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Len Fox 1905-2004

Rowan Cahill
University of Wollongong, rowanc@uow.edu.au

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(by Rowan Cahill)

The Eureka flag draped over the coffin of Len Fox was there because Len had spent much of his life, some 60 years and three books, authenticating a flag in the Ballarat Art Gallery as the flag that flew over the stockade of the Eureka rebels in 1854, the symbol, in the words of historian Bob Walshe who spoke at his funeral service, “that most dramatically captures the spirit of Australian struggle for an independent democratic republic”.

Len was a significant Labour movement intellectual, variously teacher, political organiser, pamphleteer, journalist, editor, publisher, historian, author, playwright, poet, artist. Born on August 28, 1905, he grew up comfortably with his Jewish and Irish-Scot-North-of-England family heritages in Melbourne’s Eastern suburbs; an adored uncle was the painter Emmanuel Phillips Fox (1865-1915). Scholarships took Len to Scotch College and Melbourne University; he graduated in Science, gained a Diploma of Education and returned to his alma mater as a teacher.

A wide reader, Len was influenced by H.G.Wells and George Bernard Shaw, and was active in the non-conformist Congregational Church. A developing awareness in the late 1920s and early 1930s that the world was deeply troubled and that modern life posed significant moral and ethical questions, led him to an interest in what is now termed ‘progressive’ education. The key to creating a better world was through child centred schooling, and education that explored notions of individuality, creativity, communality, and freedom, and which took account of modern psychological theory.

With a view to perhaps teaching at a progressive school, Fox went to England in late 1933 to learn from leading progressive practitioners like Dora Russell and A. S. Neill, and he stayed briefly at Neill’s legendary progressive school, Summerhill. However the extremes of the Depression, significant events like the Hunger Marches, a visit to Nazi Germany in 1934, rising anti-semitism, exposure to a range of socialist thought from Christian Socialism to Marxism, politicised the burgeoning educationist.

Returning to Melbourne during 1934 Fox became active in the Movement Against War and Fascism, and soon became Secretary of its Victorian Branch. He joined the Communist Party (CPA) the following year. For the rest of his life Fox earned his living on the Left, increasingly as an intellectual and writer, and he remained a member of the CPA until 1970. When comrades variously left the party in 1956, and in 1968, he stayed, opting to, as he put it, “fight Stalinism from within”.

When Australians mobilised in support of the Spanish Republic in its fight against Fascism, Fox was active on the Victorian Spanish Relief Committee. Here he was influenced by the broad cultural approach of the Committee president, well-known writer Nettie Palmer.

In 1940 Fox transferred to Sydney, and journalism. The war years were spent on the lively four-page Leftist weekly Progress, working alongside a journalists like Rupert Lockwood, Bill Wood, George Farwell. With a circulation of 20,000 Progress was, particularly during the early war years, a major source of Left information and perspective in heavily censored times. The paper folded in 1946.

During the early 1950s Fox edited the four-page weekly magazine section of the
communist newspaper **Tribune**, before joining editor Edgar Ross on **Common Cause**, weekly newspaper of the Miners’ Federation. Following the retirement of Ross in 1965, Fox edited the paper until his own retirement in 1970.

There was a two year break, in 1956-1957, when Fox and his wife, the playwright Mona Brand, worked in North Vietnam helping the government with the English language which had assumed political importance as the language of the International Commission supervising the divided country’s scheduled 1956 elections. Len and Mona had met through their membership of the Sydney Realist Writers Group and married in 1955.

Aside from journalism, Fox was a widely read pamphleteer during the late 1930s and 1940s on political, economic and historical matters. His pamphlets were between 4000 and 9000 words in length, and based on extensive research; aimed at both working and middle class audiences, the language was accessible, the intention tended to be educational rather than agitational, the style dogma and jargon free.

Fox was also part of a cultural minority in the 1940s and 1950s which argued that Australia had a national culture, and directed significant energies to identifying and promoting this. In the face of dominant cultural cringe attitudes, and academic, media and political hostilities, people like Fox, Katharine Susannah Prichard, Brian Fitzpatrick, Stephen Murray-Smith, Helen Palmer, Ian Turner, Russel Ward, did much of the spade work leading to the post-1960s recognition of, and interest in, Australian culture.

During the 1960s and 1970s Fox and Brand were active in a number of committees for Aboriginal Advancement whose campaigning led to major progressive changes in Australian legislation and public opinion.

The bulk of Fox’s literary output took place after his retirement, reflecting a wide range of interests, from the old windmills of colonial Sydney through to the impact of multinationals on the Australian economy. Two autobiographical works, **Broad Left, Narrow Left** (1982) and **Australians on the Left** (1996), have proved to be quarries for historical researchers.

Overall Fox wrote at least 38, probably more than 40, pamphlets, booklets, books, on economics, history, biography and poetry, beginning with **The First World War - And the Second?** in 1935. Aside from his mass circulation pamphlets, his best-seller was **Old Sydney Windmills** (1978), with the proceeds donated to the National Trust. Many of his post-1970 publications were illustrated with his own art work, while a number of his oil paintings were successful fund raisers for peace and green causes.

Looking back on a full life on the Left, the old writer stressed the value of a broad and tolerant approach in personal life and politics, and a wide interest in cultural matters, stressing the need for broad Left alliances to achieve democracy, internationalism and world peace.

Len Fox died in his Sydney home on January 3, 2004. He is survived by many nephews and nieces, and by his wife Mona.

Rowan Cahill.