

Labour and the Great War

The Australian Working Class and
the Making of Anzac

Edited by

Frank Bongiorno,
Raelene Frances and
Bruce Scates

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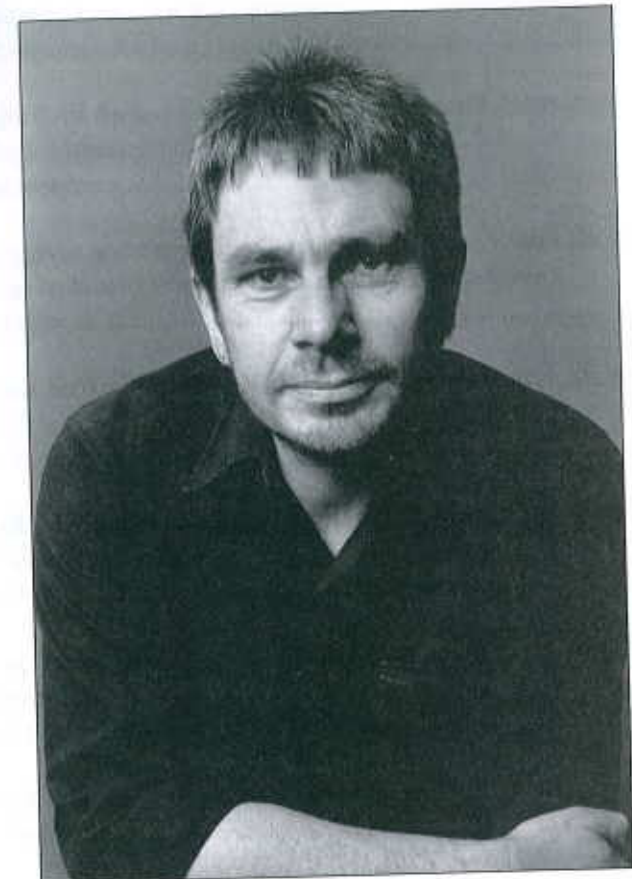
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Dedication

This issue is dedicated to the memory of Tony Harris, labour historian, founder of the Greens in Australia and anti-war activist.



Tony Harris (1948–2013)

Photograph by Jack Carnegie

"We need more than a 'peace' response. We need an assertive antiwar response that specifically and critically takes on the historical misrepresentations and omissions of the Anzac Legend ... [And we] need ... a compassionate respect for veterans."

Tony Harris, 9 May 2013

<http://watermelontharris.blogspot.com.au/2013_05_01_archive.html>

Contents

Preface: Labour History at War <i>Jay Winter</i>	iii
Labour and Anzac: An Introduction <i>Frank Bongiorno, Raelene Frances and Bruce Scates</i>	1
At the Birth of Anzac: Labor, Andrew Fisher and Australia's Offer of an Expeditionary Force to Britain in 1914 <i>Douglas Newton</i>	19
Stopping War and Stopping Conscription: Australian Labour's Response to World War I in Comparative Perspective <i>Robin Archer</i>	43
The Great Strike of 1917 in Victoria: Looking Fore and Aft, and from Below <i>Charles Fahey and John Lack</i>	69
Job Skill, Manliness and Working Relationships in the Australian Imperial Force during World War I <i>Nathan Wise</i>	99
Shaping the Legend: The Role of the Australian Red Cross and Anzac <i>Melanie Oppenheimer</i>	123
"Natural Enemies"? Anzac and the Left to 1919 <i>Mark Cryle</i>	143
Labor and the Anzac Legend, 1915-45 <i>Nick Dyrenfurth</i>	163
Class Factors in the Radicalisation of Archbishop Daniel Mannix, 1913-17 <i>Val Noone</i>	189
Labor, Loyalty and Peace: Two Anzac Controversies of the 1920s <i>Phillip Deery and Frank Bongiorno</i>	205
"I Intend to Get Justice": The Moral Economy of Soldier Settlement <i>Bruce Scates and Melanie Oppenheimer</i>	229

Preface: Labour History at War

Between 1970 and the present, there has been a sea change in the study of labour history. From the commanding heights of the 1960s, when a generation of British scholars transformed labour history into one of the most robust and dynamic fields of historical research, there has been first an erosion, and then a fragmentation, of the agenda of labour history. Some of the sources for this decline were apparent. Most labour historians had operated on a materialist agenda in which work was the centre of social life, and when conditions of work changed, so did the industrial and political forms workers adopted and shaped to defend their interests and to advance their goals. As machines changed, so did men and their politics. In a nutshell, this was the *modus operandi* of a generation.

This perspective fell apart over the following 20 years. The sources for that unravelling of approaches and agendas were multiple, and it is their coming together which presented the most serious challenge to the discipline. First, a wave of de-industrialisation swept through Western Europe and the United States, shutting down the old staples of production, coal, textiles, shipbuilding, and destroying the communities which had thrived when these industries dominated the industrial landscape. The shift into the service sector presented problems of workplace organisation and time-discipline of an entirely different order than that prevailing during the in the factory era, and very high levels of unemployment broke the power of the trade union movement to do anything about this massive transformation in the world of work.

At the same time, Marxist theories of society (how change happens) and theories of action (what working-class people can do about it) slowly but surely fell apart. This was not simply a reflection of the failure of the Soviet bloc to compete with the West, but the increasing evidence that there was never going to be a transition from capitalism to socialism led by communist parties. East Berlin in 1953, Budapest in 1956, Prague in 1968 proved otherwise, and the internal collapse of the Soviet Union simply put a punctuation point on the statement that state socialism was a failed experiment which had cost the lives of millions of people.

The period of labour history as labour movement history by and large came to an end in the 1990s. Instead, labour history took either an anthropological or a linguistic turn, and sometimes both. By anthropological, I mean the search for the history of everyday life, which finally registered the fact that half the working population of the world

was female. Feminist historians were pioneers in the development of oral history, which is a goldmine for popular historians of all kinds. Through works such as Michel de Certeau's *The Politics of Everyday Life* and the exploration of migrant labour from the global "south" to the "north," different perspectives emerged which turned labour history into the social history of working men and women globally. And the greater tendency of historians to use visual images and sources turned the history of material objects into a powerful tool of analysis of workers and their world.

At the same time, the undermining of materialist approaches led inevitably to a more idealist approach to the language workers used to express their aspirations. Gareth Stedman Jones ran a coach and horses through earlier interpretation of the Chartists in his collection of essays significantly entitled *Languages of Class*, emphasizing the religious origins of the Chartists' outlook, and the absence in their imagination of how to arrive at a different kind of social order, however defined.

Both these initiatives turned some social historians into cultural historians, though the difference between their approaches was relatively slight. Cultural history in this sense is the study of signifying practices in the past, of ways contemporaries have tried to make sense of the world in which they lived. Labour historians had investigated such matters for decades, but now that task took on a different meaning.

The field of cultural history expanded exponentially at the same time as both labour history and economic history were dwindling to relatively minor elements in the study of contemporary history. Part of the reason for the growth of cultural history was its focus on war. I can recall at the Warwick Centre for Social History in the early 1970s, Edward Thompson telling me that I had lost my way; his point was simple: "we" don't do military history; "they" do. I should have answered him with Trotsky's adage that you may not be interested in war, but war is interested in you. Unfortunately, he intimidated me into silence, but not into changing the work I was doing linking labour history and the history of the Great War. Over the following decade Edward Thompson changed his mind, especially with regard to nuclear weapons, but by then the damage to the field had been done. Labour history had lost its dynamism and has been searching for a new identity ever since.

This selection of essays shows how far labour historians have come since those old antinomian days. Now labour historians engage in the study of war for the simple reason that you cannot write the history of working men and women in the twentieth century and after without dealing with the upheavals of war. Scholars have used oral history to great effect in sketching out the hidden injuries of war in the lives of the

men who fought and on the families who lived with the consequences. A deep knowledge of labour history has helped transform the field of popular commemoration.

The braiding together of labour history and the cultural history of war is one of the most exciting developments in recent years. Workingmen did not cease to be precisely that – workingmen – when they put on a uniform. And those in uniform knew very well that the industrialisation of warfare had made military life a vast assembly line of destruction with massive consequences for the organisation of work in the shadow of war. The history of war is everybody's business, as a glance at the holdings of any major bookstore today will attest. That is the last reason for turning away from the subject; on the contrary, now is the time to seize the opportunities this market affords.

We all know that the so-called "war on terrorism" threatens to dissolve totally the frontiers between war and peace. Therefore, it is all the more important to salute the scholars who have joined together to produce this volume, in showing how much labour history has to offer us, not only in this, the season of the centenary of the Great War, but also in informing us of the dangers in the militarised world in which we live.

Jay Winter

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