Modernity’s Discontents: Esmonde Higgins and James Rawling as Labour Intellectuals

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Abstract
In the first half of the twentieth century, two young men from different backgrounds broke with the ruling culture in Australia and became labour intellectuals. Why did this happen? Was there some disruptive element in their early engagement with ruling ideas – perhaps in their family life – that made their defection possible? And how did the break occur? Was it due perhaps to a moment of intellectual enlightenment, in which powerful new ideas captured the mind, or did it also involve a coming together of history and biography, a moment of concentrated exposure to modernity’s discontents at the same time as disorienting personal crises? Further, in their commitment to communism, how did they understand their political practice as intellectuals? And how should we understand it? Did it draw on their previous training and experiences? As intellectuals they were ‘modern’ men, but what kind of modernists were they?
In the first half of the twentieth century, two young men from different backgrounds broke with the ruling culture in Australia and became labour intellectuals. Why did this happen? Was there some disruptive element in their early engagement with ruling ideas – perhaps in their family life – that made their defection possible? And how did the break occur? Was it due perhaps to a moment of intellectual enlightenment, in which powerful new ideas captured the mind, or did it also involve a coming together of history and biography, a moment of concentrated exposure to modernity’s discontents at the same time as disorienting personal crises? Further, in their commitment to communism, how did they understand their political practice as intellectuals? And how should we understand it? Did it draw on their previous training and experiences? As intellectuals they were ‘modern’ men, but what kind of modernists were they?

Esmonde Higgins was born in 1897 and James Rawling in 1898. They enlisted in the first AIF, they went to university, and they joined the Communist Party, for which they worked as researchers, journalists, trainers, and organisers in the 1920s and 1930s. They got to know each other in the mid-1920s; they worked together in a Communist peace organisation in the early thirties, and in the last years of his life Rawling planned to write a biography of Higgins. Both of them left the Communist Party. Higgins, forced off the Central Committee in 1930 by the incoming Stalinist leadership of Lance Sharkey and J.B. Miles, drifted away in the mid-thirties. Rawling made a much more public exit in 1940 after the Soviet Union invaded Finland.
He wrote anti-communist articles in the daily press and was a friendly witness at the Victorian Royal Commission into Communism in 1949. He joined the Labor and then the Liberal party. In this period he earned his living by teaching, mainly in private schools. Meanwhile, Higgins who had made a career in adult education remained a socialist, holding a ticket in the Labor Party. Higgins died in 1960, Rawling in 1966.

The Worm in the Bud

Esmonde Higgins grew up in Kew, a middle-class suburb of Melbourne where his father was an accountant in Collins Street, the business heart of Australia at that time. The family values were typically bourgeois – hard-working, public-spirited, patriotic, prohibitionist and non-smoking – and Esmonde’s early life seemed to embody them. He joined the Boy Scouts, attended the local Baptist Church with his parents, and did well at school, becoming Dux of Scotch College. At Ormond College in the University of Melbourne, where he won several Exhibitions, he enjoyed the initiation ceremonies, drilled when the war broke out, and attended the Bible Study circle. Completing his studies he enlisted but arrived in France after the fighting had ended. In 1919 he entered Balliol College in Oxford University.3

Yet the family had other faces, and Esmonde had an elder sister who encouraged him to see them. Janet, known as Nettie, was twelve years older, and by the time he was fifteen she was a poet, a feminist, a socialist, and a teacher with a Masters degree. When he was seventeen she married another socialist, the writer Vance Palmer. Together they taught him to listen for a critical and activist orientation in the family’s apparently conventional engagement with the ruling culture. When his grandmother (who was 88) heard that Esmonde had quizzed the local candidate during the election of 1913 she surprised him by declaring that she hoped he would become a politician, as she would have, had she been a man.4 He was impressed that his mother was interested in eugenics and went to Adela Pankhurst’s “at home” in 1914, and that his Aunt Ina was a leading suffragist in Melbourne. He recorded that after Sunday lunch his father and uncle would discuss their hopes for Irish home rule.5 The uncle was H.B. Higgins, former Attorney-General of the Commonwealth in Labor’s first government,
Esmonde Higgins at Balliol, 1919
(Source: Oxford: Balliol College Archive)
and then a Justice of the High Court. He had paid for Nettie to study in Germany, and would pay for Esmonde at Balliol. Nettie and Esmonde were proud of his liberal and interventionist stance in public affairs. Under Nettie’s influence, expressed through an almost weekly correspondence between them during his adolescence and early twenties, Esmonde became a socialist. More importantly in these years he discovered the ‘vitalist’ principles of progressive social thought. Validating his experiences of war and revolution, these principles would eventually lead him to the Communist Party. He also smoked secretly in his last year at school, discovered alcohol while at Ormond, and rejected his parents’ understanding of Christianity.

James Rawling’s father was a miner in the Hunter Valley. The family lived in Wallsend, a small working-class village on the outskirts of Newcastle. With only one full High School for boys in the area, the competition for entry was stiff, so when James enrolled at Newcastle Boys High in 1912 it was a sign that his mother had decided that at least one of her six sons should be lifted out of a life of manual labour. It was a not uncommon decision in respectable working-class families. The politics of the family were Labor but conventional. James remembers hero-worshipping the members of the British cabinet whose photographs appeared in the *Newcastle Morning Herald* at this time. He was also an Australian patriot. Although he was bright enough to win a scholarship for his last two years of schooling and subsequent training at Teachers’ College, James enlisted in the AIF before taking his final school examination.

But there was another side to Rawling. At 17 he was ordained a Deacon in the Reorganised Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (RLDS), which had a branch in Wallsend. The RLDS traced its roots back to the church founded in 1830 by Joseph Smith Jr, who claimed to have translated the Book of Mormon. Smith dedicated his life to establishing Zion, the kingdom of God on earth, in anticipation of the Second Coming of Christ. After Smith’s death, the founders of what would soon become the ‘Reorganised’ church refused to follow Brigham Young and the majority of Mormons into Utah in the 1840s. So young Rawling, from a working-class family on the edge of the Australian bush, was a member of a minor branch of a fringe church. In the landscape of Australian churchgoing it was but
a tiny hillock. There were 42 members of the Wallsend branch when Rawling was baptised in 1908, and that was about one tenth of the entire New South Wales membership.\(^9\) It must have felt like being a member of a revolutionary political sect.

The RLDS in Australia at that time was a working-class church. There were four congregations of Saints (as

\(^9\) Source: Daphne Rawling)
they called themselves) in the Hunter region, and another in Balmain. Among the attractions of the RLDS to respectable but disempowered working-class families was the opportunity it offered of ‘fleeing to Zion’ where, it was said, there would be neither rich nor poor. Then there was the appeal of the church’s ‘multi-tiered priesthood’, which allowed all members ‘to be called according to their gifts’, and the decentralised and democratic form of church governance. The Saints were encouraged to live near their church, for in cultic fashion the RLDS prized its sense of separation from society and aimed, like the German Social-Democratic Party, to provide for its members from the cradle to the grave, and in the case of the RLDS, beyond the grave. On the other hand, the Saints were missionaries, but unlike evangelical Protestantism, their object was not primarily to save souls, to enable converts to find Jesus, for the Saints did not believe in salvation by faith. They believed their mission was to prepare for the Second Coming. In this sense, theirs was not a comfortable religion. Finding Jesus was difficult enough, but the real test of faith was committing to the reality of the Second Coming, a reality that could not be comprehended by those Christians who prized only the gradual spread of the Gospel. Like the impossibilist Marxists heckling their reformist opponents in the labour movement, the Saints, denouncing their fellow Christians for theological error and corruption, expected to be vindicated by imminent apocalyptic events.

Rawling, despite his youth, quickly became prominent in the RLDS. It trained him as a writer, lecturer and organiser. He embraced its mission with voluntarist zeal: ‘We must not be cold or luke-warm, we must be red-hot; only men are needed in the church who place the work before everything else.’ If Higgins’s family background made him a socialist before he was a communist, Rawling’s in a sense made him a (small ‘c’) communist before he was a (big ‘C’) Communist – at least in so far as the Party claimed to understand history’s laws – for he was already primed by his training to believe that an organisation (the RLDS) would play a vital part in the (eschatological) climax of history.

Modernity’s Discontents – and the Conversion to Communism

It was the First World War that gave Higgins and Rawling a
concentrated taste of the massified, impersonal and bureaucratic conditions of modernity. Their response, a search for personal agency, was distinctively modern. Rawling’s experiences on the Western Front confirmed his sense of mission and apartness. For Higgins, a trip to Soviet Russia in 1920 provided a similar opportunity. But the moment of conversion to Communism would depend on disturbing events in their personal lives.

Higgins was contemptuous of the ‘futile formalities’ of army life; he resented the contraction of his life from active citizen to passive soldier; and he feared the development of an Australian culture of conformity among men obeying orders without question. It was the loss of the capacity for an active, independent and purposeful life that depressed him most, and we see the same anxiety at work in his response to Oxford. Rescued from his duties in the Army Education Scheme by Uncle Henry’s offer to pay for his studies, Higgins was admitted to Balliol in February 1919. By the middle of that year he knew he had made a mistake. Oxford lacked vitality; it was not training him for any useful role in life.

Whereas Higgins enlisted too late to actually fight, James Rawling arrived on the Western Front in November 1917. Knee deep in mud he surveyed the ruin and desolation. Firing a Lewis gun with little apparent result he was soon disillusioned with war, describing it as ‘the apotheosis of stupidity and misery’. Like Higgins, he chafed at the loss of independence and human feeling: ‘One sees his comrades and best friends falling around him and can do nothing to prevent it ...One sees everywhere one’s fellow men lying dead around one, and one takes no more notice than he did formerly of a dead dog.’ Still, there were ways to resist. With his fellow soldiers he developed a ‘vested interest in keeping the war stable – as it was – those who wanted raids and offensives were our enemies.’ Sometimes there was an opening for a confrontation. Barely a month after arriving at the front he claims to have been the ringleader of a jack-up. The routine was four days in the front line, four days in support, followed by four nights in the back of the lines carrying supplies. Arriving back from the front on 7 December, 1917, the officer called them out for immediate fatigue duty. But: ‘we stayed in our dug-outs and refused to answer the call either of patriotism or sergeant-major.’
The war may have brought out an independent streak in his character but it neither upset his conventional values nor gave him the common touch. He remained an outsider, voting for conscription in the second referendum to the disgust of some of his fellow front-line soldiers. After the armistice, Rawling joined the Army Education Service, becoming Battalion Education Officer and earning another stripe. Not long after Higgins went off to get his degree from dreamy Oxford, Rawling embarked for Australia to finish his schooling in gritty Newcastle. After a patriotic, if disturbing, military excursion, he had resumed his path out of the working class. Matriculating on the basis of his war service and Leaving Certificate results, Rawling moved to Sydney and studied at the University and the Sydney Teachers’ College between 1920 and 1922.

Meanwhile, at Balliol Higgins was befriended by Andrew Rothstein, whose father was a representative in London of the Soviet Government. Through this connection Higgins went to Russia in the summer of 1920, worked in a Soviet commissariat for a few weeks, explored Moscow with Andrew and another Balliol friend, Tom Wintringham (revolutionary patriot and founder of the Home Guard) and discovered ‘life in an absolutely different civilisation’. He told his parents that no person could go to Russia without getting ‘violently excited’. His parents must have groaned as they read on: ‘I’m too wildly excited with these ideas to sink back into an attitude appropriate for getting a job. I’ve never felt anything with the conviction I have in these “principles”…’. To ignore them would be ‘shirking an obvious duty’.

The ideas he referred to were those of Marxism, but he did not become a communist because he discovered Marxist theory. It was not that he was disinterested in theory. He had organised a theory discussion group in the Socialist Society in Oxford, and he was attracted to the materialist conception of history, as were his friends Clem Lazarus (who became the businessman S.C. Leslie) and ‘Joe’ Hancock (who became the distinguished historian, W. K. Hancock). His sister Nettie and her husband Vance both agreed with him about the power of the materialist conception. None of these people became communists, but Higgins did. After he returned from his working vacation in Russia, the Master of Balliol reprimanded him, but sent down
his Russian-Jewish friend, Rothstein. From London, MI5 summoned him for a friendly chat about his Soviet experiences but he declined to attend. Although friendless and alienated from Oxford, this treatment only served to confirm for Higgins the validity of his ‘excitement’. He was ready for conversion, but to a way of life not a theory. More precisely, it was a way of life that would integrate a socialist intellectual with the working class that he wished to serve. And so he joined the British Communist Party in 1920.

Explaining how Rawling, a conventional and conservative young man, joined the Communist party is difficult if you ignore his RLDS background and events in his personal life. Naturally, Rawling himself wished to ignore these, declaring to the Victorian Royal Commission on Communism in 1949 that he became interested in communism while writing an essay on Bolshevism for a history honours course at the University of Sydney, probably in 1922.24 The argument that he was under the influence of an overwhelmingly powerful idea would work better if he had joined the Communist party only once. In fact he joined three times: in 1924, in 1928, and again in 1932; presumably in between these dates there was a waning of the idea. So, it is surprising to find scholars repeating Rawling’s rationalisation, as John Pomeroy does when he claims that only intellectual persuasion can explain Rawling’s conversion to communism.25 In the same vein, Stephen Holt has attributed Rawling’s embrace of communism, and atheism as well, to discovering Lenin’s theory of imperialism while studying history with Professor George Arnold Wood.26 Apart from the fact that it is unlikely that an English translation of Lenin’s pamphlet would have been available in Australia at that time, the idea that people give up one set of beliefs because they read about another is just implausible. Additionally, in Rawling’s case, as a Deacon in the RLDS, his original beliefs had brought him respect and given him a sense of vocation.

Between 1920 and 1924, Rawling experienced a series of crises in his personal life. First, he lost his faith in religion. In 1920–21 the effects of a false prophecy rocked the RLDS. A Church sister in Victoria prophesised that there would be seven years of famine that would destroy much of the country. Saints began to stock-pile food. When the famine did not eventuate,
disillusionment and resignations followed. This disturbance is described in a published history of the Balmain branch, of which Rawling would have been a member. We do know that in July of 1921 he resigned as a Deacon. A second crisis occurred early the next year: his girl friend, daughter of a prominent RLDS family, was pregnant. Apprehensive, and lacking the rail fare, he walked from Wallsend to Gladesville in order to front up to her parents. He had very little to eat, slept in railway waiting rooms, and tried unsuccessfully to cadge the fare. It took him three days. Five days after he arrived he married Mary Stewart.

At this unsteady moment he cast around for a new centre for his identity. He wrote to a variety of socialist and radical bodies overseas, including the Anthroposophical Society (of Rudolph Steiner), and the Society for Constructive Birth Control, who sent him a no-doubt useful pamphlet on contraception. And in Australia, it was not the Communist Party but the Rationalist Association that benefited from his organising and proselytising energies. He became the Hon. Secretary-Treasurer, a frequent lecturer, and one of its main controversialists in the daily newspapers. He edited and published in 1923 a new journal for the Rationalists that lasted one issue – another blow to his self-esteem.

Then, early in 1924 the debacle occurred that would ruin his teaching career in the public schools. A summons from the Small Debts Court was served on him at the Crown Street (Sydney) school at the instigation of the Rationalist Association. Inadvertently, he had been using Association money for his own expenses and had fallen behind in the repayments to the Association. It was a small sum (perhaps about fifteen pounds), and as the Rationalists soon cleared him of any fraudulent intention the summons was probably the result of personal animosity between Rawling and another member. But Rawling reacted in the wrong way. Fearing arrest, he stayed away from the school. When the Education Department asked him to explain, he did not reply. The Education Department then dismissed him. Meanwhile, not having told his wife about his debt, relations at home were strained. To find work he was forced to return to Wallsend and live with his mother, leaving Mary and their eighteen-month old child in Sydney. It was at this moment of personal failure and intellectual isolation, a
moment when he needed the support of fellow agitators, that he decided to join the Communist party.

**Intellectuals, Political Practice, and the Communist Party**

When Higgins and Rawling decided to join the Communist party they embraced revolutionary politics but we must not assume that this fully explains their work as intellectuals. This was as much determined by how they understood their intellectual practice as Communists. As Ron Eyerman has pointed out, given that intellectuals are personally involved in their work, the ‘the self-referential location of intellectuals’, that is how they understood their roles, is part of the definition of the modern intellectual.  

In the case of Higgins we have plenty of evidence, for he spent his life trying to understand socialist politics and the specific contribution of intellectuals to it. For Rawling the evidence of his personal views is weaker, but this is in itself evidence about his understanding of his role. Rawling’s intellectual practice was surprisingly little affected by his membership of and employment by the Communist party. It was only in the years after he left the Party that he reflected on what he had been doing as a Communist intellectual.

Here, in a schematic form, are the elements of Higgins’s understanding of his political practice and the steps in its development, after he returned to Australia in 1924. Firstly, he worked out the ethical basis for his politics. He believed that feeling should never be separated from reason when making decisions about political acts. Throughout his life Hig (as he was known to friends) insisted that he could always see both sides of any question, and could therefore not project a course of action based on intellect alone. Secondly, he drew on his conviction that fulfilling personal relationships should be at the centre of wider efforts for change and improvement. Beginning with his involvement in Frederick Sinclaire’s Free Religious Fellowship in Melbourne before the war, Hig placed a high value on intimate friendship as the basis for political activity – on politics as an art of living. Lawrence Stone coined the term ‘affective individualism’ to describe the generalised ethos of modernity, and in particular the modern culture of affection, intimacy, and self-disclosure within the family; we might see
Higgins’s beliefs as a translation of this ethos into the socialist public sphere, a modernist form of affective collectivism. From this perspective, the connective tissue of friendship had to submerge the ego; it required the person to act selflessly, to set
an example through sacrifice. Finally, he drew on the modern tradition of the movement intellectual to define the purpose of politics as the empowering of ordinary people, not only for their material betterment but so that the inspiring and unifying power of beauty could be brought to the masses.33

When Higgins was moving away from the Communist party in the mid-thirties he reaffirmed this position, describing his role as that of a teacher immersed in the everyday world of the ordinary people, empathising with their instinctual life, easing their pain with the balm of culture, and communicating with them, as he put it, in ‘the conversation of human interests’.34 But it is critical for the argument of this paper that we understand that this was also his position as he wrestled with the romance of revolution in 1919. He wrote to Nettie that he was not attracted to revolution because of a fixation with the millennium: ‘I’m realising that the world isn’t a place that would be Eden if weren’t for the Capitalist system… but that the world is made up of mobs of individuals all crammed full of instincts to live and get what’s possible out of life and bring up kids … to get friends and have sprees..., and that all systems, social and political, are very incidental.’ Under whatever system people choose to live, the ‘regulations’ will be irksome. ‘If that is so the mere overthrowing of a few of these “regulations” wouldn’t help matters greatly.’ Rather, the sympathetic intellectual’s role was ‘to make relations smoother’.35

So, if Higgins held this point of view, what was the attraction of revolution? Firstly there was its cleansing process. Reflecting on the Bolsheviks and the Irish rebels he concluded, approvingly, that, ‘The most important thing these days seems to smash without worrying what is to be smashed.’ Secondly, as an exemplary action, it was ethical, because untainted by selfishness, opportunism, or holding on to the status quo. He believed that revolutionaries were honest people: ‘if the rebels [achieve] nothing at all they’ll have at least saved their own souls, and have given themselves as examples of the wonderfully rare thing “sincerity”’.36 But most importantly, revolution was an experience that intellectuals could share with plebeian rebels. By contrast, the main institutions of the labour movement offered no such common experience; indeed the very source of labour’s sense of injustice and its claim to dignity sprang from a
proletarian life-world that middle class intellectuals could only empathise with from the outside.

What he might be able to share, however, with his working-class comrades, was a proletarian public sphere, a deliberately constructed milieu and field of ideas in which ‘workers’, and ‘intellectuals’ were held together in the same ‘public’ by the mediating and directing role of a revolutionary party. This understanding enabled Higgins to join the Communist party in good faith.

So a few months later, after his final exams, he went to work in the Labour Research Department in London, which had come under Communist influence. For the next four years his role was to provide intellectual services to British communism. This busy life fulfilled his desperate need for vital and purposeful work, as he well understood. He consciously repelled his non-communist friends, including Nettie. But he knew exactly what he was doing: he was following orders, because like a Jesuit (which was how he described himself to his parents) the party had a place for him in a project that would overcome his sense of separation from the life-world of ordinary people. He admitted to being ‘a narrow-minded bigot’. Admitting too that the revolution in Britain was not imminent, he still insisted that ‘these days the best thing for people like me to do is to criticise and to analyse the character of the present system; we’ve no chance to do anything but be maliciously destructive…’ As the revolution receded, sectarian certainty increased. Meanwhile, he was deliriously happy. He was the indestructible reveller, the energetic dancer, the weekend cricketer and rambler, the breaker of female hearts, and the boozer who ended too many nights sleeping on the carpet at the Labor Research Department.

James Rawling’s approach to the Communist party was quite different. He used the party. His first period of membership lasted about a year. Then he re-joined when he wanted the party’s support to win a position in the Newcastle branch of the Ironworkers’ Association. He failed in this attempt and dropped out again. Moving to Sydney in 1928 he completed his Arts degree but suffered another setback when Professor George Arnold Wood refused to recommend him as a teacher of history. Over the next three years he consolidated his reputation as a public controversialist in the press and lecture hall, attacking
churches, defending Soviet Russia, and warning of the danger of imperialist war. He joined and soon became prominent in a Communist front body, the League Against Imperialism. Then at the end of 1932 he was re-admitted to the Party, and 18 months later became Research Officer to the Central Committee.

There is no suggestion in Rawling's conversion to Communism that he was involved in working out for himself either a new intellectual practice or a way to live with others. The fact that he understood this is evident in his self-description as a 'lone wolf'.\(^{40}\) That he could carry on the same role in the Communist party and its front organisations as he had among the Rationalists or the Saints suggests that it was their leadership opportunities rather than belief systems that guided his public career. Later, he would ruefully admit to having 'messianic delusions' in these years; he liked to get his own way. Certainly there is no evidence that either the materialist conception of history or Leninist ideology bothered him very much. Thus, the Stalinisation of the Communist party in the early 1930s simply passed over Rawling's head, as he would later admit to the Royal Commission.\(^ {41}\) In 1929 he had written to the *Newcastle Morning Herald* defending working and living conditions in the Soviet Union.\(^ {42}\) In 1931 he wrote another letter asserting that the Communist party was a democratic organisation not a minority group aiming to overthrow the Government by force.\(^ {43}\) An unworldly, impulsive, security-seeking man, he had transferred his 'messianic' delusion from the Saints of Zion to the imperfect men of Moscow.

It also has to be said that the Communist Party used Rawling. He was useful when the rigidities of the ‘Third Period’ line were being overturned by the search for a cross-class alliance against fascism. In this ‘popular front’ period his entrepreneurial impulse and his lecturing, writing and administrative skills were valuable to the Communist party. At the same time the party’s leaders were well aware of his ideological ‘unsoundness’, criticising him publicly on several occasions. Yet they understood what drove him, and gave him another chance to make a mark, this time as a secular Deacon. His life was full of attempts to revive or initiate organisations, journals, schools, research bodies, manifestos and conferences. He needed to lecture and get published, at the very least in the
James Rawling wrote about history in The Communist Review and published under the party’s auspices The Story of the Australian People (Sydney, 1937–39). It was to appear in 10 parts but only 6 appeared. Parts 4 and 5 had attractive modernist covers. (Source: Irving collection)

‘letters to the editor’ columns of the daily papers. He was an intellectual entrepreneur in a particular tradition, that of those dissenters who dreamed of the millennium. Near the end of his life, he would write: ‘We – I – alone in a universe without a God –
all have failed me and now none offers hope, justice, retribution in a planless world.’ Then he listed the Gods whose plans he had committed to: ‘Jehovah, MCH [the materialist conception of history], Democracy – the Free World’, and concluded, ‘all have failed.’

Conclusion

When intellectuals write about other intellectuals they are likely to focus on the kind of knowledge that intellectuals deal in – that is, theoretical knowledge. They are prone to forget that their subjects are sensuous men and women, grounded in spatial and social relationships, and affected by experience. In this paper I chose not to write about Higgins and Rawling as Marxists, as if a body of theoretical knowledge alone constructed their world. I have tried instead to reconstruct their experiential knowledge, or at least a part of it. Taking experience seriously as a source of knowledge means that contextualisation cannot be disposed of by a few token references to historical events and processes; it is necessary to show the subjects actually gaining knowledge as a result of their experiences, preferably expressed in their own words. Inevitably this pushes the analysis on to a biographical level.

The knowledge about politics that Higgins and Rawling brought into the Communist Party was a response to their experience of modernity. Their politics was not a response to class oppression in their personal lives but to the massification of modern life and the false promises of politics pursued through the modern state. They embraced Marxism to understand how this situation had arisen, and Leninism to point a way out of it, but while their political practice now incorporated the proclaiming of Communist truths, each of these men retained a core of political knowledge from their own experiences of modern life. In different ways they arrived at the conclusion that their mission was to make men the subject of history – a typically modernist conclusion.

What is interesting is how romantic their modernism was, especially in Higgins. His idea of politics as an act of moral will, his search for a political life of vitality and affection, his faith in reconciliation and beauty as a way to achieve it, his altruism – all this is the stuff of romanticism. Similarly,
Rawling’s voluntarism, his heroic self-image as the messiah of the masses, and his entrepreneurial approach, are a mile away from modernist ideas of iron cages (Max Weber) and scientific laws (Auguste Comte). On the other hand, there was something calculative in his relationship with the party. That Communism in Australia could accommodate men such as Higgins and Rawling as well as brawlers and bureaucrats suggests a complexity in the composition of the party in this period that is likely to be overlooked. It also suggests that for the study of intellectuals in labour, the quintessentially modern social movement, subjectivity is as important as materialist framework.45

Notes

1 An earlier version of his paper was presented at the ‘Ruling Class, Ruling Culture’ Conference, Melbourne Trades Hall, 19–21 July 2002, to mark the twenty-fifth anniversary of the publication of R.W. Connell’s Ruling Class, Ruling Culture, Melbourne, 1977.  
3 E. M. Higgins’s papers are in the Mitchell Library, Sydney: ML MSS 740. The details of his early life are drawn from these papers, and from the Palmer Papers in the National Library of Australia, Canberra, MSS 1174.  
4 Nettie Higgins to her mother, no date but during the elections of 1913, 1174/1/reel 4. Nettie married Vance Palmer on 23 May 1914.  
5 Nettie Palmer to mother, 3/5/1915, 1174/1/1462; E.M. Higgins (EMH) to Nettie, 0/4/1914, 1065 and 1070; EMH to Nettie, 14/9/1914, 1174/1/1242.  
7 J. N. Rawling’s personal papers are in the Mitchell Library,
Sydney: ML MSS 1326; his political papers (which include material on Higgins) are in the Noel Butlin Archives, Australian National University, Canberra: N57. The details of his early life are drawn from these papers.

8 I am most grateful to Margaret Morris, the official historian of the RLDS (since 2000 known as the Community of Christ) in NSW for information about the Rawling family, the church, and its organisation. My interpretation of this information may not coincide with hers.

9 Gospel Standard, 1/2/1908.

10 Paul Henricks, The Hub of the Mission: A Centennial History of the Balmain-Drummoyne Branch of the Saints Church, Drummoyne RLDS, Drummoyne, 1993, p.8

11 JN Rawling (JNR) to Brother Howard, 26/12/1917, Rawling Papers, ML 1326, K21942.

12 Nettie Palmer published an edited version of EMH’s letters on the army in the journal of the Free Religious Fellowship, Fellowship, vol.5 (6), January 1919, pp. 86–87; see also Nettie Palmer to EMH, 2/12/18, 740/8.

13 EMH to his parents, 2/6/1919, 740/5; to his mother, 16/7/1919, 740/5; to his parents 26/8/1919, 740/5.

14 JNR to his mother Anne Rawling, 29/11/1917, 1326 K21943.

15 JNR to Anne Rawling, 3/9/1918, 1326 K21942.

16 JNR undated notes, ibid.

17 JNR diary, 7/12/1917, 1326 K21943

18 JNR diary, 11/12/1917, 1326 K21943


20 EMH to parents, 13/10/1920, 740/6; to parents, 1/2/1921, 740/6.

21 EMH to Nettie Palmer, 9/8/1919, 1174/1/2212.

22 S.C. Lazarus to EMH, 5/5/1920, 740/11/123; W.K. Hancock to EMH, 21/12/1920, 740/11/143.


26 Stephen Holt, ‘James Normington Rawling, 1898–1966’, *National Library of Australia News*, July 1998, p. 16. Lenin’s *Imperialism* was translated into French and German in 1920; the earliest English translation I have found is 1933, when both International Publishers in NY and Martin Lawrence in London printed the work as vol. 15 in the Little Lenin Library.

27 The Balmain branch was the most active in Sydney, and it is likely that Rawling lodged in Balmain with the Stewarts, whose daughter Mary, he married. See Paul Henricks, *The Hub of the Mission – A Centennial History of the Balmain-Drummoyne Branch of the Saints Church*, RLDS Drummoyne Congregation, Drummoyne, 1993, p. 10.

28 JNR diary, 10/2/1922, 18/2/1922, in ML 1326 K21943.

29 JNR to Hugh King, 5/7/1959, ML 1326 K21942.


31 When describing the practice of the members of the Free Religious Fellowship, H. Winston Rhodes, in his *Frederick Sinclaire* (University of Canterbury, Christchurch, 1984, p. 98), refers to their commitment to ‘the art of living’. He has influenced my thinking on this point, although I want to bring out what might be called the politics of living.


33 Sean Scalmer and I (see endnote 1) have adopted the idea of the movement and dissenting traditions of the modern intellectual from Ron Eyerman, *op.cit.*, ch. 4.

34 EMH to Nettie Palmer, 17/7/1935, 1174/1/1780.

35 EMH to Nettie Palmer, 18/8/1919, 1174/1/2221.

36 EMH to Nettie Palmer, 9/8/1919, 1174/1/2212.

37 I have drawn here on David Harvey, ‘The Practical Contradictions of Marxism’, *Critical Sociology*, vol. 24, number 1 / 2, 1998.


39 EMH to parents, 13/7/1922, 740/6.

40 JNR to Hugh King, 5/7/1959, ML 1326, K21942.
41 JNR, ‘Preliminary Statement to the Royal Commission’ *ibid.*
42 JNR letter to *Newcastle Morning Herald*, 11/10/1929.
43 JNR letter to *Newcastle Morning Herald*, 18/12/1931.
44 JNR diary, 6/1/1957, ML 1326 K21943.
AN INJURY TO ONE
IS AN INJURY TO ALL

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