

CHAPTER ONE

Workers, Racism and the RSL: a review of the literature

Dislike of foreigners [was a] national working-class characteristic.

Ray Markey¹

The White Australia Policy ... can be considered a justifiable attempt to protect the economic livelihood of our country, but its racist xenophobic undertones are no longer acceptable.

Ian Cambridge, then Joint National Secretary
Australian Workers' Union²

[T]he White Australia policy was a victory neither of nor for the labour movement.

Verity Burgmann³

Introduction

In Australian labour historiography, racism has all too often been treated as an inevitable feature of working class politics. This approach has marginalised the role of anti-racist activists within the labour movement, and even the anti-racist propaganda of the Communist Party of Australia (CPA) is credited with having only a marginal impact on the 'race question'. This chapter examines the ways in which historians have attempted to explain 'working class racism'. It begins with those who have emphasised competitive employment relations and/or 'natural' ethnic rivalries as the foundations of racial tension. While the survey is not exhaustive, it does incorporate work from those authors who, it is argued, best represent three important 'strands' of argument that are prominent in the literature on Australian racism – the contention that proximity

¹ R. Markey, 'Australia' in Marcel van der Linden and Jürgen Rojahn (eds), *The Formations of Labour Movements 1870-1914*, E. J. Brill, New York, 1990, pp. 580-1.

² Foreword to M. Hearn and H. Knowles, *One Big Union: A History of the Australian Workers Union 1886-1994*, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 1996, p. ix.

³ V. Burgmann, 'Capital and Labour' in A. Curthoys and A. Markus (eds), *Who are our Enemies? Racism and the Working Class in Australia*, Hale and Iremonger, Neutral Bay, 1978, p. 21.

necessarily breeds contempt among people of different ethnic backgrounds, the widespread acceptance that workers are ‘natural’ supporters of exclusion because of competition for jobs, and the notion that, for the first half of the twentieth century at least, racism was a virtually unchallenged ideology. The focus will then shift to Verity Burgmann’s rebuttal of these arguments which is based on the premise that racism, as a hegemonic ideology, must be a ruling class, not working class, initiative. To extend this analysis, this study examines the RSL as an active perpetrator of the conservative case for non-British immigration restriction. While the RSL’s commitment to the White Australia policy has been widely recognised, a review of the literature pertaining to this influential organisation demonstrates that its role in spreading racist ideology among working people has never been adequately analysed.

Employment competition and proximity: no way out for workers

As noted in the introduction to this study, Myra Willard’s highly contradictory account of the development of the White Australia policy argued that preserving the ‘British’ character of the new Australian nation was the most vital preoccupation of the first Federal legislators. She invoked the words of Alfred Deakin to illustrate the widely-held view that ‘[n]o motive power operated more universally ... in dissolving the technical and arbitrary political divisions which previously separated us than the desire that we should be one people ... without the admixture of other races.’⁴ While Deakin had insisted that there was cross-class support for non-British immigration restriction, Willard sought to ‘whitewash’ the first Federal Parliament of impure motives for instituting a racially discriminatory immigration policy by assigning blame for its ‘indefensible’ aspects to the working class. She portrayed ‘worker agitation’ as motivated by base monetary concerns, coupled with ignorant and uncouth suspicions regarding the dangers of proximity with purported savages. With little qualification, Willard stated that ‘[i]t was the least educated section of the people that at this time felt most keenly on the Chinese question.’⁵ In her view, working class racism was spiteful and uncouth while the more educated racists could spout ‘higher’ and more ‘logical’ reasons for exclusion. In this

⁴ M. Willard, *History of the White Australia Policy to 1920*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, 1974 (first published 1923), p. 119.

vein, Willard could disingenuously suggest that '[t]hough the public agitation against [non-British] immigration was carried on mainly by the labouring classes, the conviction that it should be restricted was much more widespread'.⁶

Willard noted the role of men like Henry Parkes who emphasised the industrial advantages that would be gained from the exclusion of 'cheap labour' from Asia, without mentioning that such men were not conspicuous in their support for high living standards in any other context. Indeed, politicians of the first Commonwealth parliament were 'practically unanimous' in their decision to restrict non-white immigration; all shades of political opinion were represented in the vote to enact the legislation – conservative, liberal and radical.⁷ As Willard put it:

Though the leaders of the people admitted the cogency of the industrial reason for the exclusion of Asiatics of the coolie classes, one and all, including the leaders of this party, believed that the higher social and political grounds for their policy were more conclusive than those of labour.⁸

Ironically, because of her view that the pursuit of racial purity was a noble ideal and a national necessity, Willard did not assign credit for this 'historic achievement' to the nascent Labor Party. In her view 'the policy was complete before the Political Labour Party had in any part of Australia been given the reins of authority'.⁹

While Willard lauded Australia as a highly democratic country with government policy clearly forming an expression of 'the will of the people', she defended Federal parliamentarians for espousing nationalistic reasons for the adoption of immigration restriction.¹⁰ The racism inherent in the exclusionary legislation was regrettable, argued Willard, but future generations would appreciate the benefits that such restrictions would bestow – the preservation of Australia's British character and the promotion of racial unity, and hence, national unity. She identified a new local nationalism that complemented, and even began to supersede, the notion of Australia as an antipodean,

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 53-54, 57-58, 120, 199-200.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 203.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 203.

but distinctly British, outpost.¹¹ Although not offending Britain's treaty partners was an important concern,¹² the fate of exclusionary legislation against Asian and African nationals was never in doubt – only the terms of its administration were debated.

Willard lamented that the history of the White Australia policy had essentially been a negative one, but looked forward to a time when the positive sides of the policy would become apparent. She was clearly in sympathy with anti-slavery agitator, Sir William Molesworth, who, in 1838, argued that Australia would be spared from disruptions to social cohesion if a proposal to allow Indian immigration was avoided, as this would only create 'a class separated by race and habits from the rest of the labouring population ... Indian immigration would only curse Australia with the social and political difficulties of a racial problem'.¹³ Willard linked the demands for immigration restriction with the outbursts of violence on the goldfields and argued that such evils could be prevented if the tide of immigration was stemmed. Displaying all the prejudices for which she damned the working class, Willard claimed that Asians brought disease, were unfitted for democracy, were too close for comfort and, paradoxically, would not assimilate. They congregated in communities of their own, uninfluenced by the ideas and customs of the people amongst whom they settled. They would remain, in her view, forever alien.¹⁴

Despite its inconsistencies, Willard's argument regarding working class support for a racially discriminatory immigration policy has achieved the aura of holy writ, handed down from generation to generation without serious challenge. Indeed, what is striking about the historiography on Australian racism is the degree to which many of the authors share Willard's obvious sympathy for the 'higher ideals' that prompted the first Federal legislators to institute immigration restriction. Perhaps it is this underlying attitude, more than anything else, which has led previous historians to overlook challenges to the hegemonic ideal of limiting 'racial admixture'. In the influential book, *The Peopling of Australia*, Professor K. H. Bailey argued that immigration restriction

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. xi, 88-9.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 189.

¹² Deakin argued that Japan was one of the most civilised nations and that, when Australia went about excluding its nationals, it must do so politely. *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, 1st session, 1901, p. 4812.

¹³ Willard, *History of the White Australia Policy*, pp. 6-7.

had not been instituted as the result of racial or political ideas, but from practical experience.

Use has been made of the “Nordic race” idea, and of the idea that political democracy requires a population of homogeneous political sentiment and outlook; but these ideas belong to the intelligentsia. In the popular mind, which expresses itself more crudely and directly, the policy is based on fear of economic competition and on race feeling.¹⁵

Even amid the political turbulence of the late 1960s, A. C. Palfreeman was able to write that the insistence on racial ‘purity’ was ‘a fundamental objective of the Australian people’ and that ‘the administrators have had to implement popular demand as best they could’.¹⁶ A few years later, he reiterated this view, claiming that immigration restriction was ‘the government’s *response* to a general consensus – to keep Australia white and racially homogeneous’. In this regard, he argued, it was ‘a fixed, unquestioned objective of Australian society’.¹⁷

A. T. Yarwood also wrote in the same vein as Willard, as if the formation of the Immigration Reform Group in the early 1960s had inspired the first significant debate about racially-based exclusion since the passing of the *Immigration Restriction Act (1901)*.¹⁸ In the introduction to his 1968 compendium of documents pertaining to Australian ‘race relations’, Yarwood speculated on a range of probable grounds for the establishment of the White Australia policy, including issues such as fears of the ‘unfamiliar and the bizarre’, a desire for racial purity, the economic motives of a labour movement anxious to preserve high living standards, isolation from Britain, male sexual jealousy and the hardening of racial ideology in the late nineteenth century. Like Willard, he was quick to distance his position from the blatant xenophobia of the uneducated and narrow-minded, but felt that undoubted benefits accrued to all Australian people as a result of immigration restriction. Indeed, Yarwood was ‘hard

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 35-37, 61, 190, 193, 200.

¹⁵ K. H. Bailey, ‘Public Opinion and Population’ in P. D. Phillips (ed), *The Peopling of Australia*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1933, p. 72.

¹⁶ A. C. Palfreeman, *The Administration of the White Australia Policy*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1967, p. 136.

¹⁷ A. C. Palfreeman, ‘The White Australia Policy’ in F. S. Stevens (ed), *Racism: The Australian Experience, A Study of Race Prejudice in Australia*, vol. 1, Sydney, 1971, p. 164.

¹⁸ See N. Viviani (ed), *The Abolition of the White Australia Policy: The Immigration Reform Group Revisited*, Centre for the Study of Australia-Asia Relations, Griffith University, Nathan, 1992.

pressed to refute the basic premises of the more enlightened Australian statesmen of the nineteenth century'.¹⁹

In 1970, Humphrey McQueen laid bare the racist threads that linked radical nationalist politics with imperialist jingoism. While his book was a watershed for the writing of Australian history and made it impossible for credible scholarship to deny Australia's racist past, *A New Britannia* centred explicitly on plebeian racism with an, as yet, unfulfilled promise that a study of ruling class racism would follow. In fact, he introduced this book with an admission that its major flaw was a failure to examine the influence of ruling class culture while describing the 'ideological subordination' of working people to that culture.²⁰ As it stands, his position regarding the *petit bourgeois* and racist nature of the Australian labour movement created the impression that the principal source of racial vilification was the working class. He, in effect, exaggerated the degree to which the lower classes embraced the ideology of independent proprietorship, promoting competitive, rather than solidaristic, impulses and, hence, allowing bourgeois hegemony to triumph. In his words, high living standards for Australian workers depended on the elimination of the threat of low-waged migrants and that 'optimists became nationalists via racism'.²¹

A few years later, in 1974, C. A. Price wrote that, when we consider the outpourings of racial stereotypes and vitriolic opposition to the admission of any non-white group, we must 'bear in mind the processes of mob psychology'.²² His warning was not, however, directed at the mobs from Colonial or Federal Parliaments or the Melbourne Club. In Price's view, it was working class agitation that provided the main impetus towards racist exclusion. He did make an occasional disclaimer that the working class clamour surrounding immigration policy could not 'explain the whole story', listing other groups that played a role in fomenting racial tension. He even puzzled over the relationship between some well-educated professional men, 'usually associated with the higher official or wealthy business sections of society', who were prone to using 'invective and vituperation', but concluded that this phenomenon was

¹⁹ A. T. Yarwood, *Attitudes to Non-European Immigration*, Cassell, Stanmore, 1980, pp. 1-2.

²⁰ H. McQueen, *A New Britannia*, Penguin, Ringwood, 1970, p. 12.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

beyond the scope of his book!²³ Unable to satisfactorily explain why different sections of the ruling class could have diametrically opposing positions on non-European immigration, Price assigned the question to the ‘too hard basket’ and determined that class analysis had little role to play in any understanding of ethnic tension. Echoing Willard’s position, he reserved ‘higher’ motives for the educated elite who supported a White Australia, apportioning blame for the more crude and base motives behind exclusion to the uneducated labouring masses. For him, it was ‘unquestionable’ that working class clamour had forced some politicians ‘reluctantly to toe the anti-Chinese line and support proposals for restrictive and discriminative legislation’.²⁴

Radical members of the New Left adopted a variation on this theme. In the mid-1980s, Connell and Irving argued that the issue of working class living standards united the labour movement with liberal reformers like H. B. Higgins and Alfred Deakin. They wrote:

By early in the [twentieth] century ... the labour movement and liberal reformists had made so obvious their opposition, on racist grounds, to cheap contract labour that it was very difficult for employers to indenture even Southern Europeans without being accused of damaging White Australia.²⁵

Likewise, Andrew Markus argued that it was ‘the people’ who successfully put forward demands for immigration restriction, demands that legislators could ignore only at their peril. His view was that politicians only instituted exclusionary legislation in order to kowtow to public opinion, referring to their decisions as a ‘courting of the constituents’.²⁶

Nor, according to Frank Farrell, was the labour movement particularly troubled by the question of the White Australia policy. Farrell claimed that it was not possible for the Left to protest against White Australia in anything other than muted tones because

²² C. A. Price, *The Great White Walls Are Built: Restrictive Immigration to North America and Australasia 1836-1888*, Australian National University Press, Canberra, 1974, p. 4.

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 114-115.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 226.

²⁵ R. W. Connell and T. H. Irving, *Class Structure in Australian History*, Longman Cheshire, Melbourne, 1980, p. 130.

the policy was so obviously successful in protecting workers' living standards. He argued that non-British immigration restriction was a necessity 'obvious even to members of the socialist sects', that the maintenance of Australian workers' living standards could only be based on social homogeneity, and that the policy's aims in both these regards had clearly been accomplished. In his words:

It was a tacit admission that the living standards of the Australian workers were considerably above the subsistence level of the Asians, and that Australians had very much more to lose than their chains when it came to questions of applying internationalism to the basic life circumstances of labour.²⁷

Such a position contradicted some of Farrell's own evidence. He demonstrated that it was within the labour movement that the effects of racism on the social, political, industrial and moral life of working class institutions were debated and the contradictions aired. Without doubt, labour movement leaders propagated racist ideas and working class people espoused them. However, this did not prevent solidarity from being a recurrent question during working class campaigns. Nor did it preclude the prospect of success, albeit temporary, for those arguing for an internationalist perspective. As Farrell detailed, the influence of IWW and CPA activists who argued against racism, the debates surrounding the Australian Council of Trade Unions' (ACTU) affiliation with the Pan-Pacific Trade Union Movement (PPTUM), the presence of migrant workers within Australian trade unions, support campaigns for workers' struggles in other countries – all these aspects of Australian labour movement history show that support for racist policies did not pass uncontested.²⁸ For the employing class, however, racism often proved to be a useful tool and it is Farrell who suggested that, while the labour movement struggled with the question of racism, the employing class was not similarly troubled. He detailed the way in which both parties attempted to portray themselves as the most effective defenders of the White Australia policy and argued that, 'in conservative propaganda even the slightest hint of criticism

²⁶ A. Markus, *Fear and Hatred: Purifying Australia and California 1850-1901*, Hale and Iremonger, Sydney, 1979, p. xvi, 43.

²⁷ F. Farrell, *International Socialism and Australian Labour*, Hale and Iremonger, Sydney, 1981, p. 16.

²⁸ See also V. G. Childe, *How Labour Governs*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1964, p. 139; S. Macintyre, *The Reds: The Communist Party of Australia from origins to illegality*, Allen and Unwin, St Leonards, 1998, p. 112; P. Mackie with E. Vassilieff, *Mount Isa: The Story of a Dispute*, Hudson,

of the White Australia policy by Marxists in the labour movement was seized on and paraded before the electorate as proof of the ALP's equivocation on the issue'.²⁹ Farrell's work also detailed the lengths to which the Bruce-Page Government went to not only prevent overseas unionists gaining entry to Australia for Pan-Pacific conferences, but also its refusal to issue passports to Australian trade unionists wishing to travel to China on trade union business.³⁰

Of late, the debates engendered by such influential works as McQueen's *A New Britannia*, Curthoys and Markus' *Who are our Enemies*, Markus' *Fear and Hatred* and the collection of articles now known as the Markus/Burgmann debate have languished unresolved, leaving open the possibility of theoretical reverses in this area. A relatively recent analysis of the White Australia policy by Sean Brawley took on all the trappings of Myra Willard's study, published more than seventy years earlier.³¹ In his book, Brawley argued that politicians viewed opposition to immigration restriction as electoral suicide and only reluctantly acquiesced to its implementation to avert the wrath of predominantly working class electorates. He fully concurred with the views of arch-conservative, John Latham, that no government would remain in office 'if it tampered with White Australia'.³² Indeed, almost seventy years after the publication of Hancock's view that the White Australia policy was universally supported, Brawley maintained that the more research he undertook, 'the more Hancock's maxim seemed to be vindicated'.³³ Brawley's writings are filled with all-encompassing references to 'most Australians' or simply 'Australians'. For example, we are glibly told that, '[p]rior to the Pacific War most North Americans and Australasians saw Asia very much as a whole.'³⁴ One wonders what 'the Japanese', demonised around Pacific Rim countries for defeating a 'white' nation in battle, would make of this riveting insight!³⁵ To leave

Hawthorn, 1989; R. Lockwood, *Black Armada: Australia and the struggle for Indonesian independence 1942-49*, Hale and Iremonger, Sydney, 1982.

²⁹ F. Farrell, *International Socialism and Australian Labour*, pp. 88-89.

³⁰ F. Farrell, 'The Pan-Pacific trade union movement and Australian labour, 1921-1932', *Historical Studies*, vol. 17, no. 69, 1977, p. 450.

³¹ S. Brawley, *The White Peril: Foreign Relations and Asian Immigration to Australasia and North America 1919-78*, University of New South Wales Press, Sydney, 1995.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 16.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 174

³⁵ In 1905, Japan won a war against Russia. This event caused a dramatic turn-around in the attitudes of 'white' nations to the rapidly modernising country. Previously perceived as 'civilised', Japan was now

his picture of unanimous support for the White Australia policy unsullied, Brawley disregarded the labour movement debate surrounding support for the PPTUM. He simply stated that the ACTU disaffiliated from the PPTUM 'rather than be forced to support non-discriminatory immigration policies'. The question of why it affiliated in the first place is left hanging. Equally unconvincingly, Brawley wrote that 'the American union movement was concerned by the current of immigration', a statement supported by a single piece of evidence – that workers at a large packing centre in Omaha, Nebraska, resolved to call for immigration restrictions.³⁶ Using mainstream newspaper editorials – hardly a reliable measure of public, let alone working class, opinion – and resolutions from non-labour movement organisations such as the Asian Exclusion League, the Canadian Bible Society and the Army and Navy Veterans of Canada, his argument for working class 'culpability' regarding racism was not based on firm foundations.³⁷

In their book, *A Divided Working Class*, Quinlan and Lever-Tracy provided important examples of multi-ethnic solidarity in the post-Second World War period.³⁸ However, much of their analysis centres on the degree to which arbitration protected workers from the divisive effects of immigration by ensuring that most workers, locals and migrants alike, were paid award wages. In other words, Australian workers might well have resorted to greater levels of racism to protect their conditions, but compulsory arbitration made such a response redundant.³⁹ As the case study chapters in this thesis will show, this conclusion does not explain the situation in the mining industry where the impact of contract labour was considerable. Payment rates were established underground between the foreman and the workers involved, meaning that competition for employment and racial divisions among and between mining teams potentially affected the rate agreed for the job. In 1999, Julia Martinez also provided a sophisticated treatment of inter-ethnic working class solidarity in Darwin between 1911-37, but in a classic example of the entrenched link between White Australia and the labour

portrayed in the press as a dangerous military threat. P. Griffiths, 'Australian Perceptions of Japan: A History of a Racist Phobia', *Socialist Review*, issue 3, Summer 1990.

³⁶ Brawley, *The White Peril*, p. 57.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 102-3, 151, 153, 195.

³⁸ C. Lever-Tracy and M. Quinlan, *A Divided Working Class: Ethnic Segmentation and Industrial Conflict in Australia*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1988.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 307-8.

movement, even she could sweepingly state that, '[u]nion racism was largely responsible for the implementation of the *Immigration Restriction Act* of 1901.'⁴⁰

In the early 1990s, Jock Collins remarked that Australia's transition from an overwhelming state of 'Britishness' to one of enormous ethnic diversity took place 'without serious social turmoil' and that this happy state of affairs:

has not been because of an enlightened government, public, or trade union movement, nor because Australia is a 'lucky country' ... Australia has managed to avoid serious racial conflict directed towards migrants more by default than by design.⁴¹

In this view, history is simply a collection of accidental and unrelated events, where the role of the labour movement in the struggle against racism is little more than happenstance. Historical explanation is limited to contingency and there is little point in trying to establish patterns that might connect various events. Even if we reject this version of what Alex Callinicos and others have so eloquently called 'the cock-up version of history',⁴² neither can our ability to understand the dynamics of racism be reliant upon slow, patient 'fact-mountaining',⁴³ until the right balance is struck. As Justina Williams wrote so pertinently of such histories, 'Masses of facts are shorn of their meaning without the mainspring of motivation – opposing class interests.'⁴⁴

If lack of attention to such interests has halted analytical progress on racism, contemporary debates have been responsible for analytical reversals. Such was the case throughout much of the 1980s when Geoffrey Blainey spoke sanguinely, and with increasing success, about the White Australia policy, arguing that Australia would not remain a land of perceived racial tolerance if high levels of Asian immigration were maintained.⁴⁵ Blainey, like Willard before him, was yet another middle class academic

⁴⁰ J. Martinez, 'Questioning White Australia: Unionism and 'Coloured' Labour, 1911-37', *Labour History*, no. 76, 1999, p. 1.

⁴¹ J. Collins, *Migrant Hands in a Distant Land*, Pluto, Leichhardt, 1991, p. 15.

⁴² Notes taken by author from A. Callinicos, History from Below, paper presented to Socialist Workers Party's Marxism conference, London, 1997.

⁴³ See Dunlop's discussion of Julian Huxley's view that 'Mountains of facts have been piled upon the plains of human ignorance', J. T. Dunlop, *Industrial Relations Systems*, Henry Holt and Company, New York, 1958, p. vi.

⁴⁴ J. Williams, *The First Furrow*, Lone Hand Press, Willagee, 1976, p. 2.

⁴⁵ See, for instance, *The Blainey View*, Macmillan, Melbourne, 1982.

who claimed to speak for ‘ordinary Australians’ while making crudely racist comments about the superiority of Anglo-Australian culture in sophisticated language. At the time, his outbursts were criticised by Verity Burgmann and Andrew Markus, although Markus has also played the ‘numbers game’ on occasion, suggesting that the level of racism in a given region corresponds to the level of immigration.⁴⁶ In his influential book, *Fear and Hatred*, Markus made a great deal over the number of Chinese immigrants being crucial to the amount of racist hysteria and suggested that their proximity to Europeans on the goldfields inspired efforts to exclude them.⁴⁷

As Burgmann pointed out, Markus’s original focus on immigration numbers, however unintentionally, reflected Blainey’s position when he wrote that the ‘Chinese came to be seen as undesirable immigrants, primarily as a result of the contact experience’.⁴⁸ This argument suggested, in a similar vein to Blainey, that it was the actions of the Chinese themselves that inspired the racist attacks against them. At one point, Markus wrote that ‘[t]his is not to say that all officials carried out their duties in accordance with the intention of the law – some officials became brutalised by constant dealings with an alien people.’⁴⁹ While he felt that initial reactions were not racist, economic competition on the fields led to a hardening of attitudes as time went by. Even so, Markus did provide delightful evidence to show that European miners helped Asian miners under threat of mob violence. He also related the experience of the Buckland field miners, who were invited to spend Chinese New Year with some of their Asian counterparts. Afterwards, one of those who attended the festivities admitted rather sheepishly that his opinions of the Chinese had changed since he and his friends had been so hospitably treated.⁵⁰ Surely these examples contradict Markus’ belief that proximity of different ‘races’ will arouse racism!

⁴⁶ See V. Burgmann, ‘Writing Racism Out of History’, *Arena*, no. 67, 1984; A. Markus, ‘Explaining the treatment of non-European immigrants in nineteenth century Australia’, *Labour History*, no. 48, 1985, p. 88.

⁴⁷ Markus, *Fear and Hatred*, pp. 2, 21, 23.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 240.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 25-6.

In 1973, Peter Corris reviewed the then recently published volumes of *Racism: The Australian Experience*.⁵¹ Although Corris, like Markus, accepted that racial tension was an inevitable outcome of the ‘contact experience’, he made an acute observation regarding the state of historical research into racism. If, he argued, most scholars agree that racism exists at all levels of Australian society, and in people of all political persuasions, surely a continuing focus on labour movement racism and radical nationalism will not allow a full understanding of ‘racialism as a whole’? In a valid critique of the scholarship then, and regrettably now, Corris asked, ‘What about the bosses?’⁵² Some years later, Burgmann began the process of answering Corris’ question and it is to her work that this discussion now turns.

Burgmann on ruling class hegemony: two steps forward, one step back

Burgmann’s work maintained that racism is an instance of a successful ruling class ideology, one that has accrued industrial benefits to employers by encouraging national rivalries among working people. She also concluded that an overwhelming focus on labour market competition had allowed some historians to ‘whitewash’ the labour movement from the stains of support for the White Australia policy. In her view, this exoneration was based on an assumption that non-European immigration represented a real threat to the wages and employment levels of local workers. As the quote from the AWU’s Ian Cambridge that opens this chapter suggests, it is still a commonly-held view. From Burgmann’s perspective, McQueen overcompensated for this ‘whitewashing’ by exaggerating the role of the labour movement in excluding non-European migrants, whereas, in her view, ‘the White Australia policy was a victory neither of nor for the labour movement’.⁵³

Although Burgmann’s work showed that ruling elites benefited from racism, in her portrayal, racist ideology appeared to have a life of its own – a self-perpetuating xenophobia that existed in the minds of all white Australians. In a valid attempt to

⁵¹ F. S. Stevens (ed), *Racism: the Australian Experience*, three volumes, Australia and New Zealand Book Company, Sydney, 1971.

⁵² P. Corris, ‘Racialism: The Australian Experience’, *Historical Studies*, vol. 15, no. 61, October 1973, pp. 750-9.

remove the self-justificatory element of the argument regarding labour market competition, she concluded that the only mitigating circumstance for the working class was that they were too politically naive to know that racism was not in their economic or political interest. As she put it: '[w]orking class racism exists, therefore, not because it expresses real working class interests but because of the all-pervasive influence of ruling class ideology.'⁵⁴ However, Burgmann's reliance on the notion of false consciousness, while providing a valid explanation for working class racism, presents an overly pessimistic view of the prospects for any labour movement challenge to racist politics. Burgmann's strongest censure fell on various small socialist groups at the turn of the century for taking pragmatic or nationalist responses to racism. While it is no doubt true that socialist organisations were not without influence at this time, it is questionable that any of them were ever large enough to win over working class allegiance from capitalist orthodoxy in any lasting fashion, even when they adopted a more consistent approach to working class solidarity.⁵⁵ By far the most coherent set of anti-racist politics came from the IWW, but its level of influence was limited and only small numbers were won over to an internationalist position. In place of the economic determinism inherent in the argument over labour market competition, Burgmann posited an ideologically deterministic formulation that workers were always too stupid to realise that the ruling class was pulling the racist wool over their eyes, despite the existence of a relative handful of socialists who had anti-racist views. In her view: 'the racism of the labour movement was blind and unthinking ... the majority of workers knew not what they were doing in declaiming against foreign workers'.⁵⁶

Despite Burgmann's obvious enthusiasm for the way in which the anti-racism of Tom Mann and the IWW gained a hearing among some groups of militant Australian workers, she regretted that there were no 'indigenous growths' of anti-racist

⁵³ Burgmann, 'Capital and Labour', p. 21.

⁵⁴ V. Burgmann, *Revolutionaries and Racists: Australian Socialism and the Problem of Racism, 1887-1917*, unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Australian National University, 1980, p. 6.

⁵⁵ The Boulder Local of the IWW, with its 117 members in June 1915, could hold meetings that would attract up to one thousand people. Crowds at meetings in Sydney in 1917 at the height of the state persecution of the organisation could not fit into a hall which seated 500 and overflow meetings of occasionally three times that number were held at another venue. V. Burgmann, *Revolutionary Industrial Unionism: The Industrial Workers of the World in Australia*, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 1995, p. 128.

⁵⁶ V. Burgmann, 'Racism, Socialism, and the Labour Movement, 1887-1917', *Labour History*, no. 47, 1984, p. 42.

sentiment.⁵⁷ While trade union militancy might have held the key to the development of a class consciousness that included workers of all countries, Burgmann felt that ALP nationalism had, to the end of her study at least, prevented the development of a home-grown variety of internationalism. As she put it:

The Australian working class appears to have been incapable of independently throwing up a vanguard bereft of the burden of nationalism. Working class consciousness was insufficiently developed, partly as a result of the strength of labour nationalism.⁵⁸

Since then, however, studies by Martinez, Small and Griffiths have attempted to reignite historical interest in the dynamics of Australian racism. As already mentioned, Martinez has described the constant intermingling of white and Asian workers in Port Darwin, thereby exposing serious flaws in the assumptions of Blainey, Markus and others that it is ‘contact’ between host workers and ‘alien’ newcomers that inevitably inspires racist responses the locals.⁵⁹ Small has re-examined the Clunes anti-Chinese riots of 1873, making a convincing case that anti-Chinese racism only flared when employers tried to use Chinese workers as strike breakers, that there were some attempts by white and Chinese workers to make common ground, and that it was only in the aftermath of the dispute that non-labour luminaries and opinion-leaders tried to portray it as a ‘racial’, rather than class, struggle.⁶⁰ For his part, Griffiths has examined the distinctly ruling class agitation for the White Australia policy in the 1870s and 1880s and, in the process, demonstrated that non-British immigration restriction was actively sought by newspaper editors, large urban and pastoralist employers, and colonial parliaments.⁶¹

The work of these historians suggests that there is no reason to follow the speculative path that Burgmann has taken more recently. In her latest book on the IWW, she claimed that the jingoistic response from workers to the outbreak of World War One

⁵⁷ Burgmann, *Revolutionaries and Racists*, p. 309.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

⁵⁹ J. Martinez, ‘Questioning White Australia’: Unionism and ‘Coloured’ Labour, 1911-37’, *Labour History*, no. 76, 1999.

⁶⁰ J. Small, ‘Reconsidering White Australia: class and racism in the 1873 Clunes riot’, Marxist Interventions website @ <http://www.anu.edu.au/polsci/marx/interventions/>, accessed 28 January 2003.

⁶¹ P. Griffiths, *The road to White Australia: Economics, politics and social control in the anti-Chinese laws of 1877-88*, unpublished manuscript in the possession of the author, 2002.

led ‘more sophisticated’ Marxist intellectuals, such as Lukàcs and Gramsci, to reject an assumption that nationalist and militarist ideas were solely products of the ruling elite. Forgetting the ruling class culpability that she herself had so forcefully insisted upon previously, she wrote:

All of them had to find some way of proceeding beyond the axioms of working-class gullibility and passivity; they had to find ways of explaining how these sentiments and attachments *were generated from within working class culture* [my emphasis].⁶²

These criticisms aside, much of Burgmann’s case is compelling but it would be fair to say that her line of reasoning has generally been ignored by most scholars of Australian history. Its ‘unfashionable’ use of class analysis, the sheer weight of the counterposing arguments regarding the working class stimulus behind racism, and the subsequent dearth of further research in the area of ‘race and class’, have all combined to relegate her important contribution to the periphery. As a way forward from this historical impasse, this study demonstrates that, in the interwar period, Australian workers did, of course, ‘declaim against foreign workers’, but Chapters Five and Seven show that they also found ways through the racist smokescreen to link arms with their migrant counterparts, an important corrective to the deterministic *and* pessimistic aspects of the existing historiography.

Little of this solidarity is evident in the literature on Kalgoorlie and Broken Hill. As the next section demonstrates, this body of work deviates little from the time-honoured tradition of blaming the workers, and even the victims, for the crime of racism.

Kalgoorlie – explanations of the 1934 race riots

Studies of Kalgoorlie have tended to focus on three race riots that occurred there in 1916, 1919 and 1934, but only Rolf Gerritsen and Patrick Bertola have attempted to

⁶² Burgmann, *Revolutionary Industrial Unionism*, p. 194.

integrate their findings within a wider analysis of Australian racism.⁶³ Nevertheless, the familiar themes of competition for jobs and ‘natural’ racial antipathy among working people also form the backbone of their analyses. In short, the Gerritsen and Bertola accounts of the 1934 Kalgoorlie race riots offer little variation from the familiar refrain of more generalist accounts that racist workers initiated the riots against southern Europeans in order to protect ‘British’ jobs.

In 1969, Rolf Gerritsen published the results of his search for the causes of the Kalgoorlie riots. While he repeated the common-sense claim that they were fuelled by labour market competition, Gerritsen advanced other contingent explanations for the tensions, such as conditions on the mines, accident rates and the prevalence of work-related disease. More debatable was his suggestion that the hot weather might have played a role as people were ‘generally restless and short tempered’.⁶⁴ Equally questionable was his focus on a form of ‘frontier mentality’ which, he argued, predisposed Kalgoorlie residents towards forms of direct action as grievance resolution.⁶⁵ These shortcomings paled into insignificance, however, alongside the frequent concessions to racism that infused Gerritsen’s work. Firstly, he argued that it was ‘defensible’ to insist that no Australian miner should be out of work while ‘non-Australians’ held jobs and that the Depression was ample justification for a racially-inspired strike. In a most blatant version of what Burgmann has identified as ‘whitewashing’, the strike was contrasted favourably with the other more violent actions taken, including ‘indefensible rioting, looting and arson’.⁶⁶ Secondly, Gerritsen lambasted the deficiencies of migrant workers, in particular, their supposed lack of language and safety awareness skills. He repeated many of the most common racist stereotypes that existed at the time of the riots, corroborated with little more than a ‘where there’s smoke, there’s fire’ attitude. His account was littered with racist contentions. As he put it, ‘there are many claims of their young men blocking footpaths and being a nuisance to young women’; ‘some of the young Italian men became infused with fascist ideals, causing them to act arrogantly’; ‘slingbacks were quite normal for

⁶³ R. Gerritsen, ‘The 1934 Kalgoorlie Riots: A Western Australian Crowd’, *University Studies in History*, vol. 5, no. 3, 1969; P. Bertola, *Ethnic Difference in Kalgoorlie 1893-1934*, unpublished Honours thesis, Murdoch University, 1978 and *Kalgoorlie, Gold, and the World Economy, 1893-1972*, unpublished PhD thesis, Curtin University of Technology, 1993.

⁶⁴ Gerritsen, ‘The 1934 Kalgoorlie Riots’, p. 43.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

foreigners in their own countries where labour was exploited' and 'a foreigner thought it quite natural to fight with a knife, though it was anathema to the Australian'.⁶⁷ With such analytical deficiencies, Gerritsen's work cannot be accepted as an authoritative study. He did, however, point out the important role played by rumour-mongers and 'active' racists in the Kalgoorlie riots, and was frustrated by the 'facelessness' of the participating crowd, a theme which will receive further attention in Chapter Five.

In 1978, Patrick Bertola took up the cudgels against Gerritsen's interpretation of the Kalgoorlie rioting, arguing that the riots should be placed within the context of industrial capitalism.⁶⁸ Despite offering a more credible approach than Gerritsen, Bertola's argument was weakened by a similar ideological determinism, which inferred a particularly uni-directional view of the effects of capitalism on class consciousness. In Bertola's view, rivalries between migrant groups and host cultures were largely inevitable. As a result, the 1934 riots were portrayed as 'the *logical outcome* of a set of factors intimately related to ethnic interaction within the parameters of particular forms of economy and society [emphasis added]'.⁶⁹ He argued that workers had a 'naively innate awareness of the realities of labour competition', that there was a 'degree of threat which the southern European posed in the labour market and the economic marketplace'.⁷⁰ While Bertola clearly had no sympathy with racial prejudice, he, like Gerritsen, reiterated some of the common stereotypes that all southern Europeans came to Kalgoorlie to work hard, keep to themselves, send money home and then, eventually, return home themselves.

Notwithstanding his interest in industrial relations on the Kalgoorlie mines, Bertola's work exhibited a remarkable lack of curiosity about relations between migrant and local workers in trade unions.⁷¹ On the contrary, he represented southern Europeans as non-unionist, segregated from other workers. In his words, they were 'a hardworking, independent ethnic minority ... who appeared to be non-integrative, in a localised

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 57-63. 'Slingbacks' were payments made to the shift bosses in order to secure employment and/or profitable sections of the mine in which to work. This practice will be discussed further in Chapter Four.

⁶⁸ Bertola, *Ethnic Difference in Kalgoorlie*, p. xiv.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. xv.

⁷¹ P. Bertola, 'Tributers and Gold Mining in Boulder, 1918-1934', *Labour History*, no. 65, 1993.

community setting where their main contact with the host society was in the marketplace.⁷² Equally puzzling for someone who argued that industrial capitalism should form the basis of any understanding of the Kalgoorlie riots, Bertola gives scant attention to a possible employer role in race relations, except to claim that local employers were not overtly racist, substantiated only by an assertion that most of his migrant interviewees suffered racial harassment, but felt generally accepted by the business community.⁷³ Of late, his position has come to resemble that of Gerritsen, in that he has recently argued that ‘introverted’ migrant workers themselves inspired the ‘working class racism’ of which they were victims. In this vein, he wrote:

that inferiority was confirmed in the minds of Anglo-Saxons by the lifestyle of the migrants, by their apparent willingness to be used in efforts to drive down wages and conditions, and by their inability to transcend the boundaries that separated them from the host culture. Equally, the tensions highlight the inability of labour to transcend a limited sense of collective consciousness, although that was not helped by the tendency of many Italians, for example, to resist involvement in unions, and to embrace a more radical, collective vision, proposed by groups like the IWW and the OBU movement.⁷⁴

It would appear that all southern Europeans, scabs or radicals, were doomed to exclusion by their own actions. In addition, this is not an isolated view. Boncompagni, who relied heavily on Bertola’s work, expressly refuted any possibility of unity among host workers and Italian migrants, stating that the newcomers were ‘driven by economic needs and displayed little interest in politics’.⁷⁵

The above notwithstanding, Bertola did expound some very convincing arguments that directly contradicted his assertion that racism was produced, in the first instance, by working class opposition to increased competition for jobs. He noted the work of de Lepervanche which demonstrated that the admission of southern European

⁷² Bertola, *Ethnic Difference in Kalgoorlie*, p. xiv.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, pp. xvii, 18.

⁷⁴ P. Bertola, *Racially Exclusive Provisions in Western Australian Mining Legislation*, unpublished paper prepared for the Australian Historical Association Conference, Mining History Stream, July, 1998.

⁷⁵ A. Boncompagni, ‘From the Apennine to the Bush: ‘temporary’ migrants from Tuscan communities to Western Australia, 1921-1939’ in R. Hood and R. Markey (eds), *Labour and Community: proceedings of the Sixth National Conference of the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History*, Wollongong, NSW, 2-4 October 1999, p. 30.

labour directly favoured the employing class.⁷⁶ Migrants were allotted lowly-paid jobs and were instrumental to the expansion of labour-intensive industries.⁷⁷ He also outlined the decisive role that successive governments played in this process – allowing migrants entry in the first instance and then legislating restrictions on the areas of employment that were available to them.⁷⁸ Nevertheless, when immigration restrictions were applied from the mid to late 1920s, Federal and State Governments were only too glad to promote the idea that they supported the exclusion of southern European migrants to reduce the already swelling ranks of the unemployed.⁷⁹ For Bertola, legislative exclusion of migrants was justifiable on economic grounds and only became racist in character when the essence of this argument was taken up by some in the labour movement.⁸⁰

In summary, Bertola maintained that the entry of southern Europeans into the labour market ensured that competition for jobs would create continued conflict. He also fell into the theoretical abyss of blaming migrants for ‘ghettoising’ themselves, a process which prompted the host culture to become suspicious and unwelcoming. Cart-like before the horse, this argument failed to prioritise his own evidence about the degree to which State legislation channelled migrants into a narrow range of occupations and, in effect, blamed the victims of racism for their own oppression. It also failed to give full consideration to the difficulties faced by many newly-arrived migrants, such as poverty, language, lack of knowledge of local conditions and pre-existing racist attitudes. Bertola compounded this theoretical impasse by attempting to make the argument work both ways. Concomitantly, he argued that the experience of migrants and locals working together confirmed the locals’ prejudices. In other words, separation ‘engendered’ racism, but then so did interaction.

⁷⁶ See M. de Lepervanche, ‘Australian Immigrants, 1788-1940: Desired and Unwanted’ in E. L. Wheelwright and K. Buckley, *Essays in the Political Economy of Australian Capitalism*, vol. 1, Australia and New Zealand Book Company, Sydney, 1975.

⁷⁷ Bertola, *Ethnic Difference in Kalgoorlie*, p. 17. For a useful warning against the dangers of stereotyping the political views of an entire migrant population, see G. Cresciani, *Fascism, Anti-Fascism and Italians in Australia, 1922-1945*, Australian National University Press, Canberra, 1980.

⁷⁸ Bertola, *Ethnic Difference in Kalgoorlie*, p. 17.

⁷⁹ G. C. Bolton, ‘Unemployment and Politics in Western Australia’, *Labour History*, no. 17, 1969, p. 82.

⁸⁰ Bertola, *Ethnic Difference in Kalgoorlie*, pp. 18-9.

The work of Gerritsen and, even more so, Bertola, has confirmed the importance of the Kalgoorlie riots to our understanding of the dynamics of Australian racism. Many of the points they have raised, such as the divisiveness of unemployment and poor conditions, are extremely pertinent. However, this thesis will argue that an emphasis on incidences of working class racism portrays only one part of the picture, while simultaneously bypassing a possible employer role in racist division. In addition, although it is not hard to find examples of local workers ‘behaving badly’, especially given the hegemony of racist ideas in Australia, struggles against that hegemony must also be examined. As will be demonstrated in this study, even in the midst of race riots we can see signs of solidarity and sympathy among workers of different nationalities. In short, racist ideas were a much more contested terrain than current explanations have allowed.

Broken Hill – solidarity forever?

While much has been written about the Kalgoorlie riots, until very recently, relatively little had been written about race relations in Broken Hill in the interwar period. As a town famed for working class unity, it was perhaps considered a poor subject for a case study about racism in the workplace. Nevertheless, not even this supposed bastion of militant unionism was immune from the raging debates about the presence of southern European labour in Australia throughout the 1920s.

Edgar Ross noted that racism began to ferment in Broken Hill in 1927, as unemployment levels began to worsen. He recalled one Richard Gully who, it would appear, almost single-handedly attempted to split the local miners’ union by agitating against the presence of southern Europeans on the mines. Ross recalled that Gully had undermined the reputation for working class solidarity that was widely regarded as the town’s ‘middle name’. Nevertheless, it was Ross who pointed to a resolution passed by the Central Council of the Miners’ Federation that opposed southern European immigration, ostensibly in the interests of the local unemployed. It was this resolution, he argued, which gave Gully the platform he needed. His right-wing rabble-rousing was able to galvanise a considerable level of support among opponents of immigration and

unionism. According to Ross, this commotion was defeated by local labour movement leaders who successfully propagandised about the dangers inherent in Gully's 'splitting action'.⁸¹ He also touched upon two issues that are pertinent to an understanding of race relations in Broken Hill, but did not elaborate on them – the importance of political leadership in the fight for and against racial division and the relationship between Gully and noted anti-labour campaigner, F. G. White.⁸²

Almost two decades later, Ellem and Shields put some 'meat on the bones' of the Gully story.⁸³ Their research plotted Gully's energetic activities as a 'sooler-on', or conservative agitator, from the time he arrived in Broken Hill in the mid-1920s until the early 1930s, when he faded out of the political spotlight. In so doing, Ellem and Shields sketched the rise and fall of an intense campaign to oust 'foreign' workers from the mines and demonstrated the importance of the more left-wing position of some of the Workers' Industrial Union of Australia leaders, particularly Richard Quintrell, in the eventual marginalisation of 'Gullyism'. However, important questions remain regarding Gully's political affiliations. The local labour newspaper, *Barrier Daily Truth*, campaigned against his attempts to split the union movement and, to this end, detailed Gully's impeccable history of service to right-wing causes – veteran of the Boer War and World War One, Nationalist candidate, and active campaigner for conscription. Ellem and Shields listed these details but did not raise the question of wider institutional support for Gully. While they noted that Gully galvanised considerable support from young men in the town, and from the racist section of the working class more generally, it remains to be asked whether there were others who may have had an interest in his reactionary agenda, such as the mine managers, their supporters and the RSL. More specifically, Ross's contention that Gully had links with F. G. White, one of the most fervent and effective campaigners for conservatism in Broken Hill during the period under review, deserves further exploration.

⁸¹ E. Ross, *A History of the Miners' Federation of Australia*, (2nd ed), Macarthur Press, Parramatta, 1984, p. 330.

⁸² E. Ross, *Of Storm and Struggle*, New Age, Sydney, 1982, pp. 40-2, 46-7.

⁸³ B. Ellem and J. Shields, 'H. A. Turner and "Australian Labor's Closed Preserve": Explaining the Rise of "Closed Unionism" in the Broken Hill Mining Industry', *Labour and Industry*, vol. 11, no. 1, August 2000, pp. 69-92.

Most discussions of Broken Hill's political history note the enormous influence of IWW politics on the local labour movement. Indeed, Broken Hill has rightly been characterised as one of the IWW's main strongholds, a place where numerous adherents were won to syndicalist political programmes. Ellem and Shields dated the 'syndicalists' last hurrah' as the February 1923 attempt by Ern Wetherell and supporters to launch a mass organisation of unionists, not divided by craft demarcations. While this is an accurate division, this thesis will examine some of the ideological residue of syndicalist influence in Broken Hill. No widely-accepted set of ideas can disappear overnight and, it will be argued, this is demonstrably so in the case of working class internationalism. Against a wider ossification of the union movement in Broken Hill, the continuing importance of mass union meetings of mine workers provides important evidence regarding rank and file attitudes to the presence of southern European workers and the anti-racist legacy of IWW propaganda. They also help to plot the shifting attitudes of the workers who attended, and were influenced by, those debates. Although battered and bruised by constant attacks from without and within, the Broken Hill labour movement managed to adhere to an, albeit damaged, form of international solidarity. Even when the WIUA closed its books to new members in 1931, the shadows of IWW internationalism remained in its non-racially-based form of local preference. The lessons of the past were certainly modified, but they were not fully forgotten.

What role for the RSL?

In 1960, Frank Crowley described the RSL as 'the most powerful organisation in the community for more than a generation' and, from his historical vantage point, such a statement was no exaggeration.⁸⁴ The RSL has enjoyed a considerable, albeit fluctuating, national membership, has intervened in virtually every national debate of any significance and has had the ear of both Federal and State governments at the highest level. As Stephen Garton wrote:

Through effective organisation and leadership, and a clear charter of principles, the League was able to achieve a political influence greater

⁸⁴ F. Crowley, *Australia's Western Third*, Macmillan, London, 1960, p. 238.

than its membership would warrant, and far greater than some other comparable groups, such as the British Legion.⁸⁵

In 1965, Ken Inglis penned a convincing, but necessarily speculative, essay on the need for historians to explore the many uncharted gaps between the various official war histories and a more critical analysis of the whole gamut of questions raised by 'Australia's' war experience.⁸⁶ Although the RSL's role on the national political stage has been documented to some extent, its influence at a local level has received comparatively little scholarly attention, a somewhat surprising deficiency when considered in relation to the prominent role that the organisation has played in the nation's history, both materially and ideologically. Only a handful of writers have been drawn to the fascinating period immediately after World War One when 'digger violence' became commonplace and equally few have looked at the various paramilitary groups that formed in the 1920s and 1930s to prepare for, and counter, episodes of civil unrest.⁸⁷ Several studies have looked at the creation of a 'digger legend', a project of prime importance to the RSL.⁸⁸ The work of Kristianson has delved into the lobbying

⁸⁵ S. Garton, *The Cost of War: Australians Return*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1996, p. 54.

⁸⁶ K. S. Inglis, 'The Anzac Tradition', *Meanjin*, March, 1965, pp. 25-44.

⁸⁷ See K. Amos, *The New Guard Movement 1931-1935*, Melbourne University Press, Clayton, 1976; H. McQueen, 'Shoot the Bolshevik! Hang the Profiteer! Reconstructing Australian Capitalism 1918-21' in E. L. Wheelwright and K. Buckley (eds), *Essays in the Political Economy of Australian Capitalism*, vol. 2, Australia and New Zealand Book Co., Brookvale, 1978; J. Murray, 'The Kalgoorlie Woodline Strikes 1919-1920: A Study of Conflict Within the Working Class', *Studies in Western Australian History*, vol. 5, December 1982; M. Cathcart, *Defending the National Tuckshop: Australia's Secret Army Intrigue of 1931*, McPhee Gribble, Fitzroy, 1988; R. Evans, *The Red Flag Riots: A Study of Intolerance*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1988; A. Moore, *The Secret Army and the Premier*, New South Wales University Press, Kensington, 1989 and *The Right Road? A History of Right-wing Politics in Australia*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1995; B. Oliver, 'Disputes, Diggers and Disillusionment: Social and Industrial Unrest in Perth and Kalgoorlie 1918-24', *Studies in Western Australian History*, vol. 11, June 1990 and *War and Peace in Western Australia: The Social and Political Impact of the Great War 1914-1926*, University of Western Australia Press, Nedlands, 1995.

⁸⁸ Re the Anzac legend, see R. White, *Inventing Australia*, Allen and Unwin, St Leonards, 1981; D. A. Kent, 'The Anzac Book and the Anzac Legend: C. E. W. Bean as Editor and Image-maker', *Historical Studies*, vol. 21, no. 84, 1985; R. Ely, 'The First Anzac Day: Invented or Discovered?', *Journal of Australian Studies*, no. 17, 1985; A. Thomson, 'Passing Shots at the Anzac Legend' in V. Burgmann and J. Lee (eds), *A Most Valuable Acquisition*, McPhee Gribble/Penguin Books, Melbourne, 1988; A. Thomson, 'Steadfast Until Death'? C. E. W. Bean and the Representation of Australian Military Manhood', *Australian Historical Studies*, vol. 23, no. 93, 1989; T. R. Frame, B. Roberts, B. Hall, L. McAulay, K. S. Inglis, W. Keys, J. Barrett, J. Ross, G. Page and R. White, 'Reflections: A symposium on the meanings of Anzac', *Journal of the Australian War Memorial*, no. 16, April 1990; P. Cochrane, *Simpson and the Donkey*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, 1992; E. M. Andrews, *The Anzac Illusion: Anglo-Australian relations during World War I*, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 1993; S. Garton, *The Cost of War: Australians Return*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1996; J. F. Williams, *Anzacs, The Media and The Great War*, University of New South Wales Press, Sydney, 1999.

methods used by the Federal Executive of the RSL to achieve its political ends.⁸⁹ Les Louis' focus on the Cold War period has also shed welcome light on the organisation's attitude to communism and communists in the post-World War Two period.⁹⁰

While all these works are very useful, their specific orientations offer only partial insights into the role of the RSL in the interwar period. For instance, we cannot draw too many conclusions from the work on the immediate post-war period, for this was an immensely fluid time in the RSL's history and cannot be considered typical of what the organisation was to become. Similarly, the fascist organisations of the 1930s were linked to, but distinct from, the day to day operations of the League. Kristianson's work raised the fascinating question of the tension within the RSL between advocates of 'constitutional methods' and those who advocated more 'direct action'. However, he primarily focused on the lobbying methods of the RSL 'brass', with the result that much of what happened outside those lofty forums received little attention. Clearly, there is scope for much further inquiry.

In 1984, Humphrey McQueen cast doubt upon the widely-held view that the RSL had provided a channel through which some Australian Imperial Force (AIF) personnel became members of the fascist New Guard in the 1930s.⁹¹ His argument was based on figures which suggest that the RSL was too small to have provided sufficient New Guard members and that the ideology which sustained New Guard membership had longer historical antecedents than that provided by the 'digger legend', although the tenets of both were exceedingly similar. He was also concerned to show that a significant number of wounded could, or would, not participate in New Guard activities because of physical disabilities and/or 'revulsion at all things military'.⁹² McQueen contended that the most favourable estimate of an RSL/New Guard link was a ratio of one RSL member in every six New Guardsmen, and while he allowed that RSL sub-branches may have been organising centres for fascist recruitment, he argued that the same could have been said of sporting clubs and business organisations.⁹³

⁸⁹ G. Kristianson, *The Politics of Patriotism: The Pressure Group Activities of the Returned Servicemen's League*, Australian National University Press, Canberra, 1966.

⁹⁰ See, for example, L. J. Louis, 'The RSL and the Cold War 1946-50', *Labour History*, no. 74, 1998.

⁹¹ H. McQueen, *Gallipoli to Petrov*, George Allen and Unwin, North Sydney, 1984, p. 199.

⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 200.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 202.

McQueen's approach underestimates the important organising role played by the RSL sub-branches in the interwar period. Certainly, McQueen's glib assumption that the reintegration of working class soldiers with their families and their jobs served to sublimate any residual conservative leanings simply will not do.⁹⁴ A significant number of RSL members were working class. How do we account for those workers who remained RSL members for the entire interwar period? What should we make of the conservative working class returned soldier – the early enlistee, the post-war blackleg, the devotee of King and Empire, the loyal servant of authority? If, despite initial ruling class fears, most diggers were not radicalised by their war experiences, what role did digger organisations have in the interwar period?⁹⁵ In addition, McQueen's arguments suggest that the political and social role of the RSL in the interwar years and its unceasing conservative propaganda deserves further investigation, both at the official level and among 'grassroots' community supporters. Such an examination might begin with Eric Campbell's 1931 description of the AIF, cited by McQueen, as a major 'moral and physical force' and that 'the manhood of the State ... [is] now pulsing with the spirit of the AIF'. Further, Campbell claimed, New Guardsmen would be able to see themselves as 'fit comrades of our glorious dead'.⁹⁶ Far from being passing comments, as McQueen described them, these words may illustrate the key to understanding the relationship between these two right-wing organisations and, equally importantly, their links with the working class. There is no doubt that the image of the returned soldier, lovingly crafted by conservative opinion in the interwar years, was a powerful one. Portrayed as noble and courageous defenders of 'liberty' and 'empire', the men of the AIF were diligently exalted in schools and churches, and other local groups. RSL speakers were present at countless public functions during this period. As such, they were far more socially integrated with the wider community than the New Guard and could exercise a greater, and more effective, influence over all the groups with which they had links, including the labour movement. In making a worthwhile case for the general lack of working class support for the New Guard, McQueen painted the fascist organisation as a rather more virile and active proponent of bourgeois ideology than the RSL. Indeed, the RSL was unenviably portrayed as an unrepresentative rump of elite

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 212.

⁹⁵ McQueen, 'Shoot the Bolshevik!', p. 196.

soldiers, failed farmers and wounded pension recipients. How then do we account for the subsequent political prominence of the RSL and the comparatively brief life of the New Guard?

Some leads have been provided by Andrew Moore who showed that the RSL played a critical role in Old Guard organising strategies, detailing many branches where the RSL executive and the Old Guard leadership were identical.⁹⁷ This is a more useful way to appreciate the role of returned soldier organisation in interwar society – while the RSL was something of a ‘public face’ organising respectable activities for the promotion of conservative values, it was not in any way divorced from the clandestine assembly of physical and ideological resources that the Old Guard coordinated. Not bound to the secrecy of the paramilitaries, the RSL could organise more freely because the place accorded it in post-war society allowed for public proselytising beyond its constituency. We might ask what was the effect of RSL propaganda on the young conservative who felt he had ‘missed his chance’ to enlist. Did 1920s school boys, for example, hold their local returned soldiers in high esteem and view the New Guard, and other conservative mobilisations, as something of a second chance to ‘do their bit’ for their country? The case study evidence which follows in later chapters suggests that RSL propaganda was particularly well-received by conservative young men who were, for one reason or another, distanced from organised labour.

The relationship between the RSL and the Old and New Guard is beyond the scope of this thesis. Instead, an assessment of the influence of the RSL at the community and industrial level will shed new light on its political significance during the interwar period, particularly in the area of race relations. Thomson comments on the nature of left-leaning returned soldier groups that largely disappeared in the early 1920s through lack of State patronage. He argued that they attacked women and migrants for taking jobs that should have been reserved for returned men, in a manner that reflected

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 204.

⁹⁷ Moore, *The Secret Army and the Premier*, p. 113. See also D. H. Lawrence, *Kangaroo*, Heinemann, London, 1923; R. Darroch, ‘D. H. Lawrence’s Australia’, *Overland*, no. 113, 1988 and ‘Kangaroo: The Darroch Thesis’, *Meridian*, vol. 11, no. 1, 1992; A. Moore, ‘The Historian as Detective’, *Overland*, no. 113, 1988, ‘Thirroul and Literary Establishment Strike Back’, *Overland*, no. 120, 1988 and ‘The Old Guard and ‘Country-mindedness’ during the Great Depression’, *Journal of Australian Studies*, no. 27, 1990; B. Steele, ‘Fiction and Fact’, *Meridian*, vol. 10, no. 1, 1991.

the ‘racist and sexist heritage of the Australian labour movement’.⁹⁸ Surprisingly, no mention was made of the very same attacks made by the RSL. For example, in 1931, *Reveille*, the official journal of the RSL’s NSW Branch, published a remarkable account by ex-soldier G. Donnellan of an ‘unofficial battle’ that took place in 1918 at a convalescent base in Wimereux, near Boulogne. During this conflict, Australian, British, Canadian and American soldiers fought with tools, knives, sticks, chair legs and stones against Portuguese troops. The Portuguese, Donnellan reported, ‘invaded our estaminets and magasins, drank our beer, tried to “pirate” our girls, and, in short, made themselves a darned nuisance’. He boasted that two men were killed ‘on our side’, while eleven funerals took place on the Portuguese side. More than a hundred other men were hospitalised and/or treated for wounds.⁹⁹ C. E. W. Bean alluded to this ‘fight’, but gave no details. He reported merely that it was General Haig’s belief that the Australian troops were ill-disciplined and should convalesce separately from other troops.¹⁰⁰ Given post-war attempts made by the RSL to sanitise the Anzac legend and to downplay such incidents, the value of printing this story may well have been its inference of staunch returned soldier support for White Australia-style attitudes to southern Europeans, and non-British migrants more generally. Given its ideological access to every corner of Australian society, coupled with its commitment to immigration restriction, it is time that the RSL’s influence over race relations within Australian society was assessed.

Conclusion

Passive acceptance of the argument that workers were ‘natural’ supporters of racist exclusion has had a dramatic effect on studies of working class responses to non-British immigration. It was not until 1980, and Verity Burgmann’s work on the role of ruling class ideology in the dissemination of racist ideas, that this consensus was shaken. While Burgmann’s study of Australian racism challenged a number of mistaken approaches, at least one still remains. By insisting that the ruling class has a material interest in perpetuating racist ideas in order to cheapen wages, divide working class organisation and to galvanise support for national projects, Burgmann went some way to correcting the emphasis on working class culpability for the White Australia policy.

⁹⁸ A. Thomson, *Anzac Memories*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1996, p. 122.

⁹⁹ *Reveille*, 31 August 1931.

Nevertheless, while she made a convincing case against the ‘whitewashers’, her thesis suggested that ruling class racism maintained its solidly hegemonic status and was unchallenged by either the working class or its institutions.¹⁰¹ Hence, we are left with a portrayal of the working class as either active supporters of, and successful campaigners for, racially-based exclusion or unquestioning dupes of a racist ruling elite. Little work has been done since that time to extrapolate from Burgmann’s conclusions. One area which promises to yield results in this area is to examine the way in which ruling class ideology was disseminated among working people and the RSL provides a useful lens through which aspects of this process can be viewed. Its ability to spread ideas about the important place of King, Empire and racial homogeneity in the development of the Australian nation among its working class constituency provides an important example of how a hegemony can be established. Equally important examples of resistance to those ideas can also be encapsulated.

¹⁰⁰ C. E. W. Bean, *The A.I.F. in France 1918*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1937, p. 31.

¹⁰¹ Burgmann, ‘Capital and Labour’, p. 21.