

A NEW BRITANNIA

An argument concerning
the social origins of Australian
radicalism and nationalism

Humphrey McQueen

PENGUIN BOOKS

For my mother and father

Penguin Books Australia Ltd.
487 Maroonah Highway, P.O. Box 257
Ringwood, Victoria, 3134, Australia
Penguin Books Ltd.
Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England

Penguin Books,
625 Madison Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10022, U.S.A.
Penguin Books Canada Ltd.,
2801 John Street, Markham, Ontario, Canada
Penguin Books (N.Z.) Ltd.,
182-190 Wairau Road, Auckland 10, New Zealand

First published 1970
Reprinted 1971
Revised edition 1976
Reprinted 1978, 1980

Copyright © Humphrey McQueen, 1970, 1975
Made and printed in Australia at
The Dominion Press, North Blackburn, Victoria
Set in Linotype Baskerville

All rights reserved

Except in the United States of America,
this book is sold subject to the condition that
it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent,
re-sold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without
the publisher's prior consent in any form of
binding or cover other than that in which it is
published and without a similar condition
including this condition being imposed on the
subsequent purchaser.

CIP

McQueen, Humphrey, 1942-
A new Britannia.

Rev. ed.
Bibliography.
Includes index.
ISBN 0 14 021904 8.

1. Nationalism—Australia. 2. Radicalism—
Australia. 3. Australia—Social conditions. I. Title.

320.54/0994

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

All of this book is an argument concerning the social origins of the Australian Labor Party. Only one eighth of it deals directly with the A.L.P. while seven-eighths spell out the total international and domestic environment – political, economic, social – from which the Labor party was formed. Through an analysis of Australian radicalism and nationalism in the nineteenth century, it is shown why the A.L.P. was anti-socialist from the very start, and why any political strategy in the 1970s to get the A.L.P. back to its supposed socialist origins is doomed to failure.

A New Britannia makes sense only when it has the coherence of a history of the A.L.P. Without that unifying plan it falls apart into a series of broadly connected chapters about radicalism and nationalists. In the first printing, this plan was not as clear as it should have been because of a publishing oversight which was largely corrected in the second printing in 1971. Part One on Nationalists and Part Two on Radicals lead up to Part Three on Laborites.

A New Britannia says nothing about the working class after about 1915. Certainly, it provides no excuse for those people who have tried to use it to justify policies which deny the leading role of the proletariat in the struggle for independence and socialism. The original introduction made this clear:

A NEW BRITANNIA

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.

In a postscript to the 1970 Introduction, I listed 'five major weaknesses' which I had discerned while reading the page proofs of *A New Britannia*:

First, the totally inadequate social theory which I have employed. In rejecting a 'base-determines-superstructure' model of Marxism I have adapted 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* rigour 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. . . . 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.

In an important way the last four weaknesses cannot go with the first. Culture, women, Aborigines and the bottom: all have an air of sentimental faddism – not as real things and living people – but as compulsory sins of omission to confess. They should have been included in *A New Britannia* because they were important, and not because they are trendy. This means they should have been included structurally into the argument and not merely given a larger percentage of the pages. But this was not possible because the first objection should be put as a statement and not as a question. *A New Britannia* was and is pre-scientific. Its underlying notions of nationalism,

INTRODUCTION

radicalism and Laborism were taken over from a pre-existing debate without any attempt to determine their validity. Because it depended upon these completely inadequate notions it is not capable of being re-written. Its passing errors have been fixed up but its fundamentally pre-scientific bases mean that it must be seen as a burning off of old rubbish, rather than as a model for new growth. This does not mean that Ward, Serle, Turner, Collan and Fitzpatrick were right. On the contrary, it means that they were even more wrong than I claimed. Their wrongness stems from the theory they employed, and not simply from their conclusions which *A New Britannia* rightly rebuts.

For example, nationalism is not a concept but an ideology. For it to become useful in historical analysis, it must be defined in relation to nation, which in turn has to be defined in terms of class struggle. The closest *A New Britannia* got to this was its placing the debate back in the context of Imperialism. Further advances can be made only by going back and establishing the concepts with which the analysis is to be conducted. No amount of factual data will increase our understanding without a prior construction of correct concepts. In other words, it depends upon the further flowering of Marxism in Australia. There are good reasons for believing that this will occur for although still few in number and uncertain on many questions, historical materialists have won a firm footing because they are at least putting the right questions and trying to answer them in the right way: questions about modes of productions and of class struggles. It is these developments which make me happier at the prospect of writing a fullscale demolition of *A New Britannia* – although that is at present the furthest thought from my mind. Returning to my own vomit is one trick this dog has no desire to learn.

My responses to most reviewers needs explaining since it is widely considered improper for an author to reply to his reviewers. I replied because I take history seriously,

A NEW BRITANNIA

that is, politically. Dilettantes and academics can afford to keep silent since they produce books for personal and/or career reasons. Revolutionaries who retreat from any ideological struggle abandon one of their most important defences against the bourgeois trap of 'good manners' which are nothing more than rules for fighting on their terms and in no way preclude their backstabbing and gossiping. The impropriety of public debate is mild stuff compared to their maliciousness over cups of tea.

My thanks stand more than ever to those I mentioned by name in 1970: John Playford, Henry Mayer, Bruce McFarlane, Eric Fry, Manning Clark, Judy McQueen; my revolutionary colleagues, especially Darce Cassidy, Mike Hyde and Albert Langer; and above all to the people of Vietnam whose heroic victory over U.S. Imperialism is a constant inspiration in Australia's struggles for independence and socialism.

Humphrey McQueen
30 June 1975

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-conscriptioin victories of 1916-17, buttressed at strategic points by the Eureka stockade and the Barcaldine shearers.

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 in the A.L.P. But it is the historians who have suffered the decline.