

TWO TRIBUTES

Dick Makinson who died in January, and Helen Palmer who died in May, both in their different ways contributed to the intellectual and cultural life of Australia and of the Australian socialist movement. Dick was a Communist Party member from the '30s until his death, while Helen was a member for nearly 20 years until her expulsion in 1956 for seeking open discussion of the crimes of the Stalin period. We publish, as tributes, orations at their funerals by Peter Mason and Jack Blake.

HELEN PALMER

We have come here to say our last farewell to our dear colleague and friend, Helen Palmer and to convey a sad farewell from her dear sister, Aileen.

The parents of Helen and Aileen, Vance and Nettie Palmer were great civilising influences in the Australian society of their day. So also in her own chosen fields of life activity, Helen Palmer had a civilising influence on people with whom she came in contact.

As a writer, Helen is known for her work in Australian history, in education, and in a wide variety of political and social subjects.

Not very long ago she was deeply moved when shown a poem by her father which was found in the pocket of a young worker after his death. The poem had been laboriously copied out in pencil on a sheet taken from an exercise book; its last line ran:

*But these are my people and I'm with them till
the end.*

But in her own way Helen continued this democratic Australian tradition throughout her life. A famous last line of her own conveys this most strikingly:

*When they gaol a man for striking
it's a rich man's country yet.*

Helen was not a shadow of her parents. She chose her own fields of endeavour and in all those fields the mark of her character and personality can be found.

As educationist and teacher she was devoted to Fort Street school with which she had a long-standing association. Her teacher colleagues became her friends. She had a warm capacity for friendship and an intuitive sense of the problems and needs of her students, especially so in cases of the under-privileged.

From her early years and during all her life, Helen was a socialist who engaged herself actively in all the causes she felt to be connected with her central socialist beliefs — the anti-fascist and anti-war movements of the thirties, the democratic movement in support of Republican Spain.

In the second world war Helen served in the airforce. After the war she continued her activities in democratic, civil liberties, peace and similar movements in the difficult years of the cold war. I

remember some twenty-seven years ago, a difficult journey she made to China; in spite of all the efforts powerful political and military authorities made to prevent her, Helen reached Peking on her mission of peace. She was a person of much moral and physical courage.

At the turning point of 1956 when the malign influence that had been at work in the heart of world socialism was revealed, Helen Palmer was one of the most vigorous and steadfast exponents of the need for full, open, democratic discussion of the causes and nature of the sickness which had seriously damaged the socialist movement. She was convinced that this was the only way to eliminate the sickness and prepare the ground for creative renewal in a cause she held so dear.

She suffered because of these efforts, but undaunted, she set about the work of founding the journal **Outlook** which carried the subtitle *An Independent Socialist Journal* and declared itself to be a forum for fact, thought and opinion in the cause of socialism in Australia.

Outlook was launched in the middle of 1957 and continued publication for 13 years until December 1970. During that time, Helen Palmer was the editor who brought together an editorial board of distinguished people of varying viewpoints, but devoted to the cause of the journal. Contributors and supporters formed a very much wider circle.

As the late Ian Turner expressed it in the final number of **Outlook**:

What did it achieve? First...Outlook provided a refuge, a place for many of us to examine, and to lick, our wounds of 1956, to regain our intellectual and emotional health and vigour, to come back fighting. Without Outlook, inspired as it was by Helen Palmer's humanity, tolerance and equanimity, we could not have done that....

Secondly, we formulated and propagated significant socialist policies on many of the major problems confronting Australian society.... It is clear now that many of our initiatives have borne fruit.

Apart from the work on Viet Nam done through **Outlook**, Helen Palmer was personally at the centre of the great popular Australian movement against the war in Viet Nam. She was active in all the public manifestations of that movement, but it was in the councils, conferences, and committees which gave guidance and inspiration to the whole movement where Helen gave her greatest service.

Those guiding bodies brought together diverse groups whose conflicts with each other at times threatened to break up the movement. Helen Palmer played a major part in preventing this, not by smooth conciliation, but in her crisp and businesslike style she would press the sources of conflict to the fringe and focus the attention of all on the common purpose. She was known to have no sectional axe to grind.

It was in that field that I came to know still better than I had before Helen's talent for discerning and nurturing the good in people. I know her to have passionately defended against attack persons who had treated her badly, or whose views on many matters she disliked, but whom she knew to be making a positive contribution to some part of the common cause.

Her friends know that with all the seriousness of her life, Helen had a keen sense of humour, she had a sharp response to the absurd or the ridiculous — a spontaneous, lively chuckle accompanied by that characteristic nasal snort. This response was just as spontaneous and marked when she told a story against herself.

Division of people into angels or devils was not Helen's way; she had the more human approach that each of us, at different times in our lives, or sometimes at one and the same, are part angel — part devil.

She avoided classifying people into unchangeable categories, and for that reason she succeeded in bringing together people who otherwise may have found themselves in conflict.

And so, in grieving at this, our last farewell to Helen, we at the same time celebrate her life. I think I express the thought of us all when I say it is that life, that unwavering line of work done in public duty, that particular person and friend, Helen Palmer, we will always remember.

— Jack Blake,
May 10, 1979.

DICK MAKINSON — SCIENTIFIC WORKER

Dick asked me to say a few things about him today. The only instruction I have is that there must be no religious mumbo-jumbo. That's just what those Greek philosophers said when they started science and, indeed, our whole Western way of thinking over 2,000 years ago.

Dick was a true natural philosopher — a physicist's physicist. He said he always wanted to know what makes things tick. So I'll talk about

Dick the scientific worker; I'll also say something about him as a person, and I'll even tell you a few of the jokes he was making just last week.

Dick was one of the few Australian Corresponding Members of the World Federation of Scientific Workers.

The primary aim of that Federation is:

the increase of human welfare through the application and development of science.

That aim is also the key to the scientific career and life of Dick Makinson: the increase of human welfare through the application and development of science; and he really lived up to it. He became an outstanding teacher — not only in his lectures, but also in tutorials, in the lab, and in his availability for helping students with problems whether scientific or not.

His research was generally directed to practical ends. When he started his well-known work on calculators for the blind I had the job of asking him what research he was planning for the coming year, and how much money he would need for it. No, he said, he wasn't doing any 'real' research, just making a few electronic gadgets that might be useful. A little money would help, but save the funds for the young staff members who were starting on their research careers and really needed it.

Later it turned out that he had been buying some items and subsidizing his calculator project out of his own pocket.

Dick got off to a brilliant scientific start, winning the University of Sydney medal for physics and going on to study the physics of metals with A. H. Wilson at Cambridge. His research on the thermal conductivity of metals was published in the Proceedings of the Cambridge Philosophical Society, and it finds its place in Wilson's classical book *The Theory of Metals*. A metal is a highly crystalline material, and Dick was just as interested in the opposite sort of material with no regular structure at all — viz. a glass.

Just last year he was thrilled to obtain a long, shiny ribbon of a new and unexpected material — a metallic glass, whose properties he intended to study.

He was lucky to be at Cambridge in a sort of Golden Age. There was a ferment of new ideas; science was again seen as a part of society but now in a dynamic society faced with the threat of fascism. Fascist technology had helped Franco to win the Spanish Civil War and science would clearly be increasingly important both in war and peace. It had political as well as purely intellectual dimensions.

As an unusually sensitive schoolboy, Dick had already developed a strong awareness of social

injustice. His scientific attitude brought him into contact with the radical scientists of Cambridge. He gravitated naturally into marxism and brought his combination of ideas back with him when he and Rachel came to Sydney, just prior to the war.

Dick's satisfaction when it came to working on calculators for the blind wasn't simply the joy in designing an instrument and getting it to work (which he did extremely well, with the particular help of Ingram Paterson), but the whole **social function** of the project — choosing and buying the components; working **with** the blind students as if he was their brother (he had a strong, near religious, faith — allied to his marxism — in the brotherhood of man, or of humanity); being completely available to the students; and beyond that, on the more tedious administrative side, working with The Royal Blind Society, sitting on committees, giving advice, and quietly, unobtrusively, getting on with the job of helping wherever he had abilities that were needed.

His personal qualities were direct, forthright, and in tune with that austere scientific world-view of his.

As so often with people who have a wide vision and a lot of dedication, it is those who are nearest to them, who love them, who have to pay much of the price. He's even been rough on me, as I'll tell you in a moment or two.

This uncompromising commitment to truth can be just too rational, too harsh, for normal human living.

But it still can require personal courage. I remember him, soon after he came to Macquarie, going out to a big and noisy Viet Nam meeting on the front lawn. When there came a turn at the microphone, he walked up and said "I don't suppose many of you have actually seen a communist before...." and proceeded to explain his position calmly and rationally, holding the whole audience silent.

Let me give you a glimpse of his character — his guts, his forthrightness and his dry humour — by telling you of a few things that have happened within this last week.

There has been a long-standing battle between Dick and me on the question of blackboards.

We both preferred them to the new-fangled alternatives, but Dick believed it imperative that they be cleaned by attendants between lectures, whilst I thought it no great sweat if we had to clean them ourselves. He became very cross with what seemed to him my sloppy attitude.

Last week, when he was being cared for at Neringbah Hospital, more gently and beautifully than I would have thought possible, a chance reference was made to blackboards. Dick waved

for a pen and paper, and scrawled (in his normal handwriting):

Chalk and blackboards are the writing instruments that come naturally

and then, in brackets —

(the hospital attendant cleans them).

The joke was certainly on me. On the same piece of paper he had already shown his tremendous spirit by suddenly sitting up and writing:

A pity there isn't an organisation to give Wakes to order.

It was an electrifying moment. We all assumed, of course, that this was what he was wanting. "Do you want a Wake?" Rachel asked him. Grabbing the paper he wrote a big, bold NO! Dick never left you in any doubt about his attitude.

On Friday night, last Friday night, WIBS Smith and I were sitting by Dick's bedside and we started talking about negative ions in the atmosphere; how they could be generated and what physiological effects they could have in making you feel brighter. Dick showed great interest and urged us to go on, even though he could only join in intermittently. His mind was crystal clear, he loved the discussion and he had no pain. He really enjoyed it. He even took some tea, a great love of his, and inseparable in his view from any good seminar. No tea and biscuits — not much of a seminar, he used to say.

Dick really was a scientist in the old Greek mould. He sought to interpret the world around him; but he also sought to change it.

With a chap like Dick, you don't easily talk to him of affection, of love, and many of us perhaps have wondered if he realized the deep affection in which he was held. We can be happy that someone had the thought to send him a letter — which he got towards the end of last week, and read twice with pleasure — telling him just how much and how widely he was loved.

He had a little trick, maybe his own invention, related to the importance he attached to tea and biscuits. I'll tell you about it, because it shows his gentleness, his humour and his brotherliness.

It was a large glass jar which he placed on the table in the tea-room. It was full of biscuits and the label, in his scrawly writing, said **Magic Pudding**.

It would, he said, never be empty. But, as a hint, the label also said

Work a little Magic yourself, sometimes.

Dick Makinson was a man who worked quite a lot of magic for quite a lot of people.

Peter Mason,
January 17, 1979.