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Two Radical Legends: Russel Ward, Humphrey McQueen and the New Left Challenge in Australian Historiography¹

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Older, more experienced men, especially those learned in tribal lore, were listened to more respectfully than younger men when a group was coming to a consensus by informal discussion of a question; but it would be just as true to say that the function of these elders was to apply the immemorial custom or law of the tribe as to lead or guide it.²

In the late 1960s and 1970s, Russel Ward's *The Australian Legend* (1958) came under sustained critique from younger radical historians associated with the New Left.³ Following the most famous of these assaults by Humphrey McQueen around 1970, attacks on the Old Left in general and Ward in particular were nearly obligatory for young historians launching academic careers. Undertaken with varying degrees of vigour, they became a part of how to perform the role of radical historian in the 1970s, attesting to the powerful status Ward's *Legend* had achieved by this time. Consider the case of a young Melbourne tutor and postgraduate student who in 1972 criticised 'the pseudo-scientific and moralist principles of selection' by which Ward attempted to 'render virtuous the Australian legend'. While Ward was not this student's only target – others included R. M. Crawford, Brian Fitzpatrick and Ian Turner – it was impossible to ignore the *Legend* in an article that professed to discuss 'Radical History and Bourgeois Hegemony'. Far from

¹ I am indebted to Humphrey McQueen for access to his papers in the National Library of Australia, and for his generous comments on the draft; to Biff Ward, for information on her father, permission to quote from his papers and her warm encouragement of my research; to Carl Bridge for access to his own collection of 'Wardiana'; to Sean Scalmer and Geoffrey Bolton for advice; and to Stuart Macintyre, John Moses, Les Louis and Graeme Davison, for their helpful feedback.

² R. Ward, *Concise History of Australia*, St. Lucia (Qld), 1992, p. 17.

³ R. Ward, *The Australian Legend*, Melbourne, 1988 [1958].

providing 'value-free knowledge', said the author, Ward's distinction between facts and values was simply 'a device of bourgeois methodology whose principal effect is to camouflage the class limitations of such knowledge'. Ward had rendered 'reality incomprehensible' because he had failed to locate racism in 'the specific totality' of colonial Australian society. In this way, it became an 'abstraction' that obscured the operation of the whole entity.⁴

Young historians such as McQueen and the twenty-five year old author of this critique, Stuart Macintyre, were influenced by the re-discovery of the writings of the young Marx; the translation into English, from 1957, of many of the key writings of Antonio Gramsci, the Italian Communist, which helped to popularise his concept of hegemony among New Left radicals in the English-speaking world; and the emergence of revisionist strains of Marxism such as the Frankfurt School and the writings of the French theorist, Louis Althusser.⁵ Other significant developments included the new social history epitomised by E. P. Thompson and the British cultural Marxists; the rise of the new social movements such as black liberation, feminism and environmentalism; the anti-Vietnam War movement; 'Third World' anti-colonial struggles; the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution in China; and the political turmoil of 1968 in Paris and Prague. When these historians turned to Australia's past, they criticised the Old Left for its insufficiently critical approach to nationalism and failure to take adequate account of Australian racism, capitalism and imperialism. Ann Curthoys has called their position 'left pessimism', although this is not the whole story, because they also believed in the possibility of social revolution and personal emancipation.⁶

⁴ S. Macintyre, 'Radical History and Bourgeois Hegemony', *Intervention*, No. 2, October 1972, p. 63.

⁵ M. E. Green, 'Concordance Table of Gramsci's Prison Notebooks', International Gramsci Society <www.internationalgramscisociety.org/resources/concordance_table/index.html> accessed 12 January 2008. For McQueen on Althusser, see 'Marx for Himself: An uncritical look at Louis Althusser', *Old Mole*, No. 5, 31 August 1970, p. 8. For criticism of McQueen from an Althusserian perspective, see S. Macintyre, 'History Debate: Reply to McQueen', *Arena*, No. 38, 1975, pp. 49-50.

⁶ A. Curthoys, *Australian Legends: Histories, Identities, Genealogies: The Russel Ward Annual Lecture, University of New England, Armidale, 27 September, 1992*, Armidale (NSW), 1992, p. 6.

The most influential of them was McQueen, and this paper explores both his critique of Ward, and Ward's response. I show that the most powerful influence on their dispute was their very different understandings of the tasks of the radical historian. Finally, I briefly examine the ways in which the controversy between Ward and McQueen continued to condition the reinterpretation of Australia's past undertaken by proponents of the new histories in the 1970s and beyond. The capacity to define where one stood in relation to *The Australian Legend* became essential when staking a claim in Australian historiography. It is true that some of McQueen's own preoccupations – notably with class and the nature of the union movement and Australian Labor Party – rapidly became marginal in Australian historiography, while matters that for the time being escaped his radar, such as the experiences of women and Aboriginals, would be increasingly prominent in the new histories of the 1970s and 1980s. But even if later historians failed to emulate either his forensic manner or his aggression, McQueen's critical attitude towards key features of the Australian historical landscape that had been politely ignored, under-estimated or even celebrated by previous historians arguably marks out *A New Britannia* as the 'daddy' of what Geoffrey Blainey (and John Howard) later criticised as the 'black armband' school of history.⁷

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The cover of the Fourth Edition of Humphrey McQueen's *A New Britannia*, published by University of Queensland Press in 2004, still wears the comment like a badge of honour: '*An Australian classic which delighted its critics* – "This is a very bad book ..." Russel Ward, *Overland*'.⁸ The confrontation between McQueen and Ward in the late 1960s and early 1970s – which culminated in a series of bitter exchanges in the pages of the Melbourne journal *Overland* concerning the first edition of *A New Britannia* – has been understood as a

⁷ F. Bongiorno, 'Sergeant Humphrey', *Australian Book Review*, No. 265, October 2004, p. 35; G. Blainey, 'Drawing Up a Balance Sheet of Our History', *Quadrant*, Vol. 37, Nos 7-8, July-August 1993, pp. 10-5.

⁸ H. McQueen, *A New Britannia*, 4th ed., St. Lucia (Qld), 2004.

significant moment in Australian historiography.⁹ This was when the Old Left was challenged by the New, when a complacent historical profession that had expanded with Australia's universities in the Menzies era was confronted by the angry young men and women of the anti-Vietnam War generation, post-war baby-boomers with three sets of jeans, a prescription for the pill, a reliable supply of dope, and no memory of either world war or great depression. Here was generational change, and yet something more; once again, it seemed possible to imagine 'socialism in our time'. As McQueen himself put it in the 'Preface' to the most recent edition of the book,

A New Britannia deserves to be read as a statement of its time. In the late 1960s, the mood was established by the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution in China, the Tet Offensive in Vietnam, the May Days in France, the Prague Spring and the O'Shea strike. At its best, and its worst, this is a book with the wind in its sails.¹⁰

McQueen's contextualisation says much about the preoccupations of his generation of radicals. McQueen might just as readily have nominated as the context for his book the minerals boom, the emergence of the 'New Nationalism' associated with Gorton and Whitlam, and the last years of capitalism's 'Golden Years' before the oil crisis and the emergence of stagflation muddied the post-war Keynesian waters.¹¹ Or he could have presented his dispute with Ward as a latter-day Australian version of the kind of internecine and inter-generational dispute that occurred within the left in Britain, the United States and elsewhere in the 1960s. That he did not do so underlines his understanding of *A New Britannia* as a revolutionary political intervention at a particular moment in Australian and world history, not simply an antipodean re-run of battles fought elsewhere, a by-product of the long boom, or an artefact of the post-Menzian Australian 'cultural renaissance'. But I

⁹ R. Pascoe, *The Manufacture of Australian History*, Melbourne, 1979, pp. 140-6; J. Merritt, 'Labour History', in G. Osborne and W. F. Mandle (eds), *New History: Studying Australia Today*, North Sydney, pp. 127-8.

¹⁰ McQueen, *New Britannia*, 4th ed., p. ix.

¹¹ E. Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century 1914-1991*, London, 1999 [1994], Ch. 9.

like McQueen's description of the book as having 'the wind in its sails'. When I reviewed the latest edition in 2004, I called *A New Britannia* 'the *Sergeant Pepper* of Australian historiography: racy, emblematic of its time and place, and full of special effects – the impolite may call some of them recording tricks'. (*Australian Book Review* gave my piece the title 'Sergeant Humphrey').¹² As it happens, *Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* isn't my favourite Beatles record, but it is truly an album 'with the wind in its sails'; it captures the atmosphere of a time and place even if, for a while, it seemed like the moment towards which all popular music had been leading.¹³

So it was with *A New Britannia*. McQueen, only twenty-eight at the time and a Senior Tutor at the Australian National University, seemed to have overturned a whole way of looking at the Australian past and begun the task of replacing it with something new. As Henry Mayer, the political scientist and McQueen's mentor, commented after reading the manuscript for John Hooker at Penguin, 'It's a real tour de force in its conceptualization and the drive and verve of the whole enterprise. It is by far the most original and exciting thing of this kind for Australia I've seen so far ... I think Penguin and you are very lucky to have this book. If it does not sell like hot cakes I give up all hope'.¹⁴ Mayer's judgment was astute; the book did well and was quickly reprinted. New editions appeared in 1976, 1986 and, as mentioned, in 2004.

The book is perhaps now too well known to require detailed summarisation.¹⁵ In a series of chapters with titles such as 'Nationalists', 'Racists', 'Invaders', 'Convicts', 'Selectors' and 'Unionists', McQueen challenged what he believed to be the

¹² Bongiorno, *op. cit.*, pp. 35-6.

¹³ For an interpretation that lays more stress on the album's traditional characteristics, see D. Sandbrook, *White Heat: A History of Britain in the Swinging Sixties*, London, 2006, pp. 414-5. 'The strongest motif, of course, was that of the late Victorian or Edwardian music hall'. Sandbrook sees the album as bathed in the 'spirit of Victorian revivalism and English nostalgia'.

¹⁴ H. Mayer to J. Hooker, 3 May 1970, Humphrey McQueen Papers, National Library of Australia (NLA) MS 4809, Box 1, Folder 9.

¹⁵ H. McQueen, *A New Britannia: An argument concerning the social origins of Australian radicalism and nationalism*, Ringwood (Vic), 1970. I am working from a 1971 reprint of the 1st ed., unless otherwise stated.

dominant interpretation of Australian history – which paradoxically and perhaps misleadingly, often turned out to be that found in the work of the left-wing historians of an older generation. A chapter on 'Pianists' argued that '[a] working class that could afford such luxuries wanted nothing to do with revolution'.¹⁶ ('Tirez sur les Pianistes!', replied Melbourne radical-nationalist historian Noel McLachlan in a mischievously titled review for *Meanjin*.)¹⁷ Convicts, far from being the progenitors of the Australian radical-democratic tradition, were 'lumpen-proletarian or petty-bourgeois'. Their dominant ethic was 'individual acquisitiveness'. Free immigration and the gold rushes merely strengthened this ethos 'and resulted in gross materialism'.¹⁸ The selectors sought to escape the demands of capitalism by retreating into a rural arcadia. Bushrangers were not popular folk heroes among rural people, but widely despised for their cruelty. Henry Lawson was not the poet of Australian labour, democracy and the common people, but a '[g]enuine fascist a la Musso'.¹⁹ The Australian Labor Party was not a socialist party, but 'the highest expression of a peculiarly Australian petit-bourgeoisie'. Australian nationalism was racist because of the threat posed by the 'Yellow Peril' from the north, a racial chauvinism that readily sustained support for a sub-imperialism in the Pacific and militarism to keep Australia white. Australia was 'a frontier of European capitalism in Asia'.²⁰

Most of these roads led back to Russel Ward and *The Australian Legend*. Ward's attempt to explain the origins and development of a particular national mystique he called 'The Australian Legend' had been published a little more than a decade before McQueen's and, as *A New Britannia* would do, very quickly acquired the status of classic.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 118.

¹⁷ N. McLachlan, 'Tirez sur les Pianistes! Humphrey McQueen's "Revolutionary History"', *Meanjin Quarterly*, Vol. 29, No. 4, December 1970, pp. 547-3. McLachlan's cheeky reference was presumably to François Truffaut's 1960 film, *Tirez sur le pianiste*, starring Charles Aznavour.

¹⁸ McQueen, *New Britannia*, pp. 19, 126-7. See also the article by Roberts in this Volume.

¹⁹ As McQueen explained to Mayer after reading Lawson's *oeuvre*. McQueen to Mayer, n.d. [c. 1969], McQueen Papers, NLA MS 4809, Box 2, Folder 10.

²⁰ McQueen, *New Britannia*, pp. 17, 236.

Importantly, and perhaps not unlike McQueen, Ward saw himself as writing for his own generation, those radical intellectuals who had passed in and out of the Communist Party in the middle decades of the twentieth century and saw their Party, until disillusionment set in, as the heir to Australia's traditions of radicalism and democracy (see also the article by Cottle in this Volume). Here is what he had to say in 1959 to Stephen Murray-Smith, editor of *Overland* and himself a recent refugee from the Communist Party:

Thanks for the cheering words about Australian Legend, though I'm a bit baffled that you of all people should find it, of all things, provocative. Should have thought you'd have agreed with every word more or less and so have had an opposite kind of reaction – "Yes, all very well and interesting no doubt, but after all it only says at length what I and every other sane, thoughtful Australian have always felt and known to be the true anatomy of our antipodean spirit."²¹

McQueen was self-consciously assaulting a whole tradition when he attacked Ward's book. In September 1969 he attended a conference of the Royal Historical Society of Victoria at which Russel Ward and another radical-nationalist historian, Geoffrey Serle, both spoke. As McQueen told Mayer, 'They trotted out all the old shit'. Serle, he said, had called the gold rush generation 'tolerant' but neglected to mention their attitudes to the Chinese. Ward, meanwhile, called them petty-bourgeois 'and British race patriots' which he concluded proved that they were 'matey and equal!!!????'. 'They convinced me that no quarter can be given', reported McQueen. 'They are like a festering bog that absorbs all criticisms. They must be totally eradicated. There is no cure. must KILL'.²²

²¹ R. Ward to S. Murray-Smith, 8 March 1959, Stephen Murray-Smith Papers, State Library of Victoria (SLV) MS 8272, Box 199/4-1.

²² McQueen to Mayer, n.d. [late September 1969], McQueen Papers, NLA MS 4809, Box 2, Folder 10. This was the Third Biennial Victorian Historical Conference, held 26-28 September 1969. Its theme was 'Gold' and, apart from Ward and Serle, speakers included L. J. Blake, Geoffrey Blainey and Noel McLachlan. For the papers by Ward and Serle mentioned by McQueen, see R. Ward, 'Two Kinds of Australian Patriotism', *Victorian Historical Magazine*, Vol. 41, No. 1, Issue 159, February 1970,

McQueen's (in)famous opening chapter on 'Historians' should be seen in this context. There, he distinguished himself from Old Left historians such as Ward, Serle, Ian Turner and Brian Fitzpatrick, for whom 'socialism is a thing of the past ... [a] tale of decline, of a once radical people corrupted by their own victories'. For them, radicalism and socialism were 'chances gone for ever' and there was 'nothing to look forward to except king-making and wire-pulling in the A.L.P.'. It was 'the historians who have suffered the decline', added McQueen pointedly.²³

Some of those who read *A New Britannia* in advance of publication were worried about its treatment of Ward. Mayer advised McQueen to be careful to get his thinking straight if he was determined to 'kill' Ward and Serle, and he commented to Hooker at Penguin that it was 'arguable how far in the bulk of the work he caricatures [sic] Ward and Gollan in order to knock them down'.²⁴ Eric Fry, himself an Old Left Marxist, formerly and briefly a 'fellow slave'²⁵ of Ward at the University of New England (UNE) and in 1970 a senior colleague of McQueen at the Australian National University (ANU), was clearly in two minds about whether McQueen was justified in his attacks on Ward:

Since the book is often a counterblast to Ward, it is to a large extent conducted within Ward's universe of discourse This concentrates its attack by confining its ground. Even Anti-Duhring suffers from beginning with Duhring and gives him an unwarranted importance! Ward is very cautious in what he actually says. Perhaps a good deal of the fire is really aimed at widespread notions held by people who have never read Ward.

pp. 225-43 and G. Serle, 'The Gold Generation', on pp. 265-72 of the same issue. Blake's paper on 'The Gold Escorts' also appeared (pp. 244-64).

²³ McQueen, *A New Britannia*, p. 15.

²⁴ Mayer to McQueen, 3 October 1969, McQueen Papers, NLA MS 4809, Box 1, Folder 4; Mayer to Hooker, 3 May 1970, McQueen Papers, NLA MS 4809, Box 1, Folder 9.

²⁵ Ward's humorous phrase for his colleagues at the UNE. See B. Mitchell, in C. Bridge (ed.), *Russel Ward: A Celebration*, Armidale (NSW), 1996, p. 19.

However, controversy is the breath of life to a book like this and personalisation stimulates it.²⁶

Stuart Macintyre reported that the proofs of *A New Britannia* were circulating in the History Department at the University of Melbourne and 'a few people seemed a bit upset by the introduction'; probably an understatement.²⁷ Certainly, one member of that department, Noel McLachlan, in his review of the book, remarked that 'old radical "legenders" ... such as Russel Ward and Bob Gollan are less likely to feel themselves "besieged" than belied',²⁸ while Ian McDougall, in the left-wing paper *Direct Action*, lamented that McQueen had been 'so bloody rude to those old left historians with whom he disagrees ... One can disagree with another leftist without getting smart and bitchy'. The 'arrogance towards the old left and others, this competitiveness, upstaging and one-upmanship' was 'itself a symptom of the petit-bourgeois outlook'. For McDougall, the task of building a revolutionary organisation still required having to 'square off with the Australian legend'.²⁹ The Communist and Melbourne University political scientist, Lloyd Churchward, meanwhile wondered whether it was 'the "generation gap"' that compelled the likes of McQueen 'to castigate their elders as "populists" and "Australian nationalists" rather than to acknowledge them as socialists'. 'This belittling of the achievements of earlier writers', he added, 'is often coupled with new distortions and exaggerated ideas about the originality of their own argument'.³⁰

What did Ward himself think about all this attention? He had first crossed swords with McQueen in the pages of *Labour History* in 1968-9, over a brilliant article that launched McQueen's career as an historian, 'Convicts and Rebels'. There, McQueen had rejected Ward's claims concerning the convicts' egalitarian class solidarity,

²⁶ E. C. Fry, 'A New Britannia by Humphrey McQueen', Unpublished Report, 14 May 1970, McQueen Papers, NLA MS 4809, Box 2, Folder 14.

²⁷ K. Rowley to McQueen, n.d. [c. late 1970], McQueen Papers, NLA MS 4809, Box 2, Folder 11.

²⁸ McLachlan, 'Tirez', p. 549.

²⁹ *Direct Action* (Sydney), January 1971, p. 11.

³⁰ L. Churchward, 'The Socialist Critics', *Meanjin Quarterly*, Vol. 31, No. 3, September 1972, p. 360.

concluding 'that Ward knows very little about the convicts and that he has a quaint notion of class'.³¹ It should be remembered that McQueen, at this stage, was still a teacher at Glen Waverley High School in Melbourne; Ward an eminent Professor of History and Head of Department at UNE. There were other differences. Ward looked a little like 'a retired colonel'; McQueen wore the kind of Lenin-style beard and long hair fashionable among young radicals of the late 1960s and 1970s.³² Ward, as Don Beer has commented, had 'the manners of a well-brought up private schoolboy, which he was; he was by no means out of place in the grazier circles of New England, in which he mixed'.³³ McQueen, by way of contrast, would have known few graziers and was solidly Brisbane working-class. As early as 1962 he had been in trouble with authorities at the University of Queensland when he published material in a newsletter deemed by them to be offensive; in fact, the somewhat unconventional sexual views of a Sydney Andersonian psychologist.³⁴ Ward celebrated the anti-authoritarianism of the nomadic tribe of bushmen but was regarded by at least some of the staff at UNE as pretty autocratic himself.³⁵ McQueen enjoyed bucking authority, including even that of his patron, Manning Clark, at the ANU in the 1970s.³⁶

A young historian writing his first major published work had issued a bold challenge. Ward was predictably unamused, but the grounds of his main criticism were especially revealing of both his

³¹ H. McQueen, 'Convicts and Rebels', *Labour History*, No. 15, November 1968, p. 24.

³² D. Aitkin, in Bridge (ed.), *Russel Ward*, p. 27; N. Pratt, 'Primer for the revolution', clipping in McQueen Papers, n.d. [November 1970] NLA MS 4809, Box 2, Folder 16.

³³ D. Beer, *A History of History: The Department of History at the University of New England University College and the University of New England, 1938-1997*, Armidale (NSW), 1998, p. 20.

³⁴ *Honi Soit*, 27 March 1962, p. 1; 31 July 1962, pp. 1, 3; J. Franklin, *Corrupting the Youth: A History of Philosophy in Australia*, Sydney, 2003, Ch. 5; C. Wallace, *Greer: untamed shrew*, Sydney, 1997, pp. 95-6; M. I. Thomis, *A Place of Light & Learning: The University of Queensland's First Seventy-five Years*, St. Lucia (Qld), 1985, pp. 303-4, 306. I'm also indebted to Humphrey McQueen for information on this point.

³⁵ G. Quaife, in Bridge (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 11.

³⁶ S. G. Foster and M. M. Varghese, *The Making of the Australian National University*, St Leonards (NSW), 1996, pp. 211-2.

personality and understanding of academic discourse, largely setting the terms for the bitter exchanges in the years ahead. Most historians, he said, would agree with the 'general drift' of McQueen's article 'while deploring its incidental displays of rudeness'. A 'sense of group solidarity with one's fellow historians', Ward believed, 'should help us to disagree without rancour and to debate without sneering'.³⁷

Ward here posited the existence of a corporate identity for historians, a sense of solidarity that should lead them to refrain from personal attacks on one another. Historians comprise a 'public' who deliberate on the accumulated evidence, exchange views and thereby arrive at the most truthful account of the past. Disagreement is not in itself unhealthy, but rancour has no place because it substitutes passion and irrationality for understanding and reason. As Ward remarked in his original *Overland* review of *A New Britannia*, 'Rational debate is impossible with one who has taken to himself the divine attribute of omniscience'.³⁸ Ward had himself been a victim of Cold War passions when deprived of appointment to the New South Wales University of Technology because of his political radicalism and past membership of the Communist Party. Perhaps he now recalled the kinds of personal attacks that M. H. Ellis, the conservative historian and publicist, had made on left-wing historians in the 1950s and 1960s and which culminated in his famous assault on the first volume of Manning Clark's *A History of Australia*, 'History Without Facts'.³⁹ Undoubtedly, Ward valued the civilised environment for historical enquiry that W. K. Hancock, notwithstanding Ellis's efforts, had tried to foster at the Australian National University after his arrival there as Director of the Research School of Social Sciences in the late 1950s – which included a place for left-wing historians and students such as Bob Gollan and Ian

³⁷ R. Ward, 'Convicts and Rebels: A Reply', *Labour History*, No. 16, May 1969, p. 58.

³⁸ R. Ward, 'Britannia Australis', *Overland*, No. 47, Autumn 1971, p. 48.

³⁹ A. Moore, "'History without facts': M. H. Ellis, Manning Clark and the origins of the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*", *Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society*, Vol. 85, Pt. 2, December 1999, pp. 71-84, and 'The "Historical Expert": M. H. Ellis and the Historiography of the Cold War', *Australian Historical Studies*, Vol. 31, No. 114, 2000, pp. 91-109. On Ward's problems in gaining an academic appointment, see S. Macintyre and A. Clark, *The History Wars*, Carlton (Vic), 2003, pp. 6-8.

Turner.⁴⁰ Ward assumed the existence of a set of rules by which debate should be conducted – rules that McQueen had broken.

That the exchange occurred in *Labour History*, of all places, underlined the sense of McQueen having breached an unwritten code of conduct. The journal had come into being in the early 1960s as a kind of united front of ex-Communists and Labor intellectuals who wished to provide a space in the academy for an account not only of the iceberg's tip, but 'the submerged bulk'⁴¹ of common folk who tended to disappear in mainstream history; and a forum where academics sympathetic to the labour movement and activists with or without formal academic qualifications could each contribute something to the pool of historical knowledge. The temptations of the ivory tower would be mitigated by the common endeavour of the activist and the worker, whose involvement was seen as essential if labour history were to fulfil a progressive social purpose, rather than simply degenerating into academic specialism. They arguably saw their collective mission as to uncover a past which would remind Australians that their affluence had not been created by Bob Menzies or Jack McEwen, but was rather the result of the battles and sacrifices endured by workers and activists over many generations.⁴²

Labour History was one manifestation of a post-1956 'New Left' – not to be confused with the later, more boisterous 'New Left' that emerged in the late 1960s in connection with anti-Vietnam War protest and the new social movements and of which McQueen was an eloquent spokesman. The debates of this first New Left occurred in a flurry of little magazines – *Outlook*, *Overland*, *Nation*, *Prospect* and *Dissent* – that emerged mainly in the late 1950s and early 1960s. These intellectuals were divided over many things, but united by a belief in free and rational debate to produce sound knowledge and progressive strategy, in contrast to the disastrous consequences of

⁴⁰ P. Love, 'Labour History Loses Another of its Founders', *Recorder*, No. 256, December 2006, pp. 1-2.

⁴¹ This evocative term comes from E. C. Fry, in 'Symposium: What is Labour History?', *Labour History*, No. 12, May 1967, p. 64.

⁴² Merritt, *op. cit.*, pp. 117-22. See also E. Fry, 'The Labour History Society (ASSLH): A Memoir of its First Twenty Years', *Labour History*, No. 77, November 1999, pp. 83-96; G. Patmore, *Australian Labour History*, Melbourne, pp. 6-7, 17.

following a party line handed down by an unaccountable authority – whether Communist Party or Catholic Church – assumed to possess a monopoly on wisdom.⁴³

Although Ward left the Party in 1949 – for personal reasons (see article by Drew Cottle in this issue) and earlier than many other intellectuals of his generation – he should be seen as part of this radical 'public' that emerged in the wake of the Soviet invasion of Hungary and Khrushchev's 'Secret Speech' denouncing Stalin at the Twentieth Party Congress. And while there is no reason to doubt Ward's commitment either to communism – during the decade he belonged to the Party – or to the Left in the longer term, there is a revealing letter in Stephen Murray-Smith's papers from the late 1970s that suggests McQueen might not have been far wide of the mark in questioning the revolutionary credentials of some members of the Old Left. Ward was responding to a comment that Murray-Smith had made in a magazine, to the effect that 'in the CP in those days we all thought of ourselves as future leaders of a Communist Australia'. Ward replied that he 'never at any time so thought of myself nor did I ever imagine that there was the remotest chance of Australia becoming a Communist (or socialist) country in my lifetime. I was astounded to read your comment. Before doing so I would naturally have added that all the Communists I knew – or nearly all – agreed with my prognosis'.⁴⁴ The kind of temperament that could produce such a remark was likely to jar with a self-proclaimed revolutionary such as McQueen prepared to talk openly about the inevitability – although not desirability – of revolutionary violence in the overthrow of Australian capitalism.⁴⁵

⁴³ For the first New Left, see A. Barcan, *The Socialist Left in Australia, 1949-1959*, Sydney, 1960; D. Bridges (ed.), *Helen Palmer's Outlook*, Sydney, 1982; K. S. Inglis (ed.), *Nation: The Life of an Independent Journal of Opinion 1958-1972*, Carlton (Vic), 1989; J. Jupp, 'Dissent then and now', *Dissent*, No. 2, Autumn/Winter 2000, pp. 27-30; T. Irving and S. Scalmer, 'The Public Sphere and Party Change: Explaining the Modernisation of the Australian Labor Party in the 1960s', *Labour History Review*, Vol. 65, No. 2, Summer 2000, pp. 227-46, esp. p. 232; J. McLaren, 'Peace Wars: the 1959 ANZ Peace Congress', *Labour History*, No. 82, May 2002, pp. 97-108 and *Free Radicals of the Left in Postwar Melbourne*, Melbourne, 2003.

⁴⁴ Ward to S. Murray-Smith, 2 October 1977, Murray-Smith Papers, SLV MS 8272 Box 199/5-1.

⁴⁵ Pratt, 'Primer for the revolution'.

Ward remained of the Left, and shared many of the objectives of the younger radicals, such as an end to the Vietnam War. He invariably joined moratorium marches in Armidale.⁴⁶ But he was never prepared to engage as sympathetically with the New Left as, for instance, his friend Ian Turner. Indeed, Ward used the occasion of Turner's tragically premature death in 1978 to write to Murray-Smith that '[t]he heroes of the young New Left all lack his integrity & toughness'.⁴⁷ Ward's ambivalence about student radicalism was made clear enough in his history of twentieth-century Australia, *A Nation for a Continent* (1977), where he opined that 'the "youth revolt" ... did demonstrably accelerate the pace of reform, and in some respects of deterioration, within the existing social structure'.⁴⁸

But a larger part of McQueen's 'problem', from Ward's point of view, was that he had broken the rules of polite academic engagement. McQueen was like the new apprentice who had arrogantly flouted the rules of the guild the moment after he had walked through the workshop door. This was a very deliberate strategy on McQueen's part and reflected his hostility to the kind of community of historians assumed by Ward. In a press interview at the time of the book's publication, McQueen opined that '[t]he bourgeois academic operates on the gentility principle – that if you don't criticise anybody, they won't criticise you ... The idea of the university as a clash of ideas just isn't true'.⁴⁹ Yet McQueen also wished to make his way in academia, and an entry in his diary for 1970 shows him torn between the desire to avoid unnecessary conflict and his need, as a revolutionary socialist, to court it:

⁴⁶ A. McLure, in D. Beer (ed.), *A Serious Attempt to Change Society: the Socialist Action Movement and Student Radicalism at the University of New England, 1969-75*, Armidale (NSW), 1998, p. 152.

⁴⁷ Ward to S. and N. Murray-Smith, 28 December 1978, Murray-Smith Papers, SLV MS 8272 Box 199/5-1.

⁴⁸ R. Ward, *A Nation for a Continent: the history of Australia 1901-1975*, Richmond (Vic.), 1977, p. 383. McQueen produced a devastating review of this book for *Nation Review*, 9-15 February 1978, p. 16. 'Ward's book is so tedious that it is hard to believe he wrote it. ... Can ... Armidale isolation excuse Ward's extraordinarily large number of factual errors? No; especially when we recall what Gramsci and Braudel did in prison.'

⁴⁹ Pratt, 'Primer for the revolution'.

Met Sir Keith Hancock at ANL [National Library of Australia], introduced by Manning [Clark]. A small, neat man. Somewhat like an elf. Says 'Very Good' to everything. He & Manning talked about fishing in the mountains. Asked me if I went walking. No, I replied. No stamina in younger generation. Felt upset at prospect of violent attack on him. Decided not to review Attempting History. As day progressed felt more like doing it because this is the way they get you – a nice comfortable passivity. Bought Attempting History to work over.⁵⁰

Ward loathed McQueen's combative style. Indeed, in a letter to Stephen and Nita Murray-Smith, there are suggestions of the public school boy dismayed at the dirty tactics of one of his fellows on the playing field. For Ward, McQueen was an underarm bowler a decade ahead of the Chappells. It is worth quoting the letter at length for its revelation of the extent to which McQueen had penetrated Ward's skin:

I've been a bit preoccupied – surprisingly to myself – over McQueen's attack. He's such a nasty vicious bastard. My review, I think was addressed to an assessment of his book – its good qualities as well as its weaknesses. His 'reply' was concerned with nothing but pissing on me – rather than my book – or so I think & by the most appalling lies ...

I feel a little hurt too that Overland (in your absence of course) should have departed from normal protocol to give him a pissing-post to stand on. The normal drill, surely is (1) the review (2) the aggrieved author replies in space, place & size of print less prominent – certainly no more so – than the review had. (3) the reviewer has the right of reply – in a less prominent & lengthy position. (4) Editor notes "This correspondence/controversy is now closed.["]

In this case my review appeared among the others, the second last thing in the volume. McQ's reply has a

⁵⁰ H. McQueen, Diary, 1970, McQueen Papers, NLA MS 4809, Box 8.

quarter-page heading to itself & figures prominently in the first part of the volume as a feature article.

This – uncharacteristic, I hope – bellyaching will show how much I dislike Mc.Q's dishonest & dirty way of arguing.⁵¹

Despite the pettiness of this letter, it underlines the extent to which the growing rancour between McQueen and Ward was more about how to behave as a left-wing historian than the content of either *The Australian Legend* or *A New Britannia*.

The point should not be pushed too far. There *were* 'academic' and methodological issues at dispute between McQueen and Ward. Ward placed greater emphasis on the strength of Australia's collectivist ethos than McQueen, who presented capitalism and individualism as more influential in shaping the society.⁵² Ward also had a more benign view of Australian nationalism, although in the 1970s McQueen's Maoist politics would lead him to a version of radical nationalism that bore more than a passing resemblance to that of the Old Left Marxists. Ward, moreover, had not ignored racism in *The Australian Legend* and his other writing before 1970, but acknowledged even in his critical review of *A New Britannia* in *Overland* that McQueen had here alighted on a theme that historians had under-estimated at the expense of a proper understanding of the Australian past.⁵³ A full consideration of Ward's shifting treatment of race and racism is beyond the scope of this article, but it was really only in relation to this matter that he made any substantial concession to the *Legend's* critics.⁵⁴ Before McQueen's criticisms,

⁵¹ Ward to S. and N. Murray-Smith, 17 September 1971, Murray-Smith Papers, SLV MS 8272 Box 199/4-1.

⁵² While in defending *The Australian Legend* Ward was insistent that he was not writing about Australian society as a whole but about a particular national stereotype, his *Australia*, a general history aimed largely at the United States market, does point to significant differences between the individualism of the USA and the stronger collectivism of Australia. See R. Ward, *Australia*, Englewood Cliffs (US), 1965, esp. pp. 14-6. For Ward's most detailed defence of his original thesis, see R. Ward, 'The Australian Legend re-visited', *Historical Studies*, Vol. 18, No. 71, October 1978, pp. 171-90.

⁵³ Ward, 'Britannia Australis', p. 49.

⁵⁴ Ward, 'Australian Legend re-visited', pp. 178-9, 190.

Ward recognised racial prejudice as a component of the Legend, but held that it was essentially a product of the gold rushes of the 1850s and 'to an appreciable extent race prejudice was brought hither by the great influx of middle-class migrants'.⁵⁵ He even went so far as to suggest that goldfield racism might have been especially indebted to the American emigrant influence; alternatively, he associated it with '[t]he Anglo-Australian, or generalised British, strand of patriotic feeling' which 'was considerably strengthened' at this time.⁵⁶ He also celebrated the 'depreciation' of 'this particular part of our "frontier" heritage' since the Second World War.⁵⁷ No reader of Ward's writings of the late 1950s or early 1960s could have seriously imagined that their author regarded racism as integral to the Legend, and it is telling that it does not appear in the famous catalogue of attributes of the 'typical Australian' laid out in the opening pages of the book. Positive attributes of the Legend, such as its egalitarianism and anti-authoritarianism, were core-values; racism was not. As Ward remarked in 1961, the White Australia Policy 'and the racist illusions which supported it are inconsistent with the more fundamental components of our national legend that all men are equal and some are *not* more equal than others'.⁵⁸ Nevertheless, Ward's rather grudging later admission that he had been wrong to see racism as a legacy of the gold rushes looks something like the

⁵⁵ Ward, *Australian Legend*, pp. 129-33; R. Ward, "An Australian Legend", *Royal Australian Historical Society Journal and Proceedings*, Vol. 47, Pt. 5, 1961, p. 343. Oddly, although Ward did not ignore white brutality towards Aboriginal people in *The Australian Legend* (see, for instance, pp. 97-100, 130, 201-4) he appears not to have integrated his general consideration of 'race prejudice' with his discussion of this theme. They essentially run along parallel paths. Even more oddly, in his 1961 article focusing on the question of racism, he ignores Aboriginals almost entirely. But Ann Curthoys has explored the broader Australian tendency to treat the themes of anti-Aboriginal and anti-Asian racism separately, a 'strange dissonance' deeply embedded in the country's intellectual, political and historiographical cultures and founded on 'the history of separate discourses and distinct mechanisms of bureaucratic control'. See her 'An Uneasy Conversation: The Multicultural and the Indigenous', in J. Docker and G. Fischer (eds), *Race, Colour and Identity in Australia and New Zealand*, Sydney, 2000, pp. 21-36.

⁵⁶ Ward, "An Australian Legend", p. 342.

⁵⁷ Ward, *Australian Legend*, p. 256.

⁵⁸ Ward, "An Australian Legend", p. 349. See also his concluding remark (p. 350): 'it is incorrect to assert that such an exclusivist racial attitude was always, and necessarily, a part of the Australian ethos'.

famous, if ultimately unavailing, German strategic retreat to the Hindenburg Line of March 1917. While Ward moved racism closer to the heart of the Legend in the early 1970s, he acknowledged it in large part in order to avoid having to deal fully with its implications for the much-vaunted egalitarianism, anti-authoritarianism and mateship that he believed formed its very essence.⁵⁹

Nevertheless, the bitter rhetoric of the confrontation between McQueen and Ward partially obscured the extent of the intellectual territory they shared. Both were essentially Marxist revisionists who rejected the attempt to explain all phenomena by reference to a material 'base'; what McQueen called 'the leprous curse of economic determinism' and the 'non-human, economic approach'. For both Ward and McQueen, ideas were something more than mere 'cover' for economic or class interests, for they had the power to move people and nations. Both historians were, like E. P. Thompson, essentially 'humanist' or 'culturalist' Marxists, who wrote with a strong sense that 'real, living people were involved' in history.⁶⁰ Both to a great extent drew on literary evidence and memoirs; their methodology was mainly qualitative, not quantitative. Both, moreover, were former school-teachers with a gift for vivid prose and for presenting their ideas with force and clarity to an audience well beyond other historians and university history students. Indeed, it was this very aspiration that was arguably at the heart of their dispute, for it rendered their respective public performances as 'radical historian' all the more significant in their academic endeavour. A dispute in the pages of an academic journal between

⁵⁹ The change in Ward's views is indicated by his judgment in 1971 that racism 'was felt most passionately by radical-minded and working class people. It is almost invariably true that the more radical, the more democratic, the more nationalist, the more chock-full of "progressive" ideals an Australian of three generations ago was in all other respects, the more viciously racist he was likely to be'. See R. Ward, 'Home Thoughts from Abroad: Australia's Racist Image', *Meanjin*, Vol. 30, No. 2, June 1971, p. 155. For this point, see also Ward to S. Murray-Smith, 14 November 1971, Stephen Murray-Smith Papers, SLV MS 8272, Box 199/4-1. For a later perspective again, which underlines the limited and grudging nature of Ward's concessions to his critics, see R. Ward, *The Back Side of the Australian Legend*, Armidale (NSW), 1986.

⁶⁰ H. McQueen, 'The Great Depression in Australian Scholarship', *Old Mole*, No. 4, 20 July 1970, p. 7.

two specialists can become rancorous, but probably less so than a confrontation between two politically-committed intellectuals who believe that the hearts and minds of a larger public are at stake.⁶¹

McQueen was perceptively self-critical when, in a section of his Introduction written in September 1970, he called *A New Britannia* 'the last of the "old left" histories of Australia. At every point it remains encapsulated within the tradition it so violently denounces'.⁶² Indeed, McQueen expressed admiration for Ward's 'synthetic view of Australian society' in *The Australian Legend*,⁶³ an opinion he offered even more forcefully in 2004:

... the historical profession has suffered a loss of nerve in its scope and scale. No doctoral student today would be allowed to attempt the expanses of Russel Ward or Robin Gollan. More than ever, students are directed to topics that could hardly matter less in a tiny patch covering less than a decade. ... *Australian Historical Studies* escaped from politics as the view from Government House verandahs to slump into an antiquarianism masquerading as post-modern.⁶⁴

Perhaps it was this ambitious breadth of scope and perspective that most readily joins Ward and McQueen, and separates them from the dominant academic historical practice of our own times. It is there, for instance, in McQueen's early article on 'Convicts and Rebels', where he comments that the influence of most convicts 'survived only in the sub-culture of bushranging and crime, and reappeared in the Wren political machine in Victoria'. At a stroke, McQueen extends his vision from 1788 through to the mid-twentieth century and beyond. And in the article's conclusion, he sees the Irish sense of

⁶¹ In a personal communication with the author (1 November 2007), McQueen recalled A. J. P. Taylor and E. P. Thompson (of the famous Perry Anderson-Thompson debates in British Marxism) as his prose models. McQueen's debts to Taylor are especially clear in his famously acerbic book reviews. I have compared McQueen's *A New Britannia* to Taylor's *The Origins of the Second World War* (1961) in Bongiorno, 'Sergeant Humphrey', p. 35.

⁶² McQueen, *New Britannia*, p. 14.

⁶³ H. McQueen, 'Reply to Russel Ward', *Overland*, No. 48, Winter 1971, p. 24.

⁶⁴ McQueen, *New Britannia*, 4th ed., p. x.

outsider status as being manifested in anti-conscriptionism and the Democratic Labor Party – all, it should be recalled, in an article about convicts.⁶⁵ The claims are naturally contestable – indeed, in some cases unsustainable – but they reveal the same kind of breadth that we find in *The Australian Legend*, whose scope extends from convict Australia through the two world wars to Australian attitudes of the 1950s. More generally, the range of both Ward's and McQueen's intellectual interests – as reflected in their writing – is extremely broad. Ward's 1949 University of Adelaide Masters thesis was on the poetry of Eliot, Pound and Auden and, in addition to his large and diverse body of writing on Australian history, culture, literature and folklore, he would also translate and publish two book-length accounts of late-nineteenth-century Australia produced by visiting Frenchmen.⁶⁶ Meanwhile, McQueen's writing has extended over art, literature, music, economics and the media, and well beyond Australian themes. He has written on Japan, and recently produced a history of Coca-Cola.⁶⁷

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In 1970 McQueen established a kind of *modus operandi* for the new histories of the 1970s and beyond. It is true that before this time some historians and social commentators – Manning Clark, Allan Martin and Peter Coleman – had constructed some of their writing as a critique of a vaguely defined radical-nationalist tradition, although not for the most part specifically of Ward's book.⁶⁸ But it

⁶⁵ McQueen, 'Convicts and Rebels', pp. 24, 30.

⁶⁶ For a select bibliography of Ward's writings, see Bridge (ed.), *op. cit.*, pp. 29-32.

⁶⁷ The range of McQueen's intellectual interests and writings is indicated on his website <home.alphalink.com.au/~loge27/> accessed 12 January 2008.

⁶⁸ P. Coleman, 'Introduction: The New Australia', in Coleman (ed.), *Australian Civilization: A Symposium*, Melbourne, 1962, p. 2. See also, in the same collection, M. Harris, 'Morals and Manners', p. 50. Clark's famous critique of the radical-nationalist tradition, delivered in 1954, preceded the publication of *The Australian Legend*. See 'Rewriting Australian History', in Manning Clark, *Occasional Speeches and Writings*, Melbourne, 1980, pp. 3-19. Ward was in attendance and found it 'an unforgettable, even an electrifying, experience'. See R. Ward, 'Well Ward ...?', in C. Bridge (ed.), *Manning Clark: Essays on his Place in History*, Carlton (Vic), 1994, p. 15. McQueen's *A New Britannia* began with an epigraph from this piece, and Clark provided McQueen's Foreword. J. Docker, *In a Critical Condition: Reading Australian Literature*, Ringwood (Vic), 1984, pp. 156-62, points to the intellectual continuities

was *A New Britannia* that showed a younger generation of historians how 'new history' might be 'performed', and popularised critique of *The Australian Legend* as almost an initiation ritual for any historian who believed they had something novel to contribute to the writing of Australian history. A significant measure of the worth of a particular field of study became what light it might shed on the Legend. So Graeme Davison's pioneering work in urban history during the 1970s was, to some extent, built on a critique of Ward, most obviously in Davison's suggestion that the Legend was not so much a product of the frontier as an escapist fantasy constructed by young writers and artists living in the boarding-house district of inner-Sydney.⁶⁹ Feminist historians such as Miriam Dixson, Marilyn Lake and, to a lesser extent, Ann Curthoys, also helped build the fields of women's history and then gender history on a re-reading of the Legend.⁷⁰ They largely accepted the existence of the national

between McQueen's New Left critique and the more conservative reading of radical nationalism developed by Clark, Coleman and others in the 1950s and 1960s. Allan Martin's gentle critique of what he saw as Whiggism in Australian history is contained in an address delivered at a conference in 1962 and widely circulated in photocopied, but unpublished, form for many years. (A copy came into my possession in the early 1990s, by which time it had well and truly entered the history of ideas.) Although Martin questioned the overall significance for Australian history of the kind of rural working-class nationalism emphasised by Ward (without criticising Ward or *The Australian Legend* directly), he was generally complimentary about his achievement and paid much greater attention to Robin Gollan's work, for Martin's preoccupations were mainly with political history. Martin and Ward were fellow-students at the Australian National University in the 1950s. See A. W. Martin, 'The "Whig" View of Australian History: A Document', in *The 'Whig' View of Australian History and Other Essays*, in J. R. Nethercote (ed.), Carlton (Vic), 2007, pp. 1-27. More critical of Ward specifically were J. M. Ward, 'Historiography', in A. L. McLeod (ed.), *The Pattern of Australian Culture*, Ithaca (US), 1963, pp. 241-2 and M. Roe, 'The Australian Legend', *Meanjin Quarterly*, Vol. 21, No. 3, September 1962, pp. 363-6, to which Ward replied (pp. 366-9).

⁶⁹ G. Davison, 'Sydney and the Bush: an urban context for the Australian Legend', *Historical Studies*, Vol. 18, No. 71, October 1978, pp. 191-209. For a less convincing critique from the view of an urban historian, see R. Lawson, 'The Bush Ethos and Brisbane in the 1890's', *Historical Studies*, Vol. 15, No. 58, April 1972, pp. 276-83.

⁷⁰ M. Dixson, *The Real Matilda: Woman and Identity in Australia 1788-1975*, Ringwood (Vic), 1976, pp. 24, 58-9, 75, 89, 155, 183, 196-7; A. Curthoys, 'Historiography and Women's Liberation', *Arena*, No. 22, 1970, pp. 137-8; M. Lake, 'The Politics of Respectability: Identifying the Masculinist Context', *Historical Studies*, Vol. 22, No. 86, 1986, pp. 116-31 and M. Lake, 'Frontier Feminism and the Marauding White Man', *Journal of Australian Studies*, No. 49, 1996, pp. 12-20.

stereotype defined by Ward, but explored the implications of his 'typical Australian' – the nomadic bushman – for the role of women, and relations between men and women, in Australian society. As Curthoys commented of feminist historians in her Russel Ward Annual Lecture in 1992, 'While we might undertake a feminist analysis of the gendered character of debate about conceptions of the nation, we have not yet been able to redefine what national identity might mean'. In Dixon's case, this was all especially ironic because she was Ward's colleague at UNE, and he had worked hard, though unsuccessfully, to block her effort to establish the teaching of women's history.⁷¹ In the field of race relations, Henry Reynolds was 'deeply influenced by Ward's book', because of its failure to recognise the role played by Aboriginal people in frontier life. 'How', asked Reynolds, 'did a fine, creative historian like Russel Ward not see, not notice the pistols nonchalantly thrust through the belt of his noble frontiersman, the carbine slung across the shoulder, the abundant ammunition, the bloodstained hands?'.⁷² And the trend continued into the 1990s and beyond, with scholars working in the burgeoning field of gay history taking up and extending Ward's brave suggestion, in a 1950s context, that the mateship of the noble bushman was 'a sublimated homosexual relationship' (see also the article by Featherstone in this Volume).⁷³

As each new field of Australian history opened up, it seemed, Ward's *Legend* was a brooding presence, inviting – indeed, demanding – that the scholar explain where they stood in relation to the *Legend's* towering presence. It would be hard to imagine a more telling tribute to the importance of a single work of history, or of the scholar who produced it.

⁷¹ Curthoys, *Australian Legends*, p. 13; Beer, *op. cit.*, p. 23; M. Jordan, *A Spirit of True Learning: The Jubilee History of the University of New England*, Sydney, 2004, p. 102.

⁷² H. Reynolds, *Why Weren't We Told? A personal search for the truth about our history*, Ringwood (Vic), 1999, pp. 128, 131-2.

⁷³ Ward, *Australian Legend*, p. 100. See, for example, C. Moore, 'The Frontier Makes Strange Bedfellows: Masculinity, Mateship and Homosexuality in Colonial Queensland', in G. Wotherspoon, (ed.), *Gay and Lesbian Perspectives III: essays in Australian culture*, Sydney, 1996, pp. 17-44, and *Sunshine and Rainbows: The Development of Gay and Lesbian Culture in Queensland*, St. Lucia (Qld), 2001; and J. Rickard, 'Sentimental Blokes', *Meanjin*, Vol. 66, No. 1, 2007, pp. 38-46.