

On the Side of History: Review of Stuart Macintyre's *The Party: The Communist Party of Australia from Heyday to Reckoning*

Stuart Macintyre. *The Party: The Communist Party of Australia from heyday to reckoning*. Allen & Unwin, 2022. ISBN: 9781760875183. 512 pp. Paperback \$49.99.

Stuart Macintyre's long-awaited *The Party* is a masterwork of Australian history that traces the Communist Party of Australia's meteoric rise during the Second World War and its post-war decline. The work is guided by several key questions including: How deep was the Australian Party's support for the Soviet Union? How did members navigate the disjuncture between Soviet Policy and local realities?

Caught between the need to address national grievances and adhere to the internationalist doctrines of the USSR, this meant the resulting gyrations in the mass line produced first fatigue, then cynicism in the party membership, who were expected to imbibe without question these often-contradictory demands.

Macintyre also claims he has not attempted a 'comprehensive account', but if this was truly his goal, he has certainly failed. *The Party* is the most detailed retelling of the CPA ever produced, that synthesises an ocean of primary material with interviews and knowledge afforded only to an insider (he joined the Party in 1971). But despite his own allegiances, *The Party* never descends into nostalgic hagiography: Macintyre's chief purpose is to explain the "breakdown of older certainties" and why Australian Communism failed.

Unlike other post-war histories of the CPA, *The Party* is not a history from above, tracing the twists and turns in the party monolith and the commands that emanated from Moscow. Macintyre strives to capture the lived dimension of Australian Communism: the personal stories of ordinary men and women who, as part of something bigger than themselves, became one with the shifting tides of history. Through discussing various crises like the miners' strike of 1949, Khrushchev's secret speech of 1956, and the Sino-Soviet split, Macintyre suggests 'these narratives are thus personal stories of a journey from innocence to experience that culminates in a decision to choose the "broad left" over the narrow'.

Communism was therefore 'a transformative life experience', a gateway to 'knowledge, confidence and... unshakeable conviction' that had real meaning for its adherents, and enabled them to enact their will to power in the unwavering pursuit of justice. It is this degree of methodological empathy that is the book's greatest success. Pairing scholarly precision and attention to detail with an approachable narrative style, *The Party* should (and hopefully will) captivate students of history, activists, and general readers alike.

The book somberly concludes with the funerals of the CPA's original leadership during the 1960s. Though varied in scope, these events were regularly punctuated with passages from the Novelist Nikolai Ostrovsky commonly used to commemorate fallen comrades:

'Man's dearest possession is his life' and since it is given just once he must use it so he can say at the end that he gave his all to 'the finest cause in the world, the liberation of humanity'.

The chapter is a melancholic parting gift from a titan of the discipline, a eulogy for the CPA and an injunction to remember its achievements. *The Party* thus also becomes a fitting final testament to Macintyre himself, a reflection on impermanence that asks us to consider how we might carry the emancipatory impulse further into the future.

Vale Stuart Macintyre: gone but never forgotten.

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