

These ideological consequences were as important in subordinating the labour movement as were the prosperity and promises that gold spread.

THIRTEEN Selectors

It is the farmer who 'gives his girls and boys to the big cities to infuse ... red blood into a society that is constantly decadent, and whose only salvation is the virility it draws from the rural section'.

Southern Argus (Wagin), 31 January 1920

To understand the intensity of the desire to possess 'land', it is essential to realise the mythical, indeed religious qualities with which it can be endowed. Fascist propagandists exploited this connection with their emphasis on the soil as the source of life, food and blood. The shift from agriculture to industry devastated those who experienced its worst features in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Britain. The enclosures forced thousands from their land. The Industrial Revolution dragged countless others into factories and towns which were the denial of the independence and sociability associated with rural life. There was a general longing for a return to the status and security of land ownership.

It is in these intangibles as much as in any material reward that the profound power of land rests — a power evident even today although its precise forms have altered. Santamaria's land schemes, demands for decentralisation, and the suburban sprawl remind us of the importance of land in the ideals of the Australian people. Our land-myth flourished upon a tripod of forces: peasant faith in land, utopianism, and an abundance of

untilled acres. The first two were imported in the baggage of convicts and free settlers alike.

Peasant faith in land was strongest among the Irish, some four thousand of whom were transported for participating in anti-eviction societies. One observer in Ireland in 1839 wrote that 'it is not enough to say that land is desired; it is envied and coveted ... and when it cannot be occupied by fair means, it is seized by crime'. In the latter part of the nineteenth century, an entirely new political weapon, the boycott, sprang from the pledge of the Land League never to purchase land from which a tenant had been evicted for non-payment of unjust rent. The desire for land was tied to the fight for Home Rule and thus carried significance for Irishmen unconnected with agriculture. When the Irish, whether convict or free, came to Australia their demand for land was undiminished, even if, like Joseph Furphy's parents, they had to wait twenty-five years before they could secure a holding.

English utopians responded to industrialisation by seizing upon 'land' as the source of salvation. Initially, this association carried over the Jacobin hatred for the aristocracy, expressed in Tom Paine's *Agrarian Justice*. In the depression that followed the Napoleonic wars, discharged sailors and soldiers responded to orators who concluded that 'the earth is at all times sufficient to place man above distress ... if he had but a spade and a hoe'. In the cooperative community of Owenism, the yearning for land acquired its first organised voice. All through this era, Cobbett expounded the cause of the displaced rural workers — not that they needed anyone to tell them from where their troubles sprang, as their revolt in 1830 showed. Some 460 of these riotous followers of 'Captain Swing' were transported to Australia.

With the 1840s came the most extraordinary exhibition of the potency of the land myth as an escape from the evils of urban industry. In the years 1845 to 1848, Fergus O'Connor enrolled into his Chartist Land Plan almost 70 000 contributors

who recognised that they had very little hope of ever finding their names on a list of chosen settlers. Yet they were aroused by the call of

Courage, poor slave! deliverance is near.

Oh! she has breathed a summons sweeter still:

Comel! take your guerdon at O'Connorville!

O'Connor won his supporters in the face of opposition from other Chartist leaders. He recognised that 'his plan has no more to do with Socialism than it has with the Comet', and was essentially conservative in character. This appraisal remained true for the various land schemes that attracted the Australians.

Despite severe disagreements between them, Caroline Chisholm and Edward Gibbon Wakefield were agreed that the emigrants desired land, and not a mere reproduction in Australia of the wage system. Mrs Chisholm favoured settling poor immigrants on plots of four to twenty hectares immediately on their arrival. Wakefield opposed this policy, arguing that unless land was of a 'sufficient price' to prevent everyone buying a farm the moment they set foot in the colony, there would be no end to the chronic labour shortage and hence a bar to the accumulation of capital. Wakefield did recognise that the establishment of a 'yeomanry' was so strongly desired by the emigrants that it could not be ignored. He proposed that the 'sufficient price' be low enough to enable farm labourers to save, within five to seven years, adequate funds to take up a property of their own. His theory foundered on the rock of how such a price was to be determined. Eventually land prices were fixed, as in South Australia, or determined by auction, as in the Port Phillip district. The result of the latter was as Wakefield had predicted: only the rich could afford to buy. Marx made merry with Australian experiences in the final chapter of the 1867 volume of *Capital*.

The depression that hit the colonies from 1840 to 1845 ac-

centuated the precarious position of the landless labourers who intensified their cry for a yeomanry. Alexander Harris, who was in Australia at this time, noted in *Settlers and Convicts* that the existing land regulations caused

A very bitter and continually deepening feeling of disaffection to the British Government ... in the minds of the colonial youth ... They say and truly enough — Great Britain sends out two classes here: one of these being rich, originally obtained vast grants of land for nothing, and is still allowed to buy on terms to which it can conform; the other, as being poor, is not even allowed to buy, because the very condition of purchase is that the purchaser be rich.

This disaffection took a curious turn in 1844 when Governor Gipps announced two sets of squatting regulations. Although these rules aimed to secure tenure for squatters, they were neither presented nor perceived as such. Wentworth, by then leader of the 'exclusivist' faction, set up a hue and cry against Gipps. The squatters' traditional enemies, the small landholders and town labourers, joined forces with the squatters against the Governor, who had made himself unpopular in the years 1840-44 by forcing up the minimum price of land. The land-hungry were driven into the arms of those who were the real enemies of open selection and went into battle, as on so many other occasions, in the interests and at the command of their masters.

The fight against Gipps led to a new set of land regulations in 1847. These amendments gave the squatters almost everything they wanted. Too late the landless realised they had fought behind false colours. Three years on, the discovery of gold set the stage for a more ferocious attack upon the squatocracy in the form of the Free Selection Acts of the 1860s. 'Selection before survey' was the culmination of a decade of campaigning to unlock the land so that the diggers, successful and failed alike, could contribute to the young nation's wealth by participating in its agriculture.

The disposal of land in Australia was more complex than indicated by the present sketch, which is concerned with its ideological implications for the aspiring classes. Just how important land was in the formation of the political and social consciousness of the Australian people will be examined by recounting some of the prolonged battles they waged in order to establish a 'yeomanry'.

The desire for land coloured two otherwise unconnected features of nineteenth-century Australian thinking. The Church and School Corporation, established in 1824, was supposed to be financed from a land grant 'comprising one seventh part in extent and value of all land in each colony'. The opposition that this aroused found life later in the campaign for secular education. A small grant of land in the Port Phillip district was made to an Aboriginal welfare organisation: 'To the squatters, this was an abomination'.

Australia had a greater percentage of its population in towns than almost any other country: more than 50 per cent in 1891, and more than in the United States. For, as James McAuley wrote in his fragment from *The True Discovery of Australia*:

though they praise the inner spaces,
When asked to go themselves, they'd rather not.

It is in the contradiction between a stated desire for land and a refusal to quit the cities that the utopian face of land reform can be divined. Large numbers of immigrants wanted to be farmers. For many others, land represented a mystical hope — the Promised Land — the alternative to the wage slavery of the factory towns. The farm was not real in the sense that every stonemason intended to leave Sydney for the bush. Rather, it was real in the sense that the demand for land was an affirmation of their desire for the freedom and security that capitalism had destroyed in Britain and was again constricting in Australia. As one new arrival put it in 1853, 'My great hope and

ambition was that ... I might become the owner of a plot of land to settle down upon and live in peace and contentment, and, what is still better, independent of the whims and caprice of an employer'.

In the early 1850s the editor of the then radical *Argus* coined the slogan 'Unlock the Lands' — a cry taken up by every reform movement in the second half of the nineteenth century. In range of political sentiment, the clamour united the quasi-Marxist Democratic Association of Victoria and the New South Wales landowner John Robertson; in time, it extended from the Ballarat Reform League at Eureka in 1854 to the Australian Labor Federation around Barcaldine in 1891. Because of the opposition it encountered in the squatter-dominated Legislative Councils, land reform became integral to democratic reform. Whether its particular manifestation was a Selection Act, a Village Settlement or a Single-Tax League, the view of land as the source of wealth and security proved central to the thinking and practices of the burgeoning labour movement.

Early in the 1860s, New South Wales and Victoria passed Selection Acts. Scholars have shown that these Acts were not intended to create a yeomanry. They did not flow from the disinterestedness of the urban middle classes. They were part of a battle between the urban capitalists and the squatters. The leaders in the fight for free selection were men such as John Robertson, a landowner. The labouring classes tied their hopes to the bourgeois, only to have them dashed once more. The workers were political pawns and their demand for land became a stepping stone for the politically ambitious:

Unlock! Unlock! throw open wide, the portals of your land,
Let all enjoy those blessings given by an all bounteous hand ...
Then to the poll, your votes enrol, each tradesman, farmer,
thrasher,
Unlock the Lands! cry out all hands, and Vote for Morris Asher!

Graham Berry in Victoria in 1877 used the demand for a pro-

gressive land tax to gain the premiership though he was far from sympathetic to the proposal. That the Selection Acts were an instrument in a struggle between fractions of capital, and because the laws put so few people on the land, does not diminish the popular support for access to land. Indeed, the politics of the second half of the nineteenth century were notable for the consistency with which the demand for land recurred, to be woven into all other proposals for progress. The battles also revealed the immaturity of the labouring classes: first, in their belief that the land offered an escape from capitalism, and secondly, in their political obeisance to bourgeois liberals. It remains to trace out the contours of these relations.

The *Times*, 23 December 1851, thought it 'an undoubted fact that most men emigrate for the sake of obtaining land', even at the height of a gold rush. Certainly, within twelve months of the first miners arriving in Victoria, an organised voice called for land reform. The subservience outlined above emerged in the next six months: the spokesmen were established radicals such as Fawcett, the 'Cobbett of the South'. None the less, the demands for farms were heartfelt. In December 1852, 13 000 diggers at Castlemaine petitioned for blocks of seven to thirty hectares. Under Fawcett's influence, a Colonial Reform Association was launched in November that same year with land reform its main objective. By the following June, the Association had presented 7000 signatures petitioning for land.

Even though the high price of land was more pressing at this time, there was a widespread belief that once the land was unlocked all would be well. The decision to 'unlock' came in a dispatch from the Secretary for the Colonies in March 1854. The new Governor, Hotham, was too busy fining miners to do anything except appoint a Royal Commission, which proved to be an excellent waste of time. The much desired 'unlocking' came and went almost unnoticed.

Three days after Eureka, a public meeting in Melbourne de-

manded that 'All land of the colony, not actually purchased and paid for, be leased to *bona fide* cultivators in Farms of 250 acres each at a nominal rent'. The difficulty faced by the diggers in their quest for land had contributed to their rebellion, but was not a necessary or a direct cause. More relevant was the high price of foodstuffs, because the administration would not sell land round the diggings. The grievance was limited to the removal of administrative injustices and did not yet assume the outright anti-squatter characteristics that soon dominated. The demand for farms quoted above had ended with proposals to compensate the squatters.

By January 1855, even someone as insensitive to public feelings as Governor Hotham realised that 'the real fight will be for the land'. The findings of the Commission that inquired into Eureka were more accurate as prediction than as history in relation to land matters. Until 1854, those desirous of land had been largely provided for. With the end of alluvial mining it was certainly most urgent that 'the flocks and herds ... give way to the human families' if Victoria's recently acquired population were to be maintained. No one was more anxious that this should be so than the merchants who interested themselves in land reform: 3000 people attended a meeting called by the mayor of Melbourne to consider the best means of opening up the countryside.

Illustrative of the change that immigration wrought in radicals was the attitude of Charles Southwell to the land question which, he asserted, could be solved by 'vision on the part of the governing classes'. When he stood for the Legislative Council, the *Age* exposed his 'revolutionary' past. He had broken with Robert Owen whom he claimed was altogether too moderate.

Despite organisational setbacks, 1855 saw the publication of perhaps the most radical demand for land reform to appear in the whole campaign. Its author, 'Peter Papineau', remains a mystery, but his intentions were clear enough: *Homesteads for*

the people and manhood suffrage. Papineau decried 'the stupid cuckoo cry, "Unlock the Lands"', which he declared to be nothing more than an opportunity to

buy bad land at a low price, or fair land at a high price; low-priced bad land that would be dear as a gift, high-priced fair land which, if he buys in a large quantity, swallows up his capital and leaves him without the means of settling upon it properly.

The wise alternative for the working man was 'not to attend the land sales at all! ... Let him keep his money and wait — he will not have to wait long'.

Immediate relief was not to be had. Two more years passed before the land reformers presented their next serious challenge. The driving force for this second campaign came from two recent arrivals, Wilson Gray and Gavan Duffy. They travelled to Melbourne on the same ship early in 1856 and set about establishing niches for themselves in local affairs. Their method of operation carried on the tradition of Irish land hunger. In 1857 they called together a Land Convention. Duffy's later explanation of his activities doubtless contains many efforts at self-justification, yet it is noteworthy that he saw land reform as a 'counterpoise' to the political power of the diggers 'who when they became unfit for that trying pursuit might become dangerous to the public safety'. Whether or not this containment was Duffy's intention at the time, the total effect of the land issue in the nineteenth century was to divert social protestors into innumerable blind alleys.

Trade union leaders made themselves prominent when the Land Convention met in Melbourne in July 1857. Delegates were elected at public meetings to attend the Convention which was seen as an extra-parliamentary assembly where the demands of the people could be voiced. The particular cause of agitation was a new land Bill which offered perpetuity of tenure to the squatters, in fact if not in law. About 70 000 people signed a petition against the Bill, at the same time demanding

democratic reforms. Rising unemployment gave a cutting edge to the demands. When the Bill, known as the 'Squatters' Charter', was defeated, holidays and bonfires spread throughout the goldfields.

The Convention represented the most radical political force in Victoria, a fact recognised by politicians such as Duffy and Higinbotham who were annoyed at being outflanked on the left. Although some speakers called for 'A Vote, A Rifle, and A Farm', this phrase was sloganeering rather than settled policy. One ardent reformer is supposed to have set off with a party to unlock the lands by force, but went only as far as Flemington. These kilometres were further than revolutionary endeavour extended.

For two years the Convention met weekly; it organised hundreds of public meetings and dozens of demonstrations. It so roused public opinion that all governments were forced to initiate radical land legislation. The Convention was also loosely allied to reform associations in country towns and to the United Australians and the National Reform Association. While these links gave it support, they accentuated the tensions that existed between country and metropolis, and between various leaders.

Union spokesmen such as C. J. Don (later MLA) had been associated with the Convention from its inception. Some unions, such as the carpenters', had linked themselves directly with the Convention. Early in 1859 they were beginning to break away in the hope of securing direct representation in parliament through a Political Labour League. The League's policy on land and democracy was identical with the Convention's policy on land and democracy but had added planks on an eight-hour day and repeal of the Masters and Servants Act. The League collapsed after the election and always cooperated with the Convention. The impulse to break free of middle-class domination was present, but feeble.

Protectionism was breaking up the Convention's domi-

nance of radical politics. Protection, for so long nothing more than an isolated cry from Geelong, had become an important movement by 1859 when manufacturers and workers founded the Tariff League. Within a year, the Convention had been absorbed by the protectionist leagues and a new chapter I perhaps the most important one I in the alliance between capitalist and wage-slave began.

The Convention's death was not obvious in the first half of 1859. Its appeal for a new convention was as spirited as ever. When its supporters met in mid-July, the gathering proved a fiasco. The splits and rivalries that had become evident in the preceding year spelt its end as a coherent organisation just when the fight for land was about to enter a more violent phase.

No attempt will be made to trace the tortuous path of the Nicholson-Service Land Bill that was introduced in November 1859 and finally passed — mutilated — in September 1860. Suffice it to say that there were the inevitable games of musical chairs in the Cabinet room as premiers and ministers came and went. All this manoeuvring was without real importance. What mattered was the capitulation of the reformers in the Assembly to the demands of the conservative squatters in the Legislative Council. All through this period, public agitation for reform proceeded. In late August, Nicholson returned as premier but revealed a willingness to give in to the squatters. On the night before parliament was due to resume, three thousand people assembled in the Eastern Market where they were addressed by leading Conventionists, including Graham Berry and Wilson Gray. The assembly decided to meet again the following night to march on Parliament House to rally support for the original Bill.

A large but orderly crowd gathered on 28 August 1860 in a show of 'moral force'. After a few stones were thrown, Nicholson ordered out the troops, who broke up the meeting with a good deal of vigour. One thousand special constables

were sworn in over the next few days and political meetings were banned from the inner city although they were still permitted at the Eastern Market. The disturbance provoked a swing to the right in the Assembly. Nicholson could give way. The tattered Bill passed in mid-September. These manoeuvres did not save the squatters or Nicholson. In the elections of August 1861, a new group of reformers, led by Heales and Brooke, won twenty-two of the twenty-seven goldfields seats and formed a government. Popular sentiment was as firmly behind land reform as ever, but henceforth this plea would be bound to moves for protection and for democratic reform.

The Duffy Land Acts came into little effect in September 1862. Of a million acres that were sold, almost two-thirds were bought by a hundred men. Corruption pervaded all. Duffy's successor, Grant, terrified the squatters. Though he did not succeed in separating them from their land he often threatened to separate their heads from their bodies. He is alleged to have told a meeting at Camperdown in 1865 that 'he carried a Guillotine in his heart — and swore by his maker that he would cut off the heads of the squatters rather than that they should have the land'. Guillotines, lamp-posts and the like figured heavily in his speeches, which were as full of spirit as Grant himself.

Throughout the 1850s in Victoria, the desire for land reform pervaded every aspect of public life. The tens of thousands who signed petitions, the thousands who demonstrated, and the hundreds who organised, showed by their actions that it is impossible to separate land reform from the politics of the time. Even when protection took over, its pre-eminence did not mean that the people had suddenly become reconciled to industry. The earliest demands for protection came from farmers demanding Corn Laws. If every man were to have a farm, it was only natural that he would want to be able to sell its produce. Some land reformers wanted democratic reforms to break the power of the squatter-dominated Legislative Coun-

cil. Others sought land reform so that democracy and property ownership could remain compatible. While the former is the more radical, both indicate the important place that land occupied in the mid-nineteenth-century radical's view of the good society. 'Unlocking the land' lost its privileged place in Victorian radicalism partly because it had become so generally accepted and partly because it was impossible to implement it until further reforms were made to the squatter-dominated Legislative Council. Attention turned towards democratic reform, not for its own sake but so that desired economic and social advances could be effected.

Pressure for land reform in New South Wales was as intense as in Victoria, although the increase in population had not been so great. Radicalism was as firmly established. A few small groups had a purely working-class membership. These associations remained feeble. When the New South Wales Land League was formed in 1857, it showed little independence and supported liberal or even conservative politicians. The desertion of its president to the conservatives to become Minister for Lands sealed its fate, before it collapsed completely in 1860, the very year its proposals became law.

Despite this organisational weakness, there had been no lack of propaganda. The poet Charles Harpur and his brother Joseph were prominent. The latter became a confidant of the sponsor of free selection, John Robertson. Continuing pressure for free selection came from papers such as Parkes's *Empire* and the more radical *People's Advocate*, which, on 1 July 1854, carried a letter from an 'Irish Labourer and Republican' telling the readers that they 'can no more secure an acre of land unless at fifty to one hundred times its value, than you can secure it in the Domain of the Duke of Norfolk, Devonshire or Northumberland'. This impediment was particularly galling since they had 'expected to find a new home in this new land, capable of supporting millions of your fellow men'. The aim 'of all interested in the progress of the country' had been spelt

out editorially in the same paper two years earlier when it called for the establishment of a yeomanry, 'that is to say, small independent farmers who should be the cultivators of their own ground which they should hold immediately from the government'.

The *Report of a Select Committee on the Condition of the Working Classes of the Metropolis* in 1859 revealed that living conditions in Sydney's working-class districts were as appalling as those of the major European cities. These circumstances found one utopian outlet in demand for land.

The absence of independent working-class organisations enabled middle-class politicians to exert their influence. These politicians had an interest of their own to further, which they did by harnessing the working man's discontent. The workers were no less pleased to be led by gentlemen. The occasional outbursts in favour of cheap land as well as for free selection did not impair the relationship between the workers and the middle classes. Even when working-class spokesmen recalled the fate of Charles I, the bourgeoisie had little to fear, since the workers' aim was to abolish monopoly, not capital; monopoly meant the squatters. Further proof of the ideological supremacy of the middle classes is that the workers accepted free selection as the extension of the principle of laissez-faire, that is, as the removal of restrictions on farming. They did not see it as state activity, and still less as a form of agricultural socialism.

D. W. A. Baker, the authority on the 1860 Selection Act in New South Wales, described the situation:

This working-class intransigence was clearly inspired not only by past suffering, but also by the contrast between their present misery and their vision of the well-being they expected as a result of free selection. The working class, with juvenile utopianism, expected heavenly results from a middle class reform. J. G. White, one of the ablest radicals, thought that the squatters' runs would give employment to a thousand times as much capital and labour as had formerly been expended on them. The cry went out from the roof tops that 'the good time is coming, boys!' Mr

McCormack saw eight hundred squatters' runs supporting a population of three hundred millions.

By the time it had become apparent that this outcome was not to be, the long boom had commenced. Utopian land schemes were to subside, but not disappear, until the boom began to collapse late in the 1880s. Full employment and high wages meant that the problems of industrial capitalism could once more be evaded, even to the extent of shelving dreams of an Australian arcadia.

The demand for land in Queensland was less because the following vicious circle operated: land had to be sold to pay for railways; railways were needed to reduce transport costs; lower transport costs were needed to make farming profitable; profitable farming had to be possible before anyone would buy land. This situation led to considerable interest in land-grant railways which were rejected by the radicals. The conservative leader McIlwraith initiated a scheme by which land would be given in payment for railway construction. The land would be resold to settlers, with the result that Queensland would have both railways and settlers without any public expenditure. McIlwraith was chairman of the railway construction company. His brave notion came to nought. His bank went broke.

In those areas of Queensland where geographic features were more favourable, as on the Darling Downs, Selection Acts operated with greater force. In addition to references to Locke and Jefferson, the advocates of free selection in Queensland had the example of the Homesteaders Act of 1862 in the United States. Agrarian feelings found voice in the Brisbane *Courier*, 23 March 1872, which believed that farmers 'live nearer God' and that the escape from the 'sickly towns' more than compensated for any lack of financial reward. It quoted the Archbishop of Brisbane who recognised that 'a man with a few acres of land is unlikely to become a socialist'. Outside some favoured areas, closer settlement in Queensland failed as

a result of the combined effects of poor transport, a low population, and a consequently slow demand for agricultural products. On top of these factors came unfavourable climatic conditions and the inevitable machinations of the squatters.

The neo-Wakefieldian principles upon which South Australia had been founded in 1836 were designed, in theory, to extend the limits of settlement in an orderly fashion so that more and more settlers would be placed on the land. Natural conditions enabled moderately sized wheat farms to succeed. Between 1850 and 1884, cultivated land increased from 26 000 to 1 117 000 hectares, which was about three hectares per person. This spread was four times as great as Victoria and ten times greater than the per capita figure for New South Wales. The virtue and value of land were always unstated assumptions in South Australia's political life. If there was no upheaval comparable to that of Victoria, it was because land monopolies had been discouraged from the first and therefore did not require breaking up. Most importantly, all land in South Australia had been purchased outright and no one dreamed of expropriating estates for which the Crown had been paid. Such a demand would have denied the security and independence that were the very basis of the clamour for land, which ignored the original dispossession.

South Australia in the late 1880s experienced a fresh upsurge of the agrarian myth when George Witherage Cotton, MLC, published *Small Holdings, the mainstay of individuals and nations*. Cotton proposed that the government lease blocks of up to eight hectares to working men. Initially these holdings would only supplement income but with the progress of agricultural science they would eventually support an entire family. These 'working men's blocks' would ward off revolutions and form the basis of a new society of independent farmers. A Homestead League campaigned on the issue in the 1890 election with some success. An Act to repurchase land for leasing was passed in 1890, followed by a Blockholders

Loans Act. By 1896, some 4 per cent of the state's population lived on these 'blocks'. Cotton had extensive connections with the SA Trades and Labour Council, presidents and secretaries of which served on the executive of the Homestead League. Cotton was claimed as a 'Labor' representative by the SA parliamentary committee in their 1889 report to the Inter-Colonial Trades Union Congress. The extension of 'working men's blocks' was part of the South Australian party's first electoral platform in 1891. The success of Cotton's ideas was related to the economic depression in the colony, a depression that would soon hit the eastern colonies with greater force.

At times of stress, the belief in land as the source of relief came to the fore. As the long boom of 1860-90 collapsed, the demand for land was once more raised by labouring men. William Lane's settlement in Paraguay was one measure of this demand, both in terms of the success he had in gaining recruits and in its eventual failure.

Before Lane set out on his ill-fated voyage he tried to establish village settlements in Australia. With the assistance of the Brisbane Trades and Labour Council, Lane proposed a scheme by which it would be possible to take up holdings of thirty hectares. The settlers would live in village groups and be assisted by the government. The appeal of this project can be seen from the people who supported it. They included the editor of the *Courier*, the headmaster of the Brisbane Grammar School and the president of the Trades and Labour Council. The Queensland reformers drew inspiration from the 1886 Lands Settlements Bill in New Zealand.

At the height of the 1891-94 shearers' strike, moves were made to avoid further disputes by escaping from the bonds of wage slavery. About one hundred strikers formed a cooperative at Alice River, financed by donations from Barcaldine. The union secretary there made other attempts to settle shearers on the land. A wire to the Minister for Lands at Perth asked if the Western Australian government would be willing to set-

the five thousand experienced bush workers in cooperative colonies. In response to a similar request to the Argentine, the government in Buenos Aires replied that it was willing to provide land and some facilities, but could not supply free transport. As union funds were soon exhausted on the strikes, neither proposal was acted upon. Closer to home, the townsmen of Narrandera in the Riverina, led by the mayor, sought to form a land-owning cooperative for working men. The Shearers' Union secretary, W. G. Spence, in October 1891 supported the Co-operative Irrigation and Mercantile Society.

Throughout 1892 and 1893 individual landowners and businessmen proposed to give their land and property to the Australian Labor Federation (ALF) so that they might participate in cooperative settlements. In March 1893 the general council of the ALF planned to inaugurate a 'Labor Bank' with £2 shares from unionists. Money thus raised would be used to establish cooperative communes having a population of about one hundred families each.

Later on in New South Wales, Holman reported that the task of organising trade unions in the pastoral industry was impeded by the shearer who was also a small farmer:

To him shearing is not a livelihood but an incident. His hope is to establish a homestead to become a small proprietor ... In two or three years [he says] he will be out of it — an employer himself. So he stays outside the union and scabs.

All along, the unionists-cum-farmers recognised that their success as small-holders would depend on governmental aid, which is what most of them understood by socialism.

Emergent Labor parties pressured governments to pass a variety of cooperative land settlement schemes. Conservative members of the Queensland Legislative Council supported the Bill on the grounds that it would 'breed a people who will take up a useful position in the country, not mixing themselves up in political matters, or worse still, political disturbances'. In

South Australia, the Trades and Labour Council saw to it that 'village settlement' clauses were added to the 1893 Crown Lands Amendment Act. By 1906 all states had passed closer settlement legislation. Most had established agricultural banks to assist farmers. The two states that did not introduce cooperative land settlements before 1900, Tasmania and Western Australia, were also without Labor parties.

With the discussion of single tax we again come into contact with ideas and activists influential at the birth of the Labor Party. Single-taxers presented a new and seemingly more sophisticated twist to the call to 'Unlock the lands'. When they spoke of 'rent', they drew upon the vocabulary of classical political economy, and not common usage. None the less, they were the inheritors of those assumptions, indeed were often the very same people who had waged the battles outlined above. On to the earlier notions of land as the source of 'morality', the followers of Henry George welded the idea that land was the source of all wealth. In accepting this element of George's preaching, the labour movement did not reject its previous view of 'land' as a good thing in itself.

Henry George's central work, *Progress and Poverty*, had been published in 1879 in the United States of America. It was reprinted soon afterwards in Australia but it did not capture public interest till the mid-1880s. George had had his precursors in Australia. David Syme, editor of the *Age*, advocated a land tax in 1874 and his protégé, C. H. Pearson, influenced by John Stuart Mill, carried the campaign into parliament. Ten years later, a Queensland squatter, Charles Boydell Dutton, as Minister for Lands, sponsored a Georgian Land Act. In 1887 Dutton became president of a Land Nationalisation League. More of these leagues were formed until superseded by single-tax leagues. The change in name was often all that did change.

So great had George's influence become even by 1885 that the *Bulletin* was reduced to ridicule. Phrenological practi-

ners, it said, had shown that George was 'the man with the brainpan resembling in altitude and capacity the dome of St Paul's Cathedral'.

In one sense, the variety of ideas that passed for the true Georgian gospel were as confused and confusing as phrenology. Any number of public figures wrapped their pet theories in the fashion of the time. That demand was for a tax on land. This tax could be a sliding one; it could apply to all land or it could exempt cultivated land, and/or estates under a certain value; it could be a revenue measure or a panacea for the world's woes. It was simultaneously the first step to socialism, or socialism's antidote. Men who believed any or almost all these things called themselves single-taxers. Not all the land-reformers recognised Henry George as their prophet when he toured Australia in 1890.

C. L. Garland, MLA and president of the NSW Single-Tax League, sponsored George's visit, which lasted from 6 March to 11 June 1890. The League had numerous branches throughout the colony as well as producing two newspapers, the *Standard* in Sydney and the *Nationaliser* in Lithgow. This latter venture had the support of the South Australian woman reformer Catherine Spence.

George's influence on and acceptance by the labour movement appeared overwhelming when, at the fourth International Trades Union Congress in Adelaide in September 1888, delegates unanimously agreed that

a simple yet sovereign remedy which will raise wages, increase and give remunerative employment, abolish poverty, extirpate pauperism, lessen crime, elevate moral tastes and intelligence, purify government and carry civilisation to a yet nobler height, is to abolish all taxation save that on land values.

This resolution was almost word for word from *Progress and Poverty*.

By the time George arrived in Sydney, he had declared his opposition to strikes, socialism and protection. As an

out-growth of American populism himself, George had seen in Grover Cleveland and his Free Trade Party the best chance of having his policy adopted. Significantly, it was the question of free trade that cut him off from the official labour movement. In New South Wales, the Trades and Labour Council declined invitations to welcome the prophet or to attend a dinner in his honour; J. C. Watson described the panacea tax as 'Extremely absurd'. Victorian unions agreed to meet George but only in the lists of debate over the relative merits of free trade and protection. Much time was taken up by comparing the price of cigars in Victoria and New South Wales. The unions' champion, W. A. Trenwith, received a gold watch from the Trades Hall in appreciation. George had to content himself with the support of rich landowners and free-trade politicians such as George Reid and B. R. Wise. 'Banjo' Paterson was a convert and his pamphlet *Australia for the Australians* was an argument for land reform — the political equivalent of 'Killey's Run'.

If the trade unions were hostile, there was a sizeable faction of the political labour movement that was not, largely because it supported free trade. This group included Holman and Hughes. The influence of the free traders and single-taxers for a time dominated the Labor Party in New South Wales.

Universal acceptance by the labour movement of Henry George as the 'Prophet of San Francisco' was prevented by his support for free trade. This distancing did not mean that any section of the labour movement opposed land reform via a land tax. The *Bulletin's* complaint was that as a result of George's advocacy of free trade, he had held back for a generation the cause of land nationalisation in Australia. William Lane summed up the feelings of the labour movement in the second issue of the *Worker* when he recommended another of George's books, *Social Problems*:

It lays no particular stress upon the single tax or upon free trade or upon individualism. It does not go out of its way to attack other

reforms as George is generally so fond of doing. It cries 'the land for the people' from the first page to the last and cries it as surely it was ever cried before.

'Land for the People' — here was an issue on which all reformers could unite. Although George himself never gained complete sway, his notion of expropriating the unearned increment was never again separated from the demand to break up the big estates. Long after Holman had broken with the single tax as a social panacea, George's influence continued to be felt in the councils of the Labor Party. This relationship was not dislodged by the fear that if everyone had a right to the land, Chinamen would have as much right to Australian land as the native-born, as one correspondent wrote to the *Sydney Morning Herald*.

The high point of the Labor Party's enthusiasm for a naturalised single-tax movement came with the federal party's first outright victory in 1910. W. M. Hughes, in an article in the *Daily Telegraph* shortly before these elections, had made it clear that 'The chief plank in the Labor Party's platform is to wipe out land monopoly by making it unprofitable for holders of great estates to hold land out of use'. This stance was the result of a long campaign. Between 1884 and 1907, most of the colonies had passed land-tax Acts in response to popular pressure. Labor's 1910 attitude had its immediate cause in the refusal of New South Wales and Victorian Legislative Councils to renew such taxes. Fisher's minority government in 1909 attempted a Land Tax Bill. When the measure was defeated by the Fusion, the issue became, as Hughes said, the 'chief plank' in Labor policy.

Advocacy of the tax contributed to Labor's victory. Jimmy Scullin (later prime minister) attributed his success in Corangamite to the proposed tax. He also pointed out that Labor held twenty-three of the thirty-six country seats in the House of Representatives.

Following the rejection of earlier protectionist legislation

by the High Court, all references to social reform were omitted from the Bill itself. These were reserved for the supporting speeches, which overflowed with schemes to divide large estates, develop the country and establish honest smallholders. An Act to establish Canberra was passed the same year. In deference to Henry George, all land in the Capital Territory was to be publicly owned so that the 'unearned increment' would accrue to the people.

Labor leaders never lost sight of the fundamental and religious associations of land. In June 1904 Hughes told the House of Representatives that 'Settlement upon the land is the basis of everything, though it is not the end of everything'. Frank Anstey's pamphlet *Monopoly and Democracy* attacked the landed interests. In support of a progressive land tax to break up the big estates, Anstey quoted the Bible: 'The Earth is the Lord's and the Fulness Thereof'.

The relationship of the 'frontier' to the formation of national consciousness, which became central in US historical writing, has received scant attention in Australia. F. J. Turner's original thesis was that the expanding frontier in the United States had acted as a safety valve for social discontent and that American 'individualism' was traceable to the independent small farmers produced by a conjuncture of a favourable climate and Homestead Acts. This treatment provided an afterword to Russel Ward's *Australian Legend*. Ward reversed the claim for Australia, reasoning that because our environment was inimical to the small farmer, and because the Free Selection Acts largely failed, the mythic Australian had been formed around collectivist notions:

The plain fact is that the typical Australian frontiersman in the last century was a wage-worker who did not, usually, expect to become anything else. The loneliness and hardships of outback life, as on the American Frontier, taught him the virtues of co-operation, but his economic interests, unlike those of the American frontiersman, reinforced this tendency towards a social, collectiv-

ist outlook. By loyal combination with his fellows he might win better conditions from his employer, *but the possibility of becoming his own master by individual enterprise was usually but a remote dream.* (p. 224, emphasis added)

This view of the Australian frontiersman did not tally with the evidence Ward had used some fifty pages earlier in his defence of bush morals. Ward quoted a squatter, Thomas Major, to the effect that the bushman

with all his faults he not infrequently marries *and settles down to farming* and raising children perhaps a degree less flash than himself. (p. 190, emphasis added)

The godfather to Ward's *Legend*, Francis Adams, explained that the bushman's

visits to the township are with a view of entering his cheque to his account, or of forwarding it by post office order to his 'old woman' *at the homestead* hundreds of miles away. (p. 191, emphasis added)

Ward failed to realise that it was not necessary for bushmen to have their farms beyond Bourke. They could have one closer in, and go outback for the shearing season.

Evidence of this mobility is not lacking. Henry Lawson's story 'The Drover's Wife' would not have made sense had the husband not spent half the year as an itinerant bush worker and the other half trying to run a farm. In the Riverina in 1891 there was general relief among the striking dray-drivers when they learnt that fines imposed could be taken only from wages and not from property; their concern suggests that, in the heartland of 'Joseph Furphy' and the *Hummer*, the bushman was not as landless as Ward made out.

Far to the north, gold miners opposed Island labourers on the sugar plantations because their indenture made large estates possible and thus limited the miners' prospects of becoming cane farmers. Nor were townfolk unaffected by this phenomenon. Indicative of the soldier settlement schemes that

awaited the conquering Anzacs is the fate of the 'Sentimental Bloke' and 'Digger Smith', both of whom went farming. The soil became the source of the Bloke's redemption from larrikin-hood.

Was Australia a big man's country? In places, yes, but these zones were not where the bulk of the non-urban population lived and worked. South Australia below the Goyder line was a smallholder's frontier. The same could be said of important pockets in the south-west of Western Australia, northern Tasmania, Gippsland, the Darling Downs and a deal of the Riverina. It was true for coastal patches of Queensland and northern New South Wales. Successful small settlement in New Zealand should be included in the experiences that sustained the belief in the possibility of landed proprietorship in Australia, especially when the high rate of transmigration is remembered. Even in the Western District, where 'a simple system of corruption' kept the selectors at bay, Margaret Kiddle recounted the departure of squatting families forced out by the land hungry.

Leaving aside the question of just how many bushmen were selectors or farmers, there is ample evidence that sufficient of them were so engaged to keep alive the hopes of the remainder. Their expectations did not die in the nineteenth century. Nor was the birth of the Labor Party indicative of a lessening of demands for agricultural independence. If anything, the reverse was true.

LABOR AND LAND

Q. 'Then, if the Labor party should return to power will graduated land taxation take precedence of everything?'¹

'I wish it to take precedence of everything except formal measures, and legislation already current.'

¹That isn't socialism, you know — the creation of a large

number of small-landed proprietors?' 'It's my kind of socialism.'

Andrew Fisher (interview), 22 April 1910

Whatever impulses had given birth to the Australian Labor Federation in Queensland in 1889, little evidence of any form of socialism remained by the time of the 1893 elections. The land question had become the focus of Labor's campaign. When Chief Justice Sir Charles Lillie stepped down from the Bench to fight land-grant railways on behalf of the Liberal Party, the Labor party gave him its support. Mat Reid, who was shortly to unseat the conservative Minister for Railways, proclaimed: 'If Sir Charles Lillie came out with a platform in harmony with the workers, he held that *it would be their duty* to put him in as senior member for North Brisbane'. Eventually, Lillie's program was acceptable to the Labor Party. Sir Charles urged that the government 'open the land by village settlements, by homestead areas and some reservations'. In this policy, he reaffirmed an opinion he had expressed in 1867: 'I hold that the State is not a merchant selling land, but a trustee holding it for equitable distributions among the people, so that it may be occupied and cultivated'.

Throughout the colony the question of land disposal occupied Labor speakers, no less in Brisbane than in country districts. On the Darling Downs, the Party attempted to forge an official bond with the Queensland's Farmers' Alliance. Its land policies were identical with that of the ALF, except for the addition of some agricultural matters. The farmers rejected these formal overtures but nonetheless gave Henry Daniels, Labor nominee for Cambooya, their overwhelming support.

New South Wales had experienced similar moves in 1885 when the Land and Industrial Alliance held a political conference in Sydney. Some trade unions gave their support and E. W. O'Sullivan served as secretary of the Alliance as well as of the Trades and Labour Council. By 1891 nothing remained of

this Alliance except the memory, which the secretary of the Wagga Shearers Union tried to revive when he circulated the local farmers' union and urged cooperation with Labor. He cited the cooperation between the US Farmers' Alliance and the Knights of Labour as a model that could be followed in Australia in order to defeat 'monopoly'. Once again it was the farmers who declined the invitation.

Labor continued to woo the farmers and apart from an occasional electoral success, these efforts came at the expense of the emancipation of the working class. The farmers made no secret of their attitude. A meeting in Sydney in 1906 established a Commonwealth Farmers' Organisation with the express purpose of defending 'Acquired rights in land and capital, machinery and money' against the declared objective of the Labor Party, 'the nationalisation of the means of production, distribution and exchange, in order to establish "a co-operative Commonwealth" of industrial workers, directed by bureaucratic officialdom, under the control of an elective Parliament'.

Such 'socialist' impulses as existed among farmers in the United States and Canada were absent in Australia largely because the railways were publicly owned here. Australian farmers were not at the mercy of the railroad 'Octopus' of Frank Norris's eponymous novel. The farmers demanded state action but this request was limited to their sectional interests. They wanted the governments to socialise their losses and inefficiencies.

Labor's attitude to the farmers was brought into open debate at the 1919 Commonwealth Conference in an interchange between two Victorian delegates. E. J. Hogan, later a Labor premier, observed that 'some people had said the cry of the small farmer was a bogey'. He, however, was of the opinion that 'if the Labor Party found it right to fight for the workers in the industrial factories it should also fight for the workers on the land'. D. L. McNamara, later federal secretary of the

Party, disagreed, arguing that 'It would be better if they had some regard for the struggling workers instead of running around to get votes which were theirs one day and not theirs the next.'

Pursuit of the farmers' vote presented the Victorian Labor Party with some peculiar difficulties arising from the singular position of the Victorian Farmers' Union, which had its base among the marginal farmers of the Mallee. Many of its supporters had been Labor Party members before the war. Some were drawn from the labouring class and maintained direct links with it, either through their own seasonal work at timber mills, mines and pastoral stations or through a close relative who filled those occupations. A Jerilderie delegate to the Farmers and Settlers Association conference in 1907 remarked on the presence in his branch of men with 'small holdings, but large families. The sons had to go out into the labour market, and the fathers naturally had sympathy with their children.'

Four Farmers' Union candidates were elected to the Victorian Parliament in 1917. By 1920 their number had grown to thirteen, which, combined with Labor's twenty, provided a bare majority in an Assembly of sixty-five. There were moves for a formal coalition but these seriously divided both parties and their relationship was limited to opposing the government. On 21 July 1921, for example, the government was defeated when it tried to decontrol wheat marketing. The premier called an election for 30 August and denounced the Farmers' Union's proposal for grower control of the wheat pool as 'syndicalism ... an extreme form of French communistic trades unionism, of which an American variant is the notorious IWW movement'. After the elections, which had little effect on the state of the parties, Labor's leader, Prendergast, announced that in 'half-a-dozen constituencies we deliberately drove Labor electors over to vote for Farmers' Union candidates'. In 1924 the compliment was partially returned when the Country Party kept Prendergast in office just long

enough to frighten the Nationalists into agreeing to give the Country Party half of the seats in a coalition cabinet.

One of the first actions of the Scaddan Labor government on coming to power in Western Australia in 1911 was to raise the maximum agricultural bank loan available to farmers by a third to £2000. Electorally, this inducement paid off. After the 1914 poll, the twenty-six-member Labor Party won support from the eight-member Country Party, Australia's first. The West Australian Farmers and Settlers Association (FSA) had grown out of a move to combat the unionisation of agricultural workers before it was captured by the poorer farmers of the state's wheat belt who gained relief from the Labor government.

Proposals for the eight-hour day were adopted by the NSW Labor Party in 1895 but were amended a year later by adding 'where practicable' in order to appease the farmers. Thirty years later, the deputy-leader of the Party, Peter Loughlin, opposed the extension of the forty-four-hour week to agricultural workers. How would it work at harvest time? he asked. In the years 1905-10, a radical section of the NSW Farmers and Settlers Association (FSA) attempted to sustain the small farmers' support for the Labor Party. Organisationally they failed, but the capture of the FSA by conservatives did not greatly alter the voting patterns of the smallholders. The Merriwa delegate told the 1909 FSA conference that two-thirds of the members of his branch belonged to the Political Labor League. Two years later, the *Pastoralists' Review* was forced to admit that agricultural discontent 'is telling in favour of the Labor Party'. Undoubtedly, the Labor Party made every effort to win and maintain this support.

Queensland Labor was obsessed with land settlement and the problems of the smallholder. The *Worker*, 18 January 1902, claimed:

If there is one class more than another in this State from which the Labor Party has a right to expect support it is the farming class. As

the land is the basis of life so agrarian reform ... is a fundamental principle of the gospel of Labor.

Labor's 1915 policy speech was largely concerned with the needs of the small farmer and the cane-grower, and with land settlement generally.

No individual Labor leader was more taken up with these matters than Queensland Premier E. G. Theodore, who had a genuine belief in the potential of small farming in north Queensland, where he planned hydro-electric schemes and mining projects. His elder brother, Stephen, became a cane-grower at Tully in 1923 and a Labor MLA in 1940. Theodore opposed the ALP's 1921 socialisation objective on the grounds that it would frighten the small farmer away from Labor. A third of his proposed fiduciary issue of £18 million during the 1930s depression was to be directed to wheat farmers in an effort to win back their electoral allegiance.

Labor's support for the farmer was tied to its nation-building as a means of defence. The *Worker*, 12 April 1923, consequently described Theodore's policy as 'one of the finest contributions to the science of state building ... a science entirely neglected by all save Labor ... ever delivered in Queensland'. In this way, Theodore tried to rescue the nationalist plank of Labor's old objective, the dropping of which he had opposed two years before.

FOURTEEN Democrats

Democracy influenced the labouring classes in nineteenth-century Australia in five interdependent ways. First, there was the inheritance from Britain where the bourgeois conquest of society in the seventeenth century occurred without (that is, before) the working class. Secondly, the labouring classes in Australia were not called upon to vanquish feudalism, and certainly not with violence. Thirdly, the open nature of Australia's political system from the mid-1850s to 1890, and in some areas beyond, did not bring the labouring classes into sustained political conflict with the bourgeoisie. Fourthly, middle-class radicals were able to maintain dominance (both organisational and ideological) over the labouring classes well into the twentieth century. Finally, the demand to fulfil the promise of complete democracy remained a major aspect, and sometimes the crux of, Labor's demands.

Perry Anderson has argued that the failure of the British working class to develop a defined socialist policy and strategy was linked to the imperfect nature of the English bourgeois revolution. Although Anderson's argument may be wrong in particulars, there can be no doubt that, compared with France or Russia, the political role of the bourgeoisie and working class in England was different, if only because the victory over feudalism was accomplished largely in the seventeenth cen-

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