

The Anti-Capitalist Core of Australian Literature

By KATHERINE SUSANNAH PRITCHARD

The finest expressions of Australian literature, rooted in our soil, reveal what Marx described as "the anti-capitalist cancer of the colonies."

It is recognised that the spirit of a pioneering people, and resentment of a system of exploitation which imposed on a virgin land the worst abuses of the old world, are characteristics of Australian literature. But the reason for these characteristics is frequently overlooked. It lies in the economic conditions associated with our history.

"Australia was the child of the American Revolution, and was cradled during its sequels, the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars,' says Professor Ernest Scott.

This means simply that, after the loss of the American colonies, Great Britain was forced to find another dumping ground for her poverty stricken farm labourers and industrial workers driven to offences against the law, professional criminals and political agitators, regarded as a menace to her system of government.

Little has been heard of the transportation of convicted persons from Great Britain to America before the settlement of Australia. Nevertheless, convicts were transported to the American colonies before the American colonists revolted against attempts of the British Government to prevent their independent development.

There was this difference between the two systems of colonisation: Free settlers arrived first in America; convicts followed. Convicts arrived first in Australia; free settlers followed. But the same factor was responsible for the creation and development of both the American and Australian colonies - insurgence against oppressive conditions in the mother country.

The American Revolution, bourgeois in origin, despite the Declaration of Independence, retained a basis for the progress of capitalism. The first Australian colonies, pioneered by forced labour seethed with the discontents of a people outraged by injustices in their own country and in the new land to which they had been transported. The fact that many of the convicts were political offenders, Chartists, Irish rebels and trade union organisers, influenced the struggle against the domination of capitalist interests in Australia. This struggle manifested itself in the growth of the trade union movement, in resistance to corrupt and vicious methods of administration, and in the demand for democratic rights. The best work of writers who identify themselves with the life of the people reflects this struggle.

Marx exposed the tragedy of building a new domain for capitalism in the great South Land, which had haunted the dreams of Chinese, Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch and British navigators since the fourteenth century. He described "the shameless lavishing of uncultivated colonial land on aristocrats and capitalists by the British Government," and the measures taken to provide labourers for the landowners. The assignment of convicts to work for them on terms almost of slavery remained one of these measures for many years.

Development of Australia, however, demanded a greater population than these elements supplied. Grants of land and bonuses for men with families proved a tempting bait for poor British farmers, who became free settlers. With the discovery of gold, there was a shortage of labour for the landowners. Hired labourers before long could themselves become small landowners. The struggle between the small landowners and the wealthy

exploiters of land and labour intensified what Marx, commenting on the theories of E. G. Wakefield, ironically refers to as "the anti-capitalist cancer of the colonies."

It is true that the first novels, articles and verses about Australia came from the colonial ruling class, their families and friends. They betrayed chiefly the homesickness of exiles in a strange land: the vision and mentality of English gentry applied to the Australian scene.

The next generation, born in Australia, produced William Charles Wentworth, the first poet to proclaim pride and joy in our country, and to foresee the growth of a nation on "the vast and (at that time) unexplored continent." Wentworth's poem, "Australasia," won a prize offered by the Chancellor of the University of Cambridge. And in 1819 his book, "A Statistical, Historical and Political Description of the Colony of New South Wales and Its Dependent Settlements," formulated demands for representative government, trial by jury, freedom of the Press and other democratic rights.

Although Wentworth became reactionary in his old age, it is significant that the first Australian writer with any national vision should have championed the cause of the people in their resistance to autocratic methods of government.

Marcus Clarke in "For the Term of His Natural Life" (1870-71) revealed iniquities of the penal system. Price Warung, a few years later, wrote "Tales of the System" and "Tales of the Early Days" - short stories, stark and authentic, if a little antiquated in manner now, which threw further light on the crimes perpetrated by British Authority in the name of justice.

Bushranging was a phenomenon of the period when the wealth of squatters incited to banditry. Rolf Boldrewood seems to have been expressing popular sympathy when he made a hero-villain of Ned Kelly in "Robbery Under Arms."

Tom Collins (Joseph Furphy) in "Such Is Life" uses a lengthy, rambling tale of personal experiences to assert his democratic convictions and love for Australia. "Such Is Life" denounces the social order in which "the best of all possible worlds remains under the worst of all possible managements."

Furphy contends that: "Toleration of growing inequality is treason of the first degree." He warns the people of his day to take heed that "their own memory may not be held accursed," because he points out, "every social hardship or injustice may be traced back to the linked sins of aggression and submission, remote or proximate in point of time." His criticisms are carried along by a shrewd and sardonic humour, which never spares the plutocracy posing "as a divinely instituted sponge for the absorption of every desirable thing the world can produce."

But Henry Lawson's short stories and poems were well known before "Such Is Life" was published, Lawson wrote with sympathy and familiarity, in casual yarning fashion, about all sorts of ordinary people, workers and their families, miners, drovers and swaggies.

His stories had a new, truly Australian quality. With realism and humour, he gave a vivid impression of the sort of people this country had created; their grit, independence and loyalty to each other, through hard and often dreary lives. Critics usually consider Lawson's prose of more importance than his poetry; but it is in his poetry that the essential Lawson is found. His rage and anguish at the suffering caused by the vicious economic system we live under surge through every line of intimate thought and feeling. Lawson, I think, laid the foundation of an Australian literature that was to be based on realism, knowledge of our own people and country, and a desire for social progress.

Hartley Grattan, the distinguished American critic, remarks that the finest representatives of the first definitely Australian period of our literature - Henry Lawson, Tom Collins, Bernard O'Dowd and Miles Franklin - all show qualities of "rebelliousness, ardent faith in the common man and an even more ardent faith in the Australian future."

These writers were in tune with the anti-capitalist ferment which flared at Eureka, and in the great strikes of the 'nineties. It gave strength to the trade union movement, caused the Australian Labor Party to be formed, inspired legislation to establish the democratic rights of the Australian, people. Adult suffrage, free education, anti-sweating laws, stand to its credit.

"The cancer of the colonies" disturbed Imperialists, but the working class of Australia organised strenuously to resist capitalism.

Australian writers who associated themselves with the work-a-day lives, thought and experience of the people created Australian literature. It is not enough for modern writers to realise the value of a legacy from the past; we, too, as sensitive instruments for human progress, must spend all our energy of body and brain to direct the anti-capitalist passion of the Australian people towards organisation for socialism, which will insure work, leisure and cultural opportunities for every man and woman.