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The Great Strikes of 1890–94: A Labour Historiography

Some say it was a period during which Australians came close to killing each other. In 1890, the colonial Australian economies suffered a downturn following a dramatic fall in the price of wool. It put an end to the great boom that had continued almost uninterrupted for forty years.² This was a time when the class divisions between capital and labour were becoming more clearly defined. The first battle in the war between labour and capital, though, came from an unlikely source. It was the affiliation of the Marine Officers' Association with the Victorian Trades Hall Council that led to the great maritime strike. The Steamship Owners' Association of Australasia (SOAA) bluntly refused to deal with its officers after the affiliation, because it could not accept its middle-class officers' association with the working-class Trades Hall

¹ I would like to thank Professor Stuart Macintyre for his comments on an early draft of this paper. My thanks also go to the anonymous peer reviewer for the helpful comments on the article.

² R.M. Crawford, *Australia* (London: Hutchinson, 1970), 123–7.

Council.³ The depression of the 1890s saw the economy shrink by thirty per cent.⁴ Its onset caused instability around the Australasian colonies during which miners, shearers, wharf-labourers, carters, and seamen went on strike. It also saw excesses of rhetoric on both sides of the divide. In Queensland, the labour newspaper *The Worker* told its readers: ‘we must realise that the labour movement is a great war not a petty skirmish, is an upheaval of the workers of the world not the insignificant squabbling of a section of a section over the proper end to break an egg’.⁵ Sent to maintain law and order at a labour march in Melbourne, Colonel Tom Price of the Victorian Mounted Rifles is said to have ordered his men, if confronted by violent protestors, ‘to fire low and lay them out so that the duty would not have to be performed again’.⁶

³ Russel Ward, *Australia: A Short History* (Sydney: Ure Smith, 1969), 110; Vance Palmer, *The Legend of the Nineties* (South Yarra: Currey O’Neil, 1954), 118.

⁴ Stuart Macintyre, *A Concise History of Australia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 129.

⁵ *The Worker* (Brisbane), May 1890, in *Sources of Australian History*, ed. C.M.H. Clark (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), 402.

⁶ Quoted in David Day, *Claiming a Continent: A New History of Australia* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1997), 201. This notorious quote is given slightly differently, but with the same meaning, in C.M.H. Clark, *A History of Australia, vol. 5: The people make laws, 1888–1915* (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1981), 49; and Humphrey McQueen, *A New Britannia* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, fourth edition, 2004), 73. John Hirst reprints the Colonel’s reported words from the Broken Hill newspaper *Silver Age*, 26 September 1890; see John Hirst, *Australia’s Democracy: A Short History* (Crows Nest: Allen & Unwin, 2002), 83.

The following article examines how the period from 1890 to 1894 has been understood by Australian historians.⁷ The maritime strike of 1890 and the great strikes that followed it until 1894 are heavily researched aspects of Australian history.⁸ Those who have written about the strikes use them to tell a wider story about Australian society. The *British Empire in Australia*, by Brian Fitzpatrick, was published in 1940 and, as Geoffrey Blainey noted, Fitzpatrick's writing style was urgent, with 'the accompanying belief that a knowledge of Australia's history was very relevant to the present'.⁹ His belief in the relevance of the history of the strikes to his own time was also a cornerstone of all the other works examined in this article. As we will see, the period 1890–94 became a major turning point in many national histories.¹⁰ Those historians who saw in the labour–capital

⁷ Other historiographical surveys of the period or the debates about it can be found in Helen Bourke, 'A reading of Brian Fitzpatrick', *Labour History* 27, 1974, 1–11; Stuart Macintyre, 'The Making of the Australian Working Class: An Historiographical Survey', *Historical Studies* 18(71), 1978, 233–53; Frank Bongiorno, 'Class and Nation: Brian Fitzpatrick and Radical Nationalist Historiography', *Melbourne Historical Journal* 21, 1991, 23–37; Frank Bongiorno, 'Class, Populism and Labour Politics in Victoria, 1890–1914', *Labour History* 66, 1994, 14–32; and Frank Bongiorno, 'Two Radical Legends: Russel Ward, Humphrey McQueen and the New Left Challenge in Australian Historiography', *Journal of Australian Colonial History* 10(2), 2008, 201–22.

⁸ On the great strikes themselves, see, for example, John Merritt, *The Making of the AWU* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1986); Stuart Svensen, *Industrial War: The Great Strikes 1890–94* (Wollongong: Ram Press, 1995); and *The Big Strikes: Queensland 1889–1965*, ed. D.J. Murphy (St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1983).

⁹ Geoffrey Blainey, 'Foreword', in Brian Fitzpatrick, *The British Empire in Australia* (Melbourne: Macmillan, 1969), viii.

¹⁰ Some saw 1890 as a turning point in Australian or labour history, and others queried what exactly that meant. See, for example, W.G. Spence,

struggle a thwarted native socialism, those who saw an aspiring middle class, and those who saw variants of these two all considered the era of the great strikes pivotal to their interpretations. This article will take a roughly chronological approach to an analysis of the main schools of thought. It will be seen, however, that the grouping of historians taken in this article is by no means definitive or lasting: each work exists as a contribution to Australian history, not merely as a contribution to a school of thought. In addition, these works will be seen to have common aspects that transcend the boundaries of schools, and vital differences with works inside their own school. The various interpretations offered by these historians paint at times an optimistic portrait of Australian society, and at others a pessimistic lament for lost opportunities. This was the point in time, according to some accounts, when the unions were defeated and the capitalists took control of Australia's destiny. Others maintain that the defeats suffered by the unions in the years 1890–94 gave the labour movement the momentum and knowledge to eventually coalesce into the Labor Party, which came to office in Federal Parliament in 1904.

Publicly, this period of unrest is not widely remembered. The preservation of the 'Tree of Knowledge', a gum tree in

Australia's Awakening: Thirty Years in the Life of an Australian Agitator (Sydney: Worker Trustees, 1909), 111; June Philipp, 'Historical Revision: No. 1. 1890—The Turning Point in Labour History?', *Historical Studies: Australia and New Zealand* 4(14) 1950, 145–54; Jean O'Connor, '1890—A Turning Point in Labour History', *Historical Studies: Australia and New Zealand* 4(16), 1951, 355–65; John Rickard, *Class and Politics: New South Wales, Victoria and the Early Commonwealth, 1890–1910* (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1976), 1–3.

Barcaldine under which the Labor Party is said to have formed, is an exception to this general trend.¹¹ The strike period of 1890–94 is certainly not a part of the nation’s narrative of history as espoused by our politicians. They are too busy emphasising vague notions like Western civilisation or our Judeo-Christian heritage.¹² If considered in detail, those aspects of our culture certainly are important. But the period of the great strikes is also a part of our history. Historians of the twentieth century saw in this period the many competing sources of the Australian democratic tradition. Examining the work of historians of 1890 helps to re-illuminate some of the formative experiences of Australian

¹¹ Barcaldine, in Queensland, was the site of the largest strike camp in the 1891 shearers’ strike. See Svensen, *Industrial War*, 34–7. The tree, now deceased, has been preserved and returned to a memorial in its original place; see Queensland Government, ‘Tree of Knowledge Receiving World-class Treatment’, Tuesday 4 December 2007, available at <http://statements.qld.gov.au/Statement/Id/55477>. Accessed 10 November 2014. See also ‘Barcaldine Tree of Knowledge Memorial’, ArchitectureAU, 2010, available at <http://architectureau.com/articles/barcaldine-tree-of-knowledge-1/>. Accessed 10 November 2014. Although the tree is significant, the Labor Party did not form until after Federation, in May 1901; see Frank Bongiorno, ‘The Origins of Caucus, 1856–1901’, in *True Believers: The Story of the Federal Parliamentary Labor Party*, ed. John Faulkner and Stuart Macintyre (Crows Nest: Allen & Unwin, 2001), 3.

¹² See, for example, Justine Ferrari, ‘Paring Back “Overcrowded” National Curriculum a Government Priority’, *Australian*, 12 October 2014; and Judith Ireland, ‘Christopher Pyne Appoints Critics of School Curriculum to Review System’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 11 January 2014. For a more nuanced exploration of the American Judeo-Christian tradition, see Deborah Moore, ‘Jewish GIs and the Creation of the Judeo-Christian Tradition’, *Religion and American Culture* 8(1), 1998, 31–53; and Douglas Hartmann, Xuefeng Zhang, and William Wischstadt, ‘One (Multicultural) Nation Under God? Changing Uses and Meanings of the term “Judeo-Christian” in the American Media’, *Journal of Media and Religion* 4(4), 2005, 207–34. In the Australian context, a detailed examination of these themes is a key part of C.M.H. Clark, *A History of Australia*, vols 1–6.

democracy that they saw in the period. There is another reason that the research into this period deserves attention. Australian politics has long been seen, with some simplification, as a struggle between two groups, one of which is Labor. The other group has variously been described as conservative, empire-nationalist, or simply anti-Labor. The lack of a name that could satisfactorily cover more than a century of anti-Labor groups underscored the mid-century view of radical-nationalist historians that nationalist history must necessarily be Labor history. This article begins with the radical nationalists, and then considers those who have revised or rejected their work.

Brian Fitzpatrick's main works dealing with the strikes of 1890–94, *The British Empire in Australia* and *A Short History of the Labor Movement in Australia*, were works of political economy that drew on a radical-nationalist understanding of Australian history. They were radical in two ways. First, both books emphasised the socialist influence in the unions and their aims. Fitzpatrick contended that the maritime strike was not sparked by the affiliation of the Marine Officers' Association with the Trades Hall Council, but rather by 'the shearers' interpretation of "the principle of unionism"'. Supporting this argument was Fitzpatrick's estimate that about half of the fifty thousand strikers in September 1890 were shearers.¹³ The heroes of these two books were the likes of William Lane, W.G. Spence and W.A. Trenwith, all labour leaders or organisers. His villains were those captains of industry so prominent in orthodox history, like Thomas

¹³ Fitzpatrick, *The British Empire in Australia*, 220–1.

McIlwraith, the influential Queensland politician who could speak and act 'as a member of the Government and the Australian Pastoralists' Association'.¹⁴ Mediocre politicians, who were permitted to appear in traditional national histories by dint of their office alone, did not rate a mention in Fitzpatrick's works.

The British Empire in Australia and *A Short History of the Australian Labor Movement* were radical interpretations, too, for their break with the traditional historiography, which saw Australia as a mere offshoot of Britain in the southern hemisphere. For Fitzpatrick, Britain was a source of both labour and capital, but the end of the nineteenth century saw the new nation of Australia emerging from its colonial dependency. The Australasian colonies, and then the Commonwealth of Australia, provided Fitzpatrick with both a subject of enquiry and local sources of documentary evidence. The final sentence of *The British Empire in Australia* portrayed well the relationship between the mother and her colonies, as Fitzpatrick saw it: 'the reservoir of Australian labour and industry has never failed to provide a stream tributary to the broad river of English wealth'.¹⁵ The radical streak in his work noted that the colonial state used armed force to support capital and in turn its dependent relationship

¹⁴ Brian Fitzpatrick, *A Short History of the Australian Labor Movement* (Melbourne: Macmillan, 1968), 65. On McIlwraith, see also John Hirst, *The Sentimental Nation: The Making of the Australian Commonwealth* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2000), 64–7.

¹⁵ Fitzpatrick, *The British Empire in Australia*, 348.

with the imperial centre.¹⁶ Fitzpatrick contended ‘that from the time about 1890 when the progressive phase of capitalism as a social force seemed to pass, capitalists and the civil power were in virtually open alliance against the working class’.¹⁷ This was the link between 1890–94 and the present for Fitzpatrick. The combination of capital and state against the interests of labour was one that he felt continued into his own time.¹⁸

Robin Gollan followed Fitzpatrick into the radical-nationalist school of thought, but his views did not always mesh with Fitzpatrick’s. Accepting the same estimate of fifty thousand strikers in late 1890, Gollan characterised the struggle as ‘open class warfare’.¹⁹ Gollan emphasised socialism in his discussion of the strikes, and defined the classes of Australian society more rigidly than Fitzpatrick. His analysis of the period arranged the chronology differently from other authors too—in his *Radical and Working Class Politics*, there is no single chapter on the strikes. For Gollan, a key aspect of the ‘new unionism’ that emerged in Australia’s eastern colonies from 1885 to 1890 was the presence of socialist ideas. The radical nature of the workers was not a revolutionary socialism—which explains how bloodshed was avoided—but it

¹⁶ On this point, see also Palmer, *Legend of the Nineties*, 120; Ward, *Australia*, 110; Day, *Claiming a Continent*, 201.

¹⁷ Fitzpatrick, *A Short History of the Australian Labor Movement*, 67.

¹⁸ Don Watson, *Brian Fitzpatrick: A Radical Life* (Sydney: Hale and Iremonger, 1979), 73.

¹⁹ Robin Gollan, ‘Nationalism, the Labour Movement and the Commonwealth, 1880–1900’, in *Australia: A Social and Political History*, ed. Gordon Greenwood (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1955), 163.

was nonetheless socialist.²⁰ This was not Marxism, but rather a socialism bred of Australian conditions and made coherent by ideas from overseas, especially those of the Californian Henry George.²¹ George argued for the simplification of the tax system with land as the central object of tax, and his ideas were taken up avidly by Australians.²² Following Russel Ward's contention that the large itinerant rural workforce had developed the concept of 'mateship', Gollan argued that 'a self-conscious nationalist press'—typified by the *Bulletin*—fostered this ideal as distinctively Australian among a broad section of the population.²³ The new unionism, in Gollan's interpretation, was intent not only on better wages and conditions, but on radical social and economic readjustment.

Nationalism was class-based in Gollan's view. Moreover, his representation of late nineteenth-century Australian society was one of distinct classes. The working class was developing class consciousness, a process Gollan inferred from the new politicised unionism of 1890, while the ruling class was 'economically and culturally bound to Britain. Consequently Australian national feeling was an essential part of the class feeling generated in the conflict between classes in

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 168.

²¹ Robin Gollan, *Radical and Working Class Politics: A Study of Eastern Australia, 1850–1910* (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1970), 119–20.

²² Palmer, *Legend of the Nineties*, 62–5.

²³ Gollan, *Radical and Working Class Politics*, 113. For Ward's thesis, see Russel Ward, *The Australian Legend* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, second edition, 1967).

Australia.²⁴ Thus labour politics became essentially Australian in Gollan's representation, while the capitalist class was tied to Imperial Britain. Gollan's understanding of class differed from the one E.P. Thompson would later adopt—for Gollan, class was a thing, and an inevitable one at that. Gollan had studied in England, and met Thompson and other communist historians after the Second World War. The strikes were, among other things, 'struggles between the opposing forces that history has created'.²⁵

This use of the present perfect tense ('history has created') is one way by which Gollan linked the era of the strikes to the present. Like Fitzpatrick, he too showed how the government 'actively collaborated with and assisted the employers', despite claiming only to be maintaining order.²⁶ Gollan's emphasis, though, was not as strong as Fitzpatrick's on this point. Gollan stressed instead the native Australian socialism that sprang from many sources, and attempted to trace republicanism among the workers. He found no clear conclusion about the level of support for republicanism, compared to the level of support for radicalism.²⁷ Gollan's study of nationalism in Australia concluded that it was at this time inextricably linked to labour, and he thus saw it to be a progressive force. Perhaps Gollan wanted to tell the story of

²⁴ Gollan, *Radical and Working Class Politics*, 104, 119.

²⁵ E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1974), 10; Gollan, *Radical and Working Class Politics*, 110.

²⁶ Gollan, 'Nationalism, the Labour Movement and the Commonwealth, 1880–1900', 166.

²⁷ Gollan, *Radical and Working Class Politics*, 118–19.

radical and working-class politics because by 1963 Australia had shown its conservative side too well for his liking. Perhaps his insistence on the socialism of Australia's national origins was a rejoinder to an era of anti-communist frenzy.

In 1973, Bede Nairn's *Civilising Capitalism* challenged the interpretations of the radical-nationalist historians. Though labour was the central object of study of his book, Nairn saw it as an offshoot of the liberal politics of New South Wales. He did not neglect radical aspects of the labour movement, but these did not negate the overall liberal trend. Politics of agitation, according to Nairn, were key to the development of New South Wales. 'Unlike other Australian colonies, with the partial exception of Tasmania, virtually no concession had been made gratuitously to New South Wales by the British government'.²⁸ This passage hints as to why Nairn wrote his book with such a strong emphasis on New South Wales, almost to the exclusion of the other colonies. The labour movement had seen its earliest parliamentary successes in colonial New South Wales.²⁹ The move into parliament was an aspect Nairn considered a pragmatic success rather than a capitulation to the established order, as some radical nationalists saw it.

Nairn's account was revisionist, but it was not a simple rejection of the radical-nationalist viewpoint. Instead, it presented an alternative labour history. Unlike Gollan and Fitzpatrick, Nairn celebrated the moderation of New South

²⁸ Bede Nairn, *Civilising Capitalism: The Labor Movement in New South Wales, 1870–1900* (Canberra: ANU Press, 1973), 2.

²⁹ See Bongiorno, 'The Origins of Caucus, 1856–1901'.

Wales Labor, with its pragmatic politics that led to the election of representatives in parliament.³⁰ The New South Wales Trades and Labor Council (TLC) featured often in Nairn's re-telling; its young luminaries John Watson and John Fitzgerald replaced the familiar heroes of the radical-nationalist pantheon in his narrative. It was the TLC, according to Nairn, which really triumphed after the maritime strike of 1890. Those unions that had sought to change society through industrial action alone now affiliated with the TLC, which combined their tactics with political action, and refused to act on the behalf of non-affiliates. 'The collapse of the strike had completed the hegemony of the Council'.³¹ Thus Nairn's interpretation explained how the labour movement, which was decisively defeated in the industrial arena each year from 1890 to 1894, was able to produce a Prime Minister in 1904.

Nairn's problem with the radical-nationalist interpretation was not one of party loyalty—the labour movement remained for him the main event of late nineteenth-century New South Wales—but of emphasis. John Christian Watson rarely appeared in Gollan's or Fitzpatrick's works, and yet he was the first Labor Prime Minister. Nairn's project, among other things, was to explain the developments that led to this result. For Nairn, socialism—so strong a force in Gollan's narrative—was ultimately foreign to Australian political thought. Revolutionaries were present in the labour

³⁰ Bongiorno, 'Class, Populism and Labour Politics in Victoria, 1890–1914', 15.

³¹ Nairn, *Civilising Capitalism*, 38.

movement, but ‘most of them were socialist elitists, blinded by their frustrations to the deeply rooted humane values of colonial society, and ultimately seeking their inspiration from alien sources whose understanding of human freedom was demonstrably and dangerously defective’.³² Thus the labour movement for Nairn was not the socialist-utopian sanctuary that Gollan depicted, but a people’s party that succeeded by acting within acceptable reform measures. Nairn’s distrust of all ideology and nationalism came through in the title he gave to his study.

Humphrey McQueen came to a similar conclusion as Nairn, but he arrived there via a different route, and made very different observations along the way. His project in *A New Britannia* was to destroy several long-held myths behind the labour tradition of revolutionary radicalism. It was an iconoclastic project because McQueen wrote as an ardent Marxist himself. He reinterpreted the primary and secondary sources of nineteenth century Australian social and political history in order to contend that ‘there was not great and prolonged civil strife in nineteenth century Australia’.³³ Agreeing with Nairn, McQueen showed that the unions were upholders of law and order and worked with employers, rather than against them, until 1890.³⁴

‘Undoubtedly’, McQueen asserted, ‘the most important single feature of the strikes of 1890–94 was the ease with which

³² *Ibid.*, 7.

³³ McQueen, *A New Britannia* (Ringwood: Penguin Books, first edition, 1970), 179.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 203–4.

they were broken by the superabundance of volunteer labour'.³⁵ He was the only one of these historians to refer to the 'scabs' in anything more than an offhand fashion, and thereby to allow them humanity. The humanity he granted scabs, however, must be taken alongside his impatient censure of the collaborationist tendencies of the racist, militaristic, piano-playing middle-class aspirants who McQueen saw as constituting the working class of the Australian colonies.³⁶ The proportion of the workforce that was unionised was so low that McQueen could argue 'that there was no general strike, and only a great strike in comparison to what they had gone through before'.³⁷ For McQueen, then, the Labor Party that grew from the strike era was an essentially conservative force, albeit leaning towards the ignoble aspirations of the working class. Its policies could be explained as protecting their privileges from several threats—the closed shop against non-union labour, compulsory arbitration against unfair employers, and White Australia against Asian and Pacific Islander workers. Revolutionaries were very much in the minority in this corporatist party of compromise that McQueen portrayed.

Soon after McQueen's myth-busting book was published, John Rickard questioned other elements of the authorised story of labour in Australia. Responding to both Nairn's work, and to the radical-nationalist writers, Rickard's *Class and Politics* was a lively re-examination of the very concept of labour

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 210.

³⁶ See, for example, *ibid.*, Chapter 11, 'Pianists'.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 211.

history. In it, Rickard attempted to analyse both Labor and anti-Labor, ‘irrevocably bound to each other as all opposites are’.³⁸ On the subject of the 1890 strike, Rickard emphasised the spark: the affiliation of the Marine Officers’ Association with Melbourne Trades Hall Council. Unflinchingly refusing to feel the ‘embarrassment’ that this clearly bourgeois group had caused other researchers, Rickard instead argued that their action was ‘supremely relevant to the central theme of the strike itself’.³⁹ He made much of the fact that the gentlemen of the MOA consciously aligned themselves with labour, and not capital, which they presumably felt they could not trust. He concluded by disagreeing with Nairn’s contention that the 1890 strike was not a showdown between labour and capital.

Rickard saw the self-identification of the Marine Officers’ Association with other employees as an expression of the emergent class tensions of the 1880s. Increasing class consciousness, according to Rickard, was a major factor in politics from the period of the strikes onward. It was not, however, a clear-cut disintegration of society along class lines. He saw working-class consciousness serving ‘the purposes which all traditions serve—they define and limit the prospects for change’.⁴⁰ Class consciousness for Rickard, therefore, did not mean class warfare—‘consciousness of class

³⁸ John Rickard, *Class and Politics: New South Wales, Victoria and the Early Commonwealth, 1890–1910* (Canberra: ANU Press, 1976), 1.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 311.

had become a comfort rather than a scourge'.⁴¹ He emphasised the way that the state created new institutions that consolidated but also limited this emerging class consciousness.

All of the historians so far surveyed agreed on several basic propositions: that the labour movement was an important part of the national story, and that it found political voice in the aftermath of the defeats sustained from 1890 to 1894. Though not necessarily disagreeing with these propositions, Manning Clark took issue with the radical nationalists in a sustained manner from the 1950s, with the beginning of his tenure as a professor of history at the Australian National University.⁴² In his 1954 inaugural lecture there, he argued that the radical nationalist picture of Australian history had been distorted by the historians joining 'the vain search for a science of society', rather than considering the big themes, or having something to say about humanity.⁴³ The fifth volume of Clark's *History of Australia* continued the idiosyncratic style of history he had begun in the earlier volumes. His history was not concerned with classes or movements, but with individuals, ideas, and conflicts. In Clark's *History*, the conflict of the strike was between those who wanted labour to

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 311.

⁴² His first misgivings about the radical nationalists can be seen in his 'Letter to Tom Collins' (1943), in C.M.H. Clark, *Occasional Writings and Speeches* (Melbourne: Fontana Books, 1980), 91–3. See also Rob Pascoe, *The Manufacture of Australian History* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1979), 75–6.

⁴³ 'Rewriting Australian History' (1954), in Clark, *Occasional Writings and Speeches*, 17–19. See also Mark McKenna, *An Eye for Eternity: The Life of Manning Clark* (Carlton: Miegunyah Press, 2011), 333–4.

prowl the halls of power and those rebellious shearers at Barcaldine who threatened to burn the whole bloody country.⁴⁴ Collectives in Clark's work tended to be shadowy, operating at the fringes, while complete agency was reserved for individuals whose inner struggle he could piece together from their records.

Like Fitzpatrick and Gollan, Clark noted the financial ties between Britain and the colonies, and found economic reasons behind the downturn that arguably caused the clash between capital and labour.⁴⁵ Stuart Svensen, on the other hand, rejected the notion that a financial downturn in 1890 caused the strike.⁴⁶ Although agreeing with the radical nationalists on the nature and importance of the strikes, which in his view were precipitated by the employers, Svensen's economic analysis differed drastically. Indeed, Svensen went so far as to argue that Fitzpatrick's emphasis on the downturn 'has retarded our understanding of the Maritime Strike'.⁴⁷ Favourable economic conditions, he argued, caused the upsurge in union membership, and fearful employers escalated the situation into full-blown conflict.⁴⁸ The Marine Officers' affiliation with the Trades Hall Council in Melbourne was, in Svensen's view, 'a pseudo-issue, cooked up by the SOAA [Steamship Owners' Association of Australasia] to

⁴⁴ Clark, *A History of Australia*, vol. 5, 56, 72. For a map of the woolshed arson attacks in Queensland, see Svensen, *Industrial War*, 60.

⁴⁵ Clark, *A History of Australia*, vol. 5, 63.

⁴⁶ Stuart Svensen, *The Sinews of War: Hard Cash and the 1890 Maritime Strike* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 1995).

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 241.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 243.

precipitate trouble'.⁴⁹ Through an analysis of the economics of the strike, Svensen was able to conclude that employers' attempts to control labour were always doomed to failure.⁵⁰

More recent work has returned to considering the British connection. Frank Bongiorno's book *The People's Party* dealt with the Victorian labour movement specifically. His interpretation of the 1890 strike was a move away from the emphases of Fitzpatrick and Gollan. He accepted the classic radical-nationalist view of the strike itself as a violent conflict between labour and capital, with the unions testing their capacity for collective action, and the employers fighting for control of industry.⁵¹ Yet Bongiorno's was no radical-nationalist interpretation. His account stressed the importance of the liberal ideas that influenced labour movement. He rejected the notion of colonial labour as a Lawnesque 'Middleton's Rouseabout' figure, lacking opinions or 'idears'.⁵² On the contrary, Bongiorno argued, the liberal values of 'self-improvement, mutual aid and respectability' formed the basis of the unionist movement, and the Labor Party that evolved from it.⁵³ In his Trevor Reese Memorial Lecture, Bongiorno also reclaimed Britishness for the labour movement. It was noted above that the radical-nationalist tradition had cast labour supporters as the true

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 88.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 245.

⁵¹ Frank Bongiorno, *The People's Party: Victorian Labor and the Radical Tradition, 1875–1914* (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1996), 32.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 11.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 13.

Australians, and capital as British or at best British-Australian.⁵⁴ For Bongiorno this was only half of the story. Fights for democracy and liberty came directly from the British radical and liberal traditions. Both the strikes and the Party were developments of these British traditions in his interpretation. The strikes, therefore, played a smaller role in the formation of the Labor Party in Bongiorno's account than in the radical-nationalist accounts.⁵⁵

The disagreements between historians of the strikes are few in number but stark in purport. They divide into two opposing camps. There are those who believe that the strikers were radical, even revolutionary, in ideology, and that most of this radicalism was somehow lost after the two great wars in the first half of the twentieth century. This view was seen most strongly in the works of Brian Fitzpatrick. Then there are those, like Humphrey McQueen, who argued that the reason socialist radicalism is no longer visible in the Labor Party is because there was only ever a tiny minority of strikers who espoused it. McQueen the Marxist felt that the strikers never formed a true class consciousness, nor a revolutionary party to lead them. Another point of contention was the outcome of the strikes. The defeat of the unions has been seen as the dawning of Labor as a political force, and alternatively as the triumph of conservatism. Thus the pessimists—Fitzpatrick and Gollan—saw a conservative triumph, and the optimists,

⁵⁴ In addition to Fitzpatrick and Gollan, see also Ward, *The Australian Legend* for examples of this view.

⁵⁵ Frank Bongiorno, *British to their Bootheels too: Britishness and Australian Radicalism, Trevor Reese Memorial Lecture 2006* (London: Menzies Centre for Australian Studies, 2006).

Rickard, Svensen, and Bongiorno, saw the progressiveness of the new unionism. The strikes that began in 1890 once formed the foundation of much Australian national history. The works of only a select few historians have been examined here, yet they give an indication of how important 1890 was to the debates about this country that continue to the present day.

It seems perverse to label a topic over which so much ink has been spilled a forgotten history. I persist with such a label because outside the debates among historians, the unrest of the 1890s has been ignored by most Australians. As has been seen here, the debates among historians were never just about the events of 1890 themselves, but rather about what that said about our nation. These debates raised the passions because the outcome showed the potential of the Australasian settler colonies to be the social laboratories of the world—places where progressive policies such as female suffrage were put in place decades before Europe, Britain, or the United States. These debates get away from the uncritical bandying around of terms like ‘Judaean-Christian heritage’ or ‘Western civilisation’. The debates examined here were not carried out for cheap political gain. Each was a sincere attempt to come to an understanding of how the Australian democracy had evolved, and what kind of society Australians had tried to build. Thorough debate about how the country dealt with crisis in the past can lead to a fuller understanding of its present, and perhaps even new ideas for its future.