic instrumentality reached a crescendo in the anti-Chinese activities of 1890.

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seamen, where the strikers were supported by almost every section of the Australian population.1

The existence of nationalist sentiment implies a certain area of consensus — an area in which rival and sectional interests and aspirations sublimate into a collective identity and interest. As mentioned earlier, the working class and the Labor Party, at least until Gallipoli in 1915, are credited with being the midwives and custodians of Australian nationalism. The values of mateship and egalitarianism nurtured in the bush and on the goldfields and later embodied in the trade unions and in the Labor Party, provide Australia with a home-grown socialism that assures justice for all — this is the popular mythology that McQueen rejects. The dominant values, he asserts, are those of the bourgeois-liberal hegemony and, in abbreviated form, these are the necessity and desirability of individual acquisition and its concomitant of competition.

His assault on mateship and egalitarianism begin at their putative birthplace — the penal colonies and the mores of the convicts fostered there. It is there that Russel Ward anchors that collection of values and virtues that form the Australian legend.2 Ward cites personal reminiscences, official reports, and ballads to establish his case. McQueen counter-quotes and offers different interpretations of some of Ward’s quotes. Faced only with this sort of quotation-game one would be justified in dismissing the book.

But McQueen offers more. The convicts, he maintains, desired what the more socially blessed had — wealth and property. That they stole to get them did not constitute a challenge to the existing system. They wished to rise in this system, and once landed in New South Wales for their efforts, some found they could advance their economic well-being legally and they readily availed themselves of every opportunity. They accepted tickets of leave, freedom, and land grants from their rulers and some were even recruited into the police force. Such conduct, McQueen seems to be saying, renders absurd any attempt to find incipient class consciousness in the convicts. He draws attention to the expedient morality in taking advantage of socio-economic elevation. Ward similarly invokes expediency in one of his explanations of mateship:

\[\ldots\text{this strong collectivist sentiment of group loyalty is, apart from his own individual cunning, the criminal’s sole means of defence against the overwhelmingly powerful organs of state and authority.}^{3}\]

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1 *A New Britannia*, p.46.
Ward is right in emphasising the advantages accruing to the individual by collective activity in such an environment. But this type of mateship is not the quasi-religious phenomenon of the popular mythology. The fact that emancipists were so easily absorbed into the society shows that they were not irreconcilably opposed to the organs of state and authority. One instance of the absence of class identification that McQueen cites is the alliance of emancipist farmers and town dwellers with the squatters in the early 1840's to oppose Gipps' land regulations. If collectivist sentiment is interpreted simply as serving the convict's best interests, and if it is conceded that there were instances when one man found his interests in conflict with those of his mate, the socialist overtones of mateship evaporate. It is not necessary for McQueen to take the extreme position that the convicts' behavior towards each other was characterised by betrayal and treachery. It is simply necessary to show mateship was compatible with advancement in capitalist society.

The notion of mateship embodying a domesticated socialist outlook is further menaced by McQueen's account of bushrangers and gold seekers. He questions the esteem in which the bushrangers were held by the rural population, noting the number of cold-blooded murders they committed; the fear they inspired in the settlers and the bushrangers' fear of being murdered by the settlers. Once again he is challenging Russel Ward's account. But McQueen's small section on bushrangers cannot be taken as a thorough refutation of Ward if only because he does not provide enough evidence to suggest more than that there were significant exceptions to the bushranger stereotype. The most interesting contribution of McQueen's is his account of why bushrangers entered the national mythology:

It was not accidental that Australians chose a racehorse and a bushranger as their heroes since both expressed the same get-rich-quick Tatts syndrome.\(^4\)

Life on the goldfields, McQueen argues, was more significant as an example of individual effort and acquisitiveness than as a continuing development of the values of mateship and egalitarian solidarity. He argues cogently that gold strengthened capitalism in Australia by providing hope for all to rise by hard work and material gain. McQueen does not succeed in establishing that mateship and egalitarianism are merely nostalgic constructs upon the past. Nor does he really show that these values were not stronger in Australia and that to this extent they were not born of circumstances unique to Australia. He does show that what

\(^4\) Ibid., Ch.6.
\(^5\) McQueen, op. cit., p.140.
mateship and egalitarianism did exist did not embody the germ of values countering those of capitalism.

As alluvial mining became less rewarding and thousands of diggers looked for a new means of livelihood the need to liberate the land from the squattocracy arose. In 1930 Keith Hancock wrote:

Australian nationalism took definite form in the class struggle between the landless majority and the land-monopolizing squatters.

Contrary to this McQueen’s account emphasises the desire of bush workers and selectors to rise in the existing society. The frontier syndrome and the bush virtues fade into insignificance juxtaposed to the drive for individual security.

The legends of the nomad tribe, of mateship and egalitarian solidarity are tied to attitude to the land. After all it was the land which was different from anything in the Old World. McQueen notes the quasi-religious significance of land in Australia, and traces the importance of the land to Irish peasants and English Utopians of the nineteenth century. Certainly much of the importance accorded to land in Australia must be traced to these sources and the idea of the redemptive value of life on the land publicized by politicians and clergy. Much of this is a desire to escape industrialism and much is a desire to strengthen the economy of the country. But the idea of the land as sacred cannot entirely be reduced to such impulses. Unfortunately McQueen does not explore the relation of the myth surrounding the land to the mateship and egalitarian myths. He does point out that even though the land was enshrined in a sacred idiom the bulk of Australia’s population were urban dwellers even in the 1880’s. Both myths, it seems, entail an idealization of reality which has been interiorized in the public consciousness until its truth value is not relevant. What is of interest here is what public needs were fulfilled by this process. McQueen does not broach this question. He confines himself to exposing the capitalist values obscured by the myths. How reality was alchemized into myth is equally crucial to the understanding of the dynamics of Australian society.

In dealing with socialism, the trade union movement and the Labor Party, McQueen continues to stress the absence of any systematic and coherent challenge to capitalism. Writing in the 1890’s, Albert Metin described the politics of Australia as “le socialisme sans doctrines”. McQueen, like Brian Fitzpatrick, finds the trade unions and the Labor Party no more socialist than they were doctrinaire. He sees the spirit of trade unionism in nineteenth century Australia embodied in the motto adopted by the

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6 Hancock, K. _Australia_, Syd. 1948, p.52.
Australian Union Benefit Society in 1834 — "United to relieve, not combined to injure". In stating that this attitude survives throughout the nineteenth century he blurs the distinction usually drawn between the earlier craft unions composed of skilled workers combined for mutual benefit and adopting methods of discussion with employers and the new unions of the 1880's composed of unskilled workers organized to some extent on an intercolonial basis and prepared to strike to gain better wages and conditions. Throughout the book McQueen's method is often defiant statement rather than argument and here all the proof he offers is that all W. G. Spence did in organizing the Amalgamated Miners' Union was to bring together the existing societies, with no significant change to their essentially friendly society character. Robin Gollan has described the differences in organization and method between the craft unions and the new industrial unions, and McQueen does not come within striking distance of this account. McQueen is consistently loath to recognize any sort of radicalism in the Australian past. If radicalism and conservatism are held to be virtually synonomous because the radicalism is compatible with ongoing of the existing society, the past is being once more distorted.

The Great Strikes of the 1890's emerge from his account as at most the tools of short range industrial purposes. The fact that they were broken by volunteer labor is enough in itself to suggest that there was little hardening of class identification. Both Robin Gollan and Brian Fitzpatrick have noted that bitterness and militancy were strongest in Queensland. McQueen disagrees:

The militancy of the Queensland shearers fed upon the rancour and enmity of smallholders towards large landowners. This does not take sufficient account of the shearers in the central west, but it seems an accurate account of the Darling Downs. D. B. Waterson's recent study reveals that:

The signing of the Pittsworth Agreement left the Downs shearers satisfied and reluctant to follow their colleagues of the central west along paths which many thought would lead to the destruction of all private property. Most of them had too much to lose — or so they thought.

As McQueen rejects the idea that the Australian labor movement ever enjoyed a period of ideological innocence there is no need for him to document the betrayal of the socialist ideal by

7 McQueen, p.206.
8 Gollan, R. Radical and Working Class Politics in Eastern Australia.
10 McQueen, p.216.
labor in politics. The political labor parties continued to exhibit their acceptance of capitalism by joining coalition governments; their consciousness of a multi-interest electorate and their willingness to break strikes.

The Australian working class, according to McQueen, was dominated by the materialist values of a bourgeois-liberal hegemony. In *A New Britannia* he delineates only the response of the dominated which, on the whole, seem to have been a willingness to acquiesce. Apart from adopting the Gramscian notion of hegemony, McQueen does not have any solid ideological framework to show why the Australian working class willingly acquiesced. This book suggests nothing to extend the explanation of Brian Fitzpatrick.

The working Australians tried, as all men try, to better their position in society, to get for themselves a greater share of the common loaf.¹²

Neither does McQueen define the composition or the dynamics of the bourgeois-liberal hegemony.

Another question McQueen leaves unasked and unanswered is whether the Labor Party sharpened the liberal conscience into conceding social welfare programmes of pensions, factory regulations and the workers' compensation. While the Labor Party did not embody a socialist vision it did advance the belief that all men deserved a better deal in this society. In Brian Fitzpatrick's phrase this made Australia a place where "men could call their souls their own". McQueen would probably reply that this is a horrifying measure of the success of capitalism — it can seduce men into finding freedom in domination and repression.

The value of McQueen's book is that it has started clearing the ground for a re-definition of Australia's self-image. Mateship and egalitarianism may well survive this re-definition but in an attenuated form, and not as Australia's version of socialism. Such a re-definition is most necessary to the Australian Left who have consistently held that a return to the values of the late nineteenth century would usher in a new order.

Like Manning Clark, McQueen locates the story of Australia in a universal context. Clark's polarization are men's ideals confounded by their weaknesses; McQueen's are capitalism and socialism, vaguely defined. Further, both stress the options that did not arise — there was no attempt to define men's needs other than on a materialist level. But where Clark's work is imbued with a Kierkegaardian bleakness, McQueen's excites the hope that change is possible and indeed must be possible.

¹² Fitzpatrick, B. *The Australian People*, MUP 1946, p.43.