REBELS AND RADICALS

Masses Are the Makers of History

Students, teachers, researchers and writers of Australian labour history owe a great debt to the work of Eric Fry. A foundation member of the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History, Eric Fry has spent a lifetime selflessly devoted to the promotion of Australian working class history, in all of its many aspects. But, more importantly, Eric Fry, like the late Alan Marshall, identifies most strongly with the driven, the battlers of Australian history.

In Rebels and Radicals, Fry has been given the opportunity to assemble the writings of like-minded souls to produce a highly readable document in Australian popular history, of which there are far too few in these dolorous days of corporate consensus.

All the essays contributed to Rebels and Radicals take up the political position of the oppressed and the exploited, whether they be Black Australian guerrilla leaders like Musquito, or 'Rebel' Major, convict poets, damned democrats, Eureka rebels, radical women or I.W.W. members who refused to cower to state repression. Fry and his fellow contributors have made a valiant attempt to tap that rich vein of radical opposition to colonialism, capitalism and imperialism which often doesn't even make the footnotes in most conventional narratives of Australian history. This alone is a great service to radical Australian historiography.

The chapters of Rebels and Radicals which investigate the episodes of the Black Australian resistance to the heinous brutalities of British colonialism make powerful reading. Christine Wise and Bruce Shaw provide, in their separate essays on Musquito and 'Rebel' Major, moving testimonies to the struggles of these black heroes. In fact, the boldness of Musquito, Major and countless other Black Australian warriors not only ensured that colonialism was never totally victorious, but also engendered and inspired a long tradition of Aboriginal resistance to capitalist oppression and exploitation.

Biographies of those who rebelled against the blood-soaked tyranny of British penal servitude are compassionately recounted by Gordon Nai Stewart, John Meredith and Rex Whalan. Like Bruce Shaw in his depiction of 'Rebel' Major, Stewart adopts a Hobsbawmian approach to the 'primitive rebellion' of the Bathurst Ribbonmen and their tribune, Ralph Entwistle. A strong sense of time and place is evoked in Stewart's account of the Bathurst convict uprising. We are shown the calculating ferocity of the colonial floggers and their red-coated minions; the continuous brutality of the convict masters which detonated the convict outbreak; the pluck and ingenuity of the 'impossible revolution' of Entwistle's rebel band. One can only hope in this time of approaching ruling class bicentennial forgetfulness that Entwistle and his insurgents are not expeditiously passed over by those who are genealogically fixated with the fashionable possibility that they may have a convict ancestor as long as he or she is of the calibre of a Francis Greenway. A vain hope.

The heirs of the master class can have their Simon Lords and Francis Greenways; the Australian working people have the convict poet who would not be silenced, Francis MacNamara. Floggings, the treadmill, the killing labour of the colonial quarries never broke the defiant tongue of Frank the Poet. John Meredith and Rex Whalan trace out the life of this convict rhymer who was transported to British Australia for the capital crime of plaid-
stealing. MacNamara's sharp, satirical voice and unrepentant behaviour saw him sent many times to the triangles to suffer the whippings of Lord Lash. But his mocking verses against the hated colonial oppressors and their penal system were known word-perfect by every human being who was forced to endure the brutalities and indignities of British convictism. The enchained 'articulate' were given the tongue of an antipodean Shelley. MacNamara's brand of committed poetry would gain a ready audience in the factories, the mines, the building sites and the dole queues of the present wage-slave system. And, no doubt, at any workers' smoko the spirit of Frank McNamara will be present. Those generations of working people who built but never owned Australia find comfort and inspiration in MacNamara's epitaph:

"... Sworn to be a tyrant's foe.
And while I've life I'll crow..."

The tragic Dan Deniehy is Gerald Waish's biographical subject. Deniehy railed against 'the Botany Bay aristocrats' and their high-handed efforts to stifle an emergent Australian democracy. He would have no truck with the Geebungs' visions of paternal despotism. At street meetings, on the parliamentary floor and through the pages of the Southern Cross, he campaigned against the infamies of the squatters and their English overlords.

The land-owning class moves swiftly against this eloquent preacher of 'mob rule. By the end of his life, the radical democrat was delivering rambling, racist speeches against the Chinese and giving up his body and soul to the lost world of grog. Although Deniehy died destitute and broken, many of the labouring classes and not a few of the more independent-minded members of the urban bourgeoisie took up

The 80-year-old Catherine Helen Spence distilled her many activities into a single assertion: 'I am a new woman, and I know it.'

Deniehy's fight against W.C. Wentworth's caste of 'bunyip aristocrats' for greater Australian democracy, whatever its bourgeois limitations.

That unlikely Australian republican, the Scottish Presbyterian minister, John Dunmore Lang, is examined by D.W.A. Baker. Like Deniehy, J.D. Lang was a brilliant publicist. Lang's political views underwent a sea change when he toured the Australian countryside. He moved from being a pristine example of reticent Scottish capitalism's ills and pursue an independent path similar to that of the American bourgeoisie. Frequent tours of the Australian countryside confirmed Lang's republican convictions. Lang took up Dan Deniehy's cudgels with a vengeance.

His former eminent Tory friends saw him as a mob orator who chanted the seditious message of universal manhood suffrage (Lang opposed votes for women on the basis of the quaint notion that it was never advocated in the Bible), land for the people (this demand earned Lang the lasting enmity of the squatters) and a

Jennifer Lorch's portrayal of Raffaello Carboni adds immeasurably to our knowledge of this complicated son of an Urbino shopkeeper who wrote as an insider at the base headquarters of the Eureka rebels. Carboni appears as a gifted but frustrated radical intellectual. He was a capable linguist, widely read in the European classics, an amateur dramatist, served with Garibaldi's Red Shirts and, thankfully, was on the side of liberty against the draconian rule of imperial Britain. This short, flamboyant Italian radical reminds one of Al Grassby in his passionate defence of individual liberty. And, like Grassby, Carboni, if alive today, would be an implacable foe of those splintering fascist grouplets who try to taint the Eureka flag with their 'White Australia' bile and divide the Australian working people along the lines of social darwinism.

As Lorch links Carboni to his chronicle of Eureka, the diggers are reduced to human proportions; they are individuals, complex in their weaknesses and strengths. Their just stand was not taken lightly; they responded collectively to an intolerable situation Carboni catches these all too human foibles in his Eureka writings. Lorch's Carboni is an intellectual who attempted to live out
Above: Musquito: From March 1820, dozens of huts and houses were attacked, stripped and fired, and the occupants speared and clubbed.

Below: The Rubei' Major: Aboriginal captives in chains during the taking of the East Kimberleys.

Farley Kelly has set herself the more difficult task in her study of that largely unknown feminist radical, Brettena Smyth. Unlike the Magarey and Matthews contributions on Catherine Spence and Louisa Lawson, Kelly has had to painstakingly drag the strands of Brettena Smyth's biography together. She presents the reader with a fine example of committed history. Smyth emerges as a remarkable 'forgotten' radical, one whose entire life was committed to progressive social change. Widowed during 'the white plague' of tuberculosis in 1873, this North Melbourne woman was left to her own scant resources to bring up her family of six. In her greengrocery-cum-confectionary-cum drapery shop, Smyth eked out a living for her young family. Bearing all of the 'male's' responsibilities, but being denied the right to vote or transmit property, Smyth began to critically question capitalist social relations. She broke with the Pauline rigidities of Catholicism, mingled with the Victorian Women's Suffrage Society, joined the Australasian Secular Association and developed into a formidable polemicist firing salvoes against religious bigotry and 'male bias', social and political inequality between the sexes and the need for democratic marriages.

She became a strident temperance campaigner, seeing the destruction excess alcohol wreaks on working people's material existence and believing, wrongly, that a 'dry' Melbourne would somehow escape the class ills of capitalism. A social 'wosser', Brettena Smyth, however, was not. She alienated much of respectable Melbourne by her championing of the sexual and social rights of the poor. Baby farms, infanticide, rape, prostitution and the chronic ill-health of the working class could, the radical Smyth argued, be presented by steady work, better housing, the condom and the wide dissemination of practical sex manuals. Although idealist solutions to the harsh realities of capitalism's 'free enterprise', Smyth's radical demands threw down an ideological challenge to the safe lives of 'Marvellous Melbourne's' high bourgeoisie.

If Brettena Smyth is a little known nineteenth century radical fighter, Louisa Lawson's name (but perhaps not her life) is remembered by most students of Australian labour history often only as the mother of a famous radical writer, or an in-law of a demagogic Labor premier hailed as being 'greater than Lenin'. The
uncompromising radical, Louisa Lawson has been made 'the madonna of the sink', to employ a Stuart Hall phrase, by most orthodox labour historians: the 'little woman' behind the great labour men. Matthews' examination of Louisa Lawson's "dawn crusade" is mercifully free of 'the great male' syndrome's principal errors.

Through Matthews' pen, Lawson emerges as a woman constantly at war with the suffocating patriarchy of late nineteenth century capitalism. Her creative potential seemed thwarted at every turn. Her unhappy marriage to Peter Larsen was but the beginning of her problems; the first of many social constrictions. She craved to be in intellectual company; to exercise her prodigious intellect on all manner of controversial subjects, particularly those which directly concerned women. Her 'neurosis' led to the establishment of Dawn, the first defiantly feminist press in the Australian colonies. The pages of Dawn sparkled with the biting articles and editorials of Louisa Lawson and her radical colleagues. The Dawn addressed all of those problems constantly reproduced in the social relations of capital — domestic violence, sexual exploitation, the tyrannies of a propertyless, male-dominated marriage, women's physical and mental health problems which some sections of the contemporary Left grandly designate as secondary contradictions and consign to the 'after the revolution' category. Louisa Lawson and her co-feminists would remain unimpressed.

The Dawn crusade petered out in the first few years of the twentieth century. Matthews provides few reasons for the paper's closure, apart from Louisa Lawson's running cattle with the petty caesars of the Post and Telegraph Department. We learn nothing of the Dawn's circulation figures, the character of its popular audience, its financial position, its internal battles, its relationship to the fledgling labour movement or its effect on the social life of its rebel editor. Presumably, Matthews will investigate these questions in his awaited biography of Louisa Lawson. Hopefully, such a study will reveal far more about this 'forgotten' radical declared by the state to be 'insane' and, at life's end, laid away in a pauper's grave.

The final chapters of Rebels and Radicals are thumbnail sketches of two battle-hardened, uncompromising radicals, W.R. Winspear and Monty Miller. For the authors of these too brief rebel portraits, Verity Burgmann and Eric Fry, their work was a labour of love. Winspear, as Burgmann demonstrates, formulated his own variant of 'socialism' from the hard school of class struggle. Denied contact with European Marxism, Winspear and many other colonial radicals were set the task of building their own socialist doctrines. Utopianism, fabianism, anarchism and, later, syndicalism, were the theories which informed not only the debates about, but also the practice of, an emergent Australian socialism.

In such a situation, Winspear and a host of worker-intellectuals became self-taught socialists. The pamphlet, the broadsheet, stump oratory, satirical songs and cartoons were their means by which to broadcast the message of socialism to a mass audience still largely denied even the rudiments of an elementary education. Winspear devoted his mighty pen to this daunting task.

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Winspear's irreverence will suffice. Burgmann follows Winspear on his evangelising peregrinations through his disputes with compromisers, opportunists and vacillating Utopians and his evolution into an uncompromising member of the Australian Socialist Party. By adopting this biographical tack, Burgmann also provides her reader with many fine examples of Winspear's pamphleteering skills; a proletarian literary form which, in Winspear's hands, bursts with mocking contempt for the bosses' war overseas into a tit-for-tat class war at home. While Winspear may have been honoured with the epithet 'socialist', he was, like so many rebels of his generation, neither a marxist nor, more crucially, a leninist. His socialism was grounded in the writings of that important American socialist Daniel DeLeon. Much of Marx's and Engels' writings were simplified and transformed by the De Leonites. Lenin's theories concerning the revolutionary party, the state, 'open' and 'secret' organisations, etc., were, unfortunately, absent from the De Leonites and their fraternal organisations, such as the Australian Socialist Party and the Australian section of the Industrial Workers of the World (I.W.W.).

Perhaps it was this factor as well as a host of doctrinal differences which later prevented Winspear from joining the Communist Party. Perhaps Winspear, a born rebel with a strong anarchist bent, could never accept the iron discipline and perseverance needed in leninist vanguard parties.
Whatever the reason, Verity Burgmann's instructive summary of W.R. Winspear is in the best traditions of history-from-the-bottom-up. If Francis MacNamara was the voice of the oppressed, W.R. Winspear was their hand; both were blessed with Blakean 'eyes of fire'. And so, too, was Monty Miller, a worker who never gave up the struggle against the class robbery and oppression of the rich, as Eric Fry's final chapter makes abundantly clear.

Miller, the 'life-long radical', travelled the length and breadth of Australia campaigning for the rights of Australian workers. His lengthy term of active service in the class spanned the Eureka Stockade and the state terror against the I.W.W. (of which Miller was a member) during the First World War.

Typically, Miller, when before the beak in the state's show trial against the I.W.W., used the court as a platform to denounce the bourgeoisie and their grubby wartime conspiracies against those who refused to obey their class laws.

Miller, eighty-four, a hero of Eureka, was first sentenced to jail for two years, but the sentence was waived because of his age and frail health. Miller, forever the fighter, did not want the judge's mercy, but social justice. It was an evergreen characteristic of Monty Miller, a trait first formed during those climactic months on the Ballarat goldfields in 1854.

As Eric Fry carefully explains, although Monty Miller could look back on a long career devoted to the people's cause, he was not a rebel given to nostalgia for a golden victorious past. Rather, Miller's cool head ruled his passionate heart. He made incisive assessments of past struggles; the victories, the unpalatable compromises, the bitter defeats.

He was a significant working class intellectual. Everything of importance to the Australian working class was assiduously studied — English chartism, American democracy, European socialism, British imperialism, the Westminster parliamentary system, atheism, anarchism, syndicalism. Miller's desire for theories and practical information pertinent to a revolutionist was inexhaustible. He harboured no illusions about the nascent Labor Party but, instead, worked persistently in Victoria and New South Wales during the 1890s to give it a mass base among the working class. He helped organise unions among 'the less skilled' of the labouring classes. He lectured on anarchism in prim Melbourne and campaigned for the Sunday opening of public libraries and art galleries so that the masses, too, could consider the books and paintings of colonial bourgeois culture. He threw his considerable energies behind the movement demanding women's rights. With the formation of the I.W.W. in the U.S.A., Monty Miller drew deeply on their theoretical arguments and practical politics. Miller was in the van, forming I.W.W. clubs and propagating syndicalist solutions to end the rule of capital.

With the advent of the first imperialist war and the Labor Prime Minister Fisher pleading Australia's 'last man and last shilling' to British imperialism, it was only a matter of time before Monty Miller and other 'wobblies' with their determined anti-imperialist war position would be in the bosses' courts or His Majesty's jails. Fry's account of the rebel, Monty Miller, is as lucid as it is inspiring.

Rebels and Radicals deserves a wide popular audience. It is the stuff radical Australian history is made of. It should be the impetus needed for a vast dictionary of forgotten labour radicals and rebels along the lines of the British Labour Dictionary to be started. This is not because the white Bicentennial ominously approaches. Instead, it is an appeal, a Mayday, to preserve the memories of all those rebels and radicals who stood up for their rights against the tyranny of capital.

Finally, a minor complaint, a quibble. Rebels and Radicals requires a better cover. The reproduction of Grace Cossington Smith's Strike will never do. Cossington Smith as Humphrey McQueen informs us in The Black Swan of Trespass (p.66) feared and was fascinated by the political power of a combative working class. Petit bourgeois voyeurism need not grace the covers of books devoted to social rebels. Surely an appropriate 'Wobbly' cartoon from Direct Action could replace the painterly efforts of Ms Cossington Smith if Rebels and Radicals runs into a second edition?

Rebels and Radicals amplifies that marxist aphorism, that the masses are the makers of history, even if not of their own choosing. Fry and his co-authors have provided a lasting text in Australian popular history.

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