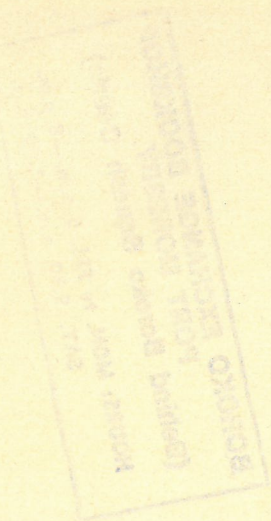


# A NEW BRITANNIA

An argument concerning the social origins  
of Australian radicalism and  
nationalism

*Humphrey McQueen*

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*For my mother and father*



## Introduction

Marxist theory sets out to disclose the forms of antagonism and exploitation in modern society, to trace their evolution, demonstrate their transient character and their transformation into a different form and thus *help the proletariat as quickly and as easily as possible to put an end to all exploitation*. For indeed the purpose of theory, the aim of science as directly laid down here, is to assist the oppressed class in its actual economic struggle.

*Lenin, 1893*

In *New Left Review*, No. 46, Gareth Stedman-Jones advised socialist historians that they should 'not retreat into the safe pastures of labour history. They should not be content to chip away at the easily sacrificed protuberances of received historical interpretation. This will only trap them in the cosy humanitarian niche which liberal historians have always been all too happy to accord to them. They should instead establish the *theoretical* foundations of any history, they should advance into the structure and history of the ruling class, into the interpretation of the historical morphology of the whole cultures . . . they should be aggressive and iconoclastic. Only vigorous intellectual imperialism and collective assault will make a mark. Otherwise the limp ghosts of long departed liberal mandarins will forever "weigh like a nightmare on the brain of the living"'. I have, as far as I am able, followed this advice. Consequently, what follows is largely interpretative. There is hardly any original research here. But there are a host of new facts, for, as E. H. Carr so rightly said, a fact is not something which has happened, but something which an historian chooses to consider important, that is, significant for his interpretation.

There is one portion of Stedman-Jones' advice which, brazen and all as I am, I cannot follow. I cannot make



a collective assault by myself. For the next two hundred odd pages I shout, wave my arms and frantically dash from one battlefield to another. But sooner or later the besieged will call a council-of-war and realize that despite the sound and the fury they are not outnumbered. If socialists are ever to realize that Australia is a capitalist society and is not possessed by some natural socialist ethos (mateship) then it will take much more than my efforts. It will involve a good deal of original research. It will mean advancing wave upon wave. But most of all it will involve the honesty which can come only from a recognition of how vital the achievement of socialism is. For while revolutionaries in power have often distorted history in order to stay there, no revolutionary movement seeking power can afford the luxury of historical misunderstanding.

Nor can revolutionary history be reduced to the usable past. Revolutionaries must not dredge up bits and pieces in order to justify our present stance. Accepting the dialectical unity of past and future we must examine the past for a guide to what needs to be done to alter the future. History is not on our side. The past belongs to the enemy. We must understand it in order to end it. But understanding requires far more than a one-sided analysis of half of the equation. The great flaw in this book is that it attempts to outline the ideological subordination of the workers without first examining the culture of the ruling class. It is just assumed. It is the next major task. Also important will be a continuation of the critique of Laborism from the 1920's to the present. I will present an outline of this early in 1971 in J. D. Playford and D. Kirsner *Australian Capitalist Society: A Socialist Critique* to be published by Penguin. The other mammoth task will be to follow through the development of the proletariat in Australia. This is hinted at in a couple of places towards the end of this book but because the present concern is with the old attitudes of Laborism the burgeoning socialism has been rigorously

ignored. This is no indication of its importance.

My thanks are due to many people: John Playford for suggesting that I write a book and for sustaining me with materials; Henry Mayer for his public praise and private chidings; Bruce McFarlane for his continual faith in the worth of the project; Eric Fry for reading the manuscript and suggesting many improvements; Manning Clark for his Foreword; my wife, Judy, who made writing the book possible; my revolutionary colleagues, especially Darce Cassidy, Mike Hyde and Albert Langer; and above all to the people of Vietnam whose heroic struggle against U.S. Imperialism was a constant inspiration.

Humphrey McQueen  
31 May 1970

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In the five months since I completed this manuscript I have added a number of supporting quotations and sources. More importantly, I have reconstructed a large part of the work. However, on reading the page proofs I have been impressed by five major weaknesses. First, the totally inadequate social theory which I have employed. In rejecting a 'base-determines-superstructure' model of Marxism I have adopted the Gramscian concept of 'Hegemony' and derived much from Lukacs on 'false consciousness'. I would not reject these as such – but they do need tying down with a *philosophic* rigor which they deny is possible. What I wonder is not whether Australian society functioned the way I have described, but whether it is possible for any society to so function? Has my eclecticism produced an impossible hybrid? Second, the purely cultural has received far too short shrift: education, temperance, fiction and poetry have been made use of; they have not been examined. Third, the role of women has been ignored. I felt particularly chastised when reading Ann Curthoys' 'Historiography & Women's Liberation' in *Arena* No. 22. It convinced me of the validity of



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'Women's Liberation' in a way direct propaganda never has. And despite my androgynous spirit the task of reshaping history to include women must be left to one of their number: at least for the appreciable future. Fourth, I have been far too peremptory in my treatment of the aborigines. Fifth, there is no attempt to write history from the bottom up. What follows is the last of the 'old left' histories of Australia. At every point it remains encapsuled within the tradition it so violently denounces.

Humphrey McQueen,  
1 September 1970.

## Historians

I do not believe that this re-writing will come from the Universities, though they will greatly assist the work of the creative writer. It will not come from the Universities, because they, instead of being the fiercest critics of the bankrupt liberal ideal, are its most persistent defenders. Then too they have been made afraid by the angry men of today with their talk about 'corrupters of youth'.

C. M. H. Clark, 1956

THE Australian legend consists of two inextricably interwoven themes: radicalism and nationalism. In the minds of their devotees these concepts are projected into 'socialism' and 'anti-imperialism'. Nineteenth-century Australia is seen as a vast spawning ground for all that is politically democratic, socially egalitarian and economically non-competitive whilst our nationalism is anti-imperial and anti-militarist. There is an arch of Australian rebelliousness stretching from the convicts to the anti-conscription victories of 1916-17, buttressed at strategic points by the Eureka stockade and the Barcardine shears.

The legends include Russel Ward, Geoffrey Serle, Ian Turner, and to a lesser extent Robin Gollan and the late Brian Fitzpatrick. None of these historians would object to being described as socialist; indeed, some have welcomed the title marxist. As I do. The difference between us is that for them socialism is a thing of the past; something to lament, and lamenting, paint in lurid rose ere the pall of death become too apparent. Their tale is a sad one. A tale of decline, of a once radical people corrupted by their own victories. In essence they picture radicalism, and with it socialism, as chances gone for ever. There is nothing to look forward to except king-making and wire-pulling the A.L.P.

But it is the historians who have suffered the decline.