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A shelf of Reds

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A shelf of Reds

Abstract

A selection of some of the books by Australian radical historians that have meant a lot to us as scholars and activists writing and exploring radical history for ten years together, and for much longer separately. The books selected have either never made it into the academic history canon or, if they did, are now neglected.

Keywords

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Radical Sydney began in June 2010 as a site devoted to the book by Terry Irving and Rowan Cahill titled 'Radical Sydney: Places, Portraits and Unruly Episodes', published by UNSW Press (2010). While this function continues, the blog has expanded as a platform for radical writing about history. The blog is regularly archived in the Pandora Web Archive of the National Library of Australia.

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A SHELF OF REDS by Rowan Cahill and Terry Irving

A selection of some of the books by Australian radical historians that have meant a lot to us as scholars and activists writing and exploring radical history for ten years together, and for much longer separately. The books selected have either never made it into the academic history canon or, if they did, are now neglected.

A SHELF OF REDS

by

Rowan Cahill and Terry Irving

These are some of the books by Australian radical historians that have meant a lot to us as scholars and activists writing and exploring radical history for ten years together, and for much longer separately. We have selected books that either never made it into the academic history canon or, if they did, are now neglected. In the neo-liberal university the production model of research and post-modern theoreticism have deadened the feeling that drove the authors in our selection - the sense of agency and engagement, of being able to make socially useful knowledge in a creative and passionate way. It is hard for scholars on a treadmill, their heads full of buzzwords, to recognise the value of the kind of books we have chosen; hence the neglect.

The books in our selection share some or all of six features that have drawn us to radical history. First, a tradition: over 80 years of radical historical writing, from the 1930s to the present. Second, a method: a history of the common people, and the historical dynamic of struggle in movement. Third, a connection with social movements: of writing within movements, of publishing by movements, of addressing movements. Fourth, a breaking of new ground, as in pioneering studies of events, themes and movements disdained by the ruling historical culture and the leading academic history professionals. Fifth, a battle waged by the authors against indifference on the part of commercial publishers, political parties and leading historians. Sixth, and most importantly, an approach to writing that inspires us to think and act: the authors are partisan and passionate, moved by feelings as well as ideas.

This is our personal selection, deliberately focused on earlier writings so as to establish the existence of a tradition. Others will no doubt have different favourites. That said, it should be understood there are many present day intellectuals in Australia carrying on the radical history tradition, and we follow their work closely. We have in mind people like: Mick Armstrong, Sandra Bloodworth, Rob Bollard, Bob Boughton, Tom Bramble, Verity Burgmann, Carole Ferrier, Di Fieldes, Gary Foley, Heather Goodall, Sarah Gregson, Phil Griffiths, Di Kelly, Julie Kimber, Rick Kuhn, Humphrey McQueen, Tom O'Lincoln, John Rainford, Judith Smart, Jeff Sparrow, Nathan Wise.

We offer this selection to those intellectuals continuing the tradition of radical history in this country.

Keith Amos, *The New Guard Movement 1931-1935, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1976.* This small book (142 pages) was ground breaking, published at a time when the NSW New Guard tended to be regarded as an eccentric, aberrant and isolated rightist response to the Labor government of NSW Premier J. T. Lang in the 1930s. In the hands of Amos however, the New Guard emerged as a highly organised, well financed, and serious fascist organisation, one of a number of right wing secret 'armies' that developed between the

wars in Australia. The book was well researched drawing on a wide range of materials including official sources, private papers, and interviews. Amos was a public school teacher at the time of his book's publication, and he opened the way for subsequent sustained studies of rightist secret 'armies' in Australia between the wars, notably Michael Cathcart, *Defending the National Tuckshop* (McPhee Gribble, Fitzroy, 1988), and Andrew Moore, *The Secret Army and the Premier* (New South Wales University Press, Kensington, 1989). Collectively, these historians established the existence of a plethora of secret rightist paramilitary political formations between the wars, anti-democratic and fascist in character, with connections to serving military personnel, and with membership, organisational and financial links to the highest echelons of the Australian ruling class, and with a collective, often overlapping male membership of some 130,000 members at a time when the male population of Australia stood at two million.

Verity Burgmann and Jenny Lee (editors), *A Most Valuable Acquisition: A People's History of Australia since 1788*, McPhee Gribble/Penguin, Melbourne, 1988; Verity Burgmann and Jenny Lee (editors), *Constructing a Culture: A People's History of Australia since 1788*, McPhee Gribble/Penguin, Melbourne, 1988; Verity Burgmann and Jenny Lee (editors), *Making a Life: A People's History of Australia since 1788*, McPhee Gribble/Penguin, Melbourne, 1988; Verity Burgmann and Jenny Lee (editors), *Staining the Wattle: A People's History of Australia since 1788*, McPhee Gribble/Penguin, Melbourne, 1988. Edited by academic Verity Burgmann and archivist/literary editor Jenny Lee, this illustrated four-volume *People's History* was conceived and published as a critical challenge to the multi-million dollar carnival of celebratory histories and dress-up nationalist re-enactments which marked the 1988 Centenary celebration of the European invasion of Australia. Beginning in 1983 with themed volumes in mind, the editors assembled a large team of specialist contributors, academic and non-academic. The brief was to produce essays on society and culture, with attention to issues of class, race, gender, and sexuality, and to be authoritative, concise, accessible. It was a long, often painful, collaborative creative process.

The editors explained their series aimed at recapturing and bringing into history the voices and experiences of those neglected in conventional histories: "Aboriginal people, women, members of ethnic or racial minorities and the working class in general". The intent was to present readers with ideas and new ways "of exploring the past, comprehending the present, and making the future". Contributor Andrew Milner, in an essay on the history of Australian radical intellectuals inside and outside the academy, argued that academic intellectuals who confine themselves to addressing social justice issues amongst niche audiences of fellow academics in the belief they were tending "the tree of liberty", were delusional and in reality did not change anything; radical intellectual activity had to be part of social movements and the masses. He presciently anticipated the fate of academic intellectuals and their emasculation by the contemporary neoliberal university.

Drew Cottle, *The Brisbane Line: A Reappraisal*, Upfront Publishing, Leicestershire, 2002. Cottle's book, based on his doctoral thesis (Macquarie University, 1991), found difficulties securing publication via traditional scholarly outlets, hence the less orthodox mode via Upfront. Consequently the book did not receive the promotion and distribution provided by a regular publisher, and was generally cold shouldered by academia. Cottle's focus was the belief held by some journalists, politicians and elements of the Australian intelligence community during the 1930s and 1940s, that in the event of the invasion of Australia by Japan, collaborators would emerge to help administer the nation in the interests of Japan, and that these would come from the elites of Australian industry, business, conservative politics, and the intelligentsia. Essentially Cottle chases a phantom, a 'what if' scenario, and ultimately he comes up empty handed. But in hunting this phantom, he engages in a robust examination of Australian capitalism, politics and culture between the wars. Drawing on a huge body of secondary sources, and immersing himself in the shadow worlds of Australian security and intelligence files across numerous agencies, Cottle interviewed key players, trawled through private papers and consular records, along with the records of business and

private organisations. His documentation and interrogation of sources is exhaustive and forensic, and in ferreting sources Cottle acted at times as a detective. The result is a political and economic tour de force, one that casts light on some dark places in the Australian national soul, and rattles skeletons in the closet of its ruling class.

R.N. Ebbels, *The Australian Labor Movement 1850-1907 - Extracts from contemporary documents, Sydney, Noel Ebbels Memorial Committee in Association with Australasian Book Society, Sydney, 1960.* Noel Ebbels became a legend to left-wing students and intellectuals after his death in 1952, thrown from the back of a semi-trailer while hitch-hiking between Sydney and Melbourne as the student organizer for the Communist party. Manning Clark, in a memoir written for this book, remembers his great personal charm and the way charity and compassion enriched his communist beliefs. The documents published here -- supplemented by others contributed by a group of well-known radical scholars -- were a product of his studies in history at Melbourne University for which he received a first-class honours degree. Their significance lies in the way they illustrated the current left-wing myth about the Australian working class's history -- at least in the period they cover -- a myth that equated political maturity with socialist consciousness. So on that score the book is an historical curiosity. But the documents are preceded by a long introduction written by Lloyd Churchward that does something different. He places the working class in its capitalist setting, making one of the first structural analyses of class relations in this period. And a particular point he makes is worth contemplating in the light of the way liberal historians dismiss all scholarly work of this kind as 'radical nationalist'. Churchward points out that Labor's nationalism was focused on state-building whereas the earlier nationalism of the labour in the 1880s and 90s was 'a democratically based nationalism', focusing on building a working class movement. In fact Churchward was prefiguring a radical critique of the nationalist strain in labour history.

THE BRISBANE LINE - A REAPPRAISAL

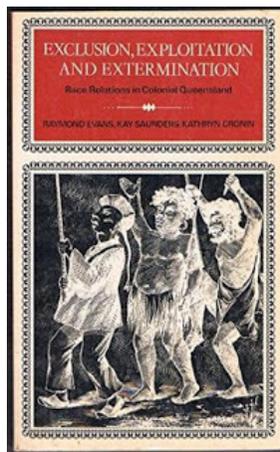
Draw Cottle



Raymond Evans, *The Red Flag Riots - A Study of Intolerance, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, Queensland, 1988.* This was the first book-length study to confront the 'popular and professional complacency' about violence in Australian history. The professionals Ray Evans had in mind were the historians of the generation that wrote and taught in the second long boom, a period when conservatives tried to bemuse us with ideas of people's capitalism, class harmony and upward mobility. These historians taught us to turn our eyes away from violence; there was even a general text called *The Quiet Continent*. Evans was from the succeeding generation of historians whose world-view was framed by conflict. In their work, the role of violence in class and race relations came into focus. But there was often something missing from their studies, a description, or better still an analysis as well as a description, of a ruling class at work. Ray Evans's book on the extraordinary events of 1919 in Brisbane made up for that absence. He directs our attention not just to the horror of the pogrom against Brisbane's Russians and to the vindictive harassment of industrial militants but more importantly to the *mobilization* of intolerance and repression, the range of establishment forces involved, the conspiratorial process needed to direct them, and the sinister connection between wealthy men and state personnel, including elements from the Labor government. In his introduction Evans explains how he was drawn to write 'people's history', and his book does capture the words and experiences of workers and agitators, but it does much more. It shows a ruling class in action, using right-wing vigilantes and pliant state authorities to defend its interests.

Raymond Evans, Kay Saunders, Kathryn Cronin, *Exclusion, Exploitation and Extermination: Race Relations in Colonial Queensland, Australia and New Zealand Book Co., Sydney, 1975.* Later republished by the University of Queensland Press with the title inverted, this book comprised a series of linked thematic essays examining the multi-faceted often violent and bloody history of race relations and racism in colonial Queensland with respect to Aboriginals, Melanesians, and Chinese. For the authors, racist legacies of this colonial past were ongoing in the Queensland of their day. While subjecting Queensland to forensic scrutiny, the authors understood that that racism was part of a wider Australian past and present. Blending history and sociology, this was the first Australian book to attempt the comprehensive analysis/discussion of Anglo-Australian racism as it applied to targeted minorities. It blazed a trail, and evolved out of the authors' various involvements during the 1960s and 1970s with issues of class, women, human rights, and in the anti-war movement and the anti-apartheid campaign against the 1971 Springbok Rugby Tour of Australia.

It was a passionate, committed book, addressing a hidden/forgotten/ignored/denied traumatic past. The authors looked forward to a future in which the legacies of this past were addressed, and society was moving on to a humane social justice based future. Around them they saw hopeful signs that Australia was moving forward in this direction. Their book was conceived to help kick the ball along. Their research was deep, their footnoting comprehensive. Critics picked up on the latter and wrongly



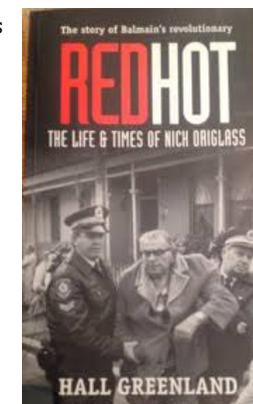
accused the authors of cobbling three doctoral theses together. However, at the time none of the authors had doctorates. But even if correct, that misunderstand purpose and intent. The footnotes documented the existence of a hugely traumatic past, generously pointed future researchers to sources, and martialled evidence; in many ways the book was not only history, but also the past on trial.

Young scholars when they wrote, the authors received little institutional support. They were warned off the project by academic colleagues, and variously faced hostility and apathy. Openly committed scholarship was not the name of the game. Once the book was published, some bookshops refused to sell it. Despite all this, the book went through three editions (1975, 1988, 1993), each with a new Preface discussing related issues and updating historiographical and research developments between editions. As for the authors, two subsequently built academic careers, and one became a human rights lawyer.

Eric Fry (editor), *Rebels & Radicals*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1983. Editor Eric Fry was a labour history pioneer in Australia, and in this book he endeavoured to break away from the genre he had helped create, which at the time had tended to become focused on the Labor party and the trade union movement to the exclusion of broader and more inclusive radical/social historical approaches. Moreover, in terms of labour biography, a canon of characters had emerged, again, primarily personalities associated with the Labor party and the trade union movement. But as Fry argued in 1983, the past and the present involve contradictory and conflicting social/historical forces; rebels and radicals are indispensable agents, helping shape the future by opposing and restricting society's rulers, paving the way for social change, opening doors to/for reformers, and giving birth to what at the time might appear as

'unthinkable'. In the process of this contestation, radical and rebels not only empower themselves, but also others. Fry cast his net widely, and in twelve biographical essays his contributors wrote of a range of Australian radicals, crossing class, race, and gender divides, lives that had previously existed in historical records in fragmentary ways, their radicalism variously played down and their contributions denied acknowledgement as credible critics of society in Australian historical canons, mainstream and otherwise.

Hall Greenland, *Red Hot: The Life & Times of Nick Origlass*, Wellington Lane Press, Neutral Bay, 1998. This book began as a post-graduate project in the early 1970s, before Greenland's possible future as an academic was stymied by vengeful authorities for his radical critiques and campus activities in pursuit of the democratisation of university structures and processes at Sydney University. Ever the activist, Greenland subsequently chalked up a lengthy record in local social and environmental issues in Sydney, was a pioneer in the development of Green politics in NSW, and became a journalist in alternative media, picking up a coveted Walkley Award along the way. Trotskyist Nick Origlass (1908-1996) was one of Greenland's mentors in the 1960s/70s. This book is the study of a cantankerous self-educated intellectual, trade unionist, local politician, who came to understand that global issues could be fought locally, and that the local could be global. It is a radical spatial study of a small area of Sydney (Balmain), its politics, culture, and radical traditions, and of a minor yet important Sydney intellectual/political tradition, Trotskyism, seldom discussed outside of internecine literature. Empathetic, critical, scholarly, enjoyably readable, *Red Hot* also demonstrates that communities can organise, resist, challenge, and defeat powerful interests and forces, and decisions, often corrupt, made at their expense.



Joe Harris, *The Bitter Fight - A Pictorial History of the Australian Labor Movement*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, Qld, 1970. Joe Harris was a Queensland building worker and rank and file union activist who wanted to do something about the ignorance of labour history among his fellow workers. So he took his collection of Queensland labour movement ephemera to a sympathetic publisher who urged him to extend it to the rest of the country. It appeared during a period of rising popular struggles, so when its 'stridently partisan tone' was attacked he responded: 'I am a militant socialist, an industrial worker with first hand experience of strikes, stoppages, and victimization. With such a background it is difficult to be "objective" about the events that shaped the labor movement, or to see much merit in the arguments of those on the opposite side of the industrial picture'. Hence the book's title. It's a big book, with nearly five

hundred illustrations, tied together by Harris's pithy commentary. The photographs, cartoons, leaflets and extracts from the newspapers are beautifully reproduced. Jim Cairns, hero of left labour and the anti-war movement, wrote the foreword – too idiosyncratic to be helpful – but reading it won't detract from the experience of being immersed in a powerful story of successful and unsuccessful struggles, of forgotten events such as the Administrator of the Northern Territory being deported from Darwin by the workers' movement, and of eccentric characters like the future Russian commissar Artem who won the metal shovelling championship while working on the Warwick railway line. Of course there are portraits of the officials and politicians but the lasting impression that the book leaves is of a vibrant labour movement culture, produced by artists, writers and educators – labour intellectuals in short, like Joe Harris himself.

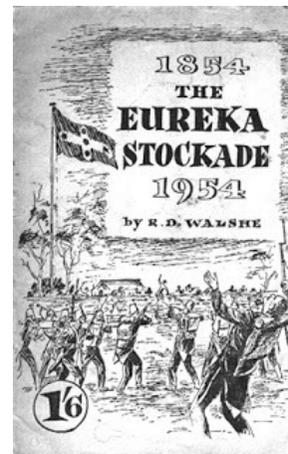
Audrey Johnson, *Bread and Roses – A personal history of three militant women and their friends, 1902-1988*, Left Book Club, Sydney, 1990. Before second wave feminism the left was as sexist and male dominated as the rest of Australian society, and feminist historians in the 1970s were right to point this out. They also contributed to exposing the androcentric bias of class analysis. By 1978, the left was moving to embrace feminism. In that year 2000 women attended the first Women and Labour conference, the papers later collected as *Women, Class and History – Feminist Perspectives on Australia 1788-1978* (edited by Elizabeth Windschuttle, Fontana, 1980). But socialist and communist women, seen through the lens of gendered oppression in the academic feminist studies, often lost their agency as working class militants. Audrey Johnson's book lovingly restored that agency. Her book is a collective biography of Mary Lamm (Wright), Topsy Small, and Flo Davis (Cluff), and a dozen or so of their friends, based on interviews and documents of the time. It follows their lives of continuous political activism from the late 1920s to the late 1980s, in party and union struggles, as rank and file activists and officials, as orators and writers. As the title says, this is a personal history, letting us hear the voices of Mary, Topsy and Flo, but also the author's voice as she sets the scene and explains the significance of campaigns with the same commitment to socialism as her three militants. In their eighties they were still fighting for pensions, women's rights and a nuclear free pacific. Audrey herself was from a working class family. After she won a scholarship to Sydney University, where she was a member of the Labour Club and the Communist Party, she became a social worker and administrator. We met her in the first New Left in the 1960s. As well as this book, Audrey Johnson wrote a biography of left-wing Senator, Bill Morrow (*Fly a Rebel Flag*, Penguin Books, 1986).

Rupert Lockwood, *Black Armada*, Australasian Book Society, South Sydney, 1975. Publication of this book was rejected during the 1960s by the Communist Party of Australia (CPA) in which Lockwood was prominent as journalist, editor, orator, pamphleteer, and intellectual (1939-1969). It was eventually published following the encouragement and support of Indonesia scholars Rex Mortimer and Benedict Anderson. Reprinted twice, it was also translated and published in Indonesia (1983). Drawing on insider knowledge, personal involvement, original research, interviews, and correspondence, Lockwood detailed the lengthy boycott (1945-1949) by Australian trade unions, particularly the maritime unions, of Dutch shipping in Australian waters which contributed to the formation of the Indonesian Republic. Thoroughly footnoted, Lockwood's account was a transnational study and explored aspects of White Australia before these became Australian academic industries. It was also written as a demonstration, and assertion, of the possibilities of trade unions engaging in social and political activities beyond the purview of wages and conditions.

Lloyd Ross, *William Lane and the Australian Labor Movement*, Lloyd Ross, 313 Cleveland Street, Redfern, 1935. This is an unusual book in the library of Australian radicalism. It is both a seminal study of Labor's betrayal of socialism and also an account of what was betrayed, a movement cemented not by personal ambition and collective opportunism but by idealism and feelings, especially love, intimacy and kinship. These were the feelings that Lane inspired and which he drew on for his vision of communism. Lloyd Ross was moved by those feelings too. He wrote the book as a socialist activist on many fronts: cultural, educational, political as well as industrial, for he was the secretary of the New South Wales branch of the Australian Railways Union when it appeared. In fact he self-published it, using his own

funds and the offices of the union in Redfern (Sydney), because no commercial publisher would touch it. And no wonder. He called its first chapter on the 1890s, 'Poets and Revolutionaries', because he wanted his readers to understand two things: that Lane's power was that of a poet, in a time 'when a poet could be a leader', and that 'only when Labor recovers its own idealism will it be able to do justice to Lane.' Since then Labor has been deserted by both poets and revolutionaries; labour history has lost its radical bite; and the book itself has been forgotten. It was almost lost. In the thirties, without the promotion of a commercial publisher, sales were slow. Unbound pages, gathering dust at the back of a Communist bookshop, were seized on the night the Menzies government banned the Communist Party in 1940. Then in the late seventies radical author and publisher, Michael Wilding, discovered that Lloyd Ross had retrieved and stored the unbound pages. Ross gladly released them and radical publishers, Hale and Iremonger, bound them, with a loose cover for which Ross wrote a few paragraphs confirming that fifty years later he still stood by the book's conclusions about Lane and the labor movement. As we do.

Malcolm Saunders and Ralph Summy, *The Australian Peace Movement: A Short History*, Peace Research Centre Australian National University, Canberra, 1986. This small book (78pp) is still the only one on the topic in the field, and that field (Peace Studies) not exactly an Australian growth industry currently or ever, and a pauper concern in a national culture that bankrolls pro-military academic studies and war commemoration with multi-millions of dollars, and publishers who generate a tsunami of military themed publications. Saunders and Summy were pioneer scholars in Peace Studies, and this book is simply what it says it is, the authors comprehensively describing a tradition of peace activism reaching back to short lived and limited protests against Australian colonial support for the British in the Sudan in the late 1880s, but not becoming established and creating continuities until the Boer War of 1899-1902. We have both used this book over the years in our various works, and regard it as an important publication despite its brevity and size, simply because it does exist in a world where mainstream history tends to ignore the subject or treat it as an irrelevancy. When 'peace' and 'anti-war' sentiment has to be discussed, as in the 1960s/70s and the Vietnam War, for example, 'anti-war' activism is treated as being specific to a time, in many ways derivative and imported, and not part of a counter, at times radical, Australian tradition with a long history.



R.D. (Bob) Walshe, 1854 *The Eureka Stockade 1954*, Current Book Distributors, Sydney, 1954; and *Australia's Fight for Independence and Parliamentary Democracy*, Current Book Distributors, Sydney, 1956. In these booklets, in just over 90 pages, Bob Walshe laid down the foundations for the radical study of democracy in Australia. Their common thread was the idea of popular struggle. At that time the new profession of academic history writing paid little attention to Australia, dissolving our history into that of Britain. The development of government organisations in the nineteenth century colonies was called 'the coming of self-government', as if it were a natural process. There was little interest in seeing the process as a contest between the colonies and Britain, and even less on seeing it as contested within Australia. Bob Walshe, although a student of history at Sydney University, drew on a different historical tradition, an anti-imperial tradition that had developed within the labour movement. He read the books and articles of movement intellectuals who wrote history in and for the movement, people such as Gordon Childe, Brian Fitzpatrick, Bert Evatt, Sam Rosa, Bob Ross, Lloyd Ross and Jim Rawling. In the first of these booklets Walshe quoted Evatt: 'Australian Democracy Was Born at Eureka', and taken together his booklets provided the first attempt by a radical historian to justify this statement. He insisted that Australia gained from a world-wide struggle for freedom and that within Australia the colonists struggled to make parliamentary government democratic and to win complete self-government.

Walshe was himself a labour movement activist. Born into a working class family, he left school at the age of 14, entered the workforce, then joined the Army for World War II. Beginning as a Fabian socialist, he emerged in 1945 a communist. Taking advantage of post-war education programs, he went to university and trained, then worked, as a history teacher. All the while he researched, wrote, published, organised, becoming a prominent intellectual in the CPA. Expelled for his role in circulating the

Twentieth Congress anti-Stalin/ist speech by Nikita Khrushchev, which the CPA tried to suppress, Walshe became a publisher and prolific author/editor of books on history and education. His school textbook *The Student's Guide to World History*, in print from 1963-1980 (three revised editions), introduced generations of Australian students to the subject, encouraging a self-directed approach to the subject and its processes. Ever the activist/organiser, Walshe also pioneered environmental activism. His original 1950s research on Eureka continues to be cited. Education historian Alan Barcan described Walshe as "a model activist"; never ego driven, and still an activist at the time of writing, he could be described as 'the most famous person you do not know'.



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