REBELS AND RADICALS

Reviewed by Drew Cottle

MASSSES ARE THE MAKERS OF HISTORY

Students, teachers, researchers and writers of Australian labour history owe a great debt to the work of Eric Fry. A foundation member of the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History, Eric Fry has spent a lifetime selflessly devoted to the promotion of Australian working class history, in all of its many aspects. But, more importantly, Eric Fry, like the late Alan Marshall, identifies most strongly with the driven, the battlers of Australian history.

In Rebels and Radicals, Fry has been given the opportunity to assemble the writings of like-minded souls to produce a highly readable document in Australian popular history, of which there are far too few in these dolorous days of corporate consensus.

All the essays contributed to Rebels and Radicals take up the political position of the oppressed and the exploited, whether they be Black Australian guerrilla leaders like Musquito, or 'Rebel' Major, convict poets, damned democrats, Eureka rebels, radical women or I.W.W. members who refused to cower to state repression. Fry and his fellow contributors have made a valiant attempt to tap that rich vein of radical opposition to colonialism, capitalism and imperialism which ofttn doesn't even make the footnotes in most conventional narratives of Australian history. This alone is a great service to radical Australian historiography.

The chapters of Rebels and Radicals which investigate the episodes of the Black Australian resistance to the heinous brutalities of British colonialism make powerful reading. Christine Wise and Bruce Shaw provide, in their separate essays on Musquito and Major, moving testimonies to the struggles of these black heroes. In fact, the boldness of Musquito, Major and countless other Black Australian warriors not only ensured that colonialism was never totally victorious, but also engendered and inspired a long tradition of Aboriginal resistance to capitalist oppression and exploitation.

Biographies of those who rebelled against the blood-soaked tyranny of British penal servitude are compassionately recounted by Gordon Niall Stewart, John Meredith and Rex Whalan. Like Bruce Shaw in his depiction of 'Rebel' Major, Stewart adopts a Hobsbawmian approach to the 'primitive rebellion' of the Bathurst Ribbonmen and their tribune, Ralph Entwistle. A strong sense of time and place is evoked in Stewart's account of the Bathurst convict uprising. We are shown the calculating ferocity of the colonial floggers and their red-coated minions; the continuous brutality of the convict masters which detonated the convict outbreak; the pluck and ingenuity of the 'impossible revolution' of Entwistle’s rebel band. One can only hope in this time of approaching ruling class bicentennial forgetfulness that Entwistle and his insurgents are not expeditiously passed over by those who are genealogically fixated with the fashionable possibility that they may have a convict ancestor as long as he or she is of the calibre of a Francis Greenway. A vain hope.

The heirs of the master class can have their Simon Lords and Francis Greenways; the Australian working people have the convict poet who would not be silenced, Francis MacNamara. Floggings, the treadmill, the killing labour of the colonial quarries never broke the defiant tongue of Frank the Poet. John Meredith and Rex Whalan trace out the life of this convict rhymer who was transported to British Australia for the capital crime of plaid-
stealing. MacNamara's sharp, satirical voice and unrepentant behaviour saw him sent many times to the triangles to suffer the whippings of Lord Lash. But his mocking verses against the hated colonial oppressors and their penal system were known word-perfect by every human being who was forced to endure the brutalities and indignities of British convictism. The enshrined 'articulate' were given the tongue of an antipodean Shelley. MacNamara's brand of committed poetry would gain a ready audience in the factories, the mines, the building sites and the dole queues of the present wage-slave system. And, no doubt, at any workers' smoko the spirit of Frank McNamara system. And, no doubt, at any workers' smoko the spirit of Frank McNamara will be present. Those generations of working people who built but never owned Australia find comfort and inspiration in MacNamara's epitaph:

"... Sworn to be a tyrant's foe
And while I've life I'll crow ..."

The tragic Dan Deniehy is Gerald Waish's biographical subject. Deniehy railed against 'the Botany Bay aristocrats' and their high-handed efforts to stifle an emergent Australian democracy. He would have no truck with the Geebungs' visions of paternal despotism. At street meetings, on the parliamentary floor and through the pages of the *Southern Cross*, he campaigned against the infamies of the squatters and their English overlords.

The land-owning class moves swiftly against this eloquent preacher of 'mob rule'. By the end of his life, the radical democrat was delivering rambling, racist speeches against the Chinese and giving up his body and soul to the lost world of grog. Although Deniehy died destitute and broken, many of the labouring classes and not a few of the more independent-minded members of the urban bourgeoisie took up Lang that his newly adopted home of Australia should be free of British capitalism's ills and pursue an independent path similar to that of the American bourgeoisie. Frequent tours of the Australian countryside confirmed Lang's republican convictions. Lang took up Dan Deniehy's cudgels with a vengeance.

His former eminent Tory friends saw him as a mob orator who chanted the seditious message of universal manhood suffrage (Lang opposed votes for women on the basis of the quaint notion that it was never advocated in the Bible), land for the people (this demand earned Lang the lasting enmity of the squatters) and a fully independent Australian republic. Though some purists, cocooned in their own historical present-mindedness, may scoff at the suggestion that J.D. Lang was in any way a radical, D.W.A. Baker, by investigating this wayward Scottish Presbyterian in his own historical context, presents us with the political transformation of an unquestioning conservative into a republican thunderer.

Jennifer Lorch's portrayal of Raffaello Carboni adds immeasurably to our knowledge of this complicated son of an Urbino shopkeeper who wrote as an insider at the base headquarters of the Eureka rebels. Carboni appears as a gifted but frustrated radical intellectual. He was a capable linguist, widely read in the European classics, an amateur dramatist, served with Garibaldi's Red Shirts and, thankfully, was on the independent path similar to that of the American bourgeoisie. Frequent tours of the Australian countryside confirmed Lang's republican convictions. Lang took up Dan Deniehy's cudgels with a vengeance.

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Above: Musquito: From March 1820, dozens of huts and houses were attacked, stripped and fired, and the occupants speared and clubbed.

Below: The 'Rebel' Major: Aboriginal captives in chains during the taking of the East Kimberleys.

his beliefs like his fellow diggers and not the comic opera sentimentalist full of excessive hyperbole as depicted by more conventional historians. For this alone, all Australian republicans should be thankful to Jennifer Lorch.

Corns on male chauvinist feet are rudely stepped upon by Susan Magarev, Farley Kelly and, to a lesser extent, by Brian Matthews in their essays on Catherine Spence, Brettena Smyth and Louisa Lawson. Each of these radical women challenged, and sometimes triumphantly overturned, the patriarchal conventions of late nineteenth century Australian capitalism. Catherine Spence suffered the abuse, scorn and apathy of much of Australian manhood as she and a valiant band of women attempted to win the vote for women of whatever class.

As a first-wave feminist, Spence defiantly carved out a radical life devoted to electoral and social reform, critical journalism and the demand that women take an active part in public life. Although never a class traitor in the same way as Rosa Luxemburg, Alexandra Kollontai and Constance de Markievicz were, Catherine Spence did attempt to give substance to the bourgeois homilies on democracy and individual liberty. Susan Magarey has rescued Catherine Spence from the patriarchal silence and condescension of bourgeois historiography and placed her rightfully at the crest of Australian first wave feminism.

Farley Kelly has set herself the more difficult task in her study of that largely unknown feminist radical, Brettena Smyth. Unlike the Magarey and Matthews contributions on Catherine Spence and Louisa Lawson, Kelly has had to painstakingly drag the strands of Brettena Smyth’s biography together. She presents the reader with a fine example of committed history. Smyth emerges as a remarkable ‘forgotten’ radical, one whose entire life was committed to progressive social change. Widowed during “the white plague” of tuberculosis in 1873, this North Melbourne woman was left to her own scant resources to bring up her family of six. In her greengrocery-cum-confectionery-cum drapery shop, Smyth eked out a living for the young family. Bearing all of the ‘male’s’ responsibilities, but being denied the right to vote or transmit property, Smyth began to critically question capitalist social relations. She broke with the Pauline rigidities of Catholicism, mingled with the Victorian Women’s Suffrage Society, joined the Australasian Secular Association and developed into a formidable polemict firing salvoes against religious bigotry and ‘male bias’, social and political inequality between the sexes and the need for democratic marriages.

She became a strident temperance campaigner, seeing the destruction excess alcohol wreaks on working people’s material existence and believing, wrongly, that a ‘dry’ Melbourne would somehow escape the class ills of capitalism. A social ‘wowser’, Brettena Smyth, however, was not. She alienated much of respectable Melbourne by her championing of the sexual and social rights of the poor. Baby farms, infanticide, rape, prostitution and the chronic ill-health of the working class could, the radical Smyth argued, be presented by steady work, better housing, the condom and the wide dissemination of practical sex manuals. Although idealist solutions to the harsh realities of capitalism’s ‘free enterprise’, Smyth’s radical demands threw down an ideological challenge to the safe lives of ‘Marvellous Melbourne’s’ high bourgeoisie.

If Brettena Smyth is a little known nineteenth century radical fighter, Louisa Lawson’s name (but perhaps not her life) is remembered by most students of Australian labour history often only as the mother of a famous radical writer, or an in-law of a demagogic Labor premier hailed as being ‘greater than Lenin’. The
uncompromising radical, Louisa Lawson has been made ‘the madonna of the sink’, to employ a Stuart Hall phrase, by most orthodox labour historians; the ‘little woman’ behind the great labour men. Matthews’ examination of Louisa Lawson’s “Dawn Crusade” is mercifully free of the ‘great male’ syndrome’s principal errors.

Through Matthews’ pen, Lawson emerges as a woman constantly at war with the suffocating patriarchy of late nineteenth century capitalism. Her creative potential seemed thwarted at every turn. Her unhappy marriage to Peter Larsen was but the beginning of her problems; the first of many social constrictions. She craved to be in intellectual company; to exercise her prodigious intellect on all manner of controversial subjects, particularly those which directly concerned women. Her ‘neurosis’ led to the establishment of Dawn, the first defiantly feminist press in the Australian colonies. The pages of Dawn sparkled with the biting articles and editorials of Louisa Lawson and her radical colleagues. The Dawn addressed all of those problems constantly reproduced in the social relations of capital — domestic violence, sexual exploitation, the tyrannies of a propertyless, male-dominated marriage, women’s physical and mental health problems some sections of the contemporary Left grandly designate as secondary contradictions and consign to the ‘after the revolution’ category. Louisa Lawson and her co-feminists would remain unimpressed.

The Dawn crusade petered out in the first few years of the twentieth century. Matthews provides few reasons for the paper’s closure, apart from Louisa Lawson’s running cattle with the petty caesars of the Post and Telegraph Department. We learn nothing of the Dawn’s circulation figures, the character of its popular audience, its financial position, its internal battles, its relationship to the fledgling labour movement or its effect on the social life of its rebel editor. Presumably, Matthews will investigate these questions in his awaited biography of Louisa Lawson. Hopefully, such a study will reveal far more about this ‘forgotten’ radical declared by the state to be ‘insane’ and, at life’s end, laid away in a pauper’s grave.

The final chapters of Rebels and Radicals are thumbnail sketches of two battle-hardened, unrepentant rebels, W.R. Winspear and Monty Miller. For the authors of these too brief rebel portraits, Verity Burgmann and Eric Fry, their work was a labour of love. Winspear, as Burgmann demonstrates, formulated his own variant of ‘socialism’ from the hard school of class struggle. Denied contact with European marxism, Winspear and many other colonial radicals were set the task of building their own socialist doctrines. Utopianism, fabianism, anarchism and, later, syndicalism, were the theories which informed not only the debates about, but also the practice of, an emergent Australian socialism.

In such a situation, Winspear and a host of worker-intellectuals became self-taught socialists. The pamphlet, the broadsheet, stump oratory, satirical songs and cartoons were their means by which to broadcast the message of socialism to a mass audience still largely denied even the rudiments of an elementary education. Winspear devoted his mighty pen to this daunting task.

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Burgmann follows Winspear on his evangelising peregrinations through his disputes with compromisers, opportunists and vacillating utopians and his evolution into an uncompromising member of the Australian Socialist Party. By adopting this biographical tack, Burgmann also provides her reader with many fine examples of Winspear’s pamphleting skills; a proletarian literary form which, in Winspear’s hands, bursts with mocking contempt for the boss class, their Tartuffes, their social system and the bloody monster, imperialism. Two examples of Winspear’s irreverence will suffice. Fragments from Winspear’s Ten Commandments of Capitalism”:

1. I, the Capitalist, am the Lord thy God. Thou shalt have no other gods before me.
2. Honor thy father and mother, and thou shalt do them what they desire, that thy days be long in My land, which the Lord thy God giveth thee in return for rent, interest, profit, etc.
3. Thou shalt not steal — from Me: but thou shalt not complain when I steal from thee, nor when I command thee to go forth and despoil mine enemies on my behalf.

And two stanzas of an unnamed poem, his last published work, written in the depths of the 1930s Depression:

Sing a song of sixpence,
And sound financial rules,
Drawn up by the bankers,
To govern all the Fools.
The banker’s in his counting house,
Making heaps of money, while people starve who cannot buy
Their milk and bread and honey.

This last published poem illustrates that Winspear even in his mid-70s had lost none of the proletarian clarity in exposing the political power of the rich and their fraudulent schemes for ‘recovery’.

In the last decade of a radical life, Winspear could look back on the great class battles in which he vigorously participated. Perhaps none was more momentous than the anti-conscription campaigns of World War I. His white-hot pen denounced the imperialist war and the Australian...
Whatever the reason, Verity Burgmann’s instructive summary of W.R. Winspear is in the best traditions of history-from-the-bottom-up. If Francis MacNamara was the voice of the oppressed, W.R. Winspear was their hand; both were blessed with Blakeian ‘eyes of fire’. And so, too, was Monty Miller, a worker who never gave up the struggle against the class robbery and oppression of the rich, as Eric Fry’s final chapter makes abundantly clear.

Miller, the ‘life-long radical’, travelled the length and breadth of Australia campaigning for the rights of Australian workers. His lengthy term of active service in the class spanned the EurekaStockade and the state terror against the I.W.W. (of which Miller was a member) during the First World War.

Typically, Miller, when before the beak in the state’s show trial against the I.W.W., used the court as a platform to denounce the bourgeoisie and their grubby wartime conspiracies against those who refused to obey their class laws.

Miller, eighty-four, a hero of Eureka, was first sentenced to jail for two years, but the sentence was waived because of his age and frail health. Miller, forever the fighter, did not want the judge’s mercy, but social justice. It was an evergreen characteristic of Monty Miller, a trait first formed during those climactic months on the Ballarat goldfields in 1854.

As Eric Fry carefully explains, although Monty Miller could look back on a long career devoted to the people’s cause, he was not a rebel given to nostalgia for a golden victorious past. Rather, Miller’s cool head ruled his passionate heart. He made incisive assessments of past struggles; the victories, the unpalatable compromises, the bitter defeats.

He was a significant working class intellectual. Everything of importance to the Australian working class was assiduously studied – English chartism, American democracy, European socialism, British imperialism, the Westminster parliamentary system, atheism, anarchism, syndicalism. Miller’s desire for theories and practical information pertinent to a revolutionist was inexhaustible. He harboured no illusions about the nascent Labor Party but, instead, worked persistently in Victoria and New South Wales during the 1890s to give it a mass base among the working class. He helped organise unions among ‘the less skilled’ of the labouring classes. He lectured on secularism in prim Melbourne and campaigned for the Sunday opening of public libraries and art galleries so that the masses, too, could consider the books and paintings of colonial bourgeois culture. He threw his considerable energies behind the movement demanding women’s rights.

With the formation of the I.W.W. in the U.S.A., Monty Miller drew deeply on their theoretical arguments and practical politics. Miller was in the van, forming I.W.W. clubs and propagating syndicalist solutions to end the rule of capital.

With the advent of the first imperialist war and the Labor Prime Minister Fisher pleading Australia’s ‘last man and last shilling’ to British imperialism, it was only a matter of time before Monty Miller and other ‘wobblies’ with their determined anti-imperialist war position would be in the bosses’ courts or His Majesty’s jails. Fry’s account of the rebel, Monty Miller, is as lucid as it is inspiring.

Rebels and Radicals deserves a wide popular audience. It is the stuff radical Australian history is made of. It should be the impetus needed for a vast dictionary of forgotten labour radicals and rebels along the lines of the British Labour Dictionary to be started. This is not because the white Bicentennial ominously approaches. Instead, it is an appeal, a Mayday, to preserve the memories of all those rebels and radicals who stood up for their rights against the tyranny of capital.

Finally, a minor complaint, a quibble. Rebels and Radicals requires a better cover. The reproduction of Grace Cossington Smith’s Strike will never do. Cossington Smith as Humphrey McQueen informs us in The Black Swan of Trespass (p.66) feared and was fascinated by the political power of a combative working class. Petit bourgeois voyeurism need not grace the covers of books devoted to social rebels. Surely an appropriate ‘Wobbly’ cartoon from Direct Action could replace the paintier efforts of Ms Cossington Smith if Rebels and Radicals runs into a second edition?

Rebels and Radicals amplifies that marxist aphorism, that the masses are the makers of history, even if not of their own choosing. Fry and his co-authors have provided a lasting text in Australian popular history.

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