

HIST MAT

Humphrey McQueen on Bruce McFarlane

Few people have two songs written about them. Few are arrested three times in anti-war protests. Few are threatened with castration by a member of parliament. Few are burnt in effigy. Few publish more than a dozen books and scores of learned articles. Few edit two academic journals. Few hold chairs in politics and in economics. Few work with four State Planning Commissions.

In his eighty years, Bruce McFarlane has done all of that and more, which is why he is Australia's preeminent critic of political economy. His criticism combines political activism with intellectual achievement. Those criticisms of 'political economy' cover the actualities of monopolising capitals here and around the globe with criticism of the Political Economy Department in this university.

Before filling out how one person acquired all the attributes in the introduction, a few words about his background. Bruce's father was a pharmacist and a Party member, a combination which attracted the displeasure of the Pharmacy Guild and the attention of ASIO, so that he ended his working days as a tally clerk on the Sydney wharves. He gave Bruce a copy of Engels's *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, a work which has attracted more people to socialism and led some on to Marxism than any other. At Wollongong Boys High in 1952, Bruce came third in his final year which tells us something about the high standards of his classmates.¹

As a student in the Economics Department here, Bruce took all the prizes and got a First but not the usual scholarship to Cambridge. Bruce doesn't think that Sid Butlin was prejudiced against him because of his views but because of his activism. Bruce was not a 'chap'. Years later, Cambridge became his intellectual home with Sraffa, Dobb, and 'Aunty Joan', as he always called her, although the greatest influence was Kalecki. Bruce and Geoff Harcourt set up a Cambridge branch office in Adelaide from the mid-1970s. The personal remained political when he married Julia Ryan, sister of the historian Lyndall, daughters of the equal pay campaigner, Edna, and Jack, a foundation member of the Communist Party, though expelled as a Bukarninite.

Not to run further ahead of the introduction, we shall proceed – seriatim - from the two songs.

Bruce was Secretary of the Australian Student Labour Federation as it split between the Groupers and the Labour Party, and within the Communist Party. At the ASLF Residential Conference, the factions were all frightened that one of the others would come during the night to bash them up that, having locked themselves in their rooms, they cheered themselves up by composing songs such as this little ditty:

My father says

It's quite alright

To throw bricks at Joseph Stalin.

But how can we be sure

¹ *Illawara Mercury*, 11 November 1952, p. 36.

That next week

It won't be Bruce McFarlane.

The second song grew out of Bruce's first arrest, a little over ten years later during the visit to Canberra of the war criminal and Hitler-loving Air Vice-Marshal Ky in January 1967, for which Julia made the first NLF flags to be carried at anti-war demos.² I was standing beside Bruce, holding one of the flags, when he threw himself across the wooden barrier into the NSW wallopers whom the Holt government had brought in to control the protesters. Only later did I learn that Bruce had seen a friend, Mick Collins, being roughed up by the police and sprang to his rescue. He was arrested and charged with the usual list of offences. A committee raised funds to employ Jim Staples as barrister for the defence. For one of their fund raisers, ANU scholar, jazz muso and poet, Bob Brissenden, composed 'The Ballad of Muscles McFarlane', which he performed far better than I shall, but you are all expected to help with the choruses:

Bruce was acquitted, as he was once more, though he was found guilty on the third occasion when he had been the victim of an unprovoked police assault during a protest at the U.S. War Memorial. Those experiences confirmed his anarchist prejudice that bourgeois justice means that the guilty get off while the innocent are stitched up.

Bruce became organising secretary of the Moratorium Committee in Canberra.³ His rhetorical gifts were considerable. He summed up the strategy of the Imperialists as; 'Kill all, burn all, destroy all' and the strategy of the Vietnamese people was to 'drive the invaders into the sea', which they did early in 1975. He had taken the prize for public speaking at high school in 1951.⁴ By then, Bruce had published an article on how the Vietnamese could plan reconstruction.

The threat of castration, which Bruce still finds chilling, came in 1962 from the sole parliamentary representative of the North Queensland Labor Party, Tom Aktin, the member for Mudginburra. Castration was Aitkin's solution to sex offenders. Bruce, however, had transgressed more grievously. While giving University Extension Lectures in Townsville, he had cast doubt on the sacred cow of Northern Development, as Jack Kelly and Bruce Davidson would do in detail the following years later.

Bruce had started work in the Economics and Commerce Department at the University of Queensland in 1960. His head of department, J.K. Gifford, a maverick who had some claim to having p the Friedmans on monetarism His sense of being neglected predisposed him to employ other unorthodox economists.⁵ In the aftermath of the 1960-62 credit squeeze which hit Queensland hardest and came within one seat of tossing Menzies out of office, Bruce and three others investigated the State's slothful development to reveal that it owed as much to bad performance by government and employers as to climate and

² Bruce had written in support of the NLF, *Thurunka*, 31 August 1965, p. 11, 5 July 1967, p. 11.

³ Canberra Times, 18 September 1970, p. 3, and 19 September 1970, p. 1.

⁴ *Illawara Mercury*, 13 December 1951.

⁵ J.E. King and Alex Millnow, 'Crank or Proto-Monetarist? J.K. Gifford and the Cost-Push Fallacy', *Proceedings of the 20th Conference of the History of Economic Thought Society*, 2007, pp. 200-215.

distance. *Queensland: Industrial Enigma, Manufacturing in the Economic Development of Queensland*. Interviews with company executives from sixty-six firms documented that their investment decisions bore little or no relation to rational calculation of demand. A jump in book profits was assumed to be justification for expanding output, but so, as Bruce put it in conversation, was whether the mistress or the missus had turned on a good naughty the night before.

A thousand miles to the south, the irrigators around Coleambally burnt Bruce in effigy after his report for the Commonwealth Bank on the economic efficiencies of the Snowy Mountains Scheme gave high marks to electricity production but a bad fail for the provision of water to keep Santamaria peasants voting for the DLP.

Journal editorship of *Labour History* in the late 1960s and then associated with the *Journal of Contemporary Asia* from its foundation year in 1970 with Malcolm Caldwell, Noam Chomsky, Gabriel Kolko and Wertheim before serving as co-editor with Peter Lindquist. From the 1990s began to spend much of his time in the Philippines, a habitat not entirely risk free for radicals.

Bruce's first book in his own right came after he had moved to the Research School at the ANU in 1963, where his research focused on the provision of power. In 1968 *Economic Policy in Australia, The Case for Reform*. Despite propaganda to the contrary, the Menzies years had been a rolling economic disaster, with one credit squeeze after another, unpopularly known as a stop-go economy. Underlying problem was with a balance of payment dependent on rural produce with all the uncertainties of the weather and international demand. Meeting repayments for even medium-term outlays was a bigger than usual risk. Policy was hobbled by a government anchored to the Country Party. An affluent society was not secured until 1963 when the export of minerals added financial ballast to the current account. Cornered into setting up an inquiry in 1962 into what had gone wrong and how it might be put to rights, Menzies was a pushover for Treasury's demolition of the Vernon Report in 1965. Refusing to contemplate the socialism of indicative planning along the lines of France, Australia had been saddled with what Bruce attacked as hydra-headed planning from the Tariff Board, the Arbitration Court, the Reserve Bank and Treasury. Against this muddling through and surrender of the commanding heights to U.S. corporations, Bruce proposed methods for countering the power of big business and to promote self-management, anticipating the upsurges of student movement and the metal-workers defeat of a Total Wage in ??? leading onto the demolition of the Penal Powers with the 1969 O'Shea strike.

The one criticism that Bruce's friend and later collaborator, Peter Groenewegen, made in his review of *The Case for Reform* was

Bruce's advocacy of 'self-management', he acknowledged, might seem unreal' but it carried over lessons he had learnt during his year in Yugoslavia and fitted in with his visceral resistance to state authorities. Those experiences and prejudices found new life when he and Ted Wheelwright, who had been one of his teachers, travelled through China as the Great Proletarian Revolution was getting under way, and about its politically-charged economic dimensions they dealt in *The Chinese Road to Socialism* (1970). The work

floor factory manager who explained that the takeover by the workers 'The Golden Monkey waved his magic baton and the Green Jade King fell down.' The Golden Monkey were the workers, the magic baton was the thought of Mao Tsetung and the Green Jade king was the bureaucratic managers.

He always looked for ways to promote self-management. As professor of politics at Adelaide, he worked closely with the anarchists driving for Worker Control in the car plants. Among Bruce's closest lifelong friends was the Sydney anarchist Jack Grancheroff – whom he took to a cocktail party in Cambridge where Jack declared himself to be more impressed by the number of people giving each other academic honours than the recipients.

That two of Bruce's first three book-length publications were cooperative efforts was no accident. That he needed no help but worked because he saw scientific research as a collaborative activity and to give a leg up to others, including his friend, the worker-intellectual Steve Cooper who is here today, on the Asiatic Mode of Production. Can be a socialist without being a Marxist but not the reverse – at least not for very long. One of Bruce's his post-graduate students in Adelaide in the late 1970s, Peter Cochrane remembers

“... a great supervisor and a terrific host. I recall the great unfixed cracks in the hallway walls in his house in ... the house was terrifically sociable and kind to rather timid post-grads.

Planning Commissions

Lessons

From self-management in Yugoslavia

And from Dobb about the Soviet Union.

Reflect on the current situation in Venezuela

And always keep in mind Engels on out

Forgetting

When I told Bruce that I was offering this paper to the conference, he told me to forget about him and to stick with my attempt to specify how exactly the revolution inside capital opened the way to the global dominance of capital-within-capitalism. I replied that I need relief from not being able to chew all that I had bitten off. Further, his articles on Dobb and Kaleki were stimulating in my attempts to replace the cliché of 'transition from feudalism to capitalism' with a revolution inside capital. Above all, without him in the early Sixties, it is less likely that I would be attempting the project at all. When we meet in 1960, the year after I left school, I assumed that Rosaluxemburg was a man's surname.

By way of encouragement, somewhere around 1962, after his failure to get me to translate sentences into graphs, he had laid it out that I would not have to become a technical economist to be a Marxist, but unless I absorbed Marx's critique of political economy I could never become a Marxist historian, political scientist, or art critic.

As well as repaying more debts than just for that advice, I am giving a paper on Bruce McFarlane because I fear the loss of collective memory on the Left, indeed, an amnesia induced by the Educational Enterprise Pty Ltd.

Students at the University of Canberra are told that they must not refer a source more than ten years old. None of the contributors to the special issue of *JAPE* on health policy included R.M. Titmuss in the references, nor did the article on health policy in the special issue entitled 'Contesting Markets. (68, 2011-2). Even Ray Moynihan told me at New Year that Titmuss was only a name in his passive memory. I was assured four weeks ago that he is still revered at the LSE.

Or Fiona Stanley

Lets hope that the Marmot's Boyer lectures redirect attention to those issues and beyond the vacuity of Defend Medicare – which is unfair and doesn't work.

Less remarkably, the *JAPE* special issue on pluralism made no mention of John Playford's 1969 exposure of pluralism as cold-war ideology. (*Arena*, 1969) It is no accident, comrades, as Stalin would have said, that we are meeting in a School of Business. Jean Chesneaux pointed out to me on his first visit in 1970 that universities had Departments of Government but not of Revolution – though they did teach counter-insurgency. Up against the drive to turn education and health into new realms in which capital can expand, bourgeois progressives try to justify their existence by appealing to past norms such as 'pluralism'.

Difference between being eclectic in the devices one uses to crunch the data. Dialecticians such as the late Richard Levins acknowledge their debts to the developments in systems theory.⁶

The last form is the *academic form*, which proceeds 'historically' and, with wise moderation, collects the 'best' from all sources, and in doing this, contradictions do not matter; on the contrary, what matters is comprehensiveness. All systems are thus made insipid, their edge is taken off and they are peacefully gathered together in a miscellany. The heat of apologetics is moderated here by erudition, which looks down benignly on the exaggerations of economic thinkers, and merely allows them to float as oddities in its mediocre pap. Since such work appears only when political economy has reached the end of its scope as a science, they are at the same time the *graveyard* of this science.⁷

Skools out?

Another issue of relevance comes from the final pages of *A History of Australian Political Thought* (1990), written in collaboration with Peter Groenewegen. Their concluding chapter asks: 'Can Australian economics survive the twentieth century?' The book had documents the Australian schools, in the plural, which emerged from seeking to make sense of the peculiarities of real existing capitalism here, notably, the impress of necessarily

⁶ Richard Levins, *Science & Society*, ????, 1998, pp.

⁷ Karl Marx, *Theories of Surplus-Value*, Part III, Progress Publishers, Moscow, p.

unpredictable rural exports on the balance of payments for highly protected processors under shifting patterns of overseas ownership and control. None of those elements was unique to Australia but their combination was exceptional and it was those shifting actualities which sent prominent economists here down novel pathways, as Mike Beggs has explored in his *Inflation and the Making of Australian Macro-economic Policy, 1945 -1985*.⁸

Cf T.M. Fitzgerald in his 1990 Boyer Lectures.

The prospects for fresh episodes in Australian schools depends on the extent to which the configuration of capital will continue to differ.

If the world turns out to be flat and universal labour times can be equalized, then the isolation required for evolving what biologists call 'sports' will have disappeared. Before then, as the differences do approach zero they will still be doing so within distinctive structures left over from a services-based economy dependent on extractive industries. – the adjustment to the end of the latest mining boom

Signs of life in Joe Collins' Ph.D. on ground rent and the resources rent tax.

But also needs intellectual sources

Economic history of Australia

And the history of economic thought, here and abroad

Only then can we grasp how concepts and actualities effect and affect each other

Quote Engels⁹

Age does not weary him

On 1 July 1st this year, Bruce turned eighty this year. Having recovered from two serious strokes, he is living in Christchurch, where he has completed his survey of the ASEAN economies which he has placed with his Japanese publisher.

We exchange letters every week. His combine annotated bibliographies in response to any author or topic I may have mentioned, along with a coruscation of suggestions for defending working people against the needs of capital. To take one example, in regard to labour in the twenty-first century, he puzzles over the biggest question: will there be any? If only half the predictions about automation and robotics come to fruition, what need will the expansion of capital have for variable capital? That question is not answered by skipping ahead to the problem of how will it be possible to realise the skericks of surplus-value as profit.

Needless to say, Bruce does not leave the matter at that level of concreteness but confronts the implications for a labour theory of value. What happens if we move from Stigler's jesting about Ricardo's 93 percent labour theory of value to the actualities of a mode of production in which the contribution of living labour to the adding of value is down to 0.93 – or even 0.0093 – percent? Here, Marx's fascination – not to say obsession –

⁸ Michael Beggs, *Inflation and the Making of Australian Macro-economic Policy, 1945-85, ????, 201??*

⁹ Engels, ape to man, p.

with the calculus, leads us into whether the accumulation of quantitative changes, i.e. diminutions, will result in a qualitative leap?

How much help? Also return to chapter 15 in volume one for how machines contributed to the extraction of more of both absolute and relative surplus value, as is happening now. Or is this combination the transitional means to an elimination of living labour?

Conclude

How often do we hear megaphone Marxists try to conceal their failure – indeed their slovenly refusal - to put in the hard yards necessary to understand how exploitation works under capitalism by misrepresenting Thesis Eleven. The point, they parrot, is to change the world, not to interpret it. If that is the point, then Marx wasted half his life. The final thesis on Feuerbach has to be interpreted through the dialectical materialism sketched out in the preceding ten to be elaborated in the opening ninety pages of *The German Ideology*. We interpret the world through changing it and can change the world only by interpreting it.

Late in 1963, Bruce sent me a telegram after I had been elected editor of the student paper at the University of Queensland: 'Do things about which others may write or write things for others to do.' Bruce McFarlane has always done both. True, he is not the full-time revolutionary intellectual about whom Lenin wrote, but has been as close to being one as any academic in the country. He has done the things about which he has written. His critiques of political economy are practical and conceptual, courageous and penetrating. He has put his body on the line and his brains on the line in the service of working people, standing forever with the weakest and the poorest. Of him too it is appropriate to say – 'noble protagonist of the proletariat'.

If the bulk of the papers at this conference are any guide, not even capable of putting their brains on the line.