

Recorder

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NOTICE OF AGM

The **Annual General Meeting** of the Melbourne Branch of the ASSLH will be held on the **4th December, 2008.**

5.30 pm

In the **New International Bookshop**

(The NIB is now situated downstairs as you enter Trades Hall from the Victoria Street entrance.)

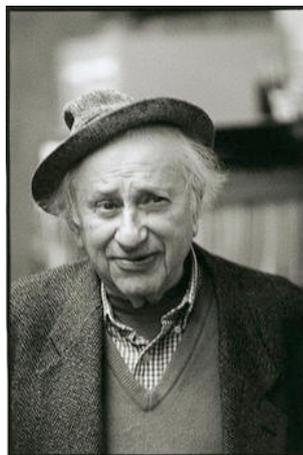
All members are welcome to stand and vote for all positions on the Executive.

'Curiosity did not kill this cat.'

VALE LOUIS 'STUDS' TERKEL

16 May 1912 – 31 October 2008

By Peter Love



The irrepressible Studs Terkel was fond of saying that, 'I came up the year the Titanic went down.' It's a sad irony that the man who gave us *Hard Times: An Oral History of the Great Depression* should have gone down in the year that the Wall Street stock market collapsed again. But, then, perhaps it's an appropriate coincidence for a man who did more than almost anyone else to help ordinary people find the voice

to tell their stories of work, war, race relations, their hopes and dreams, and the experience of growing old. Most of the interviews that were the raw material for his books came from what he called 'guerrilla journalism' on his highly popular Chicago radio show. With his voluble but gently empathetic interrogations, he drew out his guests by paying them the compliment of genuine curiosity about their lives. Implicitly, they joined him in common cause to transform folksy chats into an immensely popular literary genre. Most countries, including Australia, have his imitators in their national historiography.

Born in the Bronx into a somewhat dysfunctional family, he moved with them to Chicago where they operated a boarding house in the Near North Side. He went on to take philosophy and law degrees at the University of Chicago but, having failed a bar exam, went to work on various New Deal projects until he began radio and stage work. Through that work he met and, in 1939 married Ida Goldberg, a social worker. Their marriage, which produced one son, Dan, lasted until Ida's death in 1999.

After brief service in the Air Force, he was discharged in 1943 on health grounds and began a career in radio, with a brief excursion into television that was cut short by McCarthyist anxieties in the NBC network. He eventually joined the WFMT radio station and commenced his long, now legendary career as a broadcaster.

From the mid-1960s he produced a long series of popular books and articles arising from his program. Along the way, he received many honours for his work, including the Peabody Award for journalism, a Pulitzer Prize and a National Book Foundation medal. He kept on working, talking, listening and writing until the end. He died on Friday 31 October 2008. He did more than most of his contemporaries to give ordinary Americans a voice of their own that rang true.

Studs Terkel's last book: *PS: Further Thoughts From A Lifetime Of Listening* was published a week after his death.

BUCKLEYS!

Ken Buckley: *Buckleys! An Autobiography*

By John McLaren

The cover of this book reminds us that Ken Buckley was a historian, author and civil libertarian. He was also a founding member of both the Labour History society and the Council for Civil Liberties in NSW. Early in his life he joined the Communist Party of Great Britain, and transferred to the Communist Party of Australia after coming to Sydney University in 1953. He left the Party after the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956, joined the ALP, and eventually became a member of the Greens. He was active in the Sydney Association of University Teachers, and was first secretary-treasurer of the Federal Council of University Staff Associations, later the NTEU. He had numerous run-ins with politicians of all colours, university hierarchies, ASIO and state police. His constant pre-occupations were "injustice and corruption ... promoting the socialist objectives of equity and well-being for all; championing civil liberties and human rights." Perhaps the best description of him is that he was an activist.

This is the source of the problem with his autobiography. He tells his readers that, as a historian, he knows that the significance of the individual in history is usually exaggerated, as "it is often the confluence of a set of circumstances at a specific time which throws up a person who meets the needs of the situation." The circumstances of Buckley's life threw him into Depression, evacuation, army training, wartime service in Yugoslavia and Bulgaria, service in Greece during the opening moves of the civil war, the postwar split in the Communist party and the efforts to establish an Australian left that was Marxist in orientation but not formally Communist, and the struggles for civil liberties across a whole spectrum of progressive and radical activities. His account of these activities is lucid, and his

analysis often penetrating, but it remains a record of events. As an economic and institutional historian, he shows us the social forces that shaped the conditions of his life, but he does not show us how it felt to be caught in these forces and to choose to respond in particular ways. We learn of his deep loves and tragedies, but he does not share with us of their personal rewards or costs.

The success of the book is giving its readers, not an insider's view, but an insider's account of the political movements he has been involved with, from the conflicts in Greece and Cyprus to the continuing battles for civil liberty. In the process, he provides entertaining and surprising anecdotes about some of the key players. For example, Neville Wran—a politician Buckley admired—chose to use his speech at an anniversary dinner of the CCL to launch a savage attack on the Council. Wran was apparently upset about its role in supporting *The Age's* publication of the tapes that had revealed the content of the illegally recorded conversations that discredited Lionel Murphy.

Buckley also shows the levels of police corruption and of obstruction by state and federal governments that the CCL encountered in matters as diverse as its opposition to censorship, support for protesters, and attempts to reveal abortion rackets. He also gives a revealing account of the politics of the split in the Sydney University Economics Department, and the contempt shown by conservatives for dissident views. He offers an interesting Marxist justification for his own civil liberties activity.

Apart from the story of the CCL, Buckley shows how his research interests developed from economic history to the history of important institutions in the economy. His history of the AEU was commissioned by the union, and published after vetting by the committee, whose members were allotted single chapters to read individually. A commission from Burns Philp led him to fascinating research into Australia's role in the Pacific, and was published despite its criticism of the company, particularly for its attitude to unions. He was not so fortunate with the commissions he received for the biography of Sir Edward McTiernan, longest serving member of the High Court, or of the QBE insurance company. The first failed to find a publisher, and the company refused trade publication of the second, which had become a general history of insurance in Australia. A soft-bound version was produced and copies donated to libraries around Australia. His biography of HV Evatt also ran into trouble when Buckley fell ill before completing it, and it became overshadowed by Peter Crockett's work.

One important episode in the book deals with the problems that hit the CCL when a new generation became involved. The newcomers were committed to direct democracy as a way of conducting the Council's affairs and to a range of specific causes that they wished it to become involved in. Buckley, probably rightly,

believed that this would destroy the Council's effectiveness by narrowing its base. After he worked the phones, the new faction was defeated in a ballot, but some of the drive had gone out of the organisation.

This matter illustrates both the strengths and weaknesses of Buckley's book. The episode is historically important as an example of the ideological clash between new and old left that occurred during the 1960s and 1970s. Now that we are accustomed to read criticism of liberalism, it is salutary to encounter an occasion when liberalism now seems clearly to have been the more effective approach. Buckley however makes no attempt to situate the clashes in this larger context. Nor does he question the approach he shared with his adversaries. Both sides were certain of their correctness, and neither took hostages.

Buckley concludes his memoir with an adaptation of Churchill's words on Attlee, that in his life he had an awful lot to be difficult, obstinate and obstreperous about. The book gives ample evidence of this, with the qualification that he was difficult on behalf of others much more than on his own account.

Buckleys! is published by A & A Publishing, \$24.95.

CHIFLEY ON BANKS

By Peter Love

As the current 'melt down' of financial institutions creates havoc in capital markets and spreads into the 'real' economy where it's devastating industries and jobs, it might be interesting to take a quick glimpse at what a future Labor Prime Minister said about the role of banks in a previous period of 'monetary confusion'. At the end of 1935, Ben Chifley was invited, as a token representative of the Federal Opposition, to be a member of a *Royal Commission appointed to inquire into the Monetary and Banking Systems at present in operation in Australia*. The Commission toured the country for most of 1936 taking evidence and presented its Report to Parliament in August 1937. Chifley, who had lived through both the 1890s and early 1930s depressions, was deeply committed to the ALP's long-standing policy of public control over the monetary system, specifically, since 1919, by nationalisation. He submitted a minority report that argued for complete government control in the public interest [1]. As *Recorder* readers will know, the second Chifley Government acted on Party policy in 1947 with its electorally suicidal attempt to nationalise the banking system.

In 1937, while he acknowledged the majority report's recommendation to establish a central bank to oversee the stability of the system, he didn't believe it possible that 'any well-ordered progress' could be made in the community 'under a system in which there are privately-owned trading banks which have been established for the purposes of making profit'. Investors did not buy

bank shares for the 'rendering of a service to the community'. They bought them because they offered better returns on capital. Although there might be difficult times in which the banks responded to the community's interest expressed through strong public opinion, they ultimately must return to profit-seeking. There was an inherent difficulty in this.

Banking differs from any other form of business, because any action – good or bad – by a banking system affects almost every phase of national life. A banking policy should have one aim – service for the general good of the community. The making of profit is not necessary to such a policy. In my opinion the best service to the community can be given only by a banking system from which the profit motive is absent, and, thus, in practice, only by a system entirely under national control.

In a passage that has some eerie contemporary parallels, he went on:

In times of unhealthy boom conditions the trading banks are unable individually to check these conditions, and collectively they have never attempted to do so. The fact that they have never even made a collective attempt indicates either a belief that they cannot do so, or that the desire for immediate profit during boom periods over-rides any consideration of the national interest. The evidence convinces me that the banks, during some years before the depression, encouraged unhealthy economic conditions by unsound advancing. During a depression or feared slump, the banks, in their own interest, and to protect their depositors, on whose confidence the banks' prestige and solvency depend, adopt a policy of contraction which intensifies the evil. Contrary to what should be expected in an effective banking system the banks have been capable of creating boom conditions; and they have been ineffective in checking or minimising a depression... Private banking systems make the community the victim of every wave of optimism or pessimism that surges through the minds of financial speculators.

He went on to say, rather generously, that he didn't accuse bankers of dishonesty, simply that a system based on profit-making could not safely serve the community.

Anticipating that the majority report would be accepted, Chifley went on to address more specific matters in that report. He recommended that the Commonwealth Bank have its functions expanded to include central, savings, trading and industry banking. On monetary policy, he suggested that restricting credit rather than raising interest rates would be a better method to deflate incipient booms. The Commonwealth Bank Board, exercising its central banking functions in the public interest, should have the capacity to compel the private banks to fall into line with its declared policy, and there should be limits imposed on the rate of profit of the private banks.

The circumstances that confront us now are different in many respects from those that Chifley addressed. Through the co-ordinated action of central banks, governments and some international agencies there is at least a remnant of the Keynesian institutional infrastructure that the post-war nation-builders bequeathed us. The neoclassical frenzy that has so disfigured monetary and fiscal policy has allowed the proliferation of loony financial instruments and created an effective free market in money. It is hardly surprising that, as the fragility and volatility of those negotiable instruments was exposed, Gresham's Law would kick in with market players hoarding sound security and attempting to dump trashy paper as confidence went into free-fall. Despite all this, Chifley's basic point remains; a monetary and banking system driven by the profit motive is inherently unstable and certainly not in the public interest. As governments bail out the speculators and their foolish followers, the case could never be stronger for vigilant and vigorous public control over the monetary system.

[1] Chifley's dissenting report is at pp.262-8 of the Commission's Report...

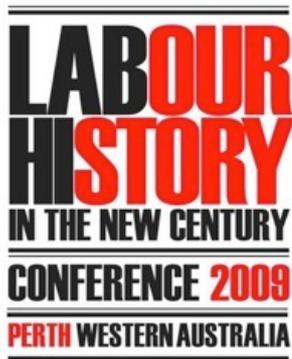
11th NATIONAL LABOUR HISTORY CONFERENCE

CALL FOR PAPERS

Deadline extended

The Perth Branch of the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History, is hosting the 11th National Labour History Conference.

8–10 July 2009



The Perth Branch welcomes papers on any topic relevant to labour history (see their website for suggested themes).

All intending contributors should send an abstract of not more than 500 words to the Convenor by 30 November 2008.

Papers, maximum length 3,000 words, submitted for formal, academic refereeing must reach them by 31 January 2009. Presentations will be 20 minutes each with 10 minutes for questions. Contributors wishing to present a display, film, performance or panel discussion should contact them with a brief proposal by 31 December 2008.

Convenor: Dr Bobbie Oliver, Department of Social Sciences, Curtin University of Technology, GPO BOX U1987, PERTH WA 6845.

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Provenance

Provenance: The Journal of Public Record Office Victoria

Provenance is the free online journal of Public Record Office Victoria (PROV), the Victorian state archives. Provenance features peer-reviewed articles, and other contributions, that present research drawing upon records in PROV custody. This year's issue again contains a diverse range of contributions coming from the wide-ranging researcher community that accesses records at Public Record Office Victoria. The current issue can be accessed at: <http://www.prov.vic.gov.au/provenance>

You can also search the current and back issues of the journal for names and places of interest at:

<http://www.prov.vic.gov.au/provenance/search.asp>

If you are interested in submitting an article for future issues or would like to receive an email reminder when each new issue is published online, please contact the Editor, Sebastian Gurciullo by phone on (03) 9348 5600; or email: provenance@prov.vic.gov.au

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Please send all submissions and research questions/notes for inclusion in *Recorder* to the editor, Julie Kimber (juliekimber@unswalumni.com)

Meetings of the society are held either in Meeting Room 1 in the Trades Hall or in the New International Bookshop. The NIB is now situated downstairs as you enter Trades Hall from the Victoria Street entrance.