

An Australian Perspective

R. M. CRAWFORD

Professor of History, University of Melbourne

These reflections on Australian history were given as the Knaplund Lectures at the University of Wisconsin in December 1958. They are both essays in perspective and a declaration of faith, in which a distinguished Australian historian, invited to the United States as Visiting Commonwealth Professor of History at the University of Wisconsin, looks at a stereotyped view of Australian history and finds it misleading.

It has been commonplace to deplore the intellectual mediocrity of Australian life and to ascribe it to the democratic cast of Australian society. This is an over-simplification, for Australian society has not been exclusively democratic, while the spiritual thinness of its colonial culture may turn out to be the temporary result of a colonial stage of development which has now passed into history. The author believes that Australia stands on the brink not only of great material development, but also of distinction in things of the mind.

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Australia and New Zealand

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University of Melbourne

AMERICAN INFLUENCES ON THE NEW ZEALAND LABOUR MOVEMENT

It is generally agreed that New Zealand is the 'most English of the Dominions', and closer in spirit to the mother country than any other British territory. Little attention has been paid to American influences on New Zealand, particularly on the labour movement. This article sets out to show the extent to which American ideas inspired the radical wing of the New Zealand labour movement in the period from the late eighteen-eighties to the end of the first world war.

The oldest trade unions in New Zealand date back to the sixties and seventies of last century. They were small craft unions and were often branches of older British unions formed by members who had emigrated to this country. Side by side with the slow growth of unionism there were recurrent unemployed agitations, particularly after the onset of the long depression in 1878.

While the skilled craft unionists took their inspiration from Britain, the unemployed frequently looked across the Pacific. In June 1880 an unemployed meeting in Christchurch sent a petition to the President of the United States asking him to help the poor of New Zealand by giving them facilities to travel to America.¹ Seven years later, a small organization of unemployed was formed in Christchurch, called the Canterbury Labour Union. Its leaders entered into correspondence with the headquarters of the Knights of Labor in Philadelphia and, at a meeting in December 1887, the organization changed its name to 'The New Zealand Knights of Labour'.² They did not formally affiliate to the Order but merely adopted the same name and rules. Correspondence was kept up with Philadelphia and preparations were made for a projected visit to New Zealand and Australia by the Grand Master Workman of the Knights, Terence Powderly.

The Christchurch group formed local branches in the suburbs and, in 1889, another assembly of the Knights of Labour was set up in Auckland. Soon afterwards, in January 1890, an American organizer, W. W. Lyght, arrived in Auckland. With his assistance, the Auckland branch was formally affiliated to the Order and was given the name of Jubilee Pioneer Assembly. The Christchurch branch was similarly renamed the Rawhiti Assembly. Lyght toured New Zealand and claimed to have founded twenty assemblies, with a total of three thousand members.³ Some were mixed assemblies, comprising members of different trades, as well as employers and women (but not 'bankers, lawyers, rumsellers and gamblers').⁴ Others were trade assemblies confined to members engaged in one occupation. Towards the end of 1890, District Assemblies were formed at Auckland and Wellington and, in 1895, the General Executive Board in Philadelphia raised District Assembly 257 in Wellington to the status of National Assembly, with jurisdiction over the whole of New Zealand and power to issue organizers' commissions, prepare seals, print supplies, and elect its own National Master Workman.

Unlike the small craft unions which confined their attentions to skilled workers, the Knights opened their doors to 'all those who by honest labour, either manual or mental, obtain their daily bread'.⁵ They made special efforts to

organize unskilled and previously unorganized workers. Assemblies were formed among the timber workers in the north of Auckland, Auckland tramwaymen, and miners on the west coast of the South Island. While the craft unions concerned themselves merely with the narrow economic interests of their members, the Knights fostered political education at their meetings and took up questions of general interest to the community, and to Labour in particular, such as the reduction of the working day, arbitration of industrial disputes, equal pay for women workers, co-operative labour, and land-tenure reform.

The Knights of Labour were the first nation-wide political organization in New Zealand. Many of the reforms they advocated became the law of the land. In the early nineties, at the height of their influence, they had perhaps five thousand members and claimed the allegiance of fourteen members of parliament.⁶ Even some cabinet ministers were said to be secret adherents, including the Premier, John Ballance.

The ideas which inspired the New Zealand Knights were largely of American origin. Henry George and Edward Bellamy were two of the main sources of Knights of Labour ideology.

As early as 1879 Henry George had sent a copy of *Progress and Poverty* to Sir George Grey, the veteran New Zealand statesman. Grey was favourably impressed and recommended the book which achieved wide popularity in New Zealand. Eight years later, in December 1887, George's adherents in Auckland formed themselves into an Anti-Poverty Society (following the example of the New York society of the same name). Among its members were parliamentarians, ministers of religion, and several prosperous businessmen. They issued a monthly journal, *Justice*, which they shared with the Knights of Labour, and published numerous pamphlets. In March 1890, when Henry George stopped for some hours in Auckland on his way to Australia, he was met at the ship's side by Sir George Grey leading a deputation from the Anti-Poverty Society, Knights of Labour, and other progressive bodies.

The single taxers stood outside the labour movement. 'Le georgisme', noted the Frenchman Albert Métin who visited New Zealand in 1899, 'est souvent le cas d'entrepreneurs disputant à la terre l'emploi des capitaux et cherchant à fermer ce placement si tentant pour les capitalistes.'⁷ Nevertheless, the single taxers exerted a strong influence on the New Zealand labour movement, in the nineties through the Knights of Labour and again, in 1912-13, when they almost took control of the United Labour Party. Since then, although their organization survives to this day, their influence has been negligible.

Another seminal influence of the early nineties was Edward Bellamy. His utopian novel *Looking Backward* had phenomenal sales in New Zealand. 'Bellamy's little brochure,' reported the *Auckland Star* on 26 April 1890, 'is just now the rage of the hour and we are afraid to mention how many of the various editions we are told have been circulated in Auckland alone.' There were local editions in Auckland, Christchurch, and Dunedin in 1890, and the book had to be reprinted within weeks to cope with the demand. No organization in support of Bellamy's ideas was formed in New Zealand but his influence persisted. David Low, cartoonist, pays tribute in his autobiography to T. J. McBride, a Canadian businessman living in Christchurch, who presented him with a copy of *Looking*

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La Monte *People's Man*

Backward in about 1908. 'He little recked of the seed he planted that day,' wrote Low. 'Before that my political ideas had been disconnected. After it, they began to take shape and relationship.'⁸ As recently as the nineteen-thirties, the New Zealand Government thought it necessary to suppress local editions of *The Parable of the Water Tank*, taken from Bellamy's other utopian romance, *Equality*.⁹

The long depression which had continued throughout the eighteen-eighties came to an end in 1895 and prosperity returned to New Zealand. It has been argued that this was because of a general rise in world prices rather than the policy of the Liberal Government. There is little doubt, however, that progressive land and labour legislation helped to spread the benefits of increased overseas earnings among wide sections of the community. Large estates were broken up and settled by small farmers, while the Arbitration Court granted higher wages and shorter working hours to industrial workers. Many Knights of Labour now settled on the land and forgot their earlier radicalism. The Order faded out of existence and is last heard of in 1898. The single taxers, too, lapsed into temporary insignificance.

New Zealand, which had been such a fruitful ground for overseas ideas, now produced its own panacea for the ills of the social system—compulsory conciliation and arbitration. The persistent agitation by the Knights of Labour in favour of peaceful arbitration of industrial disputes undoubtedly played its part in preparing public opinion for this innovation but many features of the new legislation, and in particular the compulsory clause, were then unique.

For the next decade, overseas investigators flocked to New Zealand to study our social experiments. Britons and Americans, Germans and Frenchmen, reported at length on 'the country without strikes', 'the social laboratory of the world', 'the birthplace of the Twentieth Century'. Even the Tsarist Government sent a commissioner to this country and in Russia, according to a later writer, 'the propaganda of the Russian mencheviks and socialist-revolutionaries often cited New Zealand as an example to the Russian workers and peasants'.¹⁰

Among Americans who carried home enthusiastic reports about New Zealand's achievements in the field of social legislation were Henry Demarest Lloyd and Frank Parsons.¹¹ When Lloyd died in 1903, the New Zealand Prime Minister, R. J. Seddon, rose in Parliament to pay tribute to his memory. 'No visitor,' he said, 'ever repaid our hospitality more generously than Mr. Lloyd. In books, in pamphlets, in public speeches, before President Roosevelt's Commission on the anthracite coal-miners' strike he never ceased pointing to New Zealand as a country that might be copied to advantage in respect to industrial questions.'¹² Lloyd's writings carried much weight in the United States. Soon, American socialists became concerned about an outbreak of 'New Zealandism' in the American labour movement. The absence of strikes in New Zealand was being quoted against the advocates of the class struggle. To counter the claims of Lloyd and his supporters, Robert Rives La Monte, a prominent member of the left wing of the American Socialist Party, decided to travel to New Zealand and gain first-hand experience of the workings of the industrial arbitration system.

La Monte had made a name for himself as a writer and translator of *The People's Marx* and other works. Late in 1902, when Tom Mann resigned as

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organizing secretary of the New Zealand Socialist Party on leaving for Australia, La Monte was appointed as his successor. Some local socialists expressed concern that La Monte's ideas of class struggle and class consciousness would not work in New Zealand. These fears proved justified. Under Mann's guidance the young Socialist Party had worked for immediate reforms without neglecting educational work on the long-term aims of socialism. La Monte, however, was an 'impossibilist' and he completely changed the policy of the party. 'Revolution, not Reform' became the new watchword. Electoral work and trade union activity for better wages were dismissed as unworthy of revolutionary socialists. In a very short time, all socialist branches outside Wellington ceased to exist and, in Wellington itself, the party lost most of its members. Setting out to 'abolish the foundations of all existing institutions', La Monte all but abolished the New Zealand Socialist Party.¹³

His failure in New Zealand did not diminish La Monte's usefulness in the United States where he was able to put his knowledge of New Zealand conditions to good advantage. He sent back critical articles on 'The New Utopia'¹⁴ and the New York *Worker* praised his writings on New Zealand for 'drawing the line between real Socialism and the bastard species, a cross between sentimental reform and shrewdly class-conscious politics, which has been so widely advertised from the Antipodes'.¹⁵

Personally [wrote La Monte], I believe that the Industrial Conciliation and Arbitration Act has up to the present time tended to improve the condition of the workers, and so I am for the present in favour of the Act, though, as a 'true Socialist', I know that the New Zealand Government, like every government of a society divided into classes, is necessarily a class government, and that this fact will sooner or later align the working class against the Act.¹⁶

In this prophecy, La Monte was correct. The Arbitration Court failed to fulfil the high expectations which the unions had placed in it. Its awards became increasingly niggardly and at times failed to keep pace with the rise in the cost of living. Complaints were voiced, first individually, then by trade unions. In 1906, there occurred the first strike against the Act, a three-hour stoppage by Auckland tramwaymen. There were more strikes the next year and by 1908 the revolt against the arbitration system was in full swing. La Monte had by then left New Zealand but the inspiration for the new militant offensive came again from the United States.

In 1906, Patrick Hickey, a young miner, returned to New Zealand the proud possessor of membership cards in the American Socialist Party and the Western Federation of Miners. He had worked in Alaska and Colorado, had met 'Big Bill' Haywood and Eugene Debs, and had, so he boasted, taken part in more strikes than any man his age. 'Pacific Slope' Hickey, as he was called by the hostile press,¹⁷ quickly put his industrial experience to work in New Zealand. He was one of the leaders of the bitter Blackball miners' strike in 1908 and was elected first secretary of the N.Z. Federation of Miners which was formed in August of that year. Under his inspiration, the new federation adopted the preamble and most of the objects of the Western Federation of Miners. Hickey also induced the West Coast miners' unions to take shares in the publishing house of Charles Kerr & Company in Chicago. Soon a steady stream of American socialist publications began to reach New Zealand. McBride, the Christchurch businessman mentioned

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earlier, contributed hundreds of pounds towards the importation of radical literature which was distributed by Hickey and other socialist pioneers. Thanks to their efforts, Marxism in its American version, with strong syndicalist overtones, began to make an impact on New Zealand workers.¹⁸

The Miners' Federation extended its scope and changed its name to N.Z. Federation of Labor¹⁹ with the motto, taken over from the Industrial Workers of the World, of 'The World's Wealth for the World's Workers'. It united within its folds miners', watersiders' and other unions in predominantly unskilled or semi-skilled occupations. Most of these unions stood outside the Arbitration Act. All were pledged to achieve their objectives by militant, industrial action. By 1912, the 'Red' Federation, as it came to be called, could claim the allegiance of a quarter of New Zealand's organized workers. The Federation of Labor adopted the well-known I.W.W. Preamble with its opening battle-cry: 'The working class and the employing class have nothing in common.' The Federation believed in industrial action first and foremost. 'By organizing industrially,' it proclaimed with the I.W.W., 'we are forming the structure of the new society within the shell of the old.'²⁰ At the same time, however, the Red Federation maintained close ties with the N.Z. Socialist Party and it never went to the syndicalist extreme of opposing all political activity. The more intransigent Chicago I.W.W. remained unrepresented in New Zealand until 1911, when a group broke away from the Christchurch branch of the Socialist Party and formed a Local Recruiting Union. In April of the following year, I.W.W. Local 175 was formed in Auckland. This Auckland Local was by far the more important of the two. It was affiliated to the Chicago headquarters and it benefited from the guidance of an experienced American leader, the Canadian J. B. King who had been a member of the Knights of Labor and later an I.W.W. organizer in Vancouver.

At the time of the Waihi gold miners' strike in 1912, King organized an economics class among the strikers. According to press reports, he advised his audience to put emery powder into oiled bearings and drop chisels into cog wheels. He also lectured to Sunday school children on the virtues of well-placed plugs of dynamite. A member of parliament urged the Government to deport King and, when the Prime Minister promised to refer the case to the Crown Law officers, King thought it wise to leave for Australia.²¹ His place as leader of the New Zealand I.W.W. was taken by Tom Barker, an English-born tramwayman from Auckland.

The I.W.W. at first supported the Red Federation. King was a delegate to the annual conference of the Federation in 1912. The break between the two organizations came later that year. In July, a Conservative Government took power, bringing to an end twenty-two years of Liberal administration. Unlike his predecessor, the new Prime Minister, Massey, did not hesitate to use the full power of the State to break the gold miners' strike at Waihi.

The Red Federation thus suffered its first serious reverse. The lesson its leaders drew from their defeat was to seek the support of the more moderate trade union leaders for a political offensive against the new government. The I.W.W., on the other hand, blamed the Federation for not calling a general strike in support of the Waihi miners. A split developed between the two organizations and the Federation of Labor pointedly dissociated itself from the I.W.W. and its ideas.²²

Early in 1913, the New Zealand I.W.W. began to publish its own monthly journal, *The Industrial Unionist*, which reached a circulation of 4,000 copies by August. In the first six months of 1913, the I.W.W. in Auckland held more than a hundred outdoor meetings and published a number of leaflets, its constitution, and two pamphlets in editions of several thousand copies.

While losing support on its left wing, the Red Federation gained a useful recruit on the right in the person of the redoubtable 'Professor' Walter Thomas Mills, of Milwaukee. Mills, a native of New York State, had played an active part in American socialist politics before coming to New Zealand for a lecture tour in June 1911. His record in America, according to a recent writer, was 'strewn with charges of immorality, dishonesty and fraud',²³ but this, unfortunately, was not then known in New Zealand. Silver-maned and barely four feet in height, Mills was an outstanding orator whose audiences quickly forgot his quaint appearance. He styled himself 'Commissioner of Municipal Enterprise of Milwaukee, U.S.A.' (Milwaukee had then a socialist city administration) and he assumed the title of 'Professor' in New Zealand. After his successful lecture tour he was supposed to return to the United States when he announced his intention of conducting a Unity Campaign to unite the warring factions of New Zealand labour, trade unions as well as political parties, into one comprehensive organization.²⁴

This campaign was only partly successful. A United Labour Party was formed in April 1912 by right-wing and moderate union leaders but it lacked the support of the most vigorous elements of the labour movement grouped around the Socialist Party and the Red Federation. The single taxers, now called the Land Values League, had much influence in the new party thanks to secret financial dealings between Mills and wealthy Auckland single tax leaders.²⁵

When the Red Federation launched its own unity campaign to oust the Massey Government, Mills at first violently opposed it. In January 1913, however, Mills's personal financial affairs reached a crisis and overnight he switched his allegiance. He attended the Unity Conference convened by the Red Federation, took his place on the preparatory committee for a still more representative Unity Congress which met in July 1913, and at that congress was elected organizer of a new Social Democratic Party which absorbed the Socialist Party (with the exception of one branch) and most of the United Labour Party.²⁶ In the months that followed, Mills, to the disgust of his earlier associates on the right wing, toured the country with the leaders of the Red Federation, now renamed the United Federation of Labour (with the spelling of 'Labour' anglicized). Everywhere Mills spoke with his customary eloquence in support of strikes and class struggle.

In October 1913, a nation-wide waterfront strike occurred which developed into a trial of strength between the government and the militant unions. The Conservative government again used the forces of the State against the strikers and effectively broke the power of the Federation of Labour. Among those who were arrested and prosecuted during the strike were Mills (for creating disorder when addressing a meeting), Peter Fraser and Robert Semple, both future Cabinet Ministers, and Tom Barker of the I.W.W.

After the collapse of the strike, Barker, in January 1914, left New Zealand for Australia where he was followed by other I.W.W. leaders. In April 1914, Mills

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departed hurriedly for San Francisco in somewhat sordid circumstances. Late the following year, Hickey also left for Australia. The I.W.W. ceased to exist in New Zealand as a separate organization, though its influence lived on and played a part in the go-slow strikes in the mines in 1917-18.

During the war years, miners who had worked in the United States and Canada formed Marxist study classes on the West Coast of the South Island. Their main textbook was *Shop Talks on Economics*, by Mary Marcy, published by Kerr in Chicago. These groups maintained contact with the Socialist Party of Canada. When news arrived of the revolution in Russia, they looked towards North America to circumvent the strict censorship imposed by the New Zealand government.

In May 1919 the secretary of the N.Z. Marxist Association, Tom Feary, and two ex-members of the I.W.W. engaged as seamen on board a ship bound for the Pacific coast with instructions to smuggle back to New Zealand as many books and pamphlets as possible. Their mission was successful. They visited the Jack London Institute and I.W.W. headquarters in San Francisco and the offices of the Socialist Party in Vancouver where they were given six copies of John Reed's *Ten Days that Shook the World* which had just come off the press. Another pamphlet which they brought back, *Soviets at Work* by Lenin, had been published by the Seattle Union Record Pub. Co. and republished by the Vancouver Trades and Labour Council with a foreword by Anna Louise Strong. It was now reprinted in New Zealand, the one and only work by Lenin ever to be published in this country.

In November 1919, Feary made a second trip to the Pacific West Coast. With the help of sympathetic seamen regular channels for the smuggling in of revolutionary literature were organized.²⁷ Soon afterwards, however, Australia and England provided the bulk of Marxist publications.

When the Marxian Association, in 1920, grew into the N.Z. Communist Party, Russia became the main source of inspiration for New Zealand radicals. Marxism, which had so frequently reached New Zealand via North America, was succeeded by Marxism-Leninism. Bolshevik agitators took the place of 'Pacific Slope' Hickey, 'Milwaukee Mills', and 'Fellow-Worker' King as newspaper villains responsible for strikes and industrial violence. American influence on the radical wing of the New Zealand labour movement came to an end.

H. ROTH

Wellington.

NOTES

1. *Lyttelton Times*, Christchurch, 9 June 1880.
2. *Ibid.*, 12 Dec. 1887.
3. *Bulletin*, Sydney, 31 Jan. 1891.
4. *Auckland Star*, 14 July 1890.
5. *Justice*, Auckland, Feb. 1891.
6. J. D. Salmond, *New Zealand Labour's Pioneering Days*, Auckland, 1950, p. 142.
7. A. Métin, *Le Socialisme sans Doctrines*, 2 ed., Paris, 1910, p. 38.
8. D. Low *Autobiography*, London, 1956, p. 40.
9. *New Zealand Gazette*, Wellington, 17 Mar. 1932.
10. *Labour-Socialism in New Zealand*, Wellington, 1934, p. 3.

11. H. D. Lloyd, *A Country Without Strikes*, New York, 1900, and *Newest England*, New York, 1900; F. Parsons, *The Story of New Zealand*, Philadelphia, 1904. Not all Americans were favourably impressed. One T. J. Diven gave his book on Australia and New Zealand the disparaging title *Diseased Communities*, Chicago, 1911.
12. *N.Z. Parl. Debs.*, cxxvii, 1903, pp. 991-92.
13. The history of the Socialist Party is treated more fully in H. Roth, 'The New Zealand Socialist Party', *Political Science*, Wellington, ix, Mar. 1957, pp. 51-60.
14. R. R. LaMonte, 'The New Utopia', *Comrade*, New York, ii, Jan. 1903, pp. 77-80.
15. *Worker*, New York, 25 Jan. 1903.
16. *New Zealand Times*, Wellington, 10 Mar. 1903.
17. *Grey River Argus*, Greymouth, 29 Jan. 1910.
18. Hickey tells his story in his "Red" *Fed Memoirs*, Wellington, 1925.
19. Note the deliberate American spelling of 'Labor'.
20. H. E. Holland, 'Ballot Box', and R. S. Ross, *The Tragic Story of the Waiti Strike*, Wellington, 1913, p. 13.
21. *N.Z. Parl. Debs.*, clviii, 1912, pp. 693-94.
22. *Maoriland Worker*, Wellington, 7 Dec. 1912.
23. I. Kipnis, *The American Socialist Movement, 1897-1912*, New York, 1952, p. 180.
24. W. T. Mills, *Unity Campaign: Here are the Proposals*, Auckland, 1911.
25. Hints of these dealings can be found in the Fowlds Papers deposited in the Library of the University of Auckland.
26. Unity Congress, *Report of Proceedings*, Wellington, 1913.
27. Feary tells his story in 'Some Marxist Pioneers in New Zealand', *New Zealand Labour Review*, Auckland, xi, Mar. 1956, pp. 16-21.

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