
Textured in silver and with an eerie, almost translucent quality — as though it could easily vanish into thin air — Wings of Desire is populated by angels, actors and an aerialiste who hover between heaven and earth, between film and everyday life.

And that is where Wings of Desire would like to position itself: as a collection of images from "no man's (sic) land", a commentary from the place where contradictions meet.

While most of the film is impressionistic — an essay in the fragmentary and alienating condition of post-war (and post-modern) existence — it is informed by a love story of sorts. Lurking in the wings (and wings are a significant reminder of a certain part of the female anatomy) is Marion, the aerialiste. In her character oppositions can be reconciled: she is both of the air and the earth. She looks angelic, and her name is a derivative of Mary, but she also inspires less than angelic feelings in Damiel, the angel who falls for her and becomes human in the process.

In becoming human, however, Damiel relinquishes his angelic state:
remember the future. Is history being 
transcended, or is Wenders merely 
trotting out the post-modernists' 
stocks in trade?

And what if connections are 
made between, for example, the 
way in which angels relate to everyday 
life, the structure of Western 
nationalist philosophy and the role of 
a director, if that doesn't inform a 
more thoroughgoing analysis of the 
power relations involved? 
Vicariously enjoying earthly 
pleasures by observing others from a 
safe distance smacks of voyeurism. 
Yet we are asked to look on 
innocently as the invisible Damiel 
watches Marion in what he believes 
to be the privacy of her own caravan. 

While the preoccupations of 
Wings of Desire are, ultimately, 
eminent forgettable (has it been so 
successful in emptying itself of 
meaning?), its images haunt the 
retina like ghosts of themselves. A 
ponytailed angel reading over 
someone's shoulder in the library 
that almost seems home to them; 
Peter Falk talking to an invisible 
angel at a roadside cafe; Daniel 
bewinged and atop the bombed ruins 
of the Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial 
Church. That all these images refer to 
the angels is probably no accident: 
Wenders was inspired to dream of 
them in the first place and they are 
beautifully realised. On the surface of 
it, Wings of Desire is perfectly 
Seductive.

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The Last Convicts?

Sanctuary? Remembering 
Postwar Immigration by Catherine Panitch. Allen and 

Migrant Hands in a Distant 
Land. Australia's Postwar 
Immigration by Jock Collins. 
Reviewed by Constance Lever 
Tracy.

These are two useful and timely 
books yet, despite the 
similarity in their titles, their 
angles of vision are polar opposites. 
Panitch, the articulate Australian 
daughter of postwar refugees, has 
synthesised the so far largely 
expressed experience of her 
parents' generation through 
hundreds of interviews and a study of 
letters, diaries and documents. 
Collins has brought together in a 
broad sweep the, by now, vast 
published literature about 
immigration from 1945 to the 
present, surveying from a left 
perspective the data and debates on 
every aspect of this question. If the 
voice of the migrants themselves is 
rarely to be heard in his pages it will, 
nonetheless, be an invaluable, well-
written and comprehensive textbook 
on the subject.

Collins' title could have served 
well for Panitch's book. The 
experiences she chronicles are of 
attacking attempts to reduce the Displaced 
Person refugees to undifferentiated 
labour power, discounting their 
skills, education, culture and history; 
use them indeed as atomised 
"hands", "the last convicts", without 
families or communities, to be sent 
here and there according to the needs 
of postwar reconstruction. 

Government bureaucracy and 
capital worked together in this. In the 
camps, couples were separated and 
parents were classified as "childless" 
if their children had passed the age of 
18. Husbands and wives were 
directed to labouring jobs hundreds of 
miles apart. These refugees held 
the fragments of their families 
and their identities together through 
the war and the European camps, 
and the fear of being split up 
motivated resistance, though for 
most the fear of deportation was even 
more powerful. Some were destroyed 
by the experience, but most held on 
until their two-year contracts were 
up, and then set about rebuilding
their social existence, as more than mere mobile “hands” of capital.

Non-Anglophones in Australia have had to wait for the next generation to record their experience. The people who came at that time, and their children, will find a passionate interest in this book; but it has more than just historic relevance. History is repeating itself with new subjects, who again lack a voice. In the spirit of the Fitzgerald report, families divided by war remain split today and immigrants as a whole find it hard to bring out their parents or other relatives because the economic rationality of the points system blocks them. Yet, in the intervening decades it was the logic of the migrants that reasserted itself through the prevalence of chain migration which reconstructed family networks and multicultural (often working class) communities. It was through these, not through bureaucratic welfare provisions, that new waves of newcomers gained the confidence and knowledge to claim their rights and to participate in the new society and in its labour movement.

Collins’ book, with a wider, if more distant lens, surveys the place of immigrant workers in Australian capitalism, from the refugees of Bonegilla to those of “Vietnamatta” (and the groups in between). He looks at the economics and the politics of the process, the exploitation of men and especially of women, evaluating the outcomes for Australian society and for the immigrants themselves, including the second generation. He outlines the major debates: on the economic advantages and disadvantages; on racism and prejudice; on assimilation and multiculturalism; and concludes with a set of mainly generous and soundly based guidelines for an Australian immigration policy. The past experience, he sees as, on balance, successful, because of the enormous efforts and sacrifices of the newcomers themselves, and because the indigenous population proved able to progressively largely overcome their long heritage of racism.

Collins’ guidelines support multiculturalism and family migration and non-racial selection (he would indeed like to see an opening of doors to Black African refugees), and he sees a continuing immigration policy as beneficial, if cautiously pursued. He has doubts, however, about the future applicability of an “immigration led recovery” and is concerned lest too large an intake put strains on the “apparent contemporary trend of increasing tolerance”; a view strangely at odds with his belief that it is the scale and diversity of immigration itself which has brought about this trend. Indeed, his words here are somewhat disconcertingly similar to Howard’s talk of the importance of “social cohesion”. We must not forget how the British labour movement in the 1960s caved in before the Powellite predictions of “blood in the streets” and joined a Dutch auction with the Conservatives in reducing immigration in the name of multiracial harmony.

The British outcome, in racial tension, ghettoisation and growing working class divisions and racism presents indeed a sharp contrast to the Australian experience. The relationship of Australian immigrants (especially the non-Anglophones) to the indigenous working class and its organisations is perhaps the weakest part of Collins’ book, reflecting the limitations of the sources he used. In structural terms, his view of the working class as fundamentally fragmented by immigration, producing racism, is both mistaken and in contradiction with his final, more optimistic conclusions. Non-Anglophones have, indeed, been systematically excluded from white collar, professional and technical jobs and concentrated in heavy and dangerous work. However, already by the mid-1960s, even the South Europeans were to be found in large numbers throughout almost all of the organised manual occupations, including the trades, being indeed over-represented in many skilled manual jobs. Their unionisation rates were high and their wage levels were similar to those of indigenous workers in the same occupations.

Migrants, then, have not formed a separate “underclass”. Despite frequently serious neglect of rank-and-file interests by the bureaucratic unions in which migrants were often members, this outcome was, in part, due to the uniting tendency of union policies. The Australian labour movement has a long heritage of racism dating back to the 19th
Searching for Labor


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political scientists in the search for a theoretical explanation of Labor. By any standard it is an impressive and persuasive performance and deserves the fullest consideration, fuller than I can hope to give here. However, perhaps because it's so good, its ultimate failure tends to irritate the reader. So far, so close, but still wrong! What is the problem?

There is nothing wrong with applying such traditional concepts as "social democratic" and "populist" to the Labor Party and Markey is undoubtedly effective in arraying a vast body of facts and detecting and explaining the variations, shifts and changes that give his thesis weight. But in order to make it stick he should have done more to examine whatever is validly general in these two concepts, and therefore properly applicable to Australia.

The Labor Party is like a social-democratic party, and undoubtedly it is, at times, the people's party. Its aims are broadly social democratic and it has often mobilised "the people", or perhaps more properly the people have mobilised it. Indeed, this is just what happened in 1890/91 in New South Wales. Between October 1890 and March 1891, the initiative of the Trades and Labour Council group that favoured a concerted independent labour entry into politics took off. Whereas, before August 1890, the group led by P.J. Brennan and F.B. Dixon could not muster complete support, thereafter the opposition to the movement for political labour representation crumbled. After a long debate virtually all strands of opinion now accept that it was the Maritime Strike — its causes, course and consequences — that made the difference.

The Australian Labor parties, Don Rawson has pointed out, are rather unusual. He has grouped them with the Labour parties of Britain and New Zealand, and the Scandinavian Social Democratic parties, and it is probably a fair comparison. But Australian Labor is close to being one-off, different to a significant extent to even British and New Zealand Labour, and the difference arises principally in the force of the trade union imprint.

The social mobilisation of the 1880s and 1890s which produced Australian Labor was first and foremost a trade union mobilisation. In a very special community — a small white population thinly spread over vast areas of somebody else's lands, lands which had been locked up by a combination of British capital and descendants of gentry and officer families — the trade unions by the 1880s had become symbolically and actually "the people". Markey emphasises this point although, somewhat dubiously, he stresses the importance of the urban craft unions in contradiction to some of his predecessors, who give the bushworkers top billing. But, for Markey, this was a class movement, not a popular one.

Markey draws a sharp distinction between the 1891 NSW Labour Electoral League (Labor Party) and the later Political Labor League (Labor Party). The first, according to Markey, was social democratic and the other, he says, populist. He likens the LEL to European social democracy because, he asserts, its program concentrated on democratic political and constitutional reform and new laws to strengthen industrial regulation. Such a "class" program proves, Markey believes, that the early NSW Labor Party was clearly a working class party. Later, the situation changed and a bloc of "utopian-socialist politician intellectuals" with the AWU hierarchy produced populist programs embracing broader issues, for example, women's voting rights and — reflecting the AWU's membership aspirations — land reform.

The argument has a certain plausibility, but there are many curiosities about it. One is Markey's handling of socialism and its significance in the emergence of NSW Labor. What is curious is that while, in many ways, giving an excellent account, Markey seems bent on minimising the importance of socialism, both as an ideology and a source of Labor's programmatic and policy aims.

He goes along with most other opinion in dismissing pre-1890 socialism as a significant influence in shaping working-class ideas leading to the setting up of the Labor Electoral League. Although he subtly charts the more militant and moderate wings of the Socialist League, he adheres to the curious term "utopian-socialist" to describe the moderate state socialist faction that did form an alliance with moderate trade union leaders.

In short, Markey's simplistic view of working-class consciousness tends to identify it with trade union consciousness. Socialism was only one, if the most important, of a group of 1880s radical movements all of which fed into the Labor Party to some extent. In these movements, or influenced by them, were many almost classic autodidacts — a number of them, both Labor Party and non-Labor Party, were printers — who provided many of the initial cadres of the Labor Party. Certainly there was a sprinkling of men and women of wider education and background. But the great majority were radical working-class agitators or union activists. This is what characterises Australian Labor.

Certainly Markey is correct to point to the populist character of the Labor Party, but the matter is more complicated than he suggests, although the variations in the 1890s reflected the fluid nature of populist ideology. Labor populism in Australia probably has four or five major ideological strands: democratism, liberalism (radicalism), nationalism and socialism. Markey deals, sometimes splendidly, with all these. His explanation of the emergence of fin-de-siecle populism in New South Wales as a shift away from what he calls social democracy can be better explained from within his own account by studying the interaction between these components as hegemonic and would-be hegemonic class fractions strove for dominance and attempted to articulate various populist ideological elements into their class discourses. In the Labor Party this process has continued without any basic change down to the 1980s.