

## TOM UREN AT LAKE ILLAWARRA

I was glancing through Tom Uren's book, entitled *Straight Left* (Random House, 1994, 500 pp.) and was surprised to learn of Uren's connections with our very own Lago Maggiore.

His father was basically a down-and-outer working for Tooths whose life was interrupted by long bouts of unemployment and drinking. He was a sometime jockey (but unusually tall: about 5' 8") and managed to hold a job between 1929 and 1934 but then remained without a permanent job until 1940.

Uren's mother, Agnes Miler, had a younger brother, Hughie, who settled in Wollongong. She married Tom Uren's father in 1918 and Uren was born in 1920.

Tom Uren spent a lot of time in Dunleavy's gym and hence found the title for his memoirs but a great career was interrupted by WW2 and a stint as a POW.

Uren's parents moved to Wollongong just before the war "to get employment at the Port Kembla steelworks and Uren remarks that, "although I visited hem, I felt that living with them would isolate me. I didn't want to lose Sydney and the excitement of life..."

Surprisingly, for all his reputation as a left-winger, the Wollongong incidents related in *Straight Left* show that, at heart, Uren was very much a Labor Conservative.

"When I returned home from the war, my father was involved in a seventeen week strike at the BHP steelworks at Port Kembla over the sacking of two employees. The strike was also use as a show of strength gains BHP by the Communist leadership of the FIA..." (p. 62)

Uren's remark that, "although my Dad would say, 'We beat the bastards,' the strike cost many people a great deal" is a good indication that even in the forties when there were plenty of Communist led unions, Uren had no belief that the capitalist system could be overturned.

His analysis is: "In my political lifetime I have always found that long strikes are disastrous for workers. I cannot recall an instance where strike leaders who lead workers into long-drawn-out strikes haven't suffered a rebuff after it is all over. The airline pilot's should have studied some union history before entering into their long conflict with the government in 1989." This seems to me a startling way for a doyen of the what is laughingly called the Labor Left to justify the use of troops against workers.

Tom Uren was fortunate to marry well - financially, at least - to a woman called Patricia Palmer on March 22, 1947 at St John's Church in Ashfield (if you ever get a chance, take a visit, for a Saturday evening mass there - even if you're an atheist like me - would probably be an atmospheric experience, particularly if you have the luxury of walking to the church through the surviving headstones lining the paths in the grounds: the church and its grounds are one of the many unregarded architectural treasures of Sydney and, what's more, one of St John's early priests was incumbent at Jamberoo for a time in the middle of last century).

None of these above details (except the date and place of marriage) are in the book, of course, but I do so enjoy showing off by bringing in arcane local connections and architectural details whenever I'm not writing about Thirroul.

After the honeymoon, Uren and Patricia moved "down to Lake Illawarra South at the house where I first met Patricia. her people owned the house and made it available to us. Then I started as a builder's labourer and dogman on one of the construction cranes, at the Port Kembla steelworks, working on the construction of the steel rod mill. We were paid big money at the Steelworks [this is the first time I've ever heard a labourer say this!!! Could it be true?] - seven pounds a week plus a special allowance of two pounds." (pp.62-3)

Uren then goes on to say, in the space of a paragraph, what a mongrel exploitative company Concrete Constructions was in the 1930s operating - like the wharves - a bull system but that at Port Kembla when "constructing the steel rod mill, they were on a 'cost plus'

contract and so didn't really worry about their costs to any extent."

But Uren saves his greatest complaint not for the company (which still survives and which, under Uren's jurisdiction, helped build the current Parliament House), but for "the builder's labourers [who] were continually having stop work meetings, which I felt was pretty unproductive." (p.62)

Uren then tells a surprising story whose point seems to be to reveal that he was basically a good, rough, knockabout bloke, but seems to me to point more to Uren being a right-wing pugilist.

"There was a big aggressive bloke there by the name of Jack Harkness, and when I put forward the proposal to refer disputes to the shop stewards committee, he said, 'Shut up, you mug!'

I said to him, "I'll talk to you later."

Harkness and Uren then agree to fight. But because Uren's parents in law were staying with them at the time, Uren (as a trained boxer and as someone who "had trained morning and night since we had arrived on the coast") determines not "To go home with any black eyes of bruises."

Uren then claims: "I only hit him once with my right hand, and that was the end of the fight. Jack was badly cut under the eye. I felt sorry for him and helped him up."

Later my Dad, who also worked at the Steelworks, was in the medical orderlies' room when Jack came in. Jack had a bit of a sense of humour, and someone asked him, Jack, what happened?"

He said, "Oh well, this bastard, is name is Tommy, I'd hit him and he'd smile. He'd hit me and it would be like a bloody pack of bricks."

The next couple of days Jack was a way. On about the third or fourth day he came back to work. There was yet another stop-work meeting, and I moved that whether we needed to come out should be referred to the shop stewards. Jack Harkness got up and said I second the motion.

Right through the years, Jack would always ask my dad, "How's young Tommy going?" He kept an interest in me as the years went on. That fight is a bit of folklore down here at the steelworks and in the Port Kembla area. Merv Nixon, the secretary of the South Coast Trades and Labour Council tells the story, but it's all stretched out of proportion.

I stayed at the Steelworks until I decided to go overseas about four months later. Having started training soon after we arrived on the coast I was in pretty good nick and I felt that instead of trying to get into the fight game in Australia, where it was particularly difficult to get bouts in my heavyweight division, I would try my hand in the United Kingdom. Patricia was supportive, and we planned originally for her to come over once I had established myself. One of the great things about Patricia was that she would never discourage me doing anything I wanted to do. "(pp.64-5)

And so ends Uren's South Coast saga.

His attitudes throughout the book are very contradictory but the book is easy to read and the section I like best was the introduction which carries a remarkable tribute to the surprising friendship had with fellow fibro beach house dweller, the very gentle long-time fibro shack-owning Gerringong artist, Lloyd Rees (but this was much later in Rees' life when he was resident in Hobart).

It gives, nonetheless, an amazing insight into the surprisingly privileged life led by a heavy weight boxing ALP conservative who has somehow come down to us as battling left-wing POW with his heart in the right place. It's a most enlightening book but has made me even more disillusioned about the Labor Left than I already was.

Joseph Davis