BRADSTOW: A STUDY OF STATUS, CLASS AND POWER IN A SMALL AUSTRALIAN TOWN by R.A. Wild. Angus & Robertson, $11.50 (hardcover) $6.95 (paperback).

Bradstow is the contrived name for a silver-tail Australian country town, real name Bowral – about 80 miles from Sydney in the heart of the Southern Highlands.

The author, Dr. R.A. Wild, a social anthropologist at Sydney University, spent a few years (1967-1970) as a participant observer in the town; he made a virtual one-man assault upon it, gathering his information from the local newspaper (by reading each issue since it began publication in 1884), observing the on-going life of the community, forming friendships, gaining the confidences of cliques, attending meetings of formal organisations (Rotary, Lions, RSL, etc.), joining committees of selected clubs, attending all meetings of local government, over an 18-month period, and conducting surveys and interviews.

The work is liberally sprinkled with direct quotes from the townspeople themselves, the author’s methodology here reminding one of an academic Frank Hardy (of ‘Power without Glory’ days)..... the names being changed to circumvent libel actions.

The result is a detailed study of life in a small country town (1635 households, 5210 people) with an emphasis upon the inter-relationships between class, status and political power in the town, a study which strips bare any pretensions Australians may have of themselves as forming part of a classless egalitarian society.

Wild’s Bradstow comprises six status groups. On the top are the descendants of the old grazing families and those whose family fortunes were made out of mid-nineteenth century industrial capitalism, Tories to the core, enshrining the conservative values of the English rural gentry, keeping mainly to themselves and, naturally, voting Liberal-Country Party.

Then come the “Grange-ites”, Pitt Street farmers, professionals and the like, wealthy refugees and tax dodgers from the city rat race, living in the best area of town (the Grange)..... large houses, huge lawns, extensive landscaped gardens ..... these are the boys and girls who make things move in Bradstow. A simple phone call (or letter, or meeting with) to the Liberal political/fat cat Public Service mates in Sydney or Canberra (remember the study took place before 1972) and they “move mountains” (or millions of bucks of real estate, or frustrate plans for decentralisation, re-zoning, etc.).

Together the Tories and the Grange-ites give Bradstow its political colouring .... right-wing, arch-conservative. It was the Tories who created the town, destroyed the bush and made pastures (planting oaks, beeches, sycamores, chestnuts, willows, to replace the wattle, gum and box); they regard it as their own and together with the Grange-ites – who seek a place in the sun for their new-found wealth and influence – they keep it that way, a sort of twentieth century rotten borough.

Their hold on the town is made all the easier by the sick political apathy of the “lesser” social orders who are kept in their place by a traditional attitude of deference towards the upper class, a hangover from pioneering days when the Bradstow grazing families – geographically isolated from the mainstream of colonial life – managed to virtually re-create a feudal system on the Southern Highlands.
The next status group in Bradstow comprises the local bosses, self-made wealthy gents sitting on piles of wealth reaped from commerce since World War II. These lads dominate everyday affairs and local government and are regarded as socially unacceptable by the gentry and the Grange-ites.

Then come the skilled manual workers and the small shopkeepers, followed by the semi-skilled tradesmen (they comprise 40 per cent of the town's population). And at the bottom of the heap is a tough 4 per cent, totally unskilled, known locally as the “no-hopers”, living in rudimentary circumstances.

“The house is in need of paint and general repairs. The floors are covered with linoleum, and the lights have no shades. The furniture is old and dilapidated and the curtains worn and tattered. The small verandah at the front is full of old wheels, wood chips, blocks of wood, chicken wire, tin cans, tools, old chairs, and innumerable other items.”

Wild tracks his themes of status, class and power through a seemingly endless proliferation of clubs (RSL, Rotary, Lions, Bowling, Country), pubs, organisations (e.g. The Bushfire Brigade, Boy Scouts) and flower festivals. What he comes up with is an eminently readable expose of everyday life in a very conservative, basically right-wing, Protestant (waspish) country town, isolated from the mainstream of society by ‘green belts’ (and few possibilities for expansion), a low population growth, little industry and few foreign immigrants.

Public reception of Wild’s book has been both interesting and sad for reviewers have tended to see Bradstow as a unique comical “freak” of a town. As ‘The Bulletin’ reviewer (July 27) put it:

“Fortunately Australia as a whole is not so stuffy and rigidly compartmented as Bradstow.”

True, but maybe there is more BRADSTOW in Australian society than people think.

Now I’ve worked in ‘Bradstow’ for three years, and during that time lived in a very small country town (population 600) some twenty miles away. And what I’ve seen and heard during that time (especially since 1972 when the federal electorate of which Bradstow is part -- Macarthur -- returned a Labor member, John Kerin, to Canberra) gives me cause for alarm.

Why Labor won is a long story but is basically accounted for by the rapid expansion of the industrial areas to the North and East of the electorate.

The federal election campaigns of 1972 and 1974 revealed the tensions and fears that lie beneath the flower festivals of Bradstow.

Labor Party posters blown to pieces by shotguns; systematic destruction of ALP display material; the local newspaper placed a prohibitive loading on advertising rates when it came to Labor election material; hospitalisation of the pregnant wife of the local ALP Branch secretary resulted from undue campaign pressures; Department of Main Roads intimidation and harassment to prevent ALP signs from going up along the highway; smears of an intimate sexual nature circulated by local liberals against Kerin; Labor Party campaigners refused service in a local pub; an ALP activist threatened service in a local pub; an ALP activist threatened with demotion by the local BHP enterprise if he didn’t resign from his executive position in the local branch; talk among the small farmers and orchardists near where I live, out where the Festival of Light movement and the League of Rights are exceptionally strong, of forming vigilante groups and the necessity of taking up the gun if Labor won ...... and the local Liberal candidate (comfortable dairy farmer and local mayor) declared his intention of clearing out for Spain (where he said some of his best friends have established themselves in baronial splendour) if Labor won.

The same sorts of tactics that helped unseat Al Grassby, tactics that reek more than strongly of the Country Party.

The crucial thing to realise about the nature of this opposition, its mealy-mouthed sinister ferocity, is that the losers cannot accept that they have lost. For in their psyches they are the guardians of the Australian way of life, they -- the owners of property, the employers, the managers -- are the trustees of the nation, the best fitted to manage and control ...... they have lost what is “rightfully” theirs.
Living in Bradstow country you get to know the intensity of opposition to the ALP that can exist, an opposition based on ideas typical of this paragraph from a recent letter to the local newspaper:

"I see my Australia, of which I was once so proud, being destroyed into a weak, cringing copy of its former self, destroyed from within and dependent upon others instead of being proud and defiant. I see the Labor Party’s intention of destroying completely any individual’s attempt to assert him or herself as a separate identity."

My point is that there are other Bradstows around the country, out in the rural areas, the political consciousness of their inhabitants moulded by the Country Party and outfits like the League of Rights, where fear and hatred are more and more coming to the fore and seeking political expression.

And the further you get away from the large centres of population the greater the fear and hatred seems to get, and with that the greater the tendency towards right-wing extremism. Geographical isolation coupled with the human isolation peculiar to farming as a work activity are conducive to the scare tactics of a Doug Anthony, the hatred and fear of a League of Rights, the moral fanaticism of a Festival of Light.

I note it was the Albury Branch of the RSL which initiated the popular move in the NSW branch of that organisation to establish a 100,000 strong uniformed volunteer paramilitary defence force. And from the Western Australian Farmers’ Union the call for farmers to withhold livestock from markets and cease payment of income tax to counter what was seen as the “disintegration of the Australian quality of life”. (SMH, August 27).

In many ways for the left in Australia, Bradstow is -- and will increasingly become -- the hurdle and frontier that must be overcome and conquered.

-- ROWAN CAHILL.


I found Trotsky’s ‘1905’ a stimulating and exciting book. Packed in its pages are a multitude of elements: the broad sweep of the revolutionary crisis, intimate portraits of figures of the times, the psychological dynamics causing people to revolt, generalised theories of revolution and detailed scientific evidence to back those theories.

This Pelican edition of ‘1905’ consists of a core -- 1905 itself written in 1908-9. In addition, there are Trotsky’s polemics within the Russian revolutionary movement: “Our Differences” -- an attack on Menshevism, and “On the Special Features of Russia’s Historical Development” -- a 1922 polemic with M.N. Pokrovsky. Trotsky’s speech to the Tsarist court trying the St. Petersburg Soviet is also included, and finally, a fitting end-piece to the whole work is the adventurous tale of Trotsky’s exile to Siberia and his subsequent escape across the snowfields.

Throughout the pages of the book, Trotsky is revealed as someone whose eye for detail and whose “feel” for a situation is remarkable whether at a demonstration in the streets of St. Petersburg or in an Ostyak village during his escape.

He is at once a historian and a maker of history, a theorist and hard-working activist.

The events of 1905 are reported not in the dry progression of many historians but in a way that combines both literary features (scraps of actual conversation, rhetorical flourishes and sustained imagery) and cool political analysis.

The events of 1905 begin on January 9 when Father Gapon led a demonstration bearing religious banners and ikons to petition the Tsar. The Tsar’s response was to unleash cossacks upon the crowd -- Bloody Sunday. The workers responded with a wave of political strikes that convulsed Russia from one end to the other.

There followed a contradictory period in which political ferment expanded in a
situation combining repression and certain limited freedoms. The universities became islands of free debate and into their quadrangles flooded the proletariat. The worker-student solidarity is vividly described by Trotsky and a strikingly familiar note is struck -- what is it? -- of course, the Sorbonne in 1968.

In September another all-Russian wave of political strikes is touched off, they pause, draw breath and plunge into the far more profound revolutionary crisis in which the Soviets are built.

Trotsky’s activity in the events of 1905 was firmly based on marxism and more particularly, a specific creative development of marxist theory -- the theory of permanent revolution. The basis for this theory can be found in the first four chapters of ‘1905’. Trotsky presents the dilemma of Russia for marxists: the backward feudal agricultural system side by side with the most concentrated industrial works; the monstrous growth of the bureaucratic state which dominated even the bourgeoisie and used “modern technological progress in order to retard the historical progress of its own country”. Russia was a country which defied the theories of dogmatic marxists who saw history and revolution advance in neat mechanical stages: feudalism -- capitalism -- socialism.

Trotsky used marxism in a creative way to advance revolutionary theory about Russia. First, simple observation showed him that “we have never had even a trace of that sturdy middle-class which first lived through centuries of self-govern.nent and political struggle, then, hand in hand with the young, as yet unformed proletariat, stormed the Bastilles of feudalism”. In other words, a classic bourgeois democratic revolution was simply not possible in Russia. The belated development of capitalism in Russia was totally under the domination of advanced European finance capital. Technology, too, was imported, like capital, and these features resulted in “combined and uneven development” (Trotsky’s phrase). The role of the State in Russia naturally developed differently from that of European states which Marx analysed -- while it dominated the bourgeoisie, and initiated industries it was, of course, a fierce defender of the status quo.

The consequence of all this for practical politics was that there was no water-tight division between the democratic stage and the socialist stage of revolution -- one grew into the other in a permanent process, in an uninterrupted fashion.

When the state granted even limited democratic freedoms under challenge from mass strikes of the proletariat, an inherently unstable situation was immediately created. The revolutionary dynamic unleashed immediately posed the question of power and of which class would lead the continuing struggle. Either there was a reversion to absolutist state power (which occurred in 1906) or a socialist revolution (a la 1917).

History showed the latter road for fifty days in 1905: the proletariat was organised into a qualitatively new organisation which transcended the trade unions -- the workers’ state in embryo, the Council of Workers’ Deputies, the Soviets. This was a “revolutionary workers’ council of self-management” (Trotsky).

Of central strategic importance was this new creature, the Soviet; yet while Trotsky gives it the importance it deserves, his description of its origins and of the response of the revolutionary left of Russia leaves much to be desired.

I have a small booklet entitled “Democratic Centralism -- the Democratic Aspect”, subtitled “Lenin in 1905” by Marcel Liebman -- it is, I think, reprinted from ‘Monthly Review’, alas no date or source is given. In it is described the attitude of Krasin the Bolshevik representative on the young St. Petersburg Soviet. He demanded officially that it accept the program...
by stalinism, does not even give fair credit to the Mensheviks.

Above all, Trotsky did grasp the revolutionary significance of the Soviet -- that it was a CLASS organisation, not an industry or craft organisation and that it began to organise and exercise its own authority counter to the regime.

* * *

In describing this period, we have vivid pen-portraits such as of Gapon:

“A spinner of fantasies on a psychological subsoil of adventurism, a southerner of sanguine temperament with a touch of the confidence man about him, a total ignoramus in social matters, Gapon was as little able to guide events as he was to foresee them...”

and of the Tsarist police chief:

“...This most foul specimen of the Russian bureaucracy’s foul mores, this thievish official whom even the unforgettable Alexander III himself was obliged to throw out with the energetic words ‘remove this swine’, this Durnovo was now brought out of the rubbish bin ......”

Trotsky’s ‘1905’ is a history written by a literary man -- by a participant in the events described.

In its own way, ‘1905’ reflects the historical and social milieu which gave us the “great” Russian novels. It contains on the one canvas the sweeping vastness of the revolutionary tide and the personal observations of a revolutionary of central importance.

A very good introduction to Trotsky and his style.

-- D. McKNIGHT.