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The Cold War and Beyond

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Reagan, amazing new science-fiction weapons, arms race, talk of war, paranoia about nuclear armageddon, spies, belligerent foreign policies ... a sense of déjà vu. I am reminded of the 1950s, when I was a kid. I am a child of the Cold War; born in the shadows of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, promised World War III some fourteen times to date, had atomic-blast emergency drills and fall-out shelters shoved down my throat before I was ten, was terrified in early adolescence by Nevil Shute's haunting On the Beach.

One night during the Falklands War I sat in the lounge-room with my seven-year-old son, watching a TV report on the sinking of the General Belgrano; the boy cuddled into me as close as he could and looked into my face to ask me in an afraid, halting voice, was there going to be another World War. I said no, but felt he was not convinced. I hugged him and felt anger that he could not grow up innocent. At the same time my mind shifted into reverse to another time, another lounge-room, another father. My son was me, and I was my own old man. Same question, same concern; déjà vu.

The Cold War tends to lie on the pages of Australian history and text books as a bland term; a neat pigeon-hole in which to deposit a decade or so. Few have gone out of their way to make the period live, to recreate it. For many Australians it is simply the 1950s, a period which saw the release of youthful exuberance via the importation of American rock-and-roll; a bit of tension here and there, but basically a quiescent time. Forgotten or ignored are the fears and the shadows; the police spies; the agents provocateurs; the informers; the progressive people who were subjected to frame-up attempts for crimes as diverse as carnal knowledge and spying; the intimidation of liberals and leftists, the police raids on their homes and offices; the bashings; the imprisonment of some leading left-wing identities; the censorship; the hate and loathing whipped up by a lap-dog conservative press that transformed lies into 'facts'; the hate and loathing that fostered under Parliamentary privilege; and the people who were frightened into silence ...

There are exceptions to my generalization. For example, the Roger Milliss autobiography Serpent's Tooth (1984) was a courageous, trail-blazing attempt to add literary flesh to historic bones; and before him, and still amongst my favorites, Ralph Gibson's modest volume of memoirs My Years in the Communist Party (1966); Don Watson's biography Brian Fitzpatrick: A Radical Life (1979) made its contribution; so too did Ian Turner's autobiographical essay “My Long March” (Overland 39). Memoirs by John Sendy, Len Fox, Jack Beasley, George Stewart and Nancy Wills have helped to make the shadows move; Richard Haeus in Rebels and Precursors (1981) has charted some of the cultural terrain. Frank Hardy's neglected The Hard Way (1961) graphically captured the paranoia, danger, fear, and loathing of the period. But in spite of all this the night remains. And generally the Cold War is neglected.

There are reasons for this. The period is only now beginning to shake itself free from the restrictions placed on research by the thirty-year rule straight-jacket on archival sources; obviously researchers have been put off by the inaccessibility of some material. But there has been, and still is, a plethora of oral-history sources; and the private collections of some Left bowers-birds are available. I suggest that part of the explanation for the neglect of the Cold War in Australian historical/cultural writing lies in the fact that a true history of the period would involve transgressing the laws of libel and defamation that so inhibit investigative writing in this country. For the Cold War was a time when a lot of people, conservatives, small 't' liberals and leftists alike, acted in ways they would today be ashamed of; and there are quite a few reputations built on sand. Lillian Hellman's memoirs of America in the 1950s were aptly titled Scoundrel Times; these words equally fit the Australian scene during the same period.

More important however is that, if we are to understand the Cold War, we have to also understand the politics and culture of the late 1930s and the 1940s. And if this is to happen we will have to expose some monstrous skeletons collecting dust in their various closets. The biggest is that which centres around the Brisbane Line controversy of World War II, and I can only echo and support the words of Humphrey McQueen here: “There are reasons for believing that the 'Brisbane Line' was not a military line — but a political one; that it marked the border between those parts of Australia which would

The Cold War and Beyond

A discussion of Australia's First Cold War 1945–1953,
Volume I: Society, Communism and Culture, edited by
Ann Curthoys and John Merritt (Allen and Unwin, $24.95).
be conceded to the Japanese to be administered directly by them and those sections of Australia which would be run by a Vichy-style government in Canberra*. 

Vance Palmer in a 'Crisis Number' of Meanjin, March 1942, referred to the Australian quailings: 'whisperers, fairhearts, near-fascists, people who have grown rotten through easy living . . .'.

In my biography of Rupert Lockwood, in progress, I will have something to say on this subject; for the moment I merely note that the main players who were willing to betray Australia in the 1940s were still on, or close to, the political stage during the Cold War. Their manipulation of anti-communism in the 1950s was ironic, given its emphasis on fifth-column traitors and the politics of betrayal; they knew all about it. When R.G. Casey (Minister for External Affairs in the Liberal government) referred in Parliament in May 1952 to a 'nest of traitors' in Australia, in a sense he was correct. Only they weren't on the Left as he intimated; and he was about twelve years too late.

Traditionally the Cold War in Australia has been dealt with by researchers in political terms. But it was more than a political phenomenon; it was a cultural one as well — a conflict between the hegemony of an old, doomed, one-dimensional WASPish Australia, and an emerging New Australia of which the Communist Party of Australia (CPA) was in many ways in the vanguard.

II

The recent publication of Australia’s First Cold War, a collection of eight essays by ten authors, edited by Ann Curthoys and John Merritt, is welcome and provocative. The book constitutes a pioneering study of politics but on social movements, the literary world, suburban life, and ordinary Australian citizens. Publishers George Allen and Unwin have selected the period 1945 to 1953 as constituting the most weathers, rather than have to confront and dirty her technological miracle. This went on for three years.

As for Dad, he performed small miracles. With bush rock and leaf-mould he turned a small sloping block into a garden of Eden, complete with chooks, that provided all our vegetable and fruit needs. And sometimes at night when the guns and searchlights of the coastal batteries practised in post-war tensions, he told me about the falling Asian dominoes, the yellow peril, and praised Robert Menzies. For Dad was a Depression youth who had ridden with the New Guard.

Hard on the heels of Alomes and company is Bruce McFarlane. Using recently released archival material, he examines Australian economic policy, 1947–1953. He shows how Australia’s Cold War alignment with the US and UK against the USSR adversely affected the Australian economy, unbalancing it and causing some sectors to stagnate, the inflation which dominated economic policy a result of our trying to combine development and defence. Australia found itself a sort of victim, caught up in a web spun by American policy-makers intent on protecting their initiatives and economic interests at Australia’s implicit in their title, that the period 1979 to the present is Australia’s Second Cold War.

The book begins energetically with an essay by Stephen Alomes, Mark Dober and Donna Hellier, an attempt to recreate the feel of life in the late 1940s and early 1950s. This has been negatively commented upon by some reviewers, but I find it comprehensive, lucid, mind-jogging, entertaining and, for those who are too young to have known the period personally, as good an introduction as will be found. The authors take us for a quick trip through a suburban world, in places still characterized by degrees of pioneering as the urban sprawl of the capital cities pushed out into the bush; an isolated world about to be changed by mass-immigration, mass-production, and mass-communication. A conservative urban world, reeling from the horrific revelations of Japanese barbarism against Australian troops, marvelling at the glories of the new electric and atomic technologies, and underscored by anti-communist, “socialism equals communism”, paranoia. Marriage, home-ownership, mortgage, family, overtime, and the suburban garden formed the still points in a turning world.

Memories flood back to me: a middle class boyhood on the suburban fringe of Sydney. Without a family car to whisk us away to other venues, the nearby bush provided our entertainment and adventures – rabbits, snakes, goannas, eels, yabbies, cicadas, caves, bush fires. China pear, loquat, persimmon and lilli-pilly trees were part of this suburban environment; so too were market gardens, orchards (declining into ruin) and swarming choko vines. It was a time when the daily milk supply was collected in a billy can from the horse-drawn waggon, when bread was baked in fiery bakery ovens; the ice man called a few days each week; the dunny carter once. Radio was King, and we kids had crystal sets.

Mum was in awe of electricity. A country girl, she knew about the slow combustion stove; after a city stint she had some experience with gas. But in 1952, when dad put an electric range in our new house, she preferred to barbecue our vegetable and fruit needs. And sometimes at night when the guns and searchlights of the coastal batteries practised in post-war tensions, he told me about the falling Asian dominoes, the yellow peril, and praised Robert Menzies. For Dad was a Depression youth who had ridden with the New Guard.

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expense, McFarlane's essay is a timely piece of research and analysis that should serve as a warning to our current policy-makers, given the recent dismantling of financial regulation in Australia, hints of an impending full-scale assault on the Australian labor movement by the international banking community that threatens to follow on as a consequence, and US expectations that Australia should willingly fit into its Star Wars/Pine Gap missile and spy webs.

Meredith Burgmann contributes two thorough, interesting, and original essays. The first examines anti-communism in the ALP, 1945 to 1949, and untangles the different attitudes of the Labor Party towards the CPA at the federal leadership and State branch levels. Burgmann shows how the federal leadership of the ALP was less hostile towards communism than were the State branches. She also shows that "the ALP leaders kept a distinction in their minds between Russian communism and Australian communism", so that no matter what was happening in Australia on the anti-communist front, in the realm of foreign affairs this did not poison Australian (Labor) government attitudes towards the Soviet Union.

In her second essay Burgmann studies Dr H.V. Evatt as a statesman, and his relationship with the USSR, 1945–1949. She rescues him from the conservative historians who neglect him, or portray him as a marginal, unstable character; and from the New Leftists who tend to depict him as a willing tool of the Americans and a betrayer of the socialist cause. Burgmann forcefully argues that: "Evatt played a substantial role in moulding the postwar world and ... stood alone as a Western statesman who did not wholly embrace the world concept provided by the Americans". A few copies of this essay circulated around Canberra today might not go astray – especially amongst those needing a bit of backbone.

Frank Cain and Frank Farrell detail the war Prime Minister Menzies waged against the CPA, 1949–1951, and his two attempts to ban it. Their account of the legal preparations leading to the framing of the Communist Party dissolution bill (April 1950) makes interesting reading, showing how Menzies, realizing he was about to take a dicey politico-legal step in trying to ban a thirty-year-old political party, attempted to make his action appear constitutional, legal, and democratic.

As it turned out Menzies failed to ban the Party. The narrow rejection of the anti-communist referendum in 1951 finally saw to that. Had he got his way the post-referendum history of Australia would have been fright-eningly different. Secret plans for the establishment of an internment camp for communists on Flinders Island (in Bass Strait) symbolize the possible—and probable—direction of events.

Geoffrey Dutton has noted that there is in Australia an unfortunate "bias against the Left among those intent on creating and maintaining a canon of Australian literature ...". His point is more than butressed by the recent publication of The Oxford Anthology of Australian Literature, edited by Leonie Kramer and Adrian Mitchell; excluded from its pages are people like Kylie Tennant, Frank Hardy, David Martin, Judah Waten, and Alan Marshall. ©

Two contributions to Australia's First Cold War examine aspects of this phenomenon. Susan McKernan looks at the small Australian literary community of the 1950s, how it was divided by the Cold War, and the tensions, conflicts, and distrust that were generated. Outstanding is Allan Ashbolt's essay, a model of forceful, controlled, committed writing which gives a detailed account, in part based on personal records, of the attack on Vance Palmer (from 1952) by right-wing MPs Stanish Keon, W.C. Wentworth and others. Taken to its crudest extent the attack alleged that Palmer, using his position as Australia's foremost man of letters, was involved in a communist conspiracy to subvert literary standards and take over the literary arts. Ashbolt makes the point that this vile attack was a manifestation of a general Australian suspicion of creative writers, and part of a politico-cultural climate "edging writers towards a discrete withdrawal from open political activity and from any sort of writing that seemed to be politically motivated or coloured". In this essay Ashbolt captures the feel of the times and its paranoia; he details the conspiracies of the conservatives, and demonstrates Palmer's dignity, nobility and courage, at the expense of his health, as he reacted to, and fought against, both the politico-cultural filth and its purveyors.

John Docker is one of the few contemporary writers on Australian cultural issues who can be read for pleasure and insight without having first been privy to a specialized arcane vocabulary and epistemology. His Australian Cultural Elites (1974) and In A Critical Condition (1984) challenged, elucidated, and entertained. Rare qualities in contemporary Australian left writing. His essay in the volume under discussion does not sit comfortably with the others, being a provocative blend of cultural exegesis, academic iconoclasm and autobiography, free wheeling through time and themes, setting in motion a host of thoughts and ideas — another of his strengths.

Docker examines a wide range of aspects of the Australian intellectual arena in the fifties — from radical-nationalism and radical-conservatism through to communist conceptions of culture and education; he concludes with an important discussion of aspects of the New Left of the 1960s, perhaps the key point of the essay. This is a logical step; the New Left was in many ways a product of the Cold War.

For Australian communists in the fifties the state education system was seen as being of benefit to the working class; knowledge was power, and could be used to enhance working-class capacity to defeat the upper class. Communists therefore encouraged their children to succeed at school, and enter tertiary institutions.

But things did not turn out as planned. Undergraduates became radicals, "but probably not in the image their parents might have wished". Concepts of class and consciousness were dropped; the radical potential of the working class was seen as a blunted force; a radicalism based on the transformation of bourgeois society by marginals was adopted — the idea of Herbert Marcuse in
One Dimensional Man (1964) that hope lay in "such disruptive characters as the artist, the prostitute, the adulteress, the great criminal and outcast, the warrior, the rebel-poet, the devil, the fool – those who don't earn a living, at least not in an orderly and normal way..."

The long-term effects of this process were cataclysmic. First, the CPA was destroyed as a movement of the working-class and supportive professional middle-class intellectuals dedicated to the liberation of the (traditional) working-class. Although Docker does not make the point, the 'marginals' philosophy has had, and will have, a wider social impact. The New Left graduates have taken their intellectual grab-bags into the ALP and the trade-union movement; the increasing concentration on marginal issues by teacher unions, for example, and the consequent alienation of many rank and file members, is one area where the effect is pronounced.

The second effect Docker deals with is the way in which the nature of left intellectual life changed; the tyranny of professionalism and credentialism emerged as the student radicals became intellectuals and found employment in the expanding tertiary teaching staffs of the 1960s and 1970s.

As Docker explains:

That intellectuals should associate in their own 'sphere' became an assumption, as natural as breathing, of many of the New Left-Vietnam war generation of intellectuals. They had, that is, successfully absorbed an ethos of specialization and professionalism through their tertiary training, a characterizing ethos of the professional middle class. They had acquired a consciousness that would look down on anyone who was not 'trained', was not specialized, as having no legitimate right to talk intellectually in public. The 'amateur' was intellectually contemptible, embarrassing; the specialist talked to other specialists. And if you became a radical specialist, you talked to other radical specialists in your area.

A sorry state of affairs, and one that can only be to the detriment of the left, leading as it does, and has, to the creation of self-supporting sects preaching to their own closed circles in equally impenetrable vocabularies. Further, it leads to arrogance, a lack of tolerance, and a certain blinkered existence.

Writing in 1980 as someone on the Left of the political spectrum, Richard Hoggart criticised the situation in England with regard to education and the arts, whereby people feel disinclined to attack "any left-wing activity" for fear of appearing to identify with the right. As a result "left-wing writers have got away with murder".

Something similar has developed in Australia during the last ten years. The institutionalized, New Left radicals have tended to create a canon of Left orthodoxies and a list of taboos; a sort of catechism of accepted Left ideas and positions – in its own way a variant of the much-despised and ridiculed intellectual Stalinism of earlier eras. In the process, freedom of debate tends to go out the window, intolerance, or the sneering dismissal, becomes the name of the game, and debaters who have more in common with the Left than the Right tend to be forced into right-wing orbits. I have already seen it happen, particularly in the context of education – one of my fields of interest. And I believe we are seeing it, for example, in the so-called 'Blainey debate'.

Geoffrey Blainey's 'crime', as I interpret events, was to open up debate on Australian immigration and challenge the simplistic public notions expounded in the Hawke government's 'lack of thought' propaganda. Blainey thereby violated a Left taboo (discussion of immigration policy in a critical manner) and was therefore seen as a reasonable subject for punishment. Stereotyped, his friendships questioned, subjected to threats of violence, personal abuse, and a Left-phalanx attack by fellow academics on the quality of his historical writing, Blainey appears to me a classic victim of a contemporary type of McCarthyism; albeit coming from the Left.

Docker, in his discussion of the New Left, emphasizes the role played by radicals coming from a communist background – his own origins. But the damage did not solely emanate from that quarter. Middle-class students with no working-class or radical background had a significant input into 1960s radicalism. I was part of that.

Arriving at Sydney University in the early sixties, I was a middle-class discontented oddball, worker-fanatic, even anarchic type, my mind reeling with a flurry of ideas fuelled by Huxley, Russell, Joyce, Lorca, Whitman, Blake, Shelley, Lawrence, Freud, Jung, Oz magazine... a lot of this courtesy of an Andersonian school teacher who helped channel my adolescent discontent in literary and philosophical directions.

Conscripted in 1965, deferred courtesy of my student status, I kept out of the Army's grasp and over the next few years developed into a radical of some notoriety... street violence, arrests, finger-prints, conscientious objection, days in court, nights in jail, pursued by military police, hiding, strange things happening to the phone, tampered mail, near-breaches of the Crimes Act, speeches, articles, pamphlets, publishing; organizing, marches, sit-ins, teach-ins... and with this the tensions, the family divisions, the loneliness of the dock, the panic surge of claustrophobia when the cell door slammed.

In the late sixties, at the height of the Australian student revolt, when the idea of a student-worker alliance hit us after the success of the student-worker uprising in Paris (1968), I recall the attitude held by myself and my tertiary companions as we fleetingly met with various union officials and addressed stop-work and lunchtime meetings of rank-and-file unionists. It was that we, the students, were the catalysts of social change, and also the embodiment of wisdom. Looking back I think that when we spoke we tended to count but not weigh; we spoke aggressively about democratic values, but undervalued those with whom we dealt, regarding them with a submerged contempt. We knew the rhetoric and some of the theory of socialism but failed, I believe, to discern its soul.

For me this began to change as the sun set on the sixties, and I was approached by the CPA to write for the Tribune. I started my wanderings on the traditional Left;
at first I met and got to know the journalists Alec Robertson, Malcolm Salmon, Pete Thomas; then cadres like the Aarons brothers, John Sendy, Laurie Carmichael, Bernie Taft; later I met people like Helen Palmer, Rupert Lockwood, Len Fox; and later still, when working with the Seamen's Union, the legendary Bill Bird and E.V. Elliot.

I was with the Seamen's Union for two years and encountered many members of what Docker calls the "upper working class", leftists who had educated themselves, who regarded it as their right to have an informed opinion on everything from politics to the arts. I well remember an occasion in the mess room of the old rusting Iron Monarch (now a victim of Asian scrappers), chatting with seamen about Australian literature and the novels of George Johnston in particular. I browsed through their shipboard library - some 500 volumes; their latest acquisition, the complete works of George Bernard Shaw.

The point is that I had experiences that many of my Left compatriots did not. Gradually my elitist fallacies were undermined as I came to realize that education and culture are not the sole preserves of the ivory towers of academia or of the mandarins they produce; nor should they be.

But this was not a widespread legacy of the sixties and early seventies. And, as Docker suggests, with the rise of the New Left and its subsequent professionalizations, traditions that were amongst the best in the old Left were destroyed. With regret I think we can also note that, as socialist writing and thinking has been hijacked by the academics, so too has it tended to lose much of its poetry and humanity.

IV

Cold War kids like me grow up, and old. For some of us circumstances, various records and files, and a track record for 'political unreliability', have dogged our careers and helped us escape professionalization. These days, as I nudge forty, I see a lot of sense in what Jack Blake wrote in 1971: "If we bear in mind that no single formula can embrace a complex process of social development, it is still possible, in a sense, to say that in pursuing the defence, broadening and development of democracy in qualitatively new ways we will emerge at the end with socialism."  

Looking around there seems to be an increasing tendency towards pessimism on the Australian Left; prominent Labor politicians in power act morally and politically like descendents of the Borgias, and in the process elevate the sell-out and betrayal of principles to a cynical art form; significant elements of the labor movement are shown to be firmly entrenched in the cogs and webs of corruption (making a refamiliarization with Frank Hardy's 1950 muckraking classic Power Without Glory yet another exercise in deja vu).

Internationally there seems little to draw hope from. Third World liberation governments adopt tired hand-me-down Marxisms to form a bullpen of left-wing fascisms, while the tentacles of Soviet and American imperialism wrestle for Lebensraum. In response the Western Left, its moral voice lost somewhere in the mists between 1956 and 1975, looks about with either a blind eye or a jaundiced romantic vision. It has been sidetracked, hooked as it is on the addictive drug of nuclear armageddon (and the hand-me-down apocalyptic visions of the Book of Revelations) with all its opportunities for melodrama, self-importance, and the peculiar adrenalin politics of despair.

And all the while as our part of the world, courtesy of satellite technology and television, locks into the illusions of Reagan's America, the greater part of the world is stalled by hunger, famine, drought, its human and natural ecologies ravaged both by conventional weaponry and the cheap germ-warfare technologies of European chemical combines. In confusing and desperate times like these we need, I believe, to emphasize and assert values like intellectual freedom and political democracy, and go forward with a vision in our minds of a socialism that is tolerant, democratic, and as free as possible from the crippling vices of sectarianism, paranoia, and pessimism; for there is much to be done. I know this is a dated, unscientific, non-trendy, non-European-Marxist thing to say; but there is no dishonor in that, and these days this pretty well describes me.

NOTES

1 Humphrey McQueen: Gallipoli to Petrov (Sydney, 1984), p.156.
5 My view of the Blainey debate has been reinforced by the A.T. Yarwood review of Blainey's All for Australia, Overland 97, and by Blainey's recent comments on the practice of history, and particularly the role of 'misunderstanding' in historical debate, in R.M. Crawford, Manning Clark, Geoffrey Blainey, Making History (McPhee Gribble/Penguin Books, 1985), pp.69–81.
6 J.D. Blake: Revolution from Within (Outlook, Sydney, 1971), pp.163–164. Ian Turner's essay "Temper Democratic, Bias Australian", in Room for Manoeuvre, edited by Leonie Sanderson and Stephen Murray-Smith (Melbourne, 1982), is also, it seems to me, a relevant piece of politico-cultural writing.