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SHORT CHANGED


Susanna Short’s biography of her father, Laurie Short, former General Secretary of the old Federated Iron Workers Association (now the Federation of Industrial Manufacturing and Engineering Employees) is a wonderful example of history being written by the victors. This is not to denigrate the author’s work—despite the familial relationship she has managed to write a reasonably critical political life of Short. While we get little flavour of her own relationship with her father, there are small hints along the way, such as her frequent references to the effect it had on his behaviour. She also notes the fact that Laurie would go to the FIA office even on the weekend just to read the newspapers. While Laurie Short is certainly no Daddie Darest, we shouldn’t be surprised that Susanna followed in the footsteps of her mother, Nancy Borlase, as art critic.

The Buried Mirror does not approach the Shakespearean drama which was the fight for control of the Australian trade union movement at the start of the Cold War. It was to determine the nature of Labor and union politics to this day.

Laurie Short was born in 1915 into a ‘respectable’ working class family of Protestant Irish ancestry. With that kind of background Short must, at times, have felt uncomfortable in later life working inside the ALP-sanctioned Industrial Groups with the predominantly Catholic members of Santamaria’s ‘Movement’. As a teenager Laurie moved away from the influence of his father, an avid Lang supporter, into the world of the Unemployed Workers Movement and the Young Communist League (from which, ironically, he was expelled in November 1932 for challenging the expulsion one month earlier of Ernie Thornton). Disillusioned by the Stalinist excesses of the local Communist Party he immersed himself in American Trotskyist literature and, in May 1933, was among those who formed the Workers’ Party of Australia (Left Opposition) with people like Professor John Anderson of Sydney University. The history of that party reads like the script of The Life of Brian (remember the titanic struggles between the People’s Front of Judaea and the Judaean People’s Front?). During the course of his Trotskyist activities he met John Kerr (who, with Jim McClelland, would form part of his legal team to ultimately defeat Thornton), Jack Sponberg (sometime
Metalworkers' official and source of the events leading to the cataclysmic Boilermakers' case of 1956), and the irrepressible Nick Origlass, a long-time industrial and community activist in the Balmain area.

Short's break with the stalinists in 1932 when he was only 17 can be explained in a number of different ways. His ultimate break with marxism and defection to the Groupers is a little more problematic. Inevitably one must wonder if he simply wanted to run the FIA and whether the only way he could achieve that end was not from a tiny trotskyist base but by using the machine created by the Industrial Groups—who were, of course, well positioned both organisationally and politically to challenge the hegemony of the existing stalinist leadership.

Susanna Short attempts to answer this but her father's almost simultaneous rejection of trotskyism and membership of a Group are hard to explain.

To my mind, the best part of the narrative is the court case in which Short challenged Thornton's win in the FIA national election of 1949. Ballot-rigging was alleged and found proven on a grand scale. This case was brought under legislation created by Ben Chifley, according to Susanna Short, at the instigation of her father who believed the Thornton leadership had remained in office by the employment of dishonest means.

The political affiliations of Thornton's group would, of course, have been already well known to Dunphy. In the Cold War atmosphere of the early 1950s it was obviously considered a relevant fact by Short's lawyers. It was noted by Dunphy that a number of the union's female office staff were members of the Communist Party and that the proprietor of the printing firm employed by the union was a member of the Realist Art Club "alleged to be a subsidiary of the Communist Party". His Honour concluded that these persons would be sympathetic to the aims of Thornton's group.

Communist domination in the FIA was over.

Among the many interesting issues the book raises is the question: what makes someone change political sides? Why did so many trotskyists of the time turn into rabid rightwingers? Didn't the ALP, in attempting to contain communist influence in the unions by the sanctioning of the Industrial Groups, realise they were creating Frankenstein's monster? To what extent has intervention by the state guaranteed democracy in Australian trade unions? Why were Australian communists so keen to toe the Moscow line when it clearly didn't always fit local conditions?

My own father worked as a boilermaker during some of the period in Short's book and his stories have made me ponder why Thornton's group commanded the support they did (despite the ballot irregularities) as long as they did. They must have been doing something right. Many large shops remained loyal to Thornton and the communists after the leadership change, including Babcock and Wilcox at Regents Park where my father worked. Another story remains to be told. The defeat of Thornton, McKeon et al probably means that they will remain in the footnotes of history. Academics rarely write about losers.

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