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978-0-521-57596-6 - A New Australia: Citizenship, Radicalism and the First Republic  
Bruce Scates

Excerpt

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## Introduction: 'The True Republic'

In the late months of 1890, the young Henry Lawson wiped a drunkard's tear from his eyes and scribbled the first lines of 'The Australian Marseillaise'. Strident, rhythmic, soaked in the language of prophecy and rebellion, it projected a vision of a New Australia beyond the 'Walls of Cant ... Custom ... Ignorance ... and Fear':

Then when Mammon's Castle crashes  
To the earth and trampled lies,  
Then from out the blood and ashes  
True Republics shall arise.  
Then the world shall rest a season  
(First since the world began)  
In the reign of right and reason  
And the dynasty of man.<sup>1</sup>

In one sense, the poem was part of a well developed genre. Since the 1880s, Lawson and his boozy, boyish companions at the *Bulletin* had railed against the 'reign of grovel' that tarnished Australian political life. 'Toadies' and 'lick spitals' sold their services to press and parliament, 'drivelling' of the Glory of the Empire and worshipping the 'fat' frumpish lady who sat on England's throne. The hopes of a new country, free of the ignorance and superstition of the old, drowned in their 'great ocean of sycophancy and lies'. This powerful republican discourse was much more than a simple 'resentment of England' or for that matter a new 'sense of being Australian'; the early work of Lawson and his circle was steeped in what one historian has identified as a 'Painite tradition'; its masculinist language, its lurid imagery, even its persuasive evocation of history, were borrowed from elsewhere.<sup>2</sup>

Having said that, 'The Australian Marseillaise' also represented something of a departure: ever so slightly, the focus had changed. Mammon had taken the place of Monarch and 'the reign of right and reason' fused an older republican agenda with distinctly socialist demands. In the 1880s, amidst the frantic celebration of the Queen's jubilee and the

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centennial of white 'settlement', Lawson and his fellow members of the Republican League had dreamed of a distant rebellion when 'Australia's [white] sons' would at last claim their own. In November 1890, the rebellion seemed upon them: the same month the poem was written, Sydney had been occupied by soldiers, police, and specials as the Great Strike drew to its bitter close. 'The Australian Marseillaise' then was a new poem for a new era. Indeed by the 1890s, all the early republican leagues had folded, broken by internal squabbles between 'milk and water' moderates and militant nationalists from the Domain. Lawson's 'True Republic' signalled something much more radical and comprehensive than independence from Britain. The fall of 'Mammon's Castle' echoed the rallying cry of socialists, anarchists, feminists and single taxers, a new generation of radicals who saw themselves as the harbingers of sweeping social change. It is these disaffected groups, these visionary, inspired and infectiously enthusiastic individuals, who are the focus of this study.<sup>3</sup>

## History

The 1890s were a likely setting for Lawson's apocalyptic fantasy. Mammon's Castle was indeed unsteady. Throughout the 1880s, massive borrowing abroad had fuelled a frenzy of speculation in the colonies; banks and a cluster of financial institutions had been floated on very little capital, pastoral properties mortgaged well beyond their value, and urban land values inflated to ridiculous levels. The 1890s were a time of reckoning as the collapse of the land boom, a dramatic fall in the value of Australia's exports and a sudden withdrawal of overseas investment sent the economy spiralling into depression. Historians have long debated whether the slump of the 1890s was caused by internal or external factors, and argued whether stronger government or more judicious investment could have averted the calamity. What is beyond dispute is that Australians benefited little from the 'lessons' of history. A century later, the country went through the same insane cycle of boom and recession, the collapse of financial institutions, mounting foreign debt and dwindling balance of payments demonstrating Australia's fragile place in the global economy. And in the 1890s (as in the 1990s) it was Lawson's 'faces in the street' who bore the real cost of economic 'restructuring'. Unemployment rose to unprecedented levels. By 1892, as many as one in every three Australians were out of work; those fortunate enough to keep a job seldom had the 'security' of full-time employment. But for virtually all the workforce there was a pervasive fear of being made 'redundant'. Then, as today, technological innovation and productive reorganisation signalled a massive disruption to the way that work was organised.<sup>4</sup>

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As employers reorganised industry, workers struggled to retain hard won wages and conditions. In the 1880s, when Lawson's Republican League made its first blustering appearance, the union movement had made significant advances. The hours, pay and conditions of Australia's skilled white artisans were amongst the best in the world; and the 'Federation of Labour' (for all its faults and exclusions) had begun to encompass unskilled and female sections of the workforce. But the new decade witnessed a dramatic confrontation between organised capital and organised labour. The Great Strikes of the 1890s were fought around the wharves, mines and shearing sheds of Australia's major industries. Unprecedented in their size, bitterness and duration, they were likened to a 'class war' by contemporaries. And alongside these major conflagrations were many smaller but no less costly battles, where hundreds of desperate unions fought (as one worker put it) 'a little Broken Hill of their own'. It was not just men who did the fighting. In the close knit communities of Australia's ports and mining towns, women attacked police and scabs, marched beside banners and danced beneath effigies. For them the strikes were also fought in many less public places: in the backyards, kitchens and laundries where (as Lawson's poem grimly noted) 'workmen's weary wives and daughters' struggled to keep their families fed. In the 1890s (as in the 1990s) 'Freedom of Contract' became the rallying cry of conservative governments and anxious employers. The union movement looked to parliament to secure its very survival.<sup>5</sup>

The rise of the Labor Party has long been seen as one of the greatest political innovations of the 1890s. In retrospect, the notion that the state was a neutral utility that could be captured and used to legislate a new social order into existence seems naive and simplistic. In the nineteenth century, though, it was an urgent political agenda. 'The reign of right and reason', as Lawson put it, seemed a simple matter of seizing power at the ballot box. The first Labor members were swept into parliament on a great tide of popular enthusiasm: their campaign rekindled hopes crushed by the Maritime Strike, it galvanised the energies of work site and neighbourhood, home and community. It took several years of splits, compromises and tiresome parliamentary intrigues before the limitations of the first labour parties were altogether obvious. By the time of federation in 1901, a moderate parliamentary leadership was committed to a program of piecemeal social reform and Lawson's 'True Republic' seemed as far away as ever.<sup>6</sup>

The diversion of class politics into the nationalist compact of the new commonwealth has been the subject of considerable historical scrutiny. But that does not detract from the great political and cultural imagination of the nineties. Despite the bleakness of the age, or perhaps because of it, the end of the nineteenth century witnessed the blossoming of new

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schools of Australian art and literature. The work of the Heidelberg painters, which responded in exciting ways to the light and colour of the Australian landscape, and the bush itself, provided a setting and idiom for *Bulletin* writers and bohemian balladists. There was an air of anticipation as six disparate colonies cautiously declared themselves a nation, and an elusive search for what (invariably white and usually male) contemporaries liked to call an 'Australian identity'. Meanwhile much older identities were thrown into question: the nineties witnessed the rise of first-wave feminism, women's claim to political citizenship and their entry into spheres of work and leisure once virtually monopolised by men. The 1890s were an age of invention, inspiration and vision, the stuff (as Vance Palmer's classic study puts it) of legends. They were also a time of anxiety, questioning and unease. Finally, they witnessed the rise of socialist, anarchist, and single tax societies: a collective radical culture which flourished briefly in many of the cities and towns of south-eastern Australia.<sup>7</sup>

## Historiography

It is not surprising that the 1890s have enjoyed so privileged a place in Australian historiography. The drama of the decade is almost compelling, its myths and crises an endless source of debate and revelation. Moreover the 1890s seem a watershed in almost every sphere of Australian history: one school of writers after another have turned to them for solace or inspiration. The first and probably most influential account of the 1890s came from the radical nationalist writers and historians who pioneered the study of Australian literature and Australian labour history. Writing in the dark years of World War Two, Brian Fitzpatrick and Vance and Nettie Palmer looked back on a heroic age when unionists challenged the forces of power and privilege and the first generation of Australia's poets projected a vision of a more just and equitable social order. They were concerned in their different ways to discover and preserve a set of Australian values: mateship, egalitarianism, humour in adversity and Stoic endurance, such was the historic legacy of the 1890s. Robin Gollan's political history and Russel Ward's excursion into Australian folklore built on the same themes twenty years later. For them the enemy was not Japan, but the cultural conservatism of Menzies post-war Australia. In the struggles of the labour movement and the writings of the *Bulletin* school, in union strikes and bush ballads, they charted a 'persistent' democratic impulse.<sup>8</sup>

The Old Left's largely optimistic vision of Australia's past immediately came under challenge. Always a creature of controversy, Manning Clark

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signalled the beginnings of 'a counter revolution' in Australian historiography. The radical nationalists had privileged the role of the labour movement and the values of the bush worker in the making of Australian history. For Clark, the 1890s were the site of more abstract human dramas: the search for spiritual meaning and enlightenment rather than the rise of some uniquely Australian sentiment. And Clark was uncomfortable with the Old Left's idealisation of mateship in the bush and solidarity in the unions. He revealed what Marie Berneri once called 'the dark side of the dream', the racism, xenophobia and ugly male arrogance which so often underpins Australian nationalism.<sup>9</sup>

Ironically, it was the New Left which drove Clark's thesis to a more theorised and ultimately more convincing conclusion. Writing in the 1970s and influenced by the recent rediscovery of Gramsci's writings, Humphrey McQueen turned the radical nationalists' vision on its head. Moderate, materialistic and tied to bourgeois values of respectability and self-improvement, the labour movement lacked the class consciousness to challenge colonial capitalism. Instead, history belonged to the enemy. The 1890s, for McQueen, were a time of racism, militarism, and authoritarianism. Even the ethos of the *Bulletin* school had soured: chauvinistic nationalism, ignorance and intolerance belied the myth of mateship in the bush. McQueen's scholarship may have been rambling but the appeal of his work was overwhelming. The use of hegemony as a heuristic device seemed novel and exciting in the 1970s: it lent a theoretical credence to the iconoclasm which characterised the New Left. And the book also mirrored the fragmentation of radical politics. For all its failings, *A New Britannia* captured the imagination of a generation of Australian scholars.<sup>10</sup>

As the challenges of the 1970s give way to the uncertainties of the 1990s, McQueen's work enjoys an unexpected revival. *A New Britannia* emphasised the exclusionary politics of the early labour movement and the failure of its vision. His scepticism seems peculiarly suited to this postmodern age. Nowhere is this more clearly illustrated than in what one critic has boldly styled 'the feminist historicism' of the 1990s. In fact recent feminist writers have developed McQueen's argument in a number of exciting new directions. On the one hand, there has been a recovery of radical traditions the Old Left largely ignored. Judith Allen, Audrey Oldfield and Katie Spearritt's work (amongst many others) recaptures much of the vitality of first-wave feminist movements: the 1890s saw the rise of the 'new woman', the struggle for suffrage, the quest for education and employment on equal terms with men. On the other hand, the 1890s provide the setting for another great human conflict. The 'class war' studied and celebrated by the Old Left has now intersected with the 'sex war' identified by feminist scholars. By far the most influential example of

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this approach has been Marilyn Lake's controversial engagement with that bible of the radical nationalists, the *Bulletin*.<sup>11</sup>

Historical traditions are rarely separate and discrete. Just as one vision of the 1890s contests the others, so too do new authors draw inspiration from the old. Verity Burgmann's lively account of early socialist movements and Bob James's companion volume on the anarchists return to the study of radical and working-class politics Robin Gollan pioneered 30 years ago. Ray Markey's monumental account of labour and industry in NSW follows a trajectory set down by Brian Fitzpatrick, Eric Fry and Vere Gordon Childe. Even the most recent work, John Docker's cultural history of the 1890s, echoes a much older genre. *The Nervous Nineties* owes much to Gollan's, Mansfield's and Churchward's early exploration of literature and ideology; like them it recaptures the excitement of this 'liminal age'.<sup>12</sup>

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Since the first brave inquiry of radical nationalists, our visions of the 1890s have widened, changed, fragmented. A host of questions and complications have arisen, informed by disciplines as diverse as cultural history, literary criticism and feminist studies. This book is a new history of nineteenth-century radicalism: a fresh attempt to retrieve the vision of what Lawson first styled the true republic. Its focus is the single tax, anarchist and socialist societies which made a brief, dramatic appearance towards the end of the nineteenth century, but its frame of reference is considerably wider. For half a century, the study of nineteenth-century radicalism has focused almost exclusively on labour politics: single tax, socialist and anarchist groups appear as small and ineffectual factions, insignificant 'tributaries' of mainstream political life. This book argues that the world of nineteenth-century radicalism is worthy of study in its own right. It explores the radicals' vibrant and dynamic culture, their rich and colourful repertoire of symbol and ritual, rhetoric and belief. In bookshops and dance halls, on street corners and public platforms, men and women laid the basis of an oppositional culture: to be a radical was not an abstract ideological position, it was an experience all of itself. Membership of these groups is often taken as given. This book asks what made men and women radical? It examines not just the literature of nineteenth-century socialism, but the process of reading, insight and conversion; not just the occupational strata of membership but the social context which gave nineteenth-century radicalism its cutting edge. While this book is not a study of the early suffrage societies (that task has been ably addressed elsewhere) it is intensely interested in the relationship



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between first-wave feminism and the anarchist socialist and single tax movements that grew up at the same time. All were part of a broader radical culture, their membership and ideology and experience overlapped and coalesced.

The validity of nineteenth-century radicalism has often been assessed in quantitative terms—How many members? How many delegates? How large the demonstration? Who spoke in their name? Size is a poor criterion of significance. The challenge of nineteenth-century radicalism was its very existence. Large and small, Australia's single tax, socialist and anarchist societies comprised a counter-hegemonic movement in late colonial society. They questioned not just the unequal distribution of property but also more generally the unequal distribution of power between rich and poor, men and women, and even (in a few courageous instances) black and white. Amongst them were the advocates of a 'true republic': vehement critics of imperialism and colonialism, bearers of an alternative vision of Australia's future and past.

In keeping with recent feminist scholarship, this book evaluates the radicals' challenge to masculinist ideology: Marilyn Lake and Joy Damousi have argued that socialists capitulated to the gender order, preserving, in organisation and ideology, the privileges of men.<sup>13</sup> This book draws out powerful exceptions to their argument, retrieving a feminist dimension to nineteenth-century radicalism which even the most recent inquiry has overlooked or obscured. And it notes the way that radicalism empowered others marginalised by the formal political process. It is remarkable that for all the scholarship centred on the (white) experience of the 1890s, we still have so little understanding of those who suffered most: the unemployed. This book surveys the causes, nature and extent of unemployment in late nineteenth-century Australia, mindful of the wider inequalities of gender, skill, class and race. It reconstructs the 'home front' of the depression, exploring the ingenious, desperate strategies whereby women and children struggled to make ends meet. And it examines the public protest of the street, a protest steeped in ritual and symbolism, which engaged a contemporary discourse on the rights of the citizen and the responsibilities of the state.

On the one hand, I have explored the utopian experiments of the 1890s, ill-fated attempts by anarchists, socialists and single taxers to build a new society in settings as diverse as Paraguay and the bush. On the other, I have turned to a theme which has preoccupied generations of scholars: the radicals' influence on the culture and institutions of organised labour. The centenary of the Labor Party in 1991 was greeted with a spate of publications: monographs, edited collections, archival guides and pictorial histories compete for a place on the library shelves and coffee tables of Labor faithful and the general reader. What is

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surprising about all these studies is how little they add to our knowledge of the 1890s. As survey histories, most of these accounts skim over Labor's origins in a few introductory remarks. And Labor's history is pre-eminently a history of its leaders. It is something of an irony that a party pledged (we are told) to improve the lot of ordinary Australians should become the stage of a few great men: 'big fellas' of the stature of Evatt, Whitlam and Lang.<sup>14</sup>

A new history of the labour movement must be a history written from below. The focus of this book moves away from 'mainstream developments'; debate at the Labor Conference is weighed against the squabbling of local party branches, resolutions at the Trades and Labour Council compared with the aspirations of each union's rank and file. By reconstructing this incomplete and scattered dialogue, I hope to create a more 'open' and contingent history, one in which there is room for struggle and choice, one in which the aspirations of labour radicals are not obscured by the machinations of the leadership or party machine. A good deal of recent social history has shied away from the study of institutions, focusing instead on the broader culture of the working class. What I hope to achieve in this book is a kind of balance: 'institutional history' (as its critics have called it) need not be one dimensional, monolithic or privilege formal politics over the wider processes of class formation. The Labor Party was the meeting place of many cultures, a 'contested terrain' on which the central concerns of social history might throw new light.<sup>15</sup>

Such a history restores the 'political vision' of the nineties. And to date the vision of the nineties has been alarmingly incomplete. The Old Left privileged a (somewhat romanticised) socialist discourse: the Labor Party in Vere Gordon Childe's classic formulation began as 'a band of inspired socialists' and 'degenerated into a vast machine for capturing political power'. 'Socialism' itself was evaluated within a strictly Marxist tradition. 'Real' socialism (as Terry Irving argued recently) was seen as 'revolutionary, scientific, anti-bourgeois and anti-liberal'. Non-Marxian socialism, by contrast is 'not quite authentic: it is statist, or moralistic, or utopian or prone to populist excess'. It is time, Irving concludes, for historians to rediscover 'alternative' socialist traditions. His point is well taken. In a new world order, Marxism can no longer maintain its monopoly on socialism: certainly, it had no such monopoly in the intellectual ferment of the 1890s where the work of Owen and Bellamy infused the very language of socialism with moral ardour and utopian zeal. But in recovering those 'alternative socialist traditions' we do well to remember that a very great part of the radical tradition was not 'socialist' at all. For much of the 1890s, single tax propagandists (advocates of Henry George's bold proposal for the redistribution of land and wealth) vied with their



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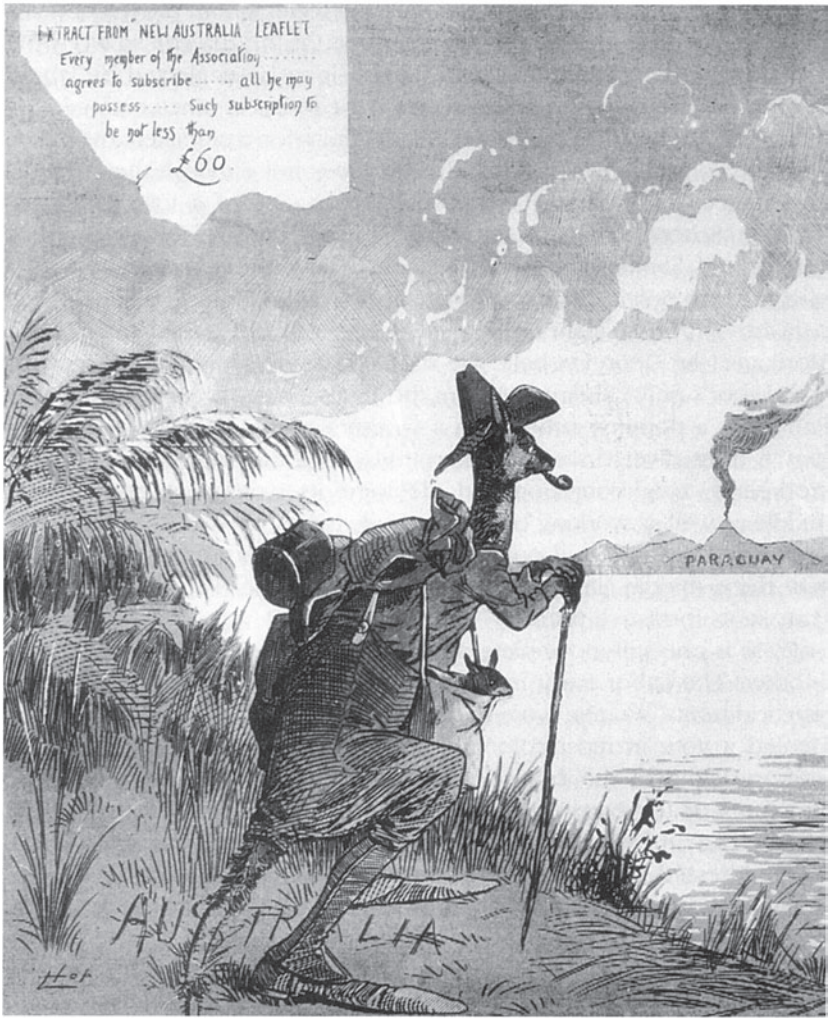
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socialist opponents for the allegiance of the wider labour movement. It is extraordinary that so large, so influential and (as the *Bulletin* so wryly put it) so exceedingly noisy a body could so long be neglected by labour historians. Of course, the Georgists were the losers of nineteenth-century radicalism, their 'faddish' obsession with land reform ultimately overtaken by more comprehensive ideals. But that does not diminish their original importance.<sup>16</sup> The single taxers were the bearers of a lost republican tradition. Schooled in the political language of Paine and Jefferson, ardent admirers of Shelley and Mazzini, they believed that monarchy was a blight on the political system. Kings, queens and landlords alike all were parasites on what Henry George liked to call 'the social organism'.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, the Georgists belie the simple class dynamic often associated with Labor's political emergence in the 1890s. From the outset, the Labor Party was a populist rather than a workers' party. Its membership was drawn from diverse social backgrounds, its local branches divided by workplace, neighbourhood and ideology, its parliamentary advocates middle as well as working class. The single taxers were a vital component of the community-based politics of the 1890s: my task is to examine the way these middle-class intellectuals influenced the nature of the Labor Party in its formative years.<sup>18</sup>

Class is one still-incomplete dimension of Labor's emergence; gender another. The Labor Party in the 1890s was a party of and for men. In practical terms, women were excluded from the formal political process. Denied a vote in most colonial legislatures, they remained (formally) unrepresented in the Labor Party until at least 1894. The rituals and structures of the party also conspired to preserve a distinctively male culture. Party meetings were held in the pub, workplace and union office, men addressed one another as mates and brothers and organised themselves in ways that affirmed the values of male solidarity. Such a party represented the interests of the white male wage earner: Labor's successive platforms happily assumed the 'worker' was male and a (real or potential) breadwinner and provider. His interests were the ones to be defended: women were merely dependents in this masculinist conception of citizenship. The male bias of Labor politics is easily identified. In language and image, ritual and policy, gendered meanings are (as Joan Scott would put it) 'embodied and encoded'. But even in this apparently 'womenless world' there were attempts at a less exclusive conception of Labor politics. This study notes the attempt by party radicals (in particular the single taxers) to secure women's franchise and to admit women to the party membership on equal terms with men. And in this and other contexts it considers the male backlash against such labour feminism.<sup>19</sup>

As my interest in these political processes suggests, citizenship is a recurrent theme of this book, but I use that term in its widest possible



'To envisage a new nation': William Lane's proposal to found a utopian colony in Paraguay was one of the most controversial radical projects of the 1890s. Here a sceptical *Bulletin* considers the scheme's limitations: with a £60 admission fee, New Australia barred access to many of the bushmen (symbolised here in the plain speaking and clearly very masculine 'roo) who Lane idealised.  
*Bulletin*, 11 March 1893.