

R E V I E W



Bewinged

Wings of Desire, written by Wim Wenders and Peter Handke. Directed by Wim Wenders. Showing at the Kino in Melbourne and the Dendy in Sydney. Reviewed by Lyndell Fairleigh.

Textured in silver and with an eerie, almost translucent quality — as though it could easily vanish into thin air — *Wings of Desire* is populated by angels, actors

and an aerialiste who hover between heaven and earth, between film and everyday life.

And that is where *Wings of Desire* would like to position itself: as a collection of images from "no man's (sic) land", a commentary from the place where contradictions meet.

While most of the film is impressionistic — an essay in the fragmentary and alienating condition of post-war (and post-modern) existence — it is informed

by a love story of sorts. Lurking in the wings (and wings are a significant reminder of a certain part of the female anatomy) is Marion, the aerialiste. In her character oppositions can be reconciled: she is both of the air and the earth. She looks angelic, and her name is a derivative of Mary, but she also inspires less than angelic feelings in Daniel, the angel who falls for her and becomes human in the process. In becoming human, however, Daniel relinquishes his angelic state:

unlike Marion, it seems, he cannot be at the point of contradiction.

All this, of course, sounds far too familiar, and given the flying start that feminism has made in analysing the insidiously repetitive representations of "Woman" as both virgin and whore (contradictory enough to hold in herself the physical and the spiritual), it's disappointing to have to watch yet another film that positions women as symbols of an unholy mystery. Especially with the mawkish sentimentality *Wings* betrays.

Daniel is not only drawn to the circus ring and Marion but also to the movie lot and a well-known American actor: Peter Falk playing himself. Another fallen angel, Falk inhabits a shadowy world bounded by TV screens and a persona that's public property. As an American winging to the Germany of his ancestors (by aeroplane, having hung up his wings), Falk's character obviously has some sympathies for Wenders himself, who, in making *Wings of Desire*, has returned to Germany to make his first film there after years obsessed with the North American landscape.

That Germany has been reproduced endlessly in war movies of the ilk that Falk, according to *Wings*' storyline, has been flown to Berlin to make. The "real" Falk was, of course, also flown to Berlin to make another kind of film about Germany, Wenders' own. An astute audience, schooled in reading self-conscious films, would immediately note that parallel as well as being attuned to Wenders distancing himself from that kind of mythmaking.

Yet Wenders is placing himself within what's fast becoming another tradition of filmmaking, one that sees itself as smashing down the icons of "realism" with radical rereadings that transgress the rigid boundaries between accepted epistemologies to flat new connections. Hence the recurring image of the Berlin Wall in *Wings of Desire*, and the wasteland bordering it. Old men and angels remember when it was a populous part of the city, unbroken by the wall: angels, being eternal, may even

remember the future. Is history being transcended, or is Wenders merely trotting out the post-modernists' stocks in trade?

And what if connections are made between, for example, the way in which angels relate to everyday life, the structure of Western rationalist philosophy and the role of a director, if that doesn't inform a more thoroughgoing analysis of the power relations involved? Vicariously enjoying earthly pleasures by observing others from a safe distance smacks of voyeurism. Yet we are asked to look on innocently as the invisible Daniel watches Marion in what he believes to be the privacy of her own caravan.

While the preoccupations of *Wings of Desire* are, ultimately,

eminently forgettable (has it been so successful in emptying itself of meaning?), its images haunt the retina like ghosts of themselves. A ponytailed angel reading over someone's shoulder in the library that almost seems home to them; Peter Falk talking to an invisible angel at a roadside cafe; Daniel bewinged and atop the bombed ruins of the Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church. That all these images refer to the angels is probably no accident: Wenders was inspired to dream of them in the first place and they are beautifully realised. On the surface of it, *Wings of Desire* is perfectly seductive.

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The Last Convicts?

Sanctuary? Remembering Postwar Immigration by Catherine Panitch. Allen and Unwin, 1988.

Migrant Hands in a Distant Land. Australia's Postwar Immigration by Jock Collins. Pluto Press, 1988. \$19.95. Reviewed by Constance Lever Tracy.

These are two useful and timely books yet, despite the similarity in their titles, their angles of vision are polar opposites. Panitch, the articulate Australian daughter of postwar refugees, has synthesised the so far largely unexpressed experience of her parents' generation through hundreds of interviews and a study of letters, diaries and documents. Collins has brought together in a broad sweep the, by now, vast published literature about immigration from 1945 to the present, surveying from a left perspective the data and debates on every aspect of this question. If the voice of the migrants themselves is rarely to be heard in his pages it will,

nonetheless, be an invaluable, well-written and comprehensive textbook on the subject.

Collins' title could have served well for Panitch's book. The experiences she chronicles are of attempts to reduce the Displaced Person refugees to undifferentiated labour power, discounting their skills, education, culture and history; to use them indeed as atomised "hands", "the last convicts", without families or communities, to be sent here and there according to the needs of postwar reconstruction.

Government bureaucracy and capital worked together in this. In the camps, couples were separated and parents were classified as "childless" if their children had passed the age of 18. Husbands and wives were directed to labouring jobs hundreds of miles apart. These refugees had held the fragments of their families and their identities together through the war and the European camps, and the fear of being split up motivated resistance, though for most the fear of deportation was even more powerful. Some were destroyed by the experience, but most held on until their two-year contracts were up, and then set about rebuilding

their social existence, as more than mere mobile "hands" of capital.

Non-Anglophones in Australia have had to wait for the next generation to record their experience. The people who came at that time, and their children, will find a passionate interest in this book; but it has more than just historic relevance. History is repeating itself with new subjects, who again lack a voice. In the spirit of the FitzGerald report, families divided by war remain split today and immigrants as a whole find it hard to bring out their parents or other relatives because the economic rationality of the points system blocks them. Yet, in the intervening decades it was the logic of the migrants that reasserted itself through the prevalence of chain migration which reconstructed family networks and multicultural (often working class) communities. It was through these, not through bureaucratic welfare provisions, that new waves of newcomers gained the confidence and knowledge to claim their rights and to participate in the new society and in its labour movement.

Collins' book, with a wider, if more distant lens, surveys the place of immigrant workers in Australian capitalism, from the refugees of

Bonegilla to those of "Vietnamatta" (and the groups in between). He looks at the economics and the politics of the process, the exploitation of men and especially of women, evaluating the outcomes for Australian society and for the immigrants themselves, including the second generation. He outlines the major debates: on the economic advantages and disadvantages; on racism and prejudice; on assimilation and multiculturalism; and concludes with a set of mainly generous and soundly based guidelines for an Australian immigration policy. The past experience, he sees as, on balance, successful, because of the enormous efforts and sacrifices of the newcomers themselves, and because the indigenous population proved able to progressively largely overcome their long heritage of racism

Collins' guidelines support multiculturalism and family migration and non-racial selection (he would indeed like to see an opening of doors to Black African refugees), and he sees a continuing immigration policy as beneficial, if cautiously pursued. He has doubts, however, about the future applicability of an "immigration led recovery" and is concerned lest too

large an intake put strains on the "apparent contemporary trend of increasing tolerance"; a view strangely at odds with his belief that it is the scale and diversity of immigration itself which has brought about this trend. Indeed, his words here are somewhat disconcertingly similar to Howard's talk of the importance of "social cohesion". We must not forget how the British labour movement in the 1960s caved in before the Powellite predictions of "blood in the streets" and joined a Dutch auction with the Conservatives in reducing immigration in the name of multiracial harmony.

The British outcome, in racial tension, ghettoisation and growing working class divisions and racism presents indeed a sharp contrast to the Australian experience. The relationship of Australian immigrants (especially the non-Anglophones) to the indigenous working class and its organisations is perhaps the weakest part of Collins' book, reflecting the limitations of the sources he used. In structural terms, his view of the working class as fundamentally fragmented by immigration, producing racism, is both mistaken and in contradiction with his final, more optimistic conclusions. Non-Anglophones have, indeed, been systematically excluded from white collar, professional and technical jobs and concentrated in heavy and dangerous work. However, already by the mid-1960s, even the South Europeans were to be found in large numbers throughout almost all of the organised manual occupations, including the trades, being indeed over-represented in many skilled manual jobs. Their unionisation rates were high and their wage levels were similar to those of indigenous workers in the same occupations.

Migrants, then, have not formed a separate "underclass". Despite frequently serious neglect of rank-and-file interests by the bureaucratic unions in which migrants were often members, this outcome was, in part, due to the uniting tendency of union policies. The Australian labour movement has a long heritage of racism dating back to the 19th

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century. Its contradictory nature is, however, not always understood. The exclusionist White Australia Policy was the product of an amalgamation of racism with fundamental opposition (dating back to convict days) to any distinctions of rights, legal status and conditions within the working class. The opposition to indentured labour or anything like job reservations was fundamental, and an insistence on union membership and standard wages and conditions for all workers was seen as axiomatic even in defence of their indigenous membership. Having conceded to admission of large numbers of culturally distinctive workers, they saw no alternative to integrating them into the working class and its organisations.

If the arrival of immigrants did not divide the working class, and if rank-and-file and institutional racism in the labour movement progressively weakened, so that they now have offered no support at all to the Blainys and Ruxtons, a large part of the credit must go to the immigrants themselves. Early fears that they would be anti-union strike breakers, or rate busters, proved false. While unionisation and Labor votes have in no way suffered from the influx, it is clear that, in some cases, the newcomers have injected new life and militancy into rank-and-file organisation and movements — such as in the car and steel industries.

An awareness of the wider experiences of the working class around the world has broadened Australian parochialism. Crucially, the reality of a multicultural workforce has made apparent the divisive perils of any concession to racism with respect to the newest waves of arrivals from Asia. The greatest benefit of post-war immigration has perhaps been that it has enabled the Australian working class to progressively throw off at least some parts of its racist heritage in a period when in countries such as Britain and France it has been growing stronger.

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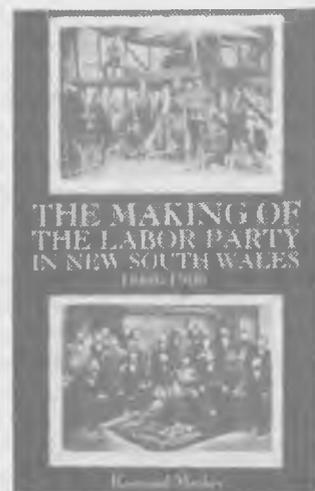
Searching for Labor

The Making of the Labor Party in New South Wales 1880 - 1900 by Raymond Markey, New South Wales University Press, Sydney, 1988. Reviewed by Roger Coates.

Raymond Markey's *The Making of the Labor Party in New South Wales* aims to be comprehensive. It is divided into three parts: social and industrial structure; labour organisation; and the emergence of Laborism, the object being to expose all aspects of the story, to reveal utterly what the Labor Party is — or, perhaps, was.

Originally, according to the book's main thesis, the movement which formed the NSW Labor Party was a class movement, its product a political party in the mould of the European social democratic parties. But, Markey argues, this working class character was lost in the mid-1890s. Then, by dint of an opportunistic *modus vivendi*, "utopian-socialist intellectuals" cum politicians and the rising AWU (Australian Workers' Union) bureaucracy transformed it into a vote-catching populist machine that straddled class lines in order to be bumped into government. By 1910, in tandem with their federal counterparts, they had succeeded — one of the first labour or social democratic parties to do so. There is much to recommend this schema because Markey has strengthened both the existing evidence and the interpretive framework. However, the thesis is marred.

Markey outlines the colonial background to the 1880s but has not thought enough about the British context. The emergence of NSW Labor and, by implication, Labor nationwide should be set in a framework of imperialist rivalries and exploitation, and conflicting loyalties. It is in this decade or decades that the character of the national ambiguities, so well caught



in Sylvia Lawson's *The Archibald Paradox*, clearly emerge.

There is no Aboriginal presence in the book, not even an Aboriginal people's role as a segment, but a highly symbolic one, of the shearing and general rural workforce. Race and race relations are treated substantially, but the fate of the indigenous people gets scant attention. Women do have a presence, but a small one. Markey puts most stress on feminism's impact on trade union and Labor platforms and policies, and the attempts to mobilise working women. In the debate between Louisa Lawson and Rose Scott, he favours Lawson. Feminism is regarded as a populist program that failed to take up Louisa Lawson's challenge of just treatment for working women.

Markey does not ignore the national question, especially its racist dimension which became, as he stresses, the touchstone of Australian sentiment. Weak as it was, an anti-imperialist critique did blend with a republican program. It was part of 1880s populism, but Markey tends to treat this program as something distracting the working class from the "class" issues.

Which brings us closer to Markey's principal theme. Markey has probably gone further than other Australian historians and

political scientists in the search for a theoretical explanation of Labor. By any standard it is an impressive and persuasive performance and deserves the fullest consideration, fuller than I can hope to give here. However, perhaps because it's so good, its ultimate failure tends to irritate the reader. So far, so close, but still wrong! What is the problem?

There is nothing wrong with applying such traditional concepts as "social democratic" and "populist" to the Labor Party and Markey is undoubtedly effective in arraying a vast body of facts and detecting and explaining the variations, shifts and changes that give his thesis weight. But in order to make it stick he should have done more to examine whatever is validly general in these two concepts, and therefore properly applicable to Australia.

The Labor Party is like a social-democratic party, and undoubtedly it is, at times, the people's party. Its aims are broadly social democratic and it has often mobilised "the people", or perhaps more properly the people have mobilised it. Indeed, this is just what happened in 1890/91 in New South Wales. Between October 1890 and March 1891, the initiative of the Trades and Labour Council group that favoured a concerted independent labour entry into politics took off. Whereas, before August 1890, the group led by P.J. Brennan and F.B. Dixon could not muster complete support, thereafter the opposition to the movement for political labour representation crumbled. After a long debate virtually all strands of opinion now accept that it was the Maritime Strike — its causes, course and consequences — that made the difference.

The Australian Labor parties, Don Rawson has pointed out, are rather unusual. He has grouped them with the Labour parties of Britain and New Zealand, and the Scandinavian Social Democratic parties, and it is probably a fair comparison. But Australian Labor is close to being one-off, different to a significant extent to even British and New Zealand Labour, and the difference arises principally in the

force of the trade union imprint.

The social mobilisation of the 1880s and 1890s which produced Australian Labor was first and foremost a trade union mobilisation. In a very special community — a small white population thinly spread over vast areas of somebody else's lands, lands which had been locked up by a combination of British capital and descendants of gentry and officer families — the trade unions by the 1880s had become symbolically and actually "the people". Markey emphasises this point although, somewhat dubiously, he stresses the importance of the urban craft unions in contradiction to some of his predecessors, who give the bushworkers top billing. But, for Markey, this was a class movement, not a popular one.

Markey draws a sharp distinction between the 1891 NSW Labour Electoral League (Labor Party) and the later Political Labor League (Labor Party). The first, according to Markey, was social democratic and the other, he says, populist. He likens the LEL to European social democracy because, he asserts, its program concentrated on democratic political and constitutional reform and new laws to strengthen industrial regulation. Such a "class" program proves, Markey believes, that the early NSW Labor Party was clearly a working class party. Later, the situation changed and a bloc of "utopian-socialist politician intellectuals" with the AWU hierarchy produced populist programs embracing broader issues, for example, women's voting rights and — reflecting the AWU's membership aspirations — land reform.

The argument has a certain plausibility, but there are many curiosities about it. One is Markey's handling of socialism and its significance in the emergence of NSW Labor. What is curious is that while, in many ways, giving an excellent account, Markey seems bent on minimising the importance of socialism, both as an ideology and a source of Labor's programmatic and policy aims.

He goes along with most other opinion in dismissing pre-1890 socialism as a significant influence in shaping working-class ideas leading to the setting up of the Labor Electoral League. Although he subtly charts the more militant and moderate wings of the Socialist League, he adheres to the curious term "utopian-socialist" to describe the moderate state socialist faction that did form an alliance with moderate trade union leaders.

In short, Markey's simplistic view of working-class consciousness tends to identify it with trade union consciousness. Socialism was only one, if the most important, of a group of 1880s radical movements all of which fed into the Labor Party to some extent. In these movements, or influenced by them, were many almost classic autodidacts — a number of them, both Labor Party and non-Labor Party, were printers — who provided many of the initial cadres of the Labor Party. Certainly there was a sprinkling of men and women of wider education and background. But the great majority were radical working-class agitators or union activists. This is what characterises Australian Labor.

Certainly Markey is correct to point to the populist character of the Labor Party, but the matter is more complicated than he suggests, although the variations in the 1890s reflected the fluid nature of populist ideology. Labor populism in Australia probably has four or five major ideological strands: democratism, liberalism (radicalism), nationalism and socialism. Markey deals, sometimes splendidly, with all these. His explanation of the emergence of *fin-de-siecle* populism in New South Wales as a shift away from what he calls social democracy can be better explained from within his own account by studying the interaction between these components as hegemonic and would-be hegemonic class fractions strove for dominance and attempted to articulate various populist ideological elements into their class discourses. In the Labor Party this process has continued without any basic change down to the 1980s.