in Britain. While Jackson found himself shunned by friends and family, Ross felt comfortable, for some time, continuing to attend church and temperance meetings alongside those of the Socialist party he was helping to form. Not that the local churches were always tolerant of the new currents in thought. One minister described Freethought as "a hideous cancer, slowly but gradually gnawing at the heart of society, and taking away its beauty, its health, and threatening to deprive it of its very existence." He warned that without the universal adoption of book burning, respect of authority, religious meditations and Catholic education the community would be "engulfed in the frightful abyss of socialism." I am unsure of how Ross's family greeted their son's changing beliefs. Did they know he ducked out of the family firm every week to buy the Worker and read it hidden under 'the frame' while he worked? His father, Robert Mitchell Ross, held a brief and unsuccessful proprietorship of a Toowoomba paper, the Darling Downs Gazette during this time. In it he writes of society emerging from the embryo and 'assuming a higher and more complex organisation', and it is quite possible that by this he meant Socialism and that the family shared their son's beliefs.

Despite his visions of utopia Bob Ross did not follow his hero, Lane, to Paraguay though it seems certain that he might have liked to. Perhaps he was a little young at twenty, perhaps a little in love, a little thin and pale next to the rugged men of the Queensland bush. Pale hair, pale eyes behind frail glasses, a printer's apprentice, perhaps he wondered what good he could do.

As it happened there was plenty for him to do in Brisbane where Lane's departure had left a vacuum in labour propaganda. After the demise of the Socialist League a new group was organised: the Social Democratic Vanguard, which again saw the team of Bob Ross and Ernie Lane. The main objective of the Vanguard was to concentrate on the free distribution of Socialist literature and Bob Ross directed his tireless energy to this task. One of their earliest publications was his 'Let There Be Light', described as a manifesto of 'reason for and work of the Vanguard'. Through the Vanguard Ross was now regularly published in the Queensland Worker, and the Gympie Truth, though rarely under his own name. As was common at that time, as William Lane had done before him, Ross chose a number of pseudonyms to sign his articles: Lionel Lynx, Max Argent, Etho and Comrade Sam seem to be directly attributable.

This work for the Socialist Vanguard in Brisbane led to an offer in 1903 to edit the Broken Hill paper the Barrier Truth owned by the Australian Labour Federation. Still a weekly at this time, Ross would lobby to have the paper made a daily, which it became in 1906 and remains today, making it the first and longest running labour daily in the English speaking world.

Ross was thirty. He arrived in town in the middle of a dust storm with a wife and child and one more not long on the way. This was his Paraguay.

The wide-eyed child who sat on the train from Brisbane via Sydney, Melbourne and Adelaide was Lloyd Ross. Later he wrote of his father at that time:

The working-class that R.S. Ross had known mainly from books and pamphlets became men who worked along the line of lode. Poverty, which he hated as an expletive, became suddenly real as he daily passed the tin shacks and saw children playing among the sand and watched the weary women working in the grim back yards. The theoretical discussions among the members of the Democratic Vanguard were argued out in pubs at the change of shifts, or at meetings of miners, whose thoughts on solidarity seemed to be very different from the ideal discussions of bush workers. Union leaders were not always comrades; friends were rare in number; but deep in their loyalties...
scientific interest and he took some effort to be informed in the area. 26
Like many of his contemporaries, he believed social and biological
evolution were inextricably entwined. Nothing in the Queensland
society he grew up in had lead him to question the assumptions behind
the idea of a superior race, least of all his worship of Billy Lane. In
Broken Hill he would meet other Darwinists, such as Tom Mann,
who had differing interpretations and who tried to argue him out of
his beliefs. 28 He would even become an enthusiast of Kropotkin and
adopt the ideas of Mutual Aid. Yet, still he persisted in his dinosaur
beliefs. When a defence was needed there was always the fear of
cheap labour to fall back on. And, it must be said, for the most part
the town approved.

Later, during the first World War, Ross would become almost
incoherent on the matter as he struggled to reconcile a deep
commitment to internationalism with his support of the White
Australia policy. Eventually, as Graham Osborne has argued in Who
Are Our Enemies?, the conflict would lead to the demise of
Internationalism in the Victorian Socialist Party partly due to Ross's
editorship of their journal the Socialist. 29 In one article Ross quotes
Liebknecht, ‘For Socialists there is no question of nationality. We
know but two nations – the nation of capitalists… and the nation of
proletarians… The workers of all countries form ONE nation,’ but
then goes on to explain: ‘As for ‘White Australia’, its seeming
contradictions with the position presented in these articles. I am
content to say that a White Australia does not necessarily conflict
with the principles of Internationalism.’ The mighty labour crusader
even resorts to the Bulletin to justify his position, ‘A year after this
cruel war is over it will again be possible for an English girl to marry
a German or an Austrian gentleman without losing caste. It will be
just as impossible as it was previously for her to marry a Ghurkin or
a variant Chinese fellow-patriot from Hong Kong without losing
caste. The Race is an imperishable principle, while the flag is a
shipping episode. 30 Could Ross not see that the maintenance of caste
of by marrying an Austrian gentleman had something to do with
class?

It is a question which Edgar Ross has asked of his father. ‘R.S.
Ross was ahead of his times in many ways, why not on this?’ Why
when ‘[h]e could see the future in many ways, a human society free
of exploitation of man by man, free of the gross inequalities between
rich and poor, free of social injustice, free of wars’, why was his
attitude on this determined by the prevailing attitude of the times? 31

In his biography of William Lane, Lloyd Ross points out that
when discussing ‘the colored question, Lane lost all sense of equality,
internationalism, decency, and respect for science. His refusal to
compromise on this issue and his determination to be extreme could
quite fairly lead to the question whether his views on other subjects
were not the result of emotionalism, rather than of intellectual
inquiry.’ Confronting the same beliefs in his father, in an
unpublished biography, Lloyd is forced again to ask this question
and concludes that in this respect only did his father’s ‘ruthless pursuit
of reason falter and confuse the problem in words.’ It is a difficult
position to defend, and the sole defence his son can give is the lame
one of ignorance, coloured by his own understanding of the man:
Lloyd writes ‘R.S. Ross was a quiet, tolerant, lovable personality
and unaware of the injustice and cruelty that his judgement of “the
alum(sic) menace” did to individual Afghans.’ 32

This questioning of Bob Ross’s reasoning is a rare moment for
Lloyd who had a firm belief in the rationality of his father. He speaks
of Ross’s ‘infatuation in the supremacy of reason’ of his search for
a new track to socialism – not through ‘wandering in …circles, nor
following votes, [nor] trust in a mirage, but logically,
methodically with courage and discretion. …His views at a
crisis in his thoughts or actions were not the result of a

confusion of tongues, but were the culmination of the ideas of many
books and much discussion. When a decision was made by him it
was clear, certain, courageous. 33 Certainly R.S. Ross has been long
regarded as a rationalist. He was associated with the Rationalist
Association in Melbourne, his journal, Ross’s Monthly being
considered something of a defacto publication for that group. His
advocacy of freethought was intricately tied up with his socialism –
he once declared them to be ‘one and indivisible’. 34 He has an entry
in the Australian Secular Who’s Who. Yet it is here, in this
interpretation of the man, that we find the most intriguing difference
between his sons. Where Lloyd is adamant that Ross did not ‘trust in a
mirage’ Edgar felt he was ‘caught up in the idealism of the Utopians’
and argues his father’s faith in visions was his downfall. ‘Logic is
not the truest guide, strange as that may seem,’ Bob Ross once advised
his son – advice neither taken nor forgotten. 35

Reading through Ross’s speeches and editorials it is not hard to
reconcile these two views. As Edgar himself has noted, they often
begin and end with wild bursts of poetry or philosophy, some of it
dating back to the little Commonplace book from Brisbane where it
all began. But the body of the text is argument and logic. His lectures
were advertised as ‘meat for strong men and not milk for babies’. 36

The writing was strong. Not just when the cup ran sweet, but
when the wine curdled in his hand Ross wrote strong. After he was
voted out of the editorship of the Barrier Truth because of his
anticlericalism, because he advocated birth control and told the
women of the Barrier where they could get it, because he would
rather see children at a socialist Sunday school than a Christian one,
because he preached himself the visions of a tangible heaven on
Sundays. After the priests and reverends and bishops had installed
that pious liar Joe Morton to his post. After all this, he started a new
paper from within the Social Democratic Club – The Flame, The
Tongue of the Revolution – which burnt like nothing he had written
before.

They made Ross town librarian and he revolutionized the Library,
consolidated and updated their collection and made sure the books
were available when and where the people were. His first report as
librarian to the council expresses his belief in the power of words:
‘Through your libraries, gentlemen, you may largely transform the
community into one of readers and thinkers’. He asks the councillors
to imagine the effect of a book like Upton Sinclair’s The Jungle on a
community if copies were available immediately after publication.
Library membership jumped from 85 to over 1000 in the eighteen
months of his tenure. 37 He went on a speaking tour and words
consumed him – writing, reading, speaking, organizing. But he was
a restless man. Unhappy, unfulfilled – he wrote to Tom Mann, as
though to himself, the task was too little, too long to wait: ‘it is a
question of years of unremitting struggle, with travail and tribulation
all the way – and you’re not prepared for years more in Broken Hill,
Bob.’ 38

Later, after the defeat of the second conscription debate there
would be despair too. After the socialization objective was dropped
from the Labour Party Platform, when he knew that Marx was dead
and worms were riddling his corpse, there was despair. But Ross did
not die a conservative, he did not lose his faith or vision, he did not
despair too. After the socialization objective was dropped
from the Labour Party Platform, when he knew that Marx was dead
and worms were riddling his corpse, there was despair. But Ross did
die a conservative, he did not lose his faith or vision, he did not
die a conservative, he did not lose his faith or vision, he did not
published in the Truth. Adams was a family favourite with the Ross's, in fact another poem of his was published by 'Comrade Eth' in her column on the same page as this verse first appears. It is a poem which neatly captures many of themes that have been discussed today. The religious overtones of fraternity and conversion which are to be found in the socialism of True Believers, and their despair as that belief is challenged not so much by the manoeuvrings of capitalists – no every move they make only confirms and steadies the believer but, by the grinding defeats in countless committees and meetings, by the apathy of the workers themselves by their snarling scorn for those who have come to save them. Titled 'To An Unionist', it is a piece that Ross returned to several times, publishing the refrain to make a point in his editorials or as a flourish to end a column of propaganda. Because of this repetition, because it addresses a despair felt by so many of those who gave their lives to the cause, not in any dramatic way by the shedding of blood, but in the harder more stubborn way of continuing on when the cause seemed lost, because we know that Ross felt this despair and continued on, because these are words from a man who later felt despair so deeply that the woman who loved him 'gave him a revolver and turned away', because of this, I suspect, I know, that for Ross... these words meant something to him.

To An Unionist31

"If you only knew
How gladly I've given it
All these years –
The light of mine eyes,
The heat of my lips,
Mine agonies,
My growing tears,
My blood that drips,
My brain that sears:
If you only knew
How gladly I've given it
All these years –
My hope and my youth,
My manhood, my Art,
My passion, my truth,
My mind and my heart:
"Oh my brother, you would not say,
What have you to do with me?
You would not, would not turn away
Doubtingly and bitterly.

"If you only knew
How little I cared for
These other things –
The delicate speech,
The high demand
Of each from each,
The imaginings
Of Love's Holy Land:
If you only knew
How little I cared for
These other things –
The wide clear view
Over peoples and times,
The search in the new
Entrancing climes,
Science's wings
And Art's sweet chimes

"Oh my brother, if you only knew
What to me in these things is understood,
As it seems to me it would seem to you,
What was good for the Cause was surely good:

"Oh my brother, you would not say:
What have you to do with me?
You would not, would not turn away
Doubtingly and bitterly:

"But you would take my hand with your hand,
O my brother, if you only knew;
You would smile at me, you would understand,
You would call me brother as I call you!"

Endnotes

2 This paper is greatly indebted to an incomplete manuscript biography of R.S. Ross by his son Lloyd Ross to be titled Red Blood and Black Ink/ A Biography of an Australian Rebel. The manuscript is held amongst the Lloyd Ross Papers, National Library of Australia (NLA), MS 3939, Boxes 65-71. Quote and anecdote from Ernie Lane, Dawn to Dusk: Reminiscences of a Rebel, William Brooks, Brisbane, 1939, pp. 59-60.
4 Edgar Ross, These Things Shall Be!, p. 178.
8 T.A. Jackson, Manuscript autobiography, quoted in Vivien Morton, William Brooks, Brisbane, 1939, p. 34.
11 Ernie Lane, Dawn to Dusk, p. 63.
12 Lloyd Ross, Manuscript, Box 65.
13 Ibid.
15 Edgar Ross, These Things Shall Be!, p.116.
21 Edgar Ross, These Things Shall Be!, p. 132-3.
22 Lloyd Ross, William Lane, p. 69.
23 Lloyd Ross, Manuscript, Box 66.
24 Ibid.
25 Ray Dahlitz, Secular Who’Who, Self Published, Melbourne, undated.
26 Edgar Ross, These Things Shall Be!, p. 178.
28 Lloyd Ross, Manuscript, Box 64.