'Fictional' history opens new front in war on workers

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Abstract
At the Prime Minister's Literary Awards on 8 December 2014, the joint winner of the Australian History Award was Hal G. P. Colebatch for his book Australia's Secret War: How Unionists Sabotaged our Troops in World War II. The judging panel was chaired by right-wing think tanker Gerard Henderson of the Sydney Institute, a diehard fan of 'Pig Iron' Bob Menzies, and included Peter Coleman, variously author, journalist, former Liberal Party politician, and veteran Cold War warrior.

Colebatch's book was published in October 2013 by the conservative Australian cultural journal Quadrant, founded during the Cold War as part of the Central Intelligence Agency's international anti-communist campaign. History Award panellist Coleman edited the journal for 20 years. Quadrant continues to trenchantly criticise and attack Australian liberals and leftists, and is especially hostile towards the ABC. It is also a vigorous propagandist in the cause of climate change denial.

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‘Fictional’ History Opens New Front in War on Workers
by Rowan Cahill
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At the Prime Minister’s Literary Awards on 8 December 2014, the joint winner of the Australian History Award was Hal G. P. Colebatch for his book *Australia’s Secret War: How Unionists Sabotaged our Troops in World War II*. The judging panel was chaired by right-wing think tanker Gerard Henderson of the Sydney Institute, a diehard fan of ‘Pig Iron’ Bob Menzies, and included Peter Coleman, variously author, journalist, former Liberal Party politician, and veteran Cold War warrior.

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Once published, the book was boosted by the Murdoch press with generous publicity, and favourable comment by Miranda Devine; on the airwaves by the enthusiasms of conservative shock jock Alan Jones; and by enthusiastic reviews in a host of ex-service and rightist newsletters and blogs. Thus an essentially eccentric niche publication was transformed to a reprint with mainstream national release and distribution for the 2013 Christmas market.

Author Colebatch has many strings to his bow, and is variously described as a Perth lawyer, author, lecturer, poet, historian, editor, commentator. His work frequently appears in *Quadrant*, and overseas in numerous right-wing publications.

Colebatch’s book is an account of homefront industrial disruptions by Australian trade unions during WWII. It is a history touted as having been rescued from ‘folk memory’, one previously suppressed by leftists, hence the use of ‘secret’. The book details ‘treacherous’ industrial actions by unionists that denied/delayed vital war materials to the frontlines between 1939 and 1945, resulting in the deaths of service personnel.

According to Colebatch, these actions were a deliberate and coordinated attempt at sabotaging the war effort by the communist leaderships of the unions
involved. Maritime unions, in particular the communist led Waterside Workers’ Federation (WWF), are the focus of the book.

In putting his history together, Colebatch made significant use of interviews and correspondence with alleged participants, or those at a remove from the action being examined. Some of the material used is based on memories and recollections made decades after the alleged events. It is the sort of material that requires a great deal of sensitivity and interrogation when using, and is notoriously fraught with problems regarding authenticity, and problems associated with misremembering and the anecdotal. Some of the ‘facts’ used by Colebatch, when rigorously examined, are simply not facts at all.

For Colebatch’s supporters and marketers, his account of wartime strikes is trail blazing. It is something no one has been able to do before due to leftism’s heavy censorious hand. On the contrary, industrial disputes and unrest in Australian wartime industries and worksites have been studied by scholars of industrial relations and labour history, as has the existence of the many strikes and industrial actions on Australian waterfronts during the war.

As Sir Paul Hasluck explained in 1969 in his official history of the WWII Australian homefront, and on the eve of him becoming Governor-General of Australia: “strikes occurred in all parts of Australia and among many groups of workers. Most of them were local disputes over local grievances and were quickly settled. A number of them were by workers in disregard and in some cases in defiance of their union executives”. Australia was not exceptional in this regard; it was similar in the wartime UK and the US.

War abroad did not mean the cessation of ‘ordinary’ life on the Australian homefront. Despite the ‘war effort’ and people pulling together, in work places pre-war situations prevailed: employers still looked for profits, corners were cut, health and safety remained issues, so too workers’ desire for adequate pay in work environments demanding increased wartime productivity. The increased presence of women in the workforce due to the need for men to serve in the armed forces, also contributed to industrial unrest. Women in some key industries like munitions, textiles, engineering, objected to being treated as lesser beings warranting lesser pay and conditions than the men they replaced.

What Colebatch and his supporters fail to accept is what the scholarly literature clearly establishes: that wartime industrial actions by waterfront workers were primarily local in origin, variously based on local factors and understandings, and occurred despite attempts by the communist national leadership of the WWF to curtail them.
Colebatch also fails to grasp the realities of a complex context and industry: a national trade union leadership, in wartime, based in Sydney, overseeing a large national membership organised in some 50 or so port-based branches dotted around a huge coastline. Each had their own leaderships, distinct histories, cultures, politics, practices, port characteristics, infrastructures and work demands. Furthermore, far from being communists during WWII or the ensuing Cold War, wharfies tended to be ALP members or sympathisers – the interesting point being they supported communist leaderships through to the 1960s because these were seen to deliver the goods so far as industrial relations were concerned.

*Australia’s Secret War* has maritime workers in its sights as a collective. While making mention of the Seamen’s Union of Australia (SUA), possibly the most communist of Australia’s wartime unions in terms of leadership and rank and file membership, the book focuses on the wharfies. This enables the wartime contribution of SUA members to be ignored. Between 1939 and 1945, Australian merchant mariners suffered high losses – at least 288 were killed by enemy action – with much of the toll in Australian waters due to enemy mines, and submarine and air attacks. Hardly a treacherous or inconsequential civilian contribution to the war effort.

Judging from reviews and online comment, Colebatch’s book is being used to argue a curious case of responsibility and heritage: the actions of the wartime unionists were ‘treasonous’ and the culprits never brought to account, so now, either the trade union movement generally or, specifically, maritime workers now organised in the Maritime Union of Australia, need to apologise. Some crazies have even called for a Royal Commission into Australian wartime industrial disputation. Overall, Colebatch’s book fits the anti-union policies of the Abbott government like a glove.

Finally, as they say in the classics, Colebatch has form. He is a son of the short-term (one-month) twelfth premier of West Australia, Sir Harry Colebatch, who accompanied strikebreakers onto the waterfront during the bitter Fremantle wharf crisis of 1919. This was an inflammatory action contributing to the death of trade union loyalist Tom Edwards following a police battoning. As Colebatch enthusiast and History Award judge Coleman commented in December 2013, Colebatch’s book is a “tribute” to Sir Harry.

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9 December 2014

[Rowan Cahill is co-author of *Radical Sydney* (with Terry Irving), and co-author of *A History of the Seamen’s Union of Australia, 1872-1972* (1981).]